The Aggressors

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THE AGGRESSORS

HALT! Who’s there?” Pfc. John Rhodes cautiously stepped off the dirt road he had been told to guard and challenged the rustling noises that came out of the darkness of the woods. An occasional “ka-boom” from the howitzers a hundred yards away was the only other sound in the still night. John strained his eyes to see in the half-light of a cloud-covered moon. Nothing. “Race horse!” He gave the first part of the password, to be answered by a countersign. The rustling had stopped. Only the continual natural stirring of the Wisconsin wilderness remained.

John unslung his M1 and held it in both hands, ready for anything. There was no ammunition for it or for the rocket launcher lying beneath a tree at his guard post, but you had to be “tactical” at all times. The thoughts that had been running through his mind; the tactical mess eaten in the dark, the steel helmet pressing him down to the ground, the itching of the wool socks and mosquito bites, the two hours of sleep he would get that night, the summer job he’d given up for two weeks, all these were promptly forgotten.

He took several cautious steps toward the angular mass of a truck, tactically hidden under the trees. “I know you’re there. Come on out,” he said with as much authority as he could squeeze through his tight throat.

Still no answer. A few more steps. An obscure shadow by a truck wheel. Or was it just a shadow? John slowly reached into the blackness and felt a soft fatigue cap and then a stick poked into his stomach.

“Got ya!” the shadow said and crawled out from behind the wheel followed by four other shadows. They slowly assumed the features of men and then John recognized the leader, Sgt. Owens from Headquarters Battery.
“Well I’ll be damned if it ain’t Rhodes,” Owens chuckled and grinned. “Guess you know you’re dead, don’t you?”

“Guess so,” John replied, recalling those long-ago games of cops and robbers. “You those aggressors they said might be out?”

“Ya. Rather be back at the barracks though. Turn around, we’ll mark you as dead.”

Dumbly John turned and felt a large D being traced on his back. “If this was Regular Army you could go back to the barracks now that you’re dead.” Owens chuckled again as he completed his task and put the piece of chalk into his pocket. “Remember, you didn’t see anyone.”

“Okay,” John replied reluctantly.

Then with a nodded farewell the aggressors disappeared in the darkness toward the main road, leaving John standing there. He turned and wandered back to his post, a little discouraged and a little bewildered. “If they’re going to play these damn war games, why don’t they explain the rules a little better. Geez!”

When he got there another bunch of shadows appeared, this time hurrying down the road with their empty rifles poised.

“Race horse!” someone challenged him.

“Jockey,” John gave the counter sign with a what-the-hell-does-it-matter-I’ve-already-been-killed-once tone of voice.

“Who’s that?” It was SFC O’Brien, sergeant in charge of the firing sections, who had given the challenge.

“Rhodes, Sergeant.”

“Did you see anybody come up this road?”

“No, Sarge, they cut through the trees.”

“Well, you should have stopped them even though they weren’t on the road. They threw some cherry bombs up near the guns and if they’d had grenades, they could’ve knocked out several.”

“I tried to stop them but I got killed,” he said feebly.

“Well, get back there and guard the road and watch the area on both sides too.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” John mumbled and turned back to his post, wondering if he had miraculously been “unkilled” or if he was merely being replaced by himself.

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