

## NINETEEN

*Play for more than you can afford to lose  
and you will learn the game.*

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

6:30 a.m., April 5, 1945

Three-hundred yards across a deep V-shaped ravine a steep knob rose to hold the German stronghold: Castle Aghinolfi.

The morning sun gathered force over the Apennines and played on the ancient, crumbling fortress, giving it mystical, white luminescence. Crumbling towers staggered over the boxy summit. Time, war, and neglect had eroded the tower-top parapets to the point that the castle looked more like a flat-topped monastery than a onetime medieval home to sword- and shield-wielding warriors.

The remaining trees on the adjacent slopes had few branches and disfigured tops, casualties of the same artillery shells that also scoured a jarring white scar in a rock outcropping fifty feet below the castle. All of this sat wrapped in morning quiet, eerie and beautiful—a peacefulness we didn't enjoy long.

It was not yet seven o'clock when Runyon and I perched at the edge of the draw to figure how to traverse its steep slopes, scale the knob, and storm the castle. It was as formidable as its reputation. Brush covered all but the last seventy-five yards of ground between us and the castle. That critical seventy-five yards not only was rocky barren ground, but it was ringed with

the ancient stone walls that had rigidly defended the castle for 1,500 years. A blind nitwit with any functioning rifle could wipe out half of any invading force brazen enough to try to scale the slope and the walls.

But orders were orders. And this was the only route to taking the castle and punching north.

Runyon and I agreed to move our machine guns to the lip of the draw to provide covering fire for the castle assault. We agonized over the absence of our mortar squads, still somewhere behind us. Our lack of mortars added great disadvantage to our all-out daylight assault. The other ramification went unspoken between us. Our lack of mortars made holding our current ground more difficult in the face of the inevitable German counterattack. We banked on our mortar squads catching up soon. They wouldn't. They had been pinned down by German machine gunners or killed by mines on Hill X. That realization was hours away.

As we contemplated, a German soldier emerged from the brush about twenty-five yards to our left and slightly below us. This was his backyard; it shouldn't have been anything startling. But it was. In surreal slow-motion, the German started to heave one of the trademark Nazi potato-masher grenades. I started to bring my M-1 around, instinctively trying to kill him before the grenade was airborne.

Runyon simultaneously yelped and scrambled to his feet, not noticing that my rifle barrel was swinging across the front of his midsection in order for me to get off the quickest shot. In his haste to escape, Runyon knocked the barrel wide and nearly knocked the rifle into the ravine. I lunged.

The German soldier's arm reached the end of its windup. He leaned forward and launched the grenade, one leg coming off the ground in the fashion of an Olympic discus thrower. The moment the grenade cleared his fingertips, he pivoted and started to run away.

I clawed the air to recover my rifle, not wanting to shoot him in the back, for some reason, but still very much wanting to kill him. The grenade tumbled toward me.

Three things happened. I cannot say in what order or if



they were simultaneous. The grenade landed five feet from me, bounced . . . but did not explode. I squeezed off two shots, slamming the German in the back. And Runyon disappeared.

I was livid. First this damn German snuck up on us. Then Runyon goes hysterical, as if he'd never seen an enemy soldier with a grenade, and as a result of those hysterics I had to adopt enough cowardice to shoot another soldier in the back. My honor was reparable. A battlefield commander so prone to panic was more unnerving.

Staff Sergeant Willie Dickens, looking much more serious and disturbed than his normal, comical self, came running at the commotion.

"I think I nailed him," I told Dickens as I struggled to my feet, too full of adrenaline to fully realize how close I'd come to becoming a corpse. "But there's liable to be a few more where he came from."

"You want a patrol?" Dickens volunteered.

"No. Keep the guys up top," I said. "Pretty soon the Germans are going to figure out we're stirring around here. I want you guys here to cover each other when the shit gets thick. Trade me guns and I'll go see if this Kraut's got any cousins down in the draw."

I tossed my rifle to Dickens and he tossed me his Thompson submachine gun. "Wait," he said as I started off, and tossed me an extra thirty-round clip.

"Thanks—good idea," I said, glad that he was thinking when I was being hasty.

Despite my strong preference for an M-1, this submachine gun was perfect for close-quartered fighting, especially when I expected to be outnumbered. I dropped into the ravine and scrambled after the grenade thrower. We needed to know where he came from and how many enemy soldiers might be with him. I found him face down, and dead, almost at the entrance of a dugout. I stuck the submachine gun into the entrance and let loose with a dozen rounds and darted to the side to await a reply. Nothing happened. I moved inside. The small cavern was empty except for a few hand grenades strewn about the floor.

I stepped out in the daylight, crouched down by the dead

soldier, and studied the area. The dugout was on a path that continued around the hill. The path led away from the castle, as if going to overlook the coastal plain and the Cinquale Canal. I followed it, sweeping the submachine gun to and fro, ready to spray the enemy soldiers I expected to come pounding along this path to find their dead buddy or investigate the rifle shots. In about a quarter mile, the narrow, chalky trail veered toward the face of the ravine—and a partially concealed Volkswagen door, strangely hanging on the side of the draw. Another dugout, I reasoned.

I heaved on the door, ready to unleash the Tommy gun the moment I cracked it open. It didn't budge.

Not knowing what I was up against, or when I could resupply myself, I retraced my steps to the first dugout, dashed inside and grabbed two of the German grenades. I returned to the Volkswagen door, nudged one of the grenades under the bottom edge, pulled the pin and dropped into the cover of bushes that still afforded a view of the entrance. The grenade ripped the door off the hillside with the shriek of tormented metal. My gun came up in anticipation. Moments later, a dazed, half dressed German soldier poked his head out the entrance. I split his skull with a single burst, charged the entrance, pulled the pin from the second grenade, and tossed it in. A roar of dirt and rocks kicked out of the opening as I dove to the side. Without waiting for the entrance to clear completely, I rolled back to my feet. I wheeled into the doorway, emptied the submachine gun's magazine into the darkness, and ducked to the side in case of a hostile reply.

Nothing.

Jamming a new magazine on the gun, I stepped over the dead soldier, through the entrance and moved to one side, out of the light, while my eyes adjusted.

Nothing.

No Germans came bursting from whatever catacomb lay at the back of the dugout; none appeared from the outside to investigate. Other than the clack and clatter of rocks settling inside the dugout, all was quiet.

I inched ahead to see the rest of the cool, dark room. Three



dead German soldiers had been heaped into opposite corners by the grenade blast. A table, overturned in the middle of the eight foot by eight foot room, was surrounded by tin plates. Breakfast was plastered against the walls and spewed over the soldiers' faces. My second breakfast kill of the day, I noted, forcing myself to think mechanically, not emotionally. This luck wouldn't last. I bolted.

I retraced the path, moving past the first dugout, and kept going until it led me to the top of the draw, almost right where Runyon and I had dangled our feet and studied the castle. Had we seen the path, hidden by the thick brush, we might have anticipated company.

As I emerged at the top, rifle fire signaled that the Germans had discovered us. Then came mortar barrages. Then came chaos.

Our forward artillery observer, Second Lieutenant Walker, grabbed the handset from his radioman and barked coordinates. He repeated the instructions over and over. Shaking his head, he pulled the telephone-style handset away from his ear and looked at me.

"Goddamn, they . . . goddamn, they don't believe we're here. They don't believe we're this far . . . behind enemy lines. Goddamnit."

Walker looked as if he wanted to break the handset on the nearest rock. We desperately needed artillery fire on the German mortar positions. Our medics couldn't get to our wounded because the air was saturated with shrapnel.

A moment of uneasy quiet punctuated the melee. I scanned the edge of the ridge, expecting attacking Germans.

"Hey, what's that?" one of my riflemen yelled. "Look at that flock of birds." He pointed to a cloud of black specks flying toward us.

"Cover!" I yelled and dived for the dirt. Those weren't birds, they were mortar rounds. Explosions rumbled in rapid succession around us. Men screamed. This round of shells carved the life out of three of my soldiers and left three others bleeding. I swore at the Germans and swore at the American intelligence officers who doubted our location.

The Germans continued warming up. Castle-side machine guns opened at full throttle. I crawled back toward Walker as he grabbed the radio handset again, this time screaming with all possible intensity, "Get me some goddamned artillery up here now!"

He paused, obviously listening.

"No, the castle!" Walker shouted in response to some question. "Hit castle and Hill R-7, to the northeast."

Intense haggling followed. Walker repeated the coordinates. It finally worked. Low-trajectory 90mm antiaircraft shells screeched from the far side of Hill X, skimmed in low over our heads, and smashed into the castle and the draw. We ducked with every round. The castle was barely higher than the ridge top where we were huddled. The margin of error between our position and the German position was negligible, as long-range artillery goes. But once we convinced our guys, they delivered on target. The antiaircraft shells temporarily quieted the German mortars.

In the next moment of calm, some of my men started going for the cover of the trees and digging in. Mortar rounds started winging in again; whish, whish, whish, KABOOM; whish, whish, whish, KABOOM. I woke to our folly and darted into the trees, shouting and grabbing people. Trees were bursting. Those that weren't a hurricane of giant, jagged slivers toppled over to crush men.

"Move. Move. Move!" I yelled. "Keep moving!"

Disintegrating trees were more dangerous than a wide open space. The Germans knew it.

Men scattered. I grabbed, snagged, yelled, and prodded, trying to get control of them. In the distance I heard the bark of a German accent.

"Feuer!"

Fire! It was the German mortar battery commander giving the order to fire. I pulled at the man nearest to me and shouted "Move! Move or die!"

For the next several rounds, we played this game of chicken. When I heard the German command to fire, we jumped and ran to a different place. For a time, it worked. The



mortar rounds always landed where we'd just left. The Germans stepped up their effort and added artillery. The howls of shells, mortars, and wounded men intensified. The air was more burned explosives and bitter cordite than oxygen. A foggy kaleidoscope of dust, debris, and blood boiled around us.

Men dropped. A few pitched forward, others went bulleting backward, as if struck by a freight train. I ran to them, saying, "Please God, let him be alive." When I got to each man, I saw an arm or a leg or half of their face blown off. An hour before, charged with adrenaline, I'd felt born to do combat. I'd known I was an invincible giant. This slaughter jarred my immortality.

The mortars paused again. I checked for wounded and living. It was gruesome. Walker's radioman was dead, and the shell that killed him also demolished the artillery radio. Walker was alive and moving, though blood oozed from dozens of gashes.

I pointed to the radio questioningly.

"They promised reinforcements," he told me of his final conversation with headquarters.

"When?" I asked.

"They said right away."

"Ah huh," I replied. "Well, we gotta have them today."

I yelled for Dandy Belk.

"Where the hell's Runyon?" I asked.

Belk shook his head. Then I realized he had no reason to know the name of a white officer who had been around but a week or two. "The captain, company commander," I said.

Belk pointed behind me.

"Over there, in the little stone house, the shed," he said. "He headed there the minute that Jerry pitched a masher at you two."

Using the meager brush for cover, I ran for the squat building. Runyon was sitting on the dirt floor, knees pulled up to his chest, his arms wrapped around his legs. His face was translucent, the color of bleached parchment.

"Baker," he said with a note of disgust, "can't you get these men together?"

"I'm doing the best goddamned job I can, captain," I snapped, boiling that he had the audacity to cower in here and still criticize those of us out in the fray.

"*Fewer!*" echoed in the distance. Seconds later, the whish, whish, whish of mortar rounds returned. I followed Runyon's gaze out the door. Lieutenant Botwinik was crouched behind a low stone wall. A mortar cascaded into the top of the wall, right above Botwinik's head. Bricks spewed from a cloud of disintegrating wall.

Runyon gasped. I muttered a kind thought for Botwinik's soul. And Botwinik stood up.

He staggered toward the shed. Runyon and I grabbed Botwinik, sat him inside the door, and checked for physical damage. The flash of the explosion had blinded him, and he was a bit dumb from shock.

Runyon cleared his throat. "Are we going to stay here?" he asked raspily.

I couldn't believe the question. We had accomplished something four other assaults hadn't matched. And we were within conquering distance of the castle.

"We're staying," I replied. "We can do this."

Runyon blinked rapidly and looked at me as if I was crazy. "Look, Baker, I'm going for reinforcements," he said, fighting to make his shaking voice sound flat and controlled.

Reinforcements? A captain going for reinforcements? Wasn't this the task of a sergeant and a couple of privates? I kept my thoughts to myself. His face said it all. He hadn't stopped running since that grenade had come flying toward us.

"All right, captain. We'll be here when you get back," I said, hoping my stare told him what my mouth hadn't.

Runyon waved a palm in front of Botwinik's face. Botwinik grabbed Runyon's arm and looked at him.

"My eyes are coming back, captain."

Runyon helped Botwinik to his feet and signaled his personal radioman to take Botwinik's other arm. The trio eased out of the shed and walked toward my men.

"We're going for reinforcements, taking what wounded we can," Runyon announced.