



Chapter 9

As the truck bounced down the road, Smith closely observed his companions. They were no better clad, shod or equipped than any other Wehrmacht he had seen in the last week. They did not even look particularly well-fed, but they were neither listless nor depressed. They joked, they laughed; one even whistled a few bars of a marching song. If these are members of a defeated army, Smith thought, no-one has told them. Only their leader was quiet, and he was observing his men as intently as Smith was. He was a boy, barely of military age, and the youngest there. He wore the two pips of a sergeant-major, but they were roughly fixed to the epaulettes of a private's tunic.

'Where do we go, *Oberfeldwebel*?', Smith asked.

'To the outskirts of Berlin, sir, unless we run into something between here and there.'

'Is this a reconnaissance or a fighting patrol?'

The boy grinned. 'We're allowed to bite off anything we think we can chew.' His men chuckled.

The truck dropped them at Steiner's furthest outpost. As the men put on their gear, the sergeant-major checked every item and every weapon. Smith could now see that the personal weapons were mainly rifles. The biggest man carried a light machine gun. His offsider and most of the other men were carrying ammunition drums. Those that weren't had what looked like stove pipes slung across their backs. Smith had not seen a *panzerfaust* before, and resolved to be nowhere near if it were used. It was roughly manufactured, and looked far more likely to blow up its operator than the tank at which it was aimed, or rather pointed, for its sights were hardly worth the name. The boy formed up his dozen men in a shallow V, machine gun on the far right, covering perhaps two hundred metres of front. Two men stepped out ahead as scouts, moving from cover to cover, and the whole formation moved forward at a brisk walk.

What particularly impressed Smith was the absolute minimum of talk. He had spent a couple of years in the Territorials, where nothing had happened without a lot of talk, mainly shouting. Here the cigarettes had been extinguished before they started, apparently without an order being given. Nearly all subsequent communication was by hand signal. Smith and the leader walked side by side, between the machine gun and the rifleman. Not a word passed between them until the noon halt, by which



time Smith estimated that they had covered ten miles or more of open farmland without seeing a soul.

'Foot inspection!', said the boy, and a dozen men removed battered boots and holed socks to show him their blisters. He moved along the line and paused beside a small dark man, little taller than his *panzerfaust*, whose feet were wrapped in rags. He shook his head and took spare socks from his own pack. 'Look after them, Hans, they're the last pair you'll be issued. The feet, that is.' A laugh went down the line. It occurred to Smith that he was watching something more than professionalism. There was no fire for a hot drink and the hard rations were consumed cold. 'Christian', the boy said, 'where's the bottle I gave you to carry?' The cognac was duly produced and each man took a swig. There was no attempt to take a little more. If anything, the bigger men tended to hold back.

The boy took the opportunity of the halt to relieve himself against a tree. Smith joined him. 'Have you and your men been together long', he asked. 'Since the retreat from the Vistula. Why?'

'You just seem to be a particularly cohesive unit.'

'What does this look like to you?', the boy said, 'A rifle section?'

Smith nodded.

'Well, it's a *panzergrenadier* company, or what's left of it, and I'm its ranking survivor. We got back to the Oder with nothing. Even our machine gun's borrowed. I told the men that our only chance of getting through this was to stick together. We swore that if any of us did buy it, the rest would do what they could for the families afterwards. So now we do what we must, but our first duty is to each other.'

'And your duty to Germany?'

The boy looked at Smith's uniform and chose his words carefully. 'My family are Junkers. Our Germany has been destroyed by its own fantasies. I look to something better rising from the ashes.'

The patrol continued south for a few miles more until the boy suddenly lifted his hand. A hundred metres ahead one of the scouts was holding his rifle over his head with both hands. The boy ran forward and just as quickly returned. A Russian armoured patrol was moving slowly along a track that crossed their front. The patrol doubled forward. The track was straight and level here, with little cover, but there was a shallow bank on the high side and a solitary tree on the low, just a little further on. The boy placed his gun group behind it and spread his riflemen along the



bank, with two *panzerfaust* nearest the machine gun. It did not look quite right to Smith. There was no anti-armour weapon up front to prevent a breakthrough straight down the road. When ambushed from the flank, the textbook response of the Russians would be to charge up the bank. Potentially suicidal, to be sure, but better than the alternative of staying where they were in the killing ground. If they did charge, however, the German machine gun would not be able to fire effectively because the vehicles would be in the way. He was spared further thought on the subject by the appearance of a Bronniford armoured car. It was followed by a Lend-Lease Dodge truck with infantry in the back. 'You'd better arm yourself', the boy said. Smith confessed that he did not have a weapon. The boy put his hand into a pocket and brought out an ugly Russian revolver, a seven-chambered Nagant. 'There's only three rounds in it, but it's better than nothing.' Smith thought that he should take it for form's sake but the boy held it away, and pointed to the field glasses hanging around Smith's neck. Smith handed them over and the boy immediately put the trade to use. 'They're not paying much attention in the truck. Cocky bastards, that'll cost 'em.'

It did. The armoured car was almost on top of the machine gun when a gout of fire erupted from its side and it heeled over at a crazy angle. Neither turret nor hatch moved. Hans was not as successful with the second *panzerfaust*. It went under the truck, exploding beneath it, but the effect on the Russians was electric. They jumped out of the vehicle on the opposite side, into the field of fire of the machine gun. The boy had read his opposition correctly. More than half of them were knocked over before they had time to raise their hands. Christian dropped an egg grenade through the driver's slit of the armoured car, just to be sure. The whole affray was over in a minute. The bag was five prisoners, including one wounded. Hans came up to the sergeant-major. He was a Silesian and spoke a little Russian. 'The prisoners see the officer's SS runes. They are frightened that they will be shot.' The boy gave Smith a hard look. 'Tell them', he told Hans, 'that the 7th SS Panzer Army shoots no prisoners today.' Smith raised his eyebrows. 'The 7th SS Panzer Army?' 'Might as well make use of you, as you're here. By the time they get back to their lines, this ambush will be a tank battalion at least. Their headquarters might want to think a bit before pushing on.'



Two of the Russians, half-carrying their wounded comrade, were pointed back the way they had come. Their two NCOs stood nervously. 'These come back with us for interrogation', the boy told Hans. 'We've got what we came for, so our only unfinished business is with the SS here.' He pointed his machine pistol at Smith. 'Where's my revolver?'

Smith went cold. He slowly drew and offered it, butt forward. The boy shook his head. 'It's better for you that I keep the glasses, and you certainly need the revolver.' Smith asked what he meant. 'My general's adjutant suggested that you should not be allowed to return to Berlin. Your glasses will satisfy him that you did not.' There was contempt in his voice. 'We do not commit crimes: neither for the SS, nor against them.' Smith heard the rustle of wings as the angel of death, having paused, moved on. His mouth was dry, and his voice uneven. 'Stay alive, soldier. Germany will be wanting people like you after this is over'.

'And you? Will it be wanting people like you?'

Smith grimaced. 'I hope not.' He consulted his map and took a compass reading. The nearest suburbs looked to be about five miles distant, due south. He shouldered his despatch case and set off across country.