

Lycanthrope Legionnaire

April 23, 2013

Panzerkrieg Chronicles: Part 2, Netherlands - Chapter 2

Resurgence without Repose

Hauptmann's Notes

Taylon Ritter, Hauptmann

Arnhem, Netherlands

10p.m. September 1st, 1944

Arnhem is such a peaceful city, every inch is undisturbed save a stray bullet hole from some drunkard. The gardens are still vibrant, the fountains still flow, the roads are clean and without fault, it's unnatural. After so many years of ruins, debris, and warfare it is unsettling to see a city still intact, pristine, and so pretty at that. For holding this area so long, there is very little sign of our presence here. I don't even smell any German cooking.

My men and I have been bedded down in two rooms of the most adorable inn I've seen outside of the Black Forest. There is such craftsmanship in all the furnishings, it's easy to forget what luxuries we've willingly forsaken to be soldiers. This is a welcome reunion with the world of comfort and civilian life. Innkeeper, that's a job I could see myself doing without regret. We could have made an inn out of our house together, so much opportunity lost..

Germany is in ever greater danger, but we have to put our personal feelings aside, we have our duty to follow. Getting us back into the field is the best thing we can do to protect the Fatherland. We're starting our familiarization with our new Panzer tomorrow, and I'm supposed to pick Sven's replacement as well. I'm not sure I'm even ready to sit with my feet almost on someone's shoulders again, it won't feel right without seeing his head past my toes. I hope the new guy's not as difficult as Sven was. That obstinate ass sure could break my balls.

The bed behind me looks heavenly, though empty. I think, for once, I'll let myself enjoy a luxury and turn in early.

The Reich's Reapers: 7:00a.m. September 2nd, 1944

In the Northwest corner of Arnhem was a wooden, tiny, and elegant cottage remade into an inn. In the streets outside the Arnhem locals, as usual, timidly made their way down their streets and filed into cafes, stores, and workplaces. Here and there the residents of the town shuffled past varying sides of the cottage. An elderly man tipped his hat and walked up to the door of the cottage. The old cat reached under the crook of his right arm and gently presented a bottle of milk to the German soldier standing watch over the inn's entrance. With a smile and "Danke" the well-kempt labradoodle accepted the milk from the ageing delivery man and placed it at his feet. The soldier fished around at his waist and fetched a small wad of Dutch currency. He counted out the amount owed and handed the old cat his due, plus extra. With a smile the cat took his payment and thanked the armed guard as graciously and normally as he would any other resident of the city. As the old man shuffled away the labradoodle once more picked up the milk jar, gently opened the door to the inn, placed the jug on a small table just inside the archway, and then closed the door back on himself, resuming his station. The dog mused to himself how nice the Dutch were being, despite occupation, as he pulled a match from his A-harness and lit up a cigarette. He took one long drag as he continued to think to himself. "Maybe they're happy to have us here." He exhaled and the cloud of smoke rose up the inn's outside walls. "Or maybe they're just scared."

The inn's second, and also top, floor had five bedroom's spanning it. In the bedroom occupying the corner of the building a wolf sat on his bed. The lupine officer sat on the side of his bed with his pants belted around his waist and his shirt in a heap at the foot of his bed. He was silent, his snout and face buried in his hands. From the open window across from him sunlight poured through, illuminating the Hauptmann's boots and the smoke that lazily wafted in through the opening. The sharp scent of tobacco played around the wolf's buried face, he sniffed sharply at it before coughing just slightly. With a labored inhale the wolf looked up from his hands and out the window. The sights of Arnhem, a cool breeze, and the warming sun came back through the window to greet him and his sullen posture. He sighed and rubbed at his eyes while groaning, all the hallmarks of a man not quite ready to be awake. Defeated, and with a sharp exhale the wolf pushed himself up from his bed and craned his neck side to side, a man who knew he had to face the day whether he wanted to or not.

The downstairs of the inn was composed of a medium sized bar, a dining area with two large tables, a large hearth against the East wall, and a few scattered tables and chairs around the rest of the open space. The fireplace was lit, but only barely; two small logs crackled and burned, giving off enough warmth to keep the room nice and cozy feeling. Sitting at a table opposite and just a couple feet from the hearth were three figures enjoying their breakfasts and readying themselves for the day ahead.

Closest to the inn's door was an orange fox, Eckart Brandt. The vulpine loader was leaning back in his chair, tilting it back on two legs, while slowly eating from a plate in his lap. Sitting to the fox's left was his rather hefty crewmate, Serge Aegerter. The slightly-portly Saint Bernard cradled and cooed to the cup of coffee in his mitts. With a love bordering on obsessive the dog sipped and savored every sip of the mug full of liquid heaven, having already obliterated his own plate of food. The last figure, an all-black shepherd who sat at the table to his crewmates' lefts was the youngest and frailest of the assembled men. The dog, Nicholas Reen, acted the most normal of the three and ate his food sitting forward in his chair, care taken to keep his elbows off the surface. All of them shared a common background and agenda for the day, armored warfare. Today was their first day back in the saddle in a good deal of time and the three soldiers were eager to be so.

Behind the bar the inn's owner, a rather burley avian man, shuffled around his self-crowded kitchen. In a pan in his left hand the innkeeper was cooking up sausages for his German patrons while his right was doing its best to flip over a few eggs without breaking their yolks. Just past the bar's length and stools was a wooden spiral-staircase that led up to the second floor. The staircase's turns were not tight, in fact rather purposefully wide and grandiose, but still served their basic purpose. Down the top steps came four loud clops, then a fifth, a sixth. The three men at their table opposite the fire turned around to watch their commander leisurely make his way down the staircase. Not one to ever lack in the appearances department, the wolf's coat-tails dragged ever so slightly behind him with each step, riding down the staircase in a flowing motion. Atop his head, there was surprisingly nothing; the Hauptmann's usual officer's-hat was nestled in the crook of his right arm as his left guided him down the banister. With one final pair of thuds the wolf hit the bottom floor's wood and paused.

Hauptmann Ritter looked about the room, he did ever-so love this inn's design and humble nature. The wolf took in each chair, wall, hand-carved stool, the bar's polished top, and the hammered iron rivets adorning the cottage's support pillars; everything in the inn was crafted so perfectly. His eyes stopped looking as he glanced over at his men, all three straightened up and saluted sharply, Serge nearly spilling his coffee in the process. The wolf smiled, nodded back, and made his way to the bar. Behind its length the innkeeper was hustling his feathers, willing them to not make a mistake in the midst of what was likely an SS officer. He piled the sausages and eggs onto his best-quality plate and spun around to present it with the attempted-sincerest look of glee he could muster. Across from him the jet-black wolf reached into his coat and took out a simple leather wallet. From the billfold he fetched enough money for the breakfast and room, as well as much more, in fact all the Dutch currency he'd been given. The wolf put it down on the bar in front of the astonished bird and graciously accepted his plate from the slack-beaked owner. The humbled Dutchman went to thank the wolf, but as he looked up from his fattened payment the officer was already making his way towards his men. Wirth mirth he stuffed the money into his hands and then fed them to the slots of his cash register.

Serge, Eckart, and Nicholas watched patiently as the Hauptmann strolled closer. As he closed the distance more details became visible, he would definitely be entertaining higher-ups today. Around the wolf's neck was an Iron Cross, worn even less than his various, lesser commendations. None of the men knew quite why the wolf refused to wear his merits, but they accepted it, it was his will after all. With a slight scratch of wood on wood the wolf pulled back a chair opposite his men and seated himself comfortably in it. Another scratch, this time heavier, as the Hauptmann scooted his seat towards the table and comfortably rested his arms in place, ready to eat.

The wolf stabbed at a sausage with his fork and set about cutting it. "Good morning, men."

All three answered in unison, though not in the same words.

"Good morning, sir." "Morning, sir." "Hauptmann Ritter, sir."

The wolf grinned as he raised a bite up to his mouth. "Ever the proper one, Serge."

"Only maintaining the rank system that keeps our military organized and running, sir."

"I appreciate your commitment, but you could relax sometimes Serge, we all need it once in a while."

The Bernard started to reply, opening his mouth to shape a word but then instantly screwed his lips shut. He tried again, failed once more, and sat motionless, looking fidgety and like he was going to explode. The wolf swallowed, sipped at a glass of water he poured himself, and sawed at his breakfast again.

The Bernard looked to his left, Nicholas nodded back. "Hauptmann, sir. Nicholas and I want to apologize more formally for our insolence yesterday. We were foolish, we undermined morale, and more so, we made you look bad."

The Hauptmann raised his fork and swallowed another bite of sausage. "Apology accepted Serge, Nicholas." The wolf nodded at both of them and went back to his plate.

"We understand we screwed up sir, you were always very adamant about keeping Sven in line. We request tradition to be upheld and for discipline to be given out."

The wolf chewed and swallowed once more. "It's fine Serge, we were all on edge. No punishment is needed, your admissions of guilt is discipline enough."

The Bernard lowered his mug to the table and sat up straight. "Sir, you always made sure to promptly punish Sven for his disregard for command. We do not want to be afforded any favors."

The wolf moved on to attacking his eggs, leaving the sausages alone for now. “Really, Serge, it’s quite all right.”

The Bernard shook his head in defiance and sat up straighter. “Sir, I demand punishment. What did you punish Sven with, we will do it ourselves.”

The wolf slightly grimaced but fought it back. He half-scolded his subordinate. “Serge...”

The dogs pressed back in unison. “Sir, please tell us.”

Agitation slightly grew in the wolf’s voice. “Serge, Nicholas, that’s enough.”

Both dogs leaned forward but only Serge spoke. “We have undermined you sir, this cannot stand to pass without ju-“

The table shook beneath the Hauptmann’s fists as he slammed them down in unison against the oaken surface with stupendous anger, his plate and the others on the table shook and jumped slightly. “I SAID ‘ENOUGH’!”

Across the table everyone widened their eyes, woke up even more, and sat still in silence. Nicholas swallowed hard and instantly looked back down at his plate to start munching on his breakfast once more. Eckart too looked down to his meal in his lap and focused the entirety of his attention on it, not daring to try and look at his commanding officer. Serge sat in silence and looked back at the wolf, his eyes were stuck glued to the Hauptmann’s and he suddenly understood some part of what the greyhound yesterday had felt like. The Hauptmann never got mad, but he was the fearsome sight when riled.

The Bernard swallowed hard and lifted his mug. “Sorry, sir.”

Patience returning, the wolf moved on and set about dividing up and eating his meal even further. “We’re picking Sven’s replacement today and I’ll want all of your opinions.”

The three men nodded in agreement and subordination, Eckart spoke up. “Can’t we get to try our new Panzer first?”

“First, we have to pick a man to drive it, unless your legs grow a couple feet in length, Mr. Brandt.”

Nicholas chuckled and the Hauptmann smiled. The grin was contagious and Eckart found himself smiling at his own foolish question. “No, sir, they haven’t. What are our options?”

The wolf swallowed a larger bight of sausage without chewing, obviously speeding up his pace. “For panzer, or crewman?”

Eckart sat forward, his chair coming down on all four legs finally. “Both, actually.”

“Her number is 526, and I narrowed down our final candidates, I refused to take any academy graduates without field experience.”

Nicholas swallowed the last bite of his sausages and licked at his own lips and snout while carefully speaking. “How many did that weed out?”

The wolf inhaled the last of his sausages. “66”

Serge sipped his coffee hurriedly, trying to keep pace with his commander. “Out of how many, sir?”

“70”

Everyone’s eyes widened just a bit, not expecting there to be so few veteran crewman left.

Eckart swallowed the last bit of his bread and placed his plate on the table. “Have you picked one yourself, yet?”

The Hauptmann rolled his last egg up into a cylinder with his fork. “I have, but you three will be the deciding factors. If you do not like him, you will have three others to choose from.”

Nicholas finished his meal and eagerly stepped into the conversation. “Which one? What’s his name?”

With a flourish the wolf raised his egg up to his mouth, tossed the rolled up morsel into his snout, then clamped down, and quickly mashed, then swallowed the last of his meal. “I’ll not say. Now, let’s be off. We’ve got to be at the proving grounds by 8:30”

Serge, last to finish, slammed back the last couple sips of coffee in one immense gulp. The dog gave a slightly worried, uncomfortable look as he fought it all down until succeeding. He gasped and exhaled, relieved. “What are we waiting for?”

The Hauptmann was already standing, he squared his dress cap evenly on his head and positioned it perfectly center. “That would be you, Serge.”

The other men laughed and stood up from their chairs, pulling their woolen caps from their back pockets and putting them on their heads in the process. Serge followed suit and stood up with his friends and commander, all of them in their cleanest wardrobes. The parade of four panzer crewman, led by their Hauptmann, marched their way to the inn’s door. The innkeeper took his milk delivery from the tiny table near the door and politely opened up the door for his guests. The bird held the heavy wooden slab open and smiled graciously, in particular at the wolf who had so handsomely compensated him for all of his services. In return the wolf nodded his head in acknowledgement and strolled out into the sunny Arnhem streets; gunner, loader, and radioman in tow.

“Hauptmann Ritter, sir.” The labradoodle door-guard locked his heels and saluted.

“Soldier.” The Hauptmann saluted back.

“If you’ll follow me sir, I’m to lead you to the proving grounds.”

The wolf scoffed and looked back to his men. “It looks like they think we’ll get lost trying to get there.”

Behind the Hauptmann his men smiled and grinned as they bunched up behind him in a semi-circle. The labradoodle stepped from off the inn’s steps and made his way a couple feet down the street, slinging his MP-40 over his right shoulder.

“This way, sir.”

The wolf extended his arms out sideways with a slight bow of the knees and looked back to his men once more, gesturing forward with a grin on his face. “You heard the man, follow him.”

Down the road the guard went, around him the Arnhem residents gave a wide berth and crossed the road to walk on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the road. The four panzer crewman followed him in tandem, catching fake smiles and scrupulous eyes as they went. Nicholas in particular felt rather unnerved by the populous staring him and his friends down as they walked past.

The shepherd frowned and craned his neck sideways to look past Eckart’s shoulder. “Why are they staring at us. We’ve done nothing bad to the Dutch”

Serge shook his head dismissively. “Occupation is reason enough, Nicholas.”

The shepherd sighed, defeated, and focused back forward. The five Germans marched through the semi-crowded streets quietly. Ahead of them the people scattered across the road to the other side, behind them they flowed back to the side they were originally on. Back down the road the innkeeper was cleaning up his stove and humming to himself thinking about the generous German patrons. As he toiled behind his bar the bell of his door rang, signaling the arrival of a customer. The bird spun around to greet his patrons, but instead just looked to the three figures in his doorway. The three men all stood at attention with “SS” thunderbolts standing out on their uniforms and two of their helmets. The highest ranking pitbull in the front of the group wiped his boots on the entry-mat and stepped inside. Behind him the two flanking Waffen SS closed the door and stood on either side, guarding the door.

The pitbull cleared his throat and smiled, jowls raise in mirthful glee. “Good day!”

Royal Navy Commandos: 7:43a.m. September 2nd, 1944

“Come on Sergeant, let me off just this one Hun!”

“Private Murray, if you ask one more time I will personally pistol-whip you.”

“You’re no fun. It’s not like they’d miss the guy. He’s standing in the middle of the woods, anything could happen to him.”

Skulking through the Southern-most section of woodlands in the Hoge Veluwe were four very out-of-place soldiers. The four British commandos had been sneaking into the Arnhem area for days now. Moving by night at first, then even by day when their time window started to narrow and shorten. The four men had come to a small clearing and stopped just on the tree line of its Western side. Walking alongside the clearing’s East side a German soldier, clad in camo-garments and carrying an STG-44, slowly paced around looking bored. Behind the thickest tree of the Western side, Sergeant Simon Frasier had his back shoved against the tree’s bark.

The ginger wolf, who had long caught guff for his unusual appearance, signaled his men to silence. To his left his Corporal, Eric Graham watched the clearing through the splitting neck of his own tree. The snow leopard, comfortable in the cool Autumn air, watched the German soldier through his tree’s “V” shaped neck, making sure nobody lost sight of the kraut. To Eric’s left a 5’ corgi, Lee Hurn, was glued to his own tree. The dog’s tree was equally as short as the corgi and Eric smiled in his mind at the thought. On the opposite side of the squad, to Sergeant Frasier’s right, was the last member, Jason “Jett” Murray. The typically brash and reckless shepherd-wolf cross was fighting back the urge to lean around his tree and kill the lone German target he had been told to leave alone.

The sergeant whisper-hissed at his subordinate. “And what happens when he doesn’t report back and they send out a search party? Have you forgot that probably half the Germans have noses as strong as ours, where are we going to hide his body?”

Jason scowled and shrunk-down in his boots a bit. “I hadn’t thought of that sir...”

The ginger wolf continued whisper-scolding. “Of course you didn’t, that’s why I’m the sergeant and you’re still a private. Now, be quiet and wait for him to leave. We’re almost at the field the Germans trucked whatever was under that huge tarp to anyway.”

Sergeant Frasier, finished berating his younger submachine gunner, peeked back around his tree to watch the German kicking at the rocks beneath his feet. He sighed heavily at the inconvenience this sudden find had put on their advance to recon the Arnhem area.

Lee leaned over from behind his tree, the shorter dog now watching his enemy as well. “What is this joker doing?”

Eric, watching the meandering chocolate lab as well, chimed in. “Performing very poorly at being on guard.”

Jett looked over to his feline squad mate. “Yeah, but still. If they’ve got guards posted all over the forest, whatever’s under that tarp must be important.”

Lee, keen on the tarp’s importance, answered back. “It’s important enough to sidetrack our reconnaissance mission and make us even more likely to get killed. We’re supposed to be updating maps with German positions, not sneaking into German encampments peeking under tarps, this is bullshit.”

Jett scowled as he watched the enemy. “I’m with Lee on this Sergeant, we don’t even get to kill any of these Huns, but they get the chance to kill us. That’s just not fair.”

Sergeant Frasier stood up straighter against his tree and gestured for his men to quiet down. “They only get the chance if you two give it to them, now shut your mouths. He has to move eventually.”

Lee looked to his sergeant with a challenging grumble. “And what if he doesn’t? We’ll miss whatever Montgomery saw fit to risk our lives for.”

Corporal Graham perked up his ears, his beret shuffling a bit at the motion. “He’ll move soon.”

Sergeant Frasier flipped his neck to look left at the cat. “Yeah? What makes you say that?”

“He keeps looking at his watch more frequently, he’s waiting for something.”

Lee popped his ears up curiously. “Any idea what?”

The serenely quiet woodlands were rendered very noisy very quickly as a whale of loudspeakers screeched outwards through the air. Three solid blasts of a standard operations siren emanated from the Southeast of their position and almost instantly the German lab was off running towards it. With large and eager strides the brown dog disappeared behind the trees and plant life with haste.

Corporal Graham smiled. “If I was a betting man, I’d say that.”

Sergeant Frasier wheeled around and off his tree and started quietly, briskly striding through the clearing. “Let’s go men, double time. We’re following that kraut.”

The three other commandos all spun off and around their trees breaking into the same brisk, crouched run across the clearing, catching up to their sergeant. Once grouped up again the four men more carefully stepped through the brush and foliage of the clearing’s Southeast side, trailing after the hasty German. They followed for about 200 paces before coming across a path. Sergeant Frasier raised his hand and his men lowered down into the brush surrounding the path,

he followed them soon after. Tense and quiet seconds went by as the four commandos lay motionless and quiet. Their training and patience was rewarded when three more Germans came running down the path, heading in the direction of the loudspeaker hale. The three pair of footsteps thundered past and when they finally passed out of hearing the four men rose up in unison, crossed the path, and kept heading Southeast through the woodland's thick growth.

Trees, bushes, tall grass, and local, feral wildlife all zoomed by as the commandos made haste through the forest towards their destination. Through the trees the unmistakable green light and sight of a massive field could start to be seen. So off the beaten path, Sergeant Frasier wasn't worried about being spotted or heard as they quickly, and somewhat-quietly stepped through all of the cool fauna surrounding them. The tree density lessened and more of the field came into view, off to one side the commandos could start to see a large, metal structure come into view. A few more minutes and a couple hundred more feet and they were a stone's throw from the tree line of this much vaster clearing. Sergeant Frasier carefully got down onto his stomach, his men followed suit, and all four crawled the last 30 meters to the bush and tree line overlooking their target.

The ginger wolf tucked his sten gun against a tree in front of him and fetched his binoculars from his pack. "Alright. Lee, camera. Jason, notepad. Eric, binoculars, and make sure the damn blinders are on it this time."

The team of men rummaged through their packs and pulled out their various tools. Lee prepared his camera on a thin rubber mat, angling its lens through the chain-link fences towards the sheet-metal building and its massive front doors. Jason fetched his notepad and pencils, ready to dictate all that his commanding officers dictated. Eric readied his own pair of binoculars, careful to double check that his blinders were on to keep them from reflecting any sunlight and getting them spotted. The leopard and wolf scanned over the massive field with their binoculars, it was huge. There were makeshift wooden cutouts of T-34 and Sherman tanks dotted here and there, various squads of cardboard soldiers stood at attention in spots on the grass, there was even an intact Cromwell tank perched just in front of a huge berm. Around the exterior of the field there was an all-encompassing chain-link fence topped with barbed wire and guarded rather extensively by patrolling guards. The only portions not being patrolled were the lengths around and behind the targets in the field, for obvious reasons. The centerpiece, even though situated on the far right edge of the area, was still the massive sheet-metal garage with at least, Eric counted, ten guards posted statically around it.

"This is some kind of operation." Eric commented. "I count at least 25 men total on guard and patrol duty, alone."

"I see a staff car coming down the road." Sergeant Frasier announced. "Four occupants. One driver, three officers."

Jason jotted down on his notepad everything that Eric and Simon fed him. In between their announcements he continuously worked on a sketch of the field and area, intending to update maps and alert the higher-ups to the proving grounds they certainly found to exist.

“Staff car stopped. Eric, ranks and medals, I’m on physical details.”

“Sir.”

Sergeant Frasier focused on the first officer. “Doberman, glasses, approximately age 45, unusual white fur pattern on the left cheek, circle-shaped.”

Eric chimed in with each officer’s rank after analyzing their uniforms. “First officer is an SS Colonel. Iron cross with oak leaves, unit citations, Leibstandarte uniform markings.”

“Second target is a Belgian shepherd, standard fur pattern it seems. Has a glossy left eye, definitely blind, age around 40.”

“Second officer is a Heer Major. Iron cross, combat wounded, valor citations, various Eastern front awards.”

“Last target is a Grey wolf, brown coat with black and white vertical snout accents. No other distinguishing traits, age approximately late-sixties.”

“Third officer is a Heer General. Iron cross with oak leaves, six unit citations, no combat wound badges, has some Great War commendations. Uniform is brand new, recent promotion.”

Lee snapped his camera, capturing a photo of the three officers shaking hands with guards and approaching the front doors of the garage. The massive doors opened slightly and then remained open as the officers walked inside.

Sergeant Frasier looked up to the road again, another staff car was approaching from down the road. “Another car coming, about 1000 feet away from the garage. Jett, radio in those officers then get ready”

Private Murray rolled over onto his side and pulled the receiver from the radio strapped around his shoulders. “Yes sir!”

The ginger-wolf looked back up the road and watched the approaching car. There was nothing too interesting with this one. It looked like there was only one officer, but there were a lot of black uniforms in the car, SS probably. He studied the car as it came closer, 500 feet away and the passengers were slightly easier to make out.

“Five passengers, looks like one officer. Stand by.”

The four commandos readied themselves as Jett finished calling in the first three officers and rolled back over onto his stomach. As he readied his pencil and continued to slowly sketch

the surrounding area his officers were glued to the approaching car while Lee fidgeted with the camera.

“Car’s stopped, get ready corporal, privates.”

The wolf and leopard watched as the driver, a simple foot soldier stepped out of the car and went over to open the door on the other side for his officer passenger. The labradoodle tugged at the short door and pulled it wide, the passenger stepped out; the other three passengers all filed out of their seats and fell in line behind the officer.

“Officer is a black wolf, tall, white ear tips, white tail tip, approximate age is 35.”

“Officer is a Heer captain, no wounded badges. Iron Cross with oak... .. Jesus.”

Sergeant Frasier looked to his right at the cat. “What?”

“He’s covered in unit citations, I mean covered. Look at his chest, look at all of their chests.”

The wolf looked back down his binoculars and scanned over the four marching men in black uniforms. “Whoa... Those krauts are painted in medals and commendations... Quick, before we lose them!”

Eric perked up. “Right!”

“Officer, Heer captain, Iron Cross with swords and oak leaves, too many citations and commendations to count or make out. Panzer officer uniform, veteran of the Eastern Front medals.”

“Next target is a grey fox, grey and brown facial markings, approximately 30, maybe severe fatigue, looks severely tired.”

“Fox looks to be a private, first class. Numerous commendations, too many to count. Veteran of the Eastern Front medals. Panzer crewman uniform. No other significant identification.”

“Third target is a shepherd, all black. No distinguishing features. Approximate age appears to be lower to mid-twenties.”

Eric scratched at his nose, focusing like this was tedious work. “Shepherd is also a private, first class. Numerous commendations, a few less than the first two. Veteran of the Eastern Front medals. Panzer crewman uniform.”

The commandos were a well-oiled machine as they analyzed, wrote down, and took photographs of all the personnel entering the area. Private Murray in particular was working overtime to record all of the information coming his way without missing any detail.

“Last target. He’s a Saint Bernard with a standard mottled face pattern. Heavy set, tall. Mild signs of fatigue it looks like. No other distinguishing features. Approximate age appears to be lower thirties.”

“Final target is a Leutnant, plain. Personal valor citations, numerous other commendations and awards, just like the other three. Veteran of the Eastern Front medals. Panzer crewman uniform.”

Jett furiously scribbled at his pad as he wrote down the last of the details in what he wished could have been short-hand. As soon as he finished he “ooed” and grabbed at his wrist in discomfort and mild pain. Lee put a cap back over the camera’s lens and rolled over on his side to look at his comrades.

Sergeant Frasier sighed and relaxed finally, but not completely. “That was the last one, no other cars or personnel approaching. Good work men.”

Jett wiggled his right wrist in the grip of his other hand. “Ouch, you bastards owe me a new wrist.”

The three other men chuckled while Eric moved the conversation backwards. “Those last four concern me. They had a hell of a lot of awards, and all of them were really close to each other in amount.”

Lee rolled his tinier, slightly portlier, body over in place to get closer to the others. “Yeah, and they were all tank crew members. Gotta’ be some kind of aces if you guys are giving any credit to just how decorated they were.”

“Trust me Lee, they were covered in them. Jason, get back on the radio and get those other four to command. With that many medals and hopefully accurate ranking from Eric-“ The snow leopard scowled a bit at any sign of distrust in him. “-command should be able to tie some names to them.”

Jett nodded and scrambled his left arm for the receiver on his back. “Sir!”

The ginger wolf cracked his neck and rested his head back down on his right forearm, staring through his binoculars at the four tank crewmen disappearing into the garage.

“Now we wait to see what they’re hiding in there. Everybody get comfortable, we could be here a while.”

The Reich's Reapers: 8:23a.m. September 2nd, 1944

The inside of "Proving Ground N14's" warehouse was not a furnished place. Sheet-metal paneling over concrete walls topped off with a sheet-metal roof fastened to crossing, interlocking steel beams. There was nothing to this building other than its efficiency at hiding its contents and keeping the elements out. Hauptmann Ritter and his crew walked through the massive, almost-hanger-sized, doors and came to a halt on the cool, concrete floor standing in a line. The panzer crew stood shoulder to shoulder with one another, Hauptmann Ritter on the far left, then Serge, Eckart, and finally Nicholas. Across from them, standing and conversing in front of a massive drab-grey tarp, were three officers; two Heer, one Waffen SS. Oberst Guderian, Major Strasse, and Generaloberst Voss spoke with one another in a jubilant manner, they hadn't noticed the men walking in and standing at attention behind them. When Major Strasse turned around he practically shouted in excitement at the assembled men.

Luckily the officer maintained his composure in spite of his favorite subordinates from the Eastern Front once again gracing his presence. Instead of shouting for joy the Major stood, crisply saluted, and beckoned his fellow officers to share his same view. The two other men turned around and grinned, their guests were here. The ageing Generaloberst eagerly approached the assembled panzer crew. When he stopped a few feet from them all four crisply saluted and clacked their heels together.

"Hauptmann Ritter, so nice to finally meet you." The ranking wolf looked over the other three men. "And you all as well, you are all legendary, it is an honor."

"Thank you, sir." The Hauptmann held his salute and nodded his head down and up in acknowledgement.

"I believe Major Strasse and Oberst Guderian need no introductions."

"None, sir."

"I hear you all served together on the Russian front." The old wolf paused to contemplate.

"Damn Bolsheviks, they're beating us you know?"

The Hauptmann swallowed and answered plainly. "I had heard this, yes."

Oberst Guderian stepped forward. "Then you know more than ever that we can't survive being squeezed on both sides. We have to push the British and Americans back into the ocean, or we will lose this war."

Major Strasse stepped forward eagerly. "Which is why you're here. You will be the vanguard of our French reclamation force."

The Belgian Shepherd stepped further once more and grabbed the Hauptmann's shoulder. "I am sorry for your loss my friend, but if we are to survive, if Germany is to survive, we must act with haste, and without repose."

The Hauptmann nodded in agreement. "I understand, and I agree Major. My men and I will do our part. Pardon my skepticism, but we just barely escaped France with our lives, we don't have the numbers or forces to take it back."

Having stood silent for longer now than he had actually spent talking to the legendary commander, the ageing Generaloberst felt it his turn once more to speak. He strode back towards the tarp he had stood beside a couple minutes earlier.

"We do not have the numbers, no. But, we do have the force necessary. Mr. Adalwulf, if you would be so kind."

From behind the tarp emerged a mangy looking wolf with longer hair who also happened to also be covered in grease on almost every part of his smock. The frailty built specimen of lupine "superiority" walked over to the side of the mound and put his hands on it. To his right another mechanic emerged, an equally mangy looking goat. Both of them gripped the tarp tightly with both hands and braced their legs.

"Sure thing, sir."

The two men pulled and tugged, their boots slipping on the concrete every couple steps, but they made progress. Inch by inch the massive grey tarp slid sideways off its hidden prize; and what a prize it was. As the fabric tugged up and over the apex of its contents it shuffled off the whole way with the assistance of gravity coming to rest in a heap alongside the metal behemoth it had hidden. This immense marvel of engineering was a sight to behold. The three officers who had earlier discussed it seemed none too shocked, but the Hauptmann and his men were practically slack-jawed at their new charge. Standing more than ten feet tall it was taller than two men standing on top of one another. Accounting for its armor skirts the giant of a tank was wider than it was tall at a width of over twelve feet. Equally impressive in length, the unveiled panzer was just over 21 feet long, not accounting for its main gun. All over, the Tiger II was sheathed in armor so thick that even at point blank, most allied cannons would just scratch it. It seemed invincible in endurance, but what really impressed and commanded the most respect was the massive 10.5cm main gun. 105 millimeters of the same killing prowess of their older 88mm gun, but better, and with a much larger caliber. This tank was excess, it was hubris, but it was a functioning design despite these traits.

Nicholas found himself talking without thinking. "My god..."

Eckart fumbled for words to match, and eventually followed suit, somewhat. "What he said."

Oberst Guderian beckoned the crew closer. “Come, this is your new steed. Familiarize yourself with it. The Royal Tiger was designed with the first Tiger in mind. You’ll find that it operates the same, but has improved in every way.”

Major Strasse chimed in. “The optics are stronger, the gun laying is even more responsive and accurate, the radio is a newer model with further range and functionality, and last but not least, it carries over fifty of the new 105mm tank shells.”

Generaloberst Voss looked like a kid in a candy store. His snout curled back in glee from ear to ear. “Go ahead, try it out!”

Serge realized one important flaw in the officer’s logic and broke his minute long fixation on the incredible main gun that was mounted on the equally massive turret.

“We still need a driver, sir.”

“Oh! Of course, I’d forgotten. Hauptmann Ritter, would you like to introduce your men to him?”

The jet-black wolf placed his hand on the coarse, slanted armor of the King Tiger’s hull and gently placed pressure on it. “I will leave that to you sir.”

“Are you sure?”

The Hauptmann turned around and latched his arms behind his back, furling his coat. “It is as up to myself as it is my men, they each cast a vote too. We may yet turn him away.”

The old wolf shuffled his jaw at the unusual turn of events, but it didn’t slow him much. “Very well then.” He yelled into the warehouse’s expanse. “Unteroffizier Nein, front and center.”

From the far wall to the left of the Tiger a dog in black Panzer uniforms strode confidently. The bright-white husky barely seemed able to keep his fur inside his uniform, the fluff was forced from his cuffs and collar neatly, but it was clear the choice was out of comfort, not dress. He approached with confidence in his step and on his face, however it was easy to tell that the prospect of working as part of such a legendary and lauded team was an intimidating matter. The prospect came to a halt, clacked his heels together and saluted to all of the assembled men, even though he technically outranked two of them.

“Unteroffizier Erwin Nein, at your service Hauptmann Ritter and crew!”

Serge cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “Why does that name sound familiar.”

Eckart nodded and barked an affirmative. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Nicholas, meanwhile, had not made the same connection. He looked to his crewmates expectantly. Somewhere in his head that surname was drawing up dread.

The Hauptmann smiled and waited. After enough time passed and it seemed like they couldn't peg it, the wolf answered them. "That's because he is Rommel Nein's brother."

Serge smashed his right fist down into the open palm of his left hand. "Damnit! I was so close, he even looks like him! Well, kind of. You know... minus that whole scar thing."

Eckart nodded in agreement. "Mmmhmm, looks like a clone of that gung-ho nutjob."

"You guys aren't exactly making him feel welcome." Nicholas quipped as the other two nodded at each other in agreement and then at Erwin.

"Oh!" Serge stopped nodding and folded his arms "Woops, sorry Erwin."

"It's all right." The husky answered back, not seeming the least bit less eager.

Nicholas looked over to his Hauptmann with his head slightly cocked. "So he's who you picked?"

The black wolf walked back over to his men and stood to their rights. "Yes. He's certainly qualified, he's a team player, he's as diligent as Sven, and I thought it would be nice to have some common ground to work off among us rather than just throw him into the fire with us."

Eckart yawned and pawed at his gaping maw. "Seems logical to me. I'm for it."

Serge wiggled his legs a bit, keeping them from getting tired, as he sized up the smaller husky. "Hmm, yeah, he looks all right to me."

Nicholas stood there thinking and pondering, wondering about the ramifications of having the husky sitting next to him instead of Sven. It would certainly be quieter and less hectic he thought. He might even be less of a pain in the ass. Nicholas swooned at the thought of this.

"I think he'll make do." Nicholas grunted, trying to appear dominant to his new neighbor inside the Panzer.

"It's settled then!" The Generaloberst brought his hands together in a big clap. "Unteroffizier Nein, welcome to the Reich's Reapers. Now, please, all of you. Get to know the Royal Tiger. We have testing of the new gun to perform in forty minutes."

The Hauptmann walked to the side of his new tank and started to climb up her side, hiking himself up onto its hull with a pull of his arms and the armor skirt as his anchor. The wolf then climbed atop the turret and, with effort, lifted the cupola free of its circlet and hefted it backwards. With a clang it fell open and the wolf crawled up and lowered his legs and waist into the immense turret. He sat down in the turret, left his cap, and then popped back up, headset on.

"You heard Generaloberst Voss, climb in and let's get Jägerwolf hunting again."

Royal Navy Commandos: 9:07a.m. September 2nd, 1944

“What do you think they’re hiding in there? Those fucks have been at it for over an hour.”

Eric reached over to his side and punched the wolf-dog in the shoulder as he hissed. “Shut your gob, Jett, you’ll get us found. That patrol over there is only 30 feet away.”

The wolf-dog rubbed at his shoulder and grumbled, looking lazily at the two German soldiers “on patrol.”

Jett scoffed, “Oh come on mate, that one’s takin’ a piss, and the others havin’ a smoke. They’re about as far from alert as you can get.”

“Still, keep your voice down. We’re here to find out what the Germans shipped here on that train, and to update maps, not get caught or in a fight.”

Jett dismissively waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah, I hear yah.”

Eric grimaced and started to voice a response until Sergeant Frasier cut him off. The Sergeant lowered his binoculars and looked to his men. “Looks like we’ve got movement. Those big front doors are sliding.”

All four men looked towards the large garage, watching the building open through the myriad of soldiers shuffling around the perimeter of the closed yard. The heavy steel slabs came to a loud and sudden halt, shaking on their guiderails and hinges. The first three German officers they saw earlier stepped out of the doorway conversing with each other. They stopped on one side of the doors and looked back inside. From inside the garage there was a loud whine, the wind dying down just enough to make it out. It grew faster and louder, more and more, like a turbine spinning up.

Jett cocked his head. “What’s that noise?”

Lee chimed in and his squad looked to him. “Sounds like a boat-sized version of my dad’s old car starting.”

The wail grew louder, faster and more intense. The patrolling German soldiers even stopped to look at the garage they guarded. As the whine hit an apex a monstrous roar erupted out from the garage doors and thick smoke started to leak out of windows just below its roof; anybody who wasn't looking before, was now. The roar lulled to a low grumble and maintained steady pitch, seeming to calm down. Seconds of just the growling of an immense engine placated everyone around the area, except the commandos. They listened carefully and expectantly; then came the shrieking and moaning of machinery and warfare.

The air around the garage filled with the sound of metal on metal, the crack of tons and tons of weight moving across concrete ground, the telltale sound of German armor. From the doors an immense, camouflaged hull and gigantic barrel started to push forward. An impossibly huge wall of steel propelled forward on its clambering tracks that came slowly into view.

Armored skirts lined above its "legs" and all over the monster was mottled, thick, and coarse plating. The lumbering giant ground forward, sinking into the soft soil as its weight was put to bear on the ground, its nose barely across the lawn. This monstrous Panzer's turret, itself nearly the size of a Stuart tank, pushed forward past the outline of the doors, its length came into view more and more with each passing second of growling propulsion. The commandos looked on as fully in view now and riding high in the cupola was the jet-black Hauptmann directing with his hands while yelling into his headset. Below him, on the side of the turret, in giant, white lettering "526" was emblazoned.

"Jesus...would you look at that thing." Jett whispered under his breath.

Sergeant Frasier calmed their awe and fears at the alien tool of warfare. "It's a King Tiger, newest Jerry tank. A pretty rare Panzer, looks like they're making more. Except, something's wrong... This one seems to have a much larger gun. Lee, take pictures, Jett, give me that radio. Command needs to hear about this."

Sergeant Frasier took hold of the hand-piece and tugged on it, Jett dragged himself forward a bit to give the chord more reach. As the ginger wolf looked through his binoculars at the trundling Panzer he got in contact with operations command.

"Command, this is 5th commandos, Sergeant Frasier. We've got new jerry armor outside Arnhem. We--"

The wolf stopped speaking so suddenly that all of his squad mates looked to the wolf as he nodded and just listened to whatever the other side of the radio was telling him. He was writing down something on his personal notepad, his face lost some color after about a minute, and then he promptly thanked Montgomery's command and handed the receiver back to Jett.

"Sir?" Eric questioned, binoculars still pointed at the tank rumbling across the field.

The Sergeant paused, took a huge breath and then exhaled slowly. "We've got a new mission men."

Lee growled and smacked his forehead. "Oh what is this shit...? Again? What now?"

"Assassination..." The wolf paused and swallowed. "The Americans were wrong. The Reich's Reapers made it out of France."

End part 2
