

THE LAST DRAFT

Ron Tanner

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT called us we thought it was some kind of mistake. Most of us had not seen combat in thirty years or more. But they said they had a job for us, so we went along. They gave us uniforms—ill-fitting blue coveralls—and put us in a trench with other old men under the command of a twenty-three-year-old youngster named Keele. The trenches are all concrete, very deep, with steps up to an observation shelf. Ours is about a quarter mile long on either side of the central bunker, where Keele and the volunteers sleep. The rest of us sleep in alcoves, more exposed to the elements. When we first arrived there was a promise of weapons, machinery, and soy meal, but supplies have never come. Keele has tried to call headquarters but his communicator receives only static. So we wait. There is nothing else to do.

Keele has the only weapon, something that looks like a miniature camera. The rest of us make do with whatever we can find, digging up broom handles and rusted tools from a nearby landfill. During our first week Keele gave us binoculars and told us to stand watch. Watch for what? we wanted to know. Anything, he said. Just keep your eyes open. So we watched the horizon for days. We saw fireworks sometimes in the distance, but they had nothing to do with us. We were too far away. Keele assured us that we would see action very soon. And he was right. The attacks now come at all hours—pink streaks of light followed by what sounds like birds chirping. We have no defense but to dive for cover while Keele stands above us, returning fire. Sometimes he sends volunteers into the field to watch for the enemy, though the enemy has yet to be identified. The volunteers succeed only in getting themselves shot, leaving their binoculars strewn about the field.

Everybody gets picked off at one time or another. It doesn't mean death, necessarily. Maybe just immobilization. There are a lot of

immobilized men out here, many of them lying around like day-dreamers, staring at the sky, nothing much to do but watch the swallows wheeling overhead, count the stars at night, mark the time passing with the rise and fall of the sun. After several days of lying about, immobilized men get dopey and hard to handle, so Keele has ordered us to leave them where they fall. Haverham, our most recent casualty, has been a particular nuisance, singing at odd hours of the night and early morning, sometimes waking the entire camp. There has been talk of moving him farther from the trench but that would mean more work for whoever has to feed him. Keele says the immobilized carry on like this to get attention, so the best thing to do is to ignore them and they will soon quiet down.

They took away our watches before sending us out here, so we don't have a good sense of time, but it is generally agreed that we've been in the trenches for more than a month. Keele is angry to have lost so many men in so short a time, especially since there were only forty of us to begin with. There are now just twelve volunteers and only a few of us in uniform. I say "in uniform" because the volunteers have taken to wearing strings of white lights. Nothing else. Just strings of small white lights, the kind we used to drape around Christmas trees but now intend for guiding aircraft to our position—aircraft we've never seen.

The volunteers wear their lights like bandoliers, strung criss-cross over their chests, each string powered by a battery the size of a pea. Keele, still in uniform, encourages the rest of us to join the volunteers, who have named themselves the Unit Watch. They collect binoculars from the field and scout the horizon for the approaching enemy. Keele lets the Watch sleep on air mattresses in his bunker. And he gives them extra packets of powdered coffee, which they dump into their canteens and drink like soda pop.

Keele is a career soldier. A tall boy with grey eyes, a shaved head, and a pale chubby face, he's been in the service for five years. He longs to be underground with the computer operators and the keyboard crews, where the real fighting is. "I have talented hands," he says, showing off his uncallused fingers. "I should be on a machine." It depresses him to be with us old men, who know nothing of the new technology.

He says the enemy is moving rapidly inland and will be upon us any day now. He's lying, of course, just trying to stir us up. But the volunteers believe him. They'll believe anything, they're so confused, walking around naked all the time. They dance about, whooping and hooting, their genitals flopping from side to side, their lights clicking like glass beads. Even some of the immobilized, sprawled nearby, join

the commotion, their voices rising like a distant wind.

If you're not a part of the Unit Watch there is absolutely nothing to do out here. Nothing to look forward to. Nowhere to go. Keele has taken away almost all privileges for those of us still in uniform. He says we're cowards for not joining the others. And he's right. Whitlow and I want nothing to do with the Watch. Whitlow is my only friend in the trench. A big nervous fellow with a red face and full head of silver hair, he's about my age, in his mid-sixties, and like me he doesn't know what's going on. He just wants to go home, lie in his heated lounge, and watch reptile fights or drill team workouts on his big screen.

Whitlow and I sometimes sneak away to the landfill while Keele pow-wows with the volunteers in his bunker. The landfill is a grassless expanse of garbage about a quarter mile behind our trench. It contains refuse from a trailer park that used to be here when an oil company was drilling the area years ago. It's hard to imagine anyone living in this place. The country is arid and empty, with low scrub-covered hills, dry creekbeds, and abandoned derricks in the distance. The junk we find is third-rate, but it gives us something to do. I have a collection of doll heads and Whitlow is starting a collection of spoons.

After dinner, while we're gathered around the heat cannister, Whitlow goads the volunteers. I've cautioned him about this, but he can't help himself, he has such disdain for the others. He wouldn't say a word, of course, if Keele weren't napping in his bunker.

"All this running around and shouting doesn't do you guys any good," Whitlow tells them. "You should try crawling across the field on your bellies, the way soldiers did in the old days."

The volunteers don't know what to say to this. It's almost time for their nightly bonfire and many are on edge.

"We'd get dirty, wouldn't we?" someone asks.

Whitlow nods, chewing a cracker. "You'd have to wear clothes. But there's a chance one of you might get through to the enemy lines."

The men murmur among themselves, their lights blinking in and out of shadows.

"Then what?" says Brimmer, one of the younger men. "We got no weapons. We supposed to beat the enemy with our broomsticks?" The others laugh and Brimmer joins them. "Broomsticks!" he says. He used to be a software salesman, but he looks more like a boxer, dark and unshaven.

"I thought you guys wanted to see the enemy," says Whitlow, raising his voice.

"Sure, we do, Whitlow." It's Keele, joining us. For the first time, he's naked like the others. Everyone is speechless with surprise. His skin

seems to glow, it's so pale. "Are you going to show us where they are, Whitlow?"

Whitlow shrugs, embarrassed. His hands are trembling. So are mine. I'm edging back into the shadows, hoping Keele doesn't think I'm in on this.

"He says we should crawl on our bellies."

"He says we can see the enemy."

Keele looks at Whitlow up and down. "Sounds like Whitlow has some good ideas." He stoops to warm his hands over the cannister, a string of lights dangling between his legs. "You'll show us how it's done, won't you, Whitlow? You'll be a volunteer." The others hoot and applaud.

"I didn't say I would do it, Keele." Whitlow is panting, panicked. "It was just a suggestion."

Keele has never sent anyone out alone, but, then, he's never been naked like this either. I don't know what to expect.

"You'll be a volunteer, Whitlow." Keele stares at the cannister, its dull orange glow.

Whitlow is wheezing, unable to speak. The others whistle and cluck their tongues. "He'll see the enemy!"

Whitlow looks at me as if I could save him but I just shrug, queasy with fear. He gasps and passes out.

Nobody moves except to hold their hands out to the heat cannister, which ticks steadily. They act as though Whitlow didn't exist. Slowly I crawl over to him, then pat his face to see if he'll come to. His fat cheeks are cool and rubbery and for a moment I almost think he's dead, until I slide a hand into his coveralls, feeling the head of his chest and the slow push of his heart. Brimmer glances at me and grins, as if I were doing something stupid. I grin back, feeling stupid. Someone snickers. I grab Whitlow under the arms and try to drag him away. Keele looks up casually. "Where are you going, Sidney?"

I shrug, staring down at Whitlow's boots. "Just getting him out of your way, that's all."

Keele nods approval. I almost thank him for letting me go so easily.

Despite the chill, I'm sweating by the time I get Whitlow to his alcove, where I prop him against a locker. The volunteers have built a fire of roots and scrub in front of their bunker, firelight throwing elastic shadows the length of the trench. Keele leads the men in a cheer, everyone shouting Unit Watch! Unit Watch! UNIT WATCH!

I pour a cup of water over Whitlow's face and he wakes, sputtering. "I got to get out of here," he says. He rubs his eyes and blinks as if about to cry. I remind him that we signed papers to be here. We agreed to be part of the action.

“But I didn’t think it would be like this.” He starts blubbing. “That kid will see me killed tomorrow.”

I sit next to him. He wipes his face with his palms. “You could hide somewhere,” I tell him. “You could hunt animals and live off the land. There are still ground squirrels hereabouts.” We’ve seen one or two darting through the scrub near the landfill, but I can’t imagine Whitlow catching one. He whimpers, staring at the darkness between his knees.

Whitlow packs his government-issued knapsack while I stand watch. “My spoons,” he says. “I want you to take my spoons. Melt them down later and make a spear or something.” He hands me six or eight tarnished spoons. I put them in my back pocket. “And here,” he says, reaching deeper into his locker. “I was saving this for a special occasion.” He gives me a doll’s head the size of a grapefruit. It’s in relatively good condition, with half a head of hair and blue eyes that open and close, winking alternately.

I tip the head forward so the eyes close. “I’ll be proud to add this to my collection, Whitlow.”

He smiles, his jowls quivering with emotion.

After the fire dies down, Keele and the others retire to their bunker for the night, leaving only two men on guard. Whitlow suggests we knock them out with a couple of large rocks. I don’t like the idea but I agree to go along because Whitlow is nearly hysterical and there’s no telling what he’d do if I didn’t help him. We sneak to opposite ends of the trench and wait for the right moment. It’s a cloudless night, lit by half a rising moon, and quiet but for the humming of an immobilized man biding his time somewhere in the dark.

Clutching a smooth oblong rock, I crouch behind a mound to one side of the trench. I can’t see the guard, but I can hear him, pausing a few feet away to clear his throat and spit. I wonder who it is. I think of us standing around on induction day, all of us shy, making awkward jokes as the doctor came by with his inoculation pen, jabbing our necks as if he were trying to spear a cocktail onion, the guy in front of me giggling, he was so nervous.

Whitlow whistles—a signal that startles me—and I clamber over the mound. But the guard hears me and turns just as I bring down the rock, smashing his right ear. The blow makes a terrible smacking sound and the man gasps, toppling and pulling me down with him, his blood dripping into my face. Spoons spill from my back pocket, tinkling like loose change into the trench. I catch a glimpse of the guard’s face in the moonlight. It’s Brimmer. He growls and falls on me, knocking me breathless. He punches me in the mouth, splitting

my lip. I squeal. I'm praying Brimmer won't knock out my teeth. He hits me again, this time in the head. My face, my nose, my sinuses are tingling, burning, as if I've just inhaled salt water. I try rolling away but Brimmer's got me by the throat. He's trying to choke me. "Hold on," I tell him hoarsely. "Wait a minute." He goes limp suddenly, then slumps over. Whitlow has just knocked him from behind.

Whitlow is trembling, his hands cold as he helps me up. I gag, unable to thank him. "You'd better pack your knapsack," he says.

I've never been so scared. My hands are shaking as bad as Whitlow's. He is close by, panting and wheezing. "Hurry," he tells me. I fumble in my locker for socks, underwear, doll heads, stuffing everything into my knapsack. The moon is high now, illuminating the field, the trench, the unconscious guards.

We make a run for it but don't get very far because Whitlow trips over a body not thirty yards outside the trench. It's an immobilized man, lying face up the way they all do. His string of lights has burnt out.

"Jesus, watch where you're going!" It's Haversham.

Whitlow apologizes in a loud whisper.

"You guys on special assignment?" As Haversham blinks up at us his eyes catch the moonlight, flashing momentarily. "You're not deserting, are you? Keele says he'll shoot deserters."

"We're collecting binoculars," I tell him.

There are an extraordinary amount of small rocks and pebbles scattered on and around Haversham—objects thrown by those who don't appreciate his singing. Whitlow and I stoop to brush away some of the debris.

"My medals," says Haversham. "Don't knock off my medals." We find several plastic chips on Haversham's chest. "Keele sent them out the first week I was immobilized."

"You've got a lot of them," says Whitlow.

"There should be enough to make an 'H'," says Haversham. He grins as we arrange them neatly on his chest. "You guys feel like singing something?"

"It's too late for singing," I tell him.

"Just a couple," he says. "We don't have to sing loud."

"You're always singing loud," says Whitlow, raising his voice.

"Shhh!" I squeeze his arm.

"Just a couple of my favorites," says Haversham. He starts singing loudly in Italian.

I clap a hand over his mouth, his hot breath wetting my fingers. Whitlow takes a sock from my knapsack and stuffs it into Haversham's mouth as I pull my hand away. Haversham makes muffled sounds of

outrage, but there's nothing he can do. He's immobilized.

We walk all night, stumbling over rocks and shrubs. We look to the horizon for signs of the enemy, but we see nothing. We stop often to pee; we're both so nervous. We haven't seen an immobilized man for miles. All is quiet but for our strained breathing and our sluggish footfalls, stirring dust to our knees. We keep in line with a distant ridge so as not to wander in circles. The sky pales in the east, threatening sunrise. "If we don't find cover soon, we'll be easy targets," says Whitlow. He starts whining. "I can't believe this is happening to me. I owned property, you know. I had investments. I paid a lot of taxes." He sits, beginning to blubber. "Damn, I deserve better than this."

I sit nearby. My knees pop as I bend. "You've said this before, Whitlow. Many times."

"I can't say it enough! My life is shot to hell." Whitlow wipes his face on the sleeves of his coveralls, spreading a smudge of dirt across one cheek. "Could you do my temples?"

Sometimes Whitlow does my feet; sometimes I do his temples. I stand behind him and massage the sides of his head with my index fingers, the way Whitlow says his mother used to do it. He was high-strung as a boy and this calmed him, he says. At first I felt awkward when he offered to massage my feet—nobody had touched them in such a long time. But when I thought of it I realized I didn't mind having my feet treated kindly, at least not under these circumstances.

Suddenly we hear birds chirping all around us. We fall to the dirt. In the dull light of dawn it is difficult to see the pink streaks of weaponfire racing overhead, but we know they are there. The attack continues for hours, it seems, until the chirping becomes a monotonous lullaby and we fall asleep, our faces against the dirt.

When we wake, the sun is almost at twelve o'clock and our necks are badly sunburned. We forgot to bring binoculars, so we can't tell how far we are from the enemy lines. We're not sure whether the attack was routine or especially aimed at us. We proceed on our hands and knees in hopes that we will not be seen. After a few hours of this, however, Whitlow quits. He's blistered and bleeding.

"I don't care if I'm shot," he says. "I'm going to walk on two feet like a man."

We decided to walk in single file so maybe one of us will survive if caught in another attack. I make Whitlow lead the way. We're very hungry. My stomach gurgles.

After a while Whitlow says, "Can you smell that?"

"Dust," I say.

"No, barbequed soy patties." He sniffs the air like a dog, his nostrils flaring. "A sizzling center cut, probably. I'd be happy just to drink the juices or hang my head over the grill and smoke my face."

I imagine a charred soy patty steaming on a plastic plate. My mouth waters.

"There!" He points. "Smoke!"

A feathery column of gray-white smoke rises from the horizon. We run for it. And soon we see the enemy. They are waving to us. Beckoning. Perhaps they think we are two of their own. But I'm not sure. This seems too easy. I stop running and tell Whitlow to hold up. He doesn't listen, trotting ahead of me, his huge rear swaying from side to side. "Can you smell it now?" he says.

I lope after him, reaching for his coveralls. "Stop, Whitlow!" Suddenly he collapses, tumbling in a heap, and I somersault over him. The enemy has opened fire. I'm hit, an odd bubbling pain in my right chest. I'm dead.

No, I'm just immobilized. Whitlow lies a few feet away. He's gasping.

The sky swirls above me and for a moment I think I'm on a tourist flight, orbiting. I'm gazing out a tiny window, watching clouds in the stratosphere. They're white and wispy like my hair the last time I saw myself in a mirror.

Whitlow is talking to me. That is, I hear him but it takes me a while to understand what he's saying. They hit him in the shoulder, he says, but he doesn't know which one because he's now immobilized and can't feel a thing. "We're going to get awfully sunburned lying here all day," he says.

We lie about for hours, squinting at the sky. Then we hear footsteps approaching, somebody coming to look at us, maybe hose us down. Whitlow starts hyperventilating. "Perfume," he says. "I smell perfume." Sure enough, some of the soldiers are women. They wear dark brown uniforms and black berets, with camera-like weapons on their belts. They are not much younger than we, but they have a disciplined manner. Apparently they are professionals.

"We've been walking for miles," I tell them. "We're exhausted."

"We thought your smoke was from a cookout." Whitlow smiles meekly. "Charbroiled soy patties? Corn on the cob?"

The soldiers take us to their trench, which is almost identical to ours. They empty our knapsacks and search our pockets. The commander, a bright youngster named Holtz, asks us all kinds of questions about Keele and the others.

"They're naked," I tell him.

"They drink a lot of coffee," says Whitlow.

We're lying on cots in Holtz's bunker, sunlight streaming through three holes in the ceiling. Holtz has a shaved head like Keele, but his face is sunburned and freckled and he has an overbite, which he tries to hide by smoking a pipe. His aides are massaging our backs all the while, and to my surprise I think I feel something, a dull tug somewhere.

"Their weapons?" says Holtz, chewing the pipe stem and puffing. His tobacco smells like smoldering compost.

"Weapons?" says Whitlow. "You're joking."

"They have lots of weapons," I blurt.

Holtz leans over me, his eyebrows raised. "Lots?"

I smile up at him, realizing how stupid I must sound since Keele is the only one who ever returns fire and probably half of that never reaches the enemy trench.

Holtz turns to Whitlow. "Lots of weapons, Whitlow?"

Whitlow is breathing hard, realizing, I hope, that he must go along with my lie. "Every man carries a weapon. That's the truth."

Holtz nods pensively, tapping his pipe stem against his buck teeth. "You guys hungry?"

"Don't torture us!" says Whitlow.

"I just asked a civil question," says Holtz, sounding a little hurt. "What do you take me for?"

His aides strap each of us into a chair built especially for the immobilized, then they feed us, spooning steamy soy meal into our mouths. They treat us well since they have no immobilized of their own. Twice a day they massage us, kneading our useless limbs, prodding our backs, reviving feeling where we thought none remained. And at night they wheel us to the campfire, where we listen to the soldiers singing.

Holtz has encouraged us to join the singalongs. He says they will help facilitate our rehabilitation. And I have to admit, we're feeling pretty good. Too good, perhaps. All we do is sit around every day and watch the soldiers going about their business, doing their wrist and hand exercises, polishing their uniforms, sweeping their alcoves, measuring the surrounding territory with their micro-transits.

"We're growing fat," I tell Whitlow.

"Listen to this," he says. He takes a deep breath and sings, "Doe, a deer, a female deer. Ray, a golden drop of sun..."

"You're getting better," I tell him.

He smiles, nodding in agreement. He's grown nearly a full beard and his face is tanned. "You should practice too."

"No, I'm going to stop altogether."

"What are you saying?" He tries to shift his head a little, grunting.

"All this singing wears me down."

"You like this singing! Last night you were louder than me." Whitlow is starting to wheeze, probably afraid I'm going to ruin everything. "You can't tell me you don't like the singalongs."

I shrug; that is, I try to shrug, but nothing happens. "Sometimes I almost feel like I can't stop singing, Whitlow. I think I'm getting dopey."

"That means you're getting better," he says. "I wish I was feeling half as dopey."

"No, I'm going to stop singing, and I think you should too."

"These people are our friends. They're *feeding* us."

"That's part of the problem," I say.

"What problem?" His voice breaks. "I don't see any problem here!"

"I'm scared, Whitlow."

Whitlow sighs, wheezing, near tears.

I'm staring down at the doll heads the soldiers have tied to my chair. They nod in the breeze. "Are you going to join me in this, Whitlow?"

"You make me miserable."

"This is the enemy, after all."

"You'll wreck everything."

"If it weren't for me you'd be lying somewhere out there immobilized."

Whitlow says nothing. He knows I'm right.

When the aides come to wheel us to the campfire Whitlow greets them with a smile but, seeing my frown, he says nothing. Holtz is leaning over the fire, his head held up as if he were warming his chin. The soldiers have gathered in a semi-circle facing him. They are chattering, some joking, others tentatively humming scales. We roll into their midst and they part, making room as if we were guests of honor. They call us by name. Somebody smooths the hair across my forehead. I smile politely. Holtz raises his pipe like a baton and suddenly the soldiers are singing, everyone linking arms. The strength of their voices startles me. This is a happy song, one of their favorites, perfectly suited to their twisting but lilting language. Holtz conducts with vigor, his eyes closed, chin up, head jerking in time, arms swinging. And I am sick, dizzy with restraint, for the urge to join them is almost irresistible. At the edge of my vision I see Whitlow sitting as silently as I, his eyes glistening. Already the soldiers have noticed our absence. Holtz squints at us, his arms slowing suddenly. The song falters and almost breaks apart, but a few take the lead and it continues, oddly altered. And as they continue, their faces yellow with firelight, the soldiers glance at us, first with caution, so as not to

be rude, then with puzzlement, and finally with alarm. They are beginning to realize that we are silent for a reason, that we mean to remain silent. I can hardly bear to watch their painful surprise, but, fixed in my chair, I cannot look away. Whitlow is about to bawl. I hear him whimpering faintly in the background. Or maybe I hear myself, wanting to make clear to the soldiers that this is nothing personal. Surely they see the pain in our faces. Surely they will realize that this is part of the sacrifice we all have to make.