



Soldier Girls in Action (Front Lines 1.50)

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Category: Young Adult, Historical, War

Description: In this first digital original novella set in the world of the Front Lines series, Michael Grant showcases the real-life female journalists of World War II who became the first women war correspondents in history.

When fierce reporter Anne “Spats” Patrone joins the front lines, she gains access to the female soldiers of Second Squad, Fifth Platoon, Company A, 119th Division, including Rio Richlin. During her journalistic investigation on the front lines she will discover that women are capable of much more than fighting. But what starts out as a pursuit for a story turns deadly when Germans attack. Will Spats make it out alive?

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Ladies of America, by the time you read this exclusive report the fighting in Tunisia will be all over, but the war has just begun for our boys in uniform—boys who have now been joined by girls. I recently had occasion to spend some time with the soldiers of Second Squad, Fifth Platoon, Company A, 119th Division, and I saw firsthand the way some of our soldier girls behave in battlefield conditions.

This is not the story of the battle of Kasserine Pass. It is not the story of any great battle of the sort you read about in history books. This is the story of one of those numberless, small but vicious fights that test a soldier's courage and determination and all too often end not with the awarding of medals, but with "Taps" being played mournfully over a fresh grave.

I had missed most of the heavy combat by the time I made it to North Africa, having, as regular readers will recall, been held up in Burma. But I was determined to see whatever was left of the fighting, so upon my arrival at the headquarters of 119th Division outside Ghezala, Tunisia, I found a young corporal named Milo Jorgenson who had temporary ownership of a jeep.

"So, where are we going, Corporal?" I asked him.

"Nowhere good, ma'am. There's a squad in a ravine up in them mountains, there? Got themselves some Kraut dead-enders that didn't get the word that it's over, I guess. SNAFU."

SNAFU, ladies, is the acronym of choice for GIs. It stands for Situation Normal: All Fouled Up. Though another word is sometimes substituted for Fouled.

Corporal Jorgenson agreed (after a negotiation involving a carton of cigarettes) to allow me to tag along on a mission to run ammunition to the infantry squad deep in the rugged foothills of the Atlas Mountains.

I soon discovered why we were carrying ammunition in a small jeep rather than one of the big trucks the GIs call deuce-and-a-halves. It seems the only road into this remote fastness was within range of the very German mortar team we were going to see about, and we didn't want to give them any more of a target than strictly necessary. Indeed, they took a shot at us and thankfully missed!

This Kraut mortar team was the objective of Sergeant Jedron Cole's squad, and his squad turned out to be quite unexpected, starting from our first encounter. For I was met on my arrival by two GIs, a big, rangy country boy named Luther Geer, and a young blonde reclining against a rock and scribbling in a notebook. She was a pretty girl with short-cut hair coated with the same dust that covered everything else. She had the collar of her overcoat turned up against the cold.

"Hello," I said.

"Yeah?" The woman soldier was as suspicious as you might expect a GI in a remote location to be upon seeing a reporter.

"I'm Ann Patrone. I'm a reporter. Friends call me Spats."

That earned me a tilted head and a guardedly interested look. "Jenou Castain," the soldier girl said. Then, "J-E-N-O-U. It's from the French word ingénue. And the big ugly one there is Luther Geer. Geer is spelled A-S-"

This being a family magazine, ladies, I will spare you the rather risqué and clearly inaccurate spelling she provided. Geer, her fellow private, took it all in good humor.

“What are you doing here?” Geer asked.

“Looking for a story.”

“Well, we ain’t much of a story. You gonna help us carry the ammo?”

I assured them that I would.

“Got any smokes?” Castain asked.

I handed her two packs of Luckies, and with that the deal was done. Although if I’d known just how hard it is to climb through ravines and scramble across slippery shale while carrying two cans of .30 caliber ammunition, my camera, and the trusty revolver my father gave me, I might have decided against it.

It was a long climb, much of it almost vertical. I tripped and fell more than once, and even slid ingloriously down a gravel slope and very nearly flattened Private Geer. But at another point I was able to stick a leg in front of the five-gallon water drum Geer was carrying and stop it rolling down into a deep crack, which earned me both a bruise and a little grudging respect.

After a long, cold, miserable climb full of scrapes and bruises, we came at last to a small, almost round bowl formed entirely of rock. It was a pretty enough spot, just the sort of place for a romantic picnic, with a sandy floor and rock walls turned red where touched by a beam of sunlight, and gray where shadows endured. It reminded me of an exhibit of landscapes by Georgia O’Keeffe I saw in New York.

One side of the bowl looked like a landslide, like maybe this bowl started out bigger but it was cut in two by an avalanche of sharp-edged stones and gravel. The fallen rock formed a ridge that rises to a height of twenty feet, and half a dozen soldiers perch atop it, careful to stay low and out of sight of whatever’s on the other side.

For I must tell you, ladies, it was the Germans on the other side of that heap of rock, and we were close enough to hear them coughing and moving about.

The squad is alert, ready to yell if the Germans suddenly come sneaking around behind us, but their relaxed postures signal that this is unlikely. I can see why: the stone bowl we're in has just a single narrow entrance—the ravine we came by. The bowl has one low side, no more than ten feet high, and it is manned by a vigilant corporal everyone calls Stick, but whose true name is Dain Sticklin. The other sides of the bowl rise sheer and tall, so I have to bend my whole body back just to see the top.

Sergeant Jedron Cole, a gap-toothed, cigar-chomping textbook example of the genus *Sergeantus americanus*, explained the situation to me.

“Up top there, that highest part, it's gravel and loose shale, so we'd hear anyone coming from that direction. Even if a Kraut got up there he wouldn't be able to sight a rifle 'cause of the angle. Might could toss some potato mashers—sorry, Kraut grenades—but they aren't as dangerous as our pineapples. And if they try to climb this rubble we'll hear 'em, and it won't be an easy climb for them.”

“So how do you plan to deal with the Germans?” I asked, to which Cole grinned and said, “Carefully, ma'am. Carefully.”

Then he turned serious and explained a little more. “Some bright bulb up the chain of command decided someone had better come in here and flush them out. We think it may be just half a dozen fellows, or maybe a dozen, but they've got that mortar and they've got themselves an old Spandau spittin' out six hundred rounds a minute. From what we've been able to make out—which is from holding a little mirror up on a stick—they're in something like a mirror image of this bowl we're in, only they've got a clear view down over the road.”

“You can’t call in an artillery mission?”

Cole spit out a loose bit of tobacco. “Lady, I don’t know how accurate you think a 105 is, but they’re as likely to kill us as the Krauts. Anyway, down in that bowl, it’d be a one in a million shot to hit them.”

“So it’s a standoff.”

“Except we can still get ammo and food, and sooner or later those cutoff Kraut bastards are going to run out. They’re being careful not to waste shots, so we know they’re getting low. They’d have gotten your jeep for sure if they could have spared the rounds.”

“So you just wait?”

With the laconic drawl that is the official tone of the combat veteran, Cole made me an offer. “If you want to go get ’em, I’ll happily loan you my Thompson

n. They’re just over that rubble. We hear ’em singing at night.”

Needless to say, ladies, I did not take him up on the offer.

Cole’s squad is unusual in that it has more women than most outfits, and it even has an Englishman, Private Jack Stafford, a rakish young charmer with a devilish gaze and a ready laugh. Stafford was evacuated to the United States during the London Blitz. He later lost his family to Nazi bombs and, unable to join up with the British Army, he added his talents to ours.

There is also an Oriental by the name of Private Hansu Pang, but never fear, ladies, this one is red, white, and blue all the way through.

Private Cat Preeling is the sort of girl you might expect to find in a front line unit—stocky and strong, but nearly as puckish as Stafford. Private Jillion Magraff is shy, quiet, given to drawing in a notebook she keeps with her at all times.

Every unit needs a playboy, and Private Tilo Suarez fills that role to a tee, looking like a dirtier, beat-up version of Frank Sinatra.

Finally, there is Private Rio Richlin. Richlin and Castain are childhood friends, but they could not be more different. For one thing, Richlin is the very picture of the corn-fed, freckle-faced, all-American girl. An all-American girl you might expect to find at the counter of the local soda shop or speaking at a high school assembly.

She looks impossibly young, but the impression of sweet innocence evaporates quickly. You see, ladies, there is a look in the eye of a true fighter, a real combat veteran. It is made of wariness, skepticism, and exhaustion that somehow add up to a profound sense of competence.

Richlin balances her M1 Garand rifle on her hip, nods warily at me, and speaks to Sergeant Cole.

“Sarge. Stick and I think we see a way to maybe get around them instead of just going at ’em and getting shot up.”

“What are you thinking, Richlin?”

“Is that spelled R-I-C-K-L-I-N?” I interrupt, ever the reporter concerned with accuracy.

“R-I-C-H-L-I-N. First name Rio, like the city down in Brazil where I wish I was right now.”

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“Let’s hear the plan, Richlin,” Cole says.

Richlin turns and points to the sheer wall to the right of the ridge where half of the other soldiers crouch. “See that kinda seam or what have you? You get to that ledge there, after that the seam cuts back into the rock so it’s covered, almost like a tunnel. We figure it’s worth checking out, because maybe it continues on and comes out on the other side. Figure the Krauts either don’t see it or can’t get at it. It’s tight and it won’t be easy, but it might give us some enfilade with Stick’s BAR.”

Cole considers this, following her pointing finger. “Richlin, that’s a long shot. You’d be exposed trying to jump to that ledge.”

“Figure we go after dark,” says the young farm girl, sounding almost bored at the prospect.

“There’s a half moon, and it’s looking to be clear,” Cole says. “Which means you’ll be silhouetted against the stars.”

“We go before the moon comes up. First light we see what we see and if we get an angle on them . . .”

“You and Stick?”

That is my cue. “And me,” I say. There is something engaging about the freckle-faced soldier girl. And a desperate night mission with one of the newly minted girl soldiers? What better story would I ever find than the battle for Tunisia in its final phase?

“Okay. You and Stick get some rest,” Cole says. “As for you, miss . . .”

“Folks call me Spats.”

“I suppose there’s a story behind that nickname,” Cole says.

“I suppose there is, and if you let me go along on this mission I’ll buy you a drink someday and tell you all about it.”

“I don’t really think that’s . . .” He begins, ready to tell me no. That’s when I play my ace.

“Say, Sarge, I notice you enjoy a good cigar.”

“Lady . . . sorry, Spats . . . I enjoy anything that even looks like a cigar out here, it don’t have to be good.”

Like a magician producing a rabbit from his hat, I draw a cigar out of my blouse pocket. “I don’t know if this is any good, but I swiped it off a colonel’s desk.”

I confess to having embellished that story a little, ladies. In fact, I swiped it from a competing reporter. But nothing catches the attention of an enlisted man like the prospect of putting one over on the brass.

I spent the rest of the day interviewing the members of the squad, and I may write about them someday. But this story, I knew, was about the freckle-faced soldier girl.

The hour comes, and we begin to crawl up the gravelly slope, the grim-faced Corporal Dain Sticklin in the lead, his BAR heavy and no doubt painful on his back. And behind him a young but equally grim soldier named Rio Richlin, with her M1 Garand slung over her shoulder and her pockets stuffed with grenades.

The plan is to reach the top of the rise and then jump—silently we all pray—to a rock ledge three feet away and in plain view of the enemy. It's too dark to see the ledge, but the two GIs have spent the day memorizing every inch of the approach. Darkness will hide them, but it may also betray them.

This is not one of the great battles of the war, ladies. This is a small but possibly deadly action, a squad of GIs against a squad of Krauts, the kind of dirty little fight that is the essence of war. Man on man, but in this case, one of the “men” is a girl who looks like she should be applying makeup and picking out a dress for the high school dance.

The jump is dangerous and terrifying. It will require Rio Richlin to stand up, fully exposed, and to leap three feet into darkness so profound I can barely see my fingers six inches in front of my face, and land on what she can only hope will be a solid ledge. Rio will go first so Stick can toss her his BAR. She crouches low and glances to her left to see the outlines of helmets from those ready to provide covering fire if the enemy starts firing.

She drinks deeply from a canteen, then sets the canteen down carefully. Canteens are noisy, and both she and Stick are stripped of all gear but ammo and grenades. The ammo clips have been wrapped in dirty socks to muffle any noise they might make.

Rio takes a couple of deep breaths, exhalation steaming, steadying herself. Then fast, silent, and fluid, she stands up and takes two steps forward over gravel that skitters a bit underfoot. And she leaps.

She lands hard, and I can hear a small sound as she bites off a grunt of pain. But she's on the ledge, and the Krauts seem not to have noticed.

She turns and stretches out—exposed again—to take the BAR from Sticklin.

Stick jumps next and is guided to a softer landing by Rio's outstretched arms. Stick squeezes her shoulder in thanks, a small gesture. A brotherly gesture, it seems to me, as I crouch terrified, waiting for my turn to jump. To my embarrassment I make a mess of it, kicking gravel on the takeoff and emitting an explosive exhalation on landing.

Immediately one of the soldiers crouching in wait below coughs loudly and scatters some gravel to distract from my clumsiness.

Miraculously, the Germans have not noticed, or if they have, they've decided against firing up at us.

We find ourselves in a smooth-walled ravine so narrow we have to turn sideways to go forward. My slight claustrophobia begins to nag at me. Some part of my brain keeps warning that we're going in and never coming out. That there's no way to run. That we could be trapped in here.

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The ravine winds, climbs, descends, and seems to be avoiding altogether the German position.

Stick risks a whisper. “By now we must be all the way behind them.”

Rio nods. “What do you think?”

“Give it another twenty minutes. Then we give up and head back.”

But we don’t need twenty minutes because the ravine widens out and finally opens onto a starlit platform, a sort of mini-mesa fifty or sixty feet across.

Stick and Rio look around warily, guns leveled, safeties off. I have my father’s trusty old Colt Single Action in my waistband, but I know it’s a useless

s weapon in a world of Schmeisser submachine guns and grenades. And I must confess it is not recommended that reporters carry weapons—but it comforts me. At least it comforts me when it’s not sticking in my stomach.

We are exposed on the starlit mesa, but the only ones to see us are the looming mountain peaks and the stars above.

Stick motions us to lie down, and then he crawls on hands and knees to the westernmost edge. Slowly, cautiously, he looks over the side. He holds that position for a minute and then crawls silently back to join Rio and your intrepid if frightened reporter.

“We’re right on top of them. Sheer wall, no way for them to get at us. First light, we let ’em have it.”

The night wears on slowly. We are condemned prisoners waiting for execution at dawn. Or maybe, if we’re lucky, we’re the executioners.

Sticklin risks a cigarette, smoked behind cupped hands just in case there are eyes on those forbidding peaks. The moon rises and we can see our surroundings for the first time. We’re on a stone table, roughly octagonal, but with none of the sides exactly drawn according to Euclidean standards. We’re already thirsty, and that’s not going to get better with time.

The night is clear and very cold, but with no wind to double the torture. We do not talk. We lie on our backs and look up at the stars and contemplate our own insignificance, until, after an eternity, the sun begins to scatter gold here and there, illuminating this boulder and that scraggly bush.

We wait until the sun at last reaches down into the bowl where the enemy lies, unaware of what is about to befall him.

“Okay,” Sticklin whispers. “Richlin? You drop some pineapples. I’ll open up, and you start plunking anything you can see.”

“Yep,” Rio says tersely. She is on her back, M1 gripped firmly and held just over her chest. She rolls and sets her rifle carefully aside on bare rock, avoiding loose dirt or gravel that might cause a jam.

She produces four hand grenades and lines them up. She checks the pins to make sure they’re loose and ready. And then she nods to Sticklin.

He nods back, and Rio rises to her knees, right at the edge, wanting to see where

she's throwing even though it almost certainly exposes her to the possibility of enemy fire.

She grips the first grenade, pulls the pin, and simply lets it roll free from her outstretched hand. A second grenade follows. And a third. And that's when the first grenade explodes with a flat, dull crumpf! sound. The second grenade is five seconds behind it, and now we hear shouts and cries in terrified German.

The third and fourth grenades go off, and still the surprised and baffled Germans don't have a target. No one is shooting at us. No one is shooting at all until Dain Sticklin stands up, aims the BAR almost straight down, and starts firing.

B-R-R-R-T!

The noise is deafening but not loud enough to mute a scream of pain and a bellow of rage from below.

And then the freckle-faced farmer's daughter from Gedwell Falls, California, stands up, her M1 aimed almost straight down. Sticklin fires in short, disciplined bursts. Richlin takes her time, and for a while it seems she won't shoot. Then bang! and Richlin's shoulder jerks slightly from the recoil.

The Germans have located their enemy now and are shooting up. But they're firing into the sun at targets they can barely see and can't hope to reach with grenades.

Richlin fires again. And again. Each time the wait, each time the careful aim, each time the gentle squeeze on the trigger. And more often than not, each round is followed by a cry of pain from below.

The Krauts are fish in a barrel.

The BAR and rifle fire alternate, a burst, a second burst, and a single shot; a burst, a second burst, and a single shot. The two GIs fire without emotion, without flinching. And then Stick tells Rio to toss a few more grenades. Richlin takes two from him, pulls the pins, and drops them both together.

The explosions sharply reduce the firing from below.

Sticklin yells down, "Surrender, you damned fools!"

Some brave German who knows a little English yells a reply that delicacy forbids repeating here.

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“Well, that was impolite,” Rio says with a grin and tosses another grenade. She drops to her belly, rolls a dozen feet to her left, and then edges forward to be able to see over the side from a different angle. She comes back, stands up, edges back from the danger zone, and says, “Stick, there’s some kind of a cave opening. It’s not deep or they’d be all the way in, but it’s enough to give cover to three or four Krauts. There’s an opening on the north side, that must be how they see the road, but I’m guessing it’s a long drop from there, so that’s why they don’t just scoot.”

Stick says, “Well, heck.”

Sergeant Cole, his voice straining, yells up, “How’s it look?” The sound echoes eerily, bouncing around the rocks.

“We’re okay, Sarge,” Stick yells. “Got maybe three or four of them left under cover.”

“Your call, Stick,” Cole shouts.

“Give us a minute.” Sticklin reloads, and Rio pops in a fresh clip as well. She’s burned through very little ammo, unlike Sticklin, whose big BAR is smoking hot.

“We’re out of grenades,” Stick summarizes. “And getting thirsty. If the squad comes over the ridge they’ll still get chewed up.”

“We could use a rope,” Richlin says.

Stick laughs. “What are you, a Ranger now, Richlin?”

“We can send Spats down for rope and more grenades. Lower me down, and I can sling grenades into the cave before they can get a shot at me.”

“No, if anyone’s going down it’s me,” Sticklin says.

“Stick, how am I going to lower a big old thing like you down there?”

“Get some of the others up here, we can do it.”

“That’s exposing someone else to fire. The Krauts are awake, and they’ve still got a line on the ridge. Someone can toss a rope; we can’t toss a GI.”

It may occur to some of you ladies that the two GIs were more willing to expose me to possible fire than their fellow soldiers. I suppose I could have resented it, but this squad has been together since basic training. They are friends, and more than friends: family. While I am just so much dead weight.

The decision is made in that silent, tacit way that becomes second nature to soldiers doing deadly work, and your humble reporter is sent scuttling back down the ravine. It takes me ninety minutes to make the steep, cramped, circuitous round trip, but at last I come back with a hundred feet of rope, six grenades, and, most welcome of all to Stick and Rio, two canteens.

Stick uncoils the rope, ties a loop at the bottom for Rio’s feet, a second loop three feet above that to pass around her waist, and a third, smaller loop to serve as a handhold.

“Well, aren’t you just the cowboy, with all that fancy rope work,” Richlin teases.

Richlin checks her clip and slings her rifle over her shoulder, muzzle down. It will be awkward to use, almost impossible as she’s flattened against the rock wall, so on an impulse I pull out my Colt and offer it to her.

“Take this. You can stick it in your belt, and it’ll be easier than trying to use a rifle.”

“Thanks,” Rio says. “A revolver, huh? I’ve never fired a revolver.”

“It’s single action. You have to cock it each time you shoot. You get six tries.”

The young woman sticks my father’s gun in the back of her waistband. I see her loosen her knife in its sheath. She nods to Sticklin, who wraps the rope around himself and ties it off, looping it over a none-too-solid boulder.

I can’t just stand there taking notes, so I grab the rope in front of Sticklin, adding my pampered civilian’s strength to the war effort.

It’s awkward getting Richlin harnessed and then lowered over the side, and it suddenly dawns on your humble correspondent, right then at that perilous moment, that I have forgotten that Private Richlin is a female. She has become just another GI going into harm’s way, like thousands of other young men and young women fighting for our liberty.

“Don’t stop to take a cigarette break, Stick,” Rio says as she slowly slips from view.

Sticklin and I play the rope out, with the muscular corporal bearing most of the weight as the rope slides taut over sharp rock.

Do the Krauts hear? Do they know what that sliding sound means? Do they know a deadly and determined farm girl is coming to kill them? I am near the edge and can see that Rio has her left hand in the loop and it’s biting into her flesh. Her weight is all on her left foot as her right foot fends off the wall of rock. Her free right hand holds a grenade, pin loosened so she can pull it with her teeth. Suddenly a lizard pops out of a hole level with her face, and she yelps in surprise. She misses her swing and crashes into the rock wall, sending down a trickle of gravel.

It's all the Krauts need to guess what's happening.

A butternut desert uniform of the Afrika Korps emerges beneath Rio, rifle raised, taking aim, a shot anyone could hit, a shot that will pierce her crotch and plow its way up through her internal organs like a steel drill bit ripping her apart from the inside.

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Panicked, Richlin kicks and swings to the right just as the Kraut fires, and as she swings and the Kraut readies to fire again, Rio stuffs her grenade in her blouse and pulls my daddy's Colt. Then she drops it from her sweaty hands!

It lands in the dirt beside the German, who must think it's a grenade because he shouts something and leaps away.

Rio Richlin is still twenty feet in the air and now armed with only her grenade. She fumbles for it, retrieves it, gets the pin in her teeth and drops it just as the German realizes his mistake and fires.

His shot is hurried and it burns a crease up Rio's left thigh and now the Kraut sees the real grenade, sees his peril and dives back inside the cave opening.

Crumpf!

The grenade lands just ten feet to the side and the upward blast pelts Rio with gravel.

"Stick! Down fast!" Richlin yells, gagging on the words, and Sticklin accelerates her descent to something just short of a dead fall. Richlin hits the ground hard, and for a moment she's tangled in the rope and can't reach her remaining grenades. But what she can reach . . . is Daddy's Colt.

Ladies, please take a moment to picture the scene, with details relayed to me after the fact, as from my angle I could see little. Before Rio is the cave, nothing but a hollow in the rock. She is completely alone facing three German soldiers, only one of whom appears to have collected his wits following the grenade explosion.

This Kraut raises his rifle and fires. A miss! But Rio knows he won't miss a second time, not at this range. He aims, and Rio can do nothing. Nothing but sit in the dust, tangled in rope, with a heavy pistol she raises far too slowly to outpace the German's trigger finger.

He pulls the trigger.

Click!

Empty!

Rio takes what aim she can, thumbs back the hammer, and fires the Colt, which gives a tremendous blast and jerks up and back like a living thing.

Rio has missed as well. The two remaining Germans are experienced combat soldiers, and they've shaken off the concussion and grabbed a rifle in one case and a Schmeisser submachine gun in the other as the first German fumbles a clip into his gun and Rio cocks and fires again.

The first German falls straight back with a red hole in his belly. He screams, and I hear from Rio a shout of fear and fury that surely no milkmaid ever had reason to utter.

She fires again, and the Kraut with the Schmeisser goes down on one knee, a red flower blooming in the center of his chest. He's pawing at it, fingers coming away red.

The last German throws down his rifle and screams, "Nein, nein, bitte nein! Kamerad, kamerad!"

But it is too late. Richlin shoots him.

Ladies, I will spare you the description of that bullet's effects, suffice to say that her bullet lifted the helmet off his head and took much of his head with it.

Scratch another Nazi superman.

Rio gets to her feet, legs shaking, and kicks her way clear of the rope. She aims the Colt at the Kraut with the stomach wound. He may yet live.

"Bitte, bitte, kamerad," he whispers in agony as she stands triumphantly over him.

Stomach wound. There are few things worse. The pain is enough to make any man beg for morphine. Even if the Kraut lives, he'll never be whole. It would be a mercy to finish him off, but later Richlin explains, "I was done shooting. He was no threat."

From the bottom of the stone bowl, now stained with the blood of Kraut soldiers, we hear Rio yell, "I'm okay! I'm okay!"

"I'm okay," in the voice of a terrified girl, a shaky alto. But there's another emotion in that voice as well, and it is unmistakable. It is the age-old sound of a warrior victorious. There is blood in the farm girl's voice.

There is triumph.

Ladies, did I feel relief? Yes. Did I feel pride in this young woman? Pride to the bursting point.

By the time Sticklin and I get back down the ravine and climb over the ridge to drop down into the Kraut encampment, the rest of the squad is there.

It is indeed a mirror image of the bowl the American GIs had occupied, but this is a slaughterhouse. The GIs have dragged eleven German bodies to form a rough lineup

in the dust, a horizontal parade line of Herr Hitler's vaunted Afrika Korps.

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One German still lives. The GIs have pumped him full of morphine, but he still bellows in pain and no one has the skill to stop the blood that mixes odoriferously with the spilled contents of his intestines. He bellows in German, and then he whimpers, and then, at last, to the relief of everyone, including perhaps himself, he dies and is dragged over to join his comrades, an even dozen now.

I walk down the line of the dead. Of the twelve bodies, three show the signs of death by grenade shrapnel. Two have been torn apart by the BAR, which practically butchers as it kills. Three are dead from my own Colt.

Four have died from neat holes punched into their upturned faces and foreheads by the deadly accuracy of the freckle-faced girl with the M1.

Twelve dead Krauts. No dead Americans, though Rio Richlin has a twisted ankle and a bright-red stripe up her thigh.

Many still debate whether women should fight or are even capable of fighting. I won't attempt to answer the first question, that's for politicians and clergymen and big thinkers, not reporters.

But I can answer that second question, the one about whether women can fight, with a single word.

Yes.

And if you want it in two words, then hell yes.

Now that the road is free of the threat from the German mortar team, a deuce-and-a-half truck and a jeep are sent to gather the squad and haul us all away to medical care, hot coffee, lousy food, and, best of all, mail from home.

Richlin's leg is on fire beneath the bandages, not that she shows it in more than a slight wince. But it's not like she can walk on her twisted ankle anyway, so she'll be out of the war for a week, recovering.

I find her lying on a cot in the field hospital tent, laughing with her hometown friend, Jenou. They're talking about boys and dropping into whispers on certain words and phrases.

"How's the leg?" I ask.

"Still attached," Rio says and grins at me.

"So, reporter lady," Jenou asks me. "You going to write about this?"

I pull a camp chair over and sit. "Well, ladies, I'll sure try. I don't know what the censors will do to it, though."

"Fine by me if you never write about it," Richlin says fervently. "I'd just as soon you not write anything. It will just worry my folks."

I said nothing to that. I have covered this war for months now and met many a brave young soldier, and the bravest are always the most humble. I confess I found myself deeply moved, so rather than reveal human emotion, I adopted the laconic, easygoing style of these young soldiers and said, "You owe me four rounds of forty-five ammo."

The two soldier girls laugh. "You're all right," Richlin says. Then adds, "For a

civilian.”

“You read much?” I ask.

“I’ve read *The Sun Also Rises*, since that’s about the only book everyone seems to have out here. I liked it.”

I pull a book from my bag and lay it on Rio’s lap. “Here’s one you can read if you want to.”

Rio reads the title aloud. “*The Big Sleep*.”

“Yeah, I read it already, and I don’t want to carry it.”

“Thanks, Spats.”

“It’s a story about tough guys and tougher dames. Or what I used to think were tough dames before I met the real thing.”

I stand to go, and Richlin extends her hand. We shake solemnly, and I turn to leave. I’m at the exit to the tent before I hear her call out, “Hey! You’re no shrinking violet yourself.”

Maybe someday I’ll win a Pulitzer Prize, but if that happy day comes I will be no prouder than I am of having won that young woman’s respect.

Editor’s Note: It is with the deepest regret that we inform our readers that this was the last story filed by this reporter. Five days after the events described here, Ann “Spats” Patrone was killed by a land mine while pursuing another story with her characteristic devotion and professionalism. She leaves behind no family but us here at Ladies’ Monthly Magazine, to whom Spats will always be family.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ann Patrone is made up, but a number of women joined the predominantly male press corps and reported on the war—from London during the Blitz to VE-Day (Victory in Europe Day). The American press corps (the media of its day) pushed hard for stories while never forgetting what side they were on, working with military authorities to tell the story without in any way aiding the enemy. Sixty-six war correspondents died so the citizens of the world's greatest democracy could understand something of the sacrifices made by those who were risking all they had to preserve liberty.

EXCERPT FROM SILVER STARS

THE SECOND BOOK OF NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR MICHAEL GRANT'S EPIC ALTERNATE HISTORY SERIES, WHICH FOLLOWS THE YOUNG WOMEN IN THE US ARMY AS THEY MOVE TO THE FRONT LINES IN ITALY.

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RIO RICHLIN—CAMP ZIGZAG, TUNISIA, NORTH A

FRICA

“What was it like?” Jenou asks. “That first time? What did you feel?”

Rio Richlin sighs wearily.

Rio and Jenou Castain, best friends for almost their entire lives, lie faceup on a moth-eaten green blanket spread over the hood of a burned-out German half-track, heads propped up against the slit windows, legs dangling down in front of the armor-covered radiator. The track is sleeker than the American version, lower in profile, normally a very useful vehicle. But this particular German half-track had been hit by a passing Spitfire some weeks earlier, so it is riddled with holes you could stick a thumb into. The bogie wheels driving the track are splayed out, and both tracks have been dragged off and are now in use as a relatively clean “sidewalk” leading to the HQ administrative tent.

The road might once have been indifferently paved but has now been chewed to gravel by passing tanks, the ubiquitous deuce-and-a-half trucks, jeeps, half-tracks, bulldozers, and tanker trucks. It runs beside a vast field of reddish sand and loose gravel that now seems to have become something like a farm field with olive drab tents as its crop. The tents extend in long, neat rows made untidy by the way the tent sides have all been rolled up, revealing cots and sprawled GIs in sweat-soaked T-shirts and boxer shorts. Here and there are extinguished campfires, oil drums filled with debris, other oil drums shot full of holes and mounted on rickety platforms to make field showers, stacks of jerry cans, wooden crates, and pallets—some broken up to feed the fires.

The air smells of sweat, oil, smoke, cordite, and cigarettes, with just a hint of fried Spam. There are the constant rumbles and coughing roars of passing vehicles, and the multitude of sounds made by any large group of people, plus the outraged shouts of NCOs, curses and blasphemies, and more laughter than one might expect.

At the edge of the camp some men and one or two women are playing softball with bats, balls, and gloves assembled from family care packages. It's possible that the rules of this game are not quite those of games played at Yankee Stadium, since there is some tripping and tackling going on.

Both Rio and Jenou wear their uniform trousers rolled up to above the knee, and sleeveless olive drab T-shirts. Cat Preeling, fifty feet away and playing a game of horseshoes with Tilo Suarez, is the only female GI with the nerve to strip down to bra and boxers. She's a beefy girl with a cigarette hanging from her downturned mouth. Tilo, like many of the off-duty men, wears only his boxers and boots, showing off a taut, olive-complected body that Jenou would be watching much more closely if only Tilo were six inches taller.

The bra and boxers look is a bit too daring for Rio and Jenou, but Cat seems to have a way of deflecting unwanted male attention, like she's wearing a sign that reads: Don't

bother. Even the ever-amorous Tilo is content to toss horseshoes with her, though the shoes in question are actually brass rings roughly cut from discarded 155 brass and the peg is a bayonet.

Rio and Jenou both have brown-tanned faces, necks, and forearms, but the rest of them blazes a lurid white with just a tinge of pink where the skin is beginning to burn.

“What was what like?” Rio repeats the question slowly. She has a wet sock laid over her eyes to afford some shade. There is a half-empty bottle of Coca-Cola beside her. It was almost cold once and now is the temperature of hot tea. Jenou has a book held up to block the sun, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, in a paperback edition.

It is the summer of 1943 in Tunisia, and it is hot. Desert hot. Completely immobile—except when they swat at a fly—both young women are still sweating.

“You know,” Jenou insists. “The first time. I’m just trying to get an idea.”

“What are you, writing a book?” Rio says sharply. “Suddenly you’re reading books and now you’re trying to plumb the depths of my soul?”

“My usual appetite for fashion and Hollywood gossip isn’t being satisfied,” Jenou says, adopting a light, bantering lilt before restating her question in a more serious tone.

Rio sighs. “I don’t know, Jen.” She pronounces the name with a soft j, like zh. Jenou’s name is inspired by the word ingenue, a perfectly inappropriate reference point for Jenou, who is far from being the innocent the name suggests.

Jenou is blond, with hair cut short to just below the ear. General Patton has decreed that all female soldiers will have hair cut to above the bottom of their earlobe. The general is improvising—army regulations have not quite caught up with the realities

of female soldiers. In addition to being blond, Jenou is quite pretty, just shy of beautiful, and has a pinup's body.

Jenou remains silent, knowing the pressure will build on Rio to say something. And of course she's right.

"It was . . ." Rio searches for a word picture, a metaphor, something that will convey enough meaning that Jenou will not feel the need to ask anymore. Thinking about it takes her back to that moment. To the sound of Sergeant Cole's voice yelling, Shoot!

Richlin! Suarez! Lay down some fugging fire!

Rio remembers it in detail. It had been as cold then as it is hot now. Her breathing had become irregular: a panicky burst followed by a leaden thud-thud-thud.

She remembers lining up the sights of her M1 Garand. She remembers the Italian soldier. And the pressure of her finger on the trigger. And the way she slowed her breathing, the way she shut out everything, every extraneous sound, every irrelevant emotion. The way she saw the target, a man in a tan uniform lined up perfectly on the sights.

The way her lungs and heart seemed to freeze along with time itself.

The moment when her right index finger applied the necessary seven-point-five pounds of pressure and the stock kicked back against her shoulder.

Bang.

The way she had first thought that he had just tripped. The way the Italian had seemed to be frozen in time, on his knees, maybe just tripped, maybe just caught his toe on a rock and . . . And then the way the man fell back.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 5:38 am

Dead.

“Like it wasn’t me,” Rio says at last. “Like someone else was moving me. Like I was a puppet, Jen. Like I was a puppet.”

This is the third time, not the first, that Jenou has asked about that first killing. Rio is vaguely aware that it has become important to Jenou that Rio remain Rio. She understands that Jenou does not have the sort of home you get sentimental over, and that as a result Rio is home to Jenou. Sometimes she intercepts a look from Jenou, a passing betrayal of inner doubts. Jenou, who Rio would never have thought capable of any sort of reflection, has developed a sidelong, contemplative gaze. A judging gaze tinged with worry. And sometimes Rio looks for ways to reassure Jenou, but at this particular moment it is just too damned hot.

“Doing my job,” Rio says with a hint of wry humor. “Rio Richlin, Private, US Army, sir! Shootin’ Krauts, sir!” She executes a lazy salute.

A truck rattles by, and a dozen male GIs whistle and yell encouragement along the lines of “Hey, sweetheart!” and “Oh baby!” and “Bring those tatas here to papa!”

Rio and Jenou ignore the catcalls as just another bit of background noise, like the coughing engine of a Sherman tank lurching toward the motor pool, or the insect buzz of the army spotter plane overhead.

“Hey, I got a letter from Strand,” Rio says, wanting to change the subject and dispel her own lingering resentment.

A dozen soldiers, mostly men, march wearily past, coming in from a patrol. “Which of you broads want me between your legs?”

Jenou raises a middle finger without bothering to look and hears a chorus of shouts and laughs, some angry, most amused.

“Well, dish, sweetie. How is tall, dark, and handsome doing?” Jenou asks.

“He says he’s fine. And he’s looking for a way to get here.”

“From Algiers? Kind of a long walk.”

“I think he was hoping for a train. Or a truck. Or a plane.”

“He’d fly his own plane over here if he really loved you.”

Does he? Does he still? Am I still the girl he fell for?

Rio reaches blindly to give Jenou a shove. “I don’t think the army just lets you borrow a B-17 whenever you want one.”

“He could offer to pay for the gas.”

“Let’s roll over. This side’s parboiled.”

They roll over, Rio recoiling as bare flesh touches the metal skin of the vehicle.

Suddenly a siren begins its windup and both girls sit up fast, shield their eyes, and scan the horizon.

“Aw, hell,” Jenou says, pointing at two black dots rushing toward them from the

direction of the sea.

The cry goes up from a dozen voices. “Plane! Plane! Take cover!”

They climb down quickly—much more quickly than they climbed up.

“Under the track?” Rio wonders aloud, looking toward the nearest ditch, which is already filling up with scrambling GIs.

“The Kraut will aim for the track!” Jenou yells.

“He’ll see it’s one of his own and burned out besides,” Rio counters in a calmer tone. They crawl madly for the shelter of all that steel and lie facedown, breathing dust, almost grateful for the shade. Antiaircraft guns at the four corners of the camp open up, firing tracer rounds at the dots, which have now assumed the shape of Me 109 fighters with single bomb racks.

Bap-bap-bap-bap-bap! The antiaircraft guns blaze, joined by small arms fire from various soldiers firing futilely with rifles and Thompsons.

The Messerschmitts come in fast and low, and starbursts twinkle on their wings and cowling. Machine gun bullets and cannon shells rip lines across the road and into the tents. A voice yells, “Goddamn Kraut shot my goddamn coffee!”

The planes release one bomb each, one a dud that plows into the dirt between two tents and sticks up like a fireplug, smoking a little. The second bomb is not a dud.

Ka-BOOM!

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The front end of a deuce-and-a-half truck, clear at the far end of the camp, explodes upward, rises clear off the ground on a jet of flame before falling to earth, a smoking steel skeleton. The engine block, knocked free by the power of the bomb, twirls through the air, rising twenty feet bef

ore falling like an anvil out of a Bugs Bunny cartoon as GIs scurry out of the way. Rio does not see where it lands.

The planes take a tight turn and come roaring back overhead, machine guns stitching the ground like some mad sewing machine.

And then they head off, unscathed, racing away to the relative safety of their base in Sicily.

Rio and Jenou crawl out from beneath the half-track and gaze, disgusted, at the caked-on dirt that covers their fronts from toes to knees to face.

“They could have waited till we toweled off,” Jenou says.

“We best go tell Sarge we’re still alive,” Rio says.

The air raids are fewer lately, as the Royal Air Force planes with some help from the Americans have claimed control of the North African skies. But now Rio hears a distant shriek of pain and thinks what every soldier thinks: Thank God it isn’t me, followed by, At least some poor bastard is going home.

A term has become common: million-dollar wound. The million-dollar wound is the

one that doesn't kill or completely cripple you but is enough to send you home to cold beer and cool sheets and hot showers.

A team of medics, three of them, rush past, with only one taking the time to turn and run backward while yelling, "I have some training in gynecology; I am happy to do an examination!" as he grabs his crotch.

He trips and falls on his back, and Rio and Jenou share a satisfied nod.

The US Army, Tunisia, in the summer of 1943.