

Short Extracts from "The Outsider"

Two foes meet in no-man's-land, deep in a Belgian forest in December 1944. One is an innocent British medical student who has never seen combat, the other is a battle-hardened Hitler Youth. But the student is from the present day, and is initially unaware he has travelled back in time. He thinks the youth is a re-enactor.

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'I need to water the plants,' said the youth, in German. **'You stay in your foxhole. I shall not be far.'** He got out, carrying his gun, and walked a short distance deeper into the copse, and squatted down just visible to Guy. A wise move, thought Guy, it's better to squat to have a pee than stand, as you would be less likely to be seen by snipers, and you present a smaller target. Must remember that. Then he reminded himself that this was the 21st century, they were not at war, there were no snipers, and he was an unwilling participant in a game which he needed to extract himself from as soon as possible. At the back of his mind he had pondered whether the Hitler Youth's weapon could actually fire anything, and if so, would he really use it? Unlikely, but they were lost, and it was getting dark. Not a good time to flee. The youth returned and got back down into his foxhole.

A minute or two passed in silence.

'Are you going back to college after Christmas?' asked Guy.

The youth paused. **'There is no college anymore.'**

'Oh no, he's going to tell me it was bombed,' mumbled Guy.

'... it was bombed,' added the youth.

Guy rolled his eyes. **'You have a good ... imagination.'**

The youth didn't reply.

'You must not take this pastime so seriously. It is not healthy,' said Guy.

'I think you have got the wrong word, Herr Doktor, a "pastime" is like swimming, playing tennis, chess. This is war. War is not a pastime.'

'But you are just a re-enactor! Right?'

'What is a re-enactor?' asked the youth.

Guy sighed.

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'Jabos!' screamed the youth, and in one movement he grabbed Guy's coat lapels and jumped out the rear of the half-track, pulling Guy with him through the open doors. Cold, wet, snowflakes thrown up from the vehicle tracks sprayed onto them as they rolled on the hard snow covered ground.

'Ooww!'

'The ditch, the ditch!' yelled the youth, staggering, running, then diving into a snow-filled depression in the middle of the field. Guy followed.

'Keep your mouth open and cover your . . .'

The youth's shout was lost in the noise of frenzied gunfire erupting from the men in the back of the Hanomag half-track as they fired at the first plane buzzing low right over their heads. The armoured vehicle's engine roared as the driver floored the accelerator to race for the cover of the trees.

Initially, Guy could not resist looking up from the shallow ditch to witness the whole spectacle. The first aircraft did not fire and climbed back to join the others who were orbiting above, then all three promptly rolled over and started an attack run. The half-track had still not made it to the woods. Some of the men on board were now abandoning the vehicle and jumping over the sides in an attempt to escape. The first Mustang came down quickly, its engine screaming, and it opened fire with its highly destructive six 0.5-inch Browning machine guns hammering away in long bursts. Guy could see the tracer as it hosepiped down towards the half-track. As the rounds struck the ground, lines of snow and earth spurted into the air as the bullets sought out the vehicle, the pilot adjusting his aim, then just before the plane passed over them, the pilot released a 500-pound bomb.

Guy mouthed the briefest of curses as he tried to bury himself in the snowy ditch, lying face down, eyes closed, and with his mouth open and his hands over his ears, the Hitler Youth likewise. The bomb whined its brief journey earthwards, exploding with a flash, a crump, then a hot shock wave that shook Guy as it punched his chest, followed by debris falling all around him. More attack runs followed in quick succession, then as suddenly as it had started, the strafing and frightening noise ended. The throb of the aircrafts' powerful Packard Merlin engines receded into the distance.

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More extracts.....

'We will wait here and see if any vehicle comes along,' said the youth. **'That should tell us if there is anyone observing the bridge.'**

With some dread, Guy wondered how long they would have to lie there and how cold they would get. But they did not have to wait long before they heard vehicles approaching with that distinctive clattering sound interspersed with metallic squeals as produced only by a tracked vehicle. A sound that puts fear into the hearts of all infantry.

'What's that?' asked Guy, tensely. **'Are they tanks?'**

'Could be ... they're coming at speed,' the youth replied.

They pressed themselves into the ground. With a roar of engines and a clatter of tracks, two Hanomag half-track vehicles came around the bend towards them, their tracks squealing as they turned the corner. They stormed past at a good 30mph, and crossed the bridge, going in the general direction that Guy and the youth had been walking before they met the river. German markings, the black and white "Balkenkreuz" cross, were painted on the sides of the vehicles, and sitting in each was a squad of soldiers, their helmets protruding above the armoured sides. Both half-tracks had pine branches attached to them as a crude form of camouflage.

'They are in a hurry!' said Guy. **'Are they heading towards or away from the front?'**

'Don't know,' answered the youth.

'Well, if they are going to the front, we're going to walk straight into the middle of a firefight!' said Guy.

'Don't worry, Herr Doktor. I'll keep you safe.'

'Can't say I like this, one little bit!'

'What?' asked the youth.

'I said I don't like this!'

'But it's good,' said the youth.

'What is?'

'No one fired on the half-tracks. That's good.'

'I don't understand. Why is that good?' asked Guy.

'It means either there is no one guarding the bridge or they are Germans.'

'Is that good?'

'Ja, I must look German, and you must look, well, like a Doktor. We will walk confidently across the bridge as if we own it.' He straightened Guy's Red Cross armband, twisting it slightly to make it more prominent.

'You're crazy,' said Guy, **'really crazy.'** He felt he was being rushed into something risky.

'Do you have a better plan?' asked the youth.

'Nein, I guess not, but let me think.'

'Stop wasting time. Let's go.'

'Wait,' said Guy. **'I think you should have your arm in a sling.'**

'That's good, Herr Doktor, very good, and you should wear my cap so you look more ... German.'

Guy reluctantly replaced his balaclava with the youth's forage cap, with its SS "Totenkopf" death's head insignia.

'Unbutton the cap and pull the sides down over the ears. Everyone does that here,' said the youth.

Guy made a quick sling for the youth, who then without any hesitation got up and walked brazenly out of the forest. Guy jumped up and followed. They walked quickly towards the bridge, heads high. Oddly, Guy's spirits rose. They were going to make it, and he enjoyed the audaciousness of their plan.

'There's a vehicle coming up behind us,' said the youth.

'What is it?' asked Guy, turning around to have a look. He could see a truck approaching quickly. This was not good.

'What do we do?' he asked.

'Keep walking,' said the youth. **'It's all right, it's one of ours.'**

'You mean it's German?' said Guy.

'Ja, Herr Doktor, it's all right. We are both Germans now.'

It was too late for Guy to complain further. The truck passed by quickly, and a couple of the soldiers in the rear gave a small wave, more just an acknowledgement to fellow comrades. The pair grinned and gave a small wave back. The truck crossed the bridge then braked hard, sliding slightly on the slippery road surface, its brakes squealing until it came to a complete stop. A soldier in the back of the truck signalled for them to catch up.

Both Guy and the youth looked at each other. This was not in the plan.

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Guy was now on his own again. He looked at his wrist to find the time, but remembered angrily that his watch had been looted. He had to find shelter before it got dark. As with the previous night he thought a foxhole might be the solution, not that it was comfortable, but at least it provided some shelter from the chilling wind, and might hide him from any marauding soldiers. That latter thought really scared him.

He began to look out for foxholes, looking both left and right as he trudged along a small track he had found in the forest. But without warning he tripped on something, and fell heavily, flat on the ground.

'Oh sh*t!' he cried out aloud. He was just about to get up, when he felt there was something across one of his boots. Very slowly he twisted his head so he could look down at his feet. Sure enough there was a wire caught around a boot. It had to be a booby trap. He froze with fear.

'Damn!' he cried aloud. 'Just my luck!'

He lay there rigid for a good minute feeling very sorry for himself, thinking to die alone in the forest would be his fate.

More extracts.....

As Guy padded along through the snow, watching the uneven ground in front of his feet, he glanced up and was taken aback to see the end gable of a dark, stone, two-storey house looming ahead of him, less than fifty metres away. He crouched down nervously, and looked all about him. He was shocked and angry at his lack of alertness. The forest at this point did not give him much cover, and he felt very exposed. He was now aware of roofs of other buildings beyond the first. A hamlet, he thought, but it seemed eerily silent. His nostrils began to detect a strange burnt smell.

Cautiously he moved forward to get a better view. Slowly the hamlet exposed itself, and as he peered around a corner of the first building, he could see that shelling, or the resulting fires, had ruined all of the buildings. Roofs were mostly gone, though blackened rafters remained, walls were damaged or reduced to rubble, windows were mere holes, and the ground was pockmarked with craters. Burnt debris littered the scene. He was shocked and disturbed to see such damage. He wondered if there was anyone hiding in the ruins or their cellars. He was relieved he could see no bodies.

At this point, Guy's nerve broke and he turned around and retreated as quickly as possible, back into the relative shelter of the woods behind him. He made a large detour around the hamlet then resumed his travel in a southwesterly direction.

Guy had been trudging along for an hour or so when he thought he heard someone or something behind him. He stopped and slid down behind a large pine tree. First he hoped it might just be another deer, but then he began to think it sounded more like the noise a human would make if moving fast through the woods. Was someone from the hamlet following him? His heart was pounding and his breathing was heavy. He tried to direct the steam coming from his breath downwards using his cupped hands. He could by now hear it was definitely a human, and his pursuer was getting ever closer. He felt sick with fear.

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Helga was not by the fire, so Guy went looking for her. He opened a door, and was taken aback to find Helga sitting, naked, with her back to him, in a hip bath in the middle of the room. It was an enamelled, white, hip bath, and was only about a metre high and long, so her legs hung over the sides. Her clothes lay in a pile on the floor, but her regulation long grey wool and rayon socks hung, rinsed out, over the bath. She turned and gave him a smile.

'Sorry,' he said, retreating.

But before he could close the door, Helga called out. **'Herr Doktor, can you scrub my back? I can't reach it.'**

Guy stared, not knowing what to say or do. For the first time he could see her face as it really was, rather than being obscured under dirt and grime. His heart missed a beat. She looked completely different and was really good looking.

'Have you not seen a girl without her clothes before?' she asked.

'I was a bit ... surprised,' he replied. **'I wasn't expecting...'**

'Are you going to wash my back?' she insisted.

Guy took off his balaclava and anorak, pulled up his sleeves, and knelt down behind her. Helga leaned forward to expose her back fully. She passed him a bar of soap and he gently and slowly washed her back using both his hands. He took much longer than was entirely necessary.

'Don't stop,' she said.

'I must go and check my patient,' he said abruptly, getting up and drying his hands.

'I thought I was your patient,' she complained. **'Herr Doktor ... I need more hot water, please.'**

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End of Extracts