

Homework

14 tanks roll out of the swamp. They file out along a barely discernible trail and fan into line-abreast on reaching firmer ground. The tanks in the middle stop while the rest are forming up on either side [Mark it]. Eight, or nine, hundred metres ahead of them is a copse of silver birch, their trunks blending in with the light scattering of snow all around.

Movement in the copse. Something shadowy but light. It is difficult to focus in close at this range, the image begins to pixelate even with the best imaging software available so the insignia can't be quite made out. In amongst the trees are a group of soldiers, one of them is smoking a pipe with a curved bowl and what appears to be a lid. Sergei is squinting to see better but it doesn't help. Fortunately the lip-reading facility on the translator seems to be picking up enough to get an audio output.

The pipe-smoker is lying down with his back resting on a stump, next to him another man is on his stomach peering through a pair of binoculars. Around them are several men all in their late teens, the man with the pipe would be the eldest but still, probably, no more than mid-twenties at most. Their uniforms are black.

[Sergei: I suspect they are one of the penal regiments. They are very badly equipped - especially given the weather.

They also do not appear to have much armament.]

The man with the binoculars has found a clear area of branches in the fallen tree to look through so that he cannot be seen himself from the front. The silver birch trees are thin and offer almost no protection against tanks.

[Me: I agree. SS troops would have better weapons and clothing even at this stage of the war.]

The translator speaks. "Well, Children, do you hear that? Do you know what that sound is?" It is the man leaning on the stump. I believe him to be a *Feldwebel*, a Sergeant, from what I am able to make out. He pauses and tamps his pipe. "It is the sound of death. Our death."

He leans to his left a little. "How far away are they, Corporal?"

Because the Corporal has his back to us the translator cannot see his lips. We have only the Sergeant's speech to listen to - the tanks make no noise to us but we can imagine the rumble of the engines and the clattering of their tracks.

"So close. The much maligned and despised Jesse Owens would take less than a minute to traverse that ground even though he is an *untermensch* and not worthy to be a member of the Greater German Reich."

He smiled gently. We can almost smell the fear oozing through the skin of the young men.

"How long do you estimate that our death will be upon us,

Corporal? Do any have their hatches open?"

He leans back on the stump and draws in a deep breath.

"They are trying to draw us out. One 'Mickey Mouse' - that's a T34/76D to you, Children, with both of its hatches open. This is so that you will know what it is that kills you. Of course, once you are in oblivion there will be no surprise, anguish, pain or regret; there will be nothing in spite of what the black crows will tell your mothers [Mark it]. We shall surprise them by not being surprising! You have approximately one and a half minutes of life left, Children. Unless one of you cut-throats, killers and thugs [Mark it] can come up with an idea that will save all our supposed souls. Not that any one of us has a soul - by order of the Great Leader himself. [Mark it.] Heil Hitler." He chuckled softly. "Enjoy what you have left before you are consigned to non-existence. Breathe deeply of the crisp morning air so that it burns in your lungs. Enjoy the sensation of it. Look at the sunshine and the sharp shadows. Notice that there is no bird-song for they have forsaken us and flown to the protection of the Great German Eagle in the West. Use your last minute wisely; write a great saga describing, in graphic detail, the might and majesty of the *WehrMacht* and the Glory of its wise and all-knowing leadership; compose an epic opera in the style of Wagner - a true Teutonic hero worthy to be called a modern German. Hurry, for you only have....how long, Corporal? About

thirty seconds before the tanks will come and mash your pink and delicate bodies into the ground. Death will be agonising, trust me on this for I have seen it so often, but it will, hopefully, be mercifully swift." [Mark it]

One of the young men stands up, shaking his fist at the Sergeant who views him dispassionately and rolls towards the Corporal. Both of them shed their packs and draw their pistols. Lugers, nine millimetre. Not very effective against T34's. "You cannot speak of our beloved *Fuhrer* in such..." The young man breaks off his speech by screaming at the front of a tank that appears so suddenly that both Sergei and I jump. Startled.

The man tries to push the tracks off him with his arms but it has no effect on what Sergei estimates as around thirty-two tons of metal. In passing I notice the Sergeant and the Corporal disappear under the tank as the front of the great machine drops into the dip that the men are hiding in. It crushes the screaming man around the hips and lower abdomen. Desperately pushing at the tracks his hands slip and are amputated between the tracks and the first set of idler wheels.

The Sergeant and the Corporal suddenly appear at the back of the tank, swinging effortlessly up onto the rear armour. At the last moment the crew members turn and see the threat but, with little room to manoeuvre they are doomed. Two bullets in

their heads see to them - swiftly followed by a stick with a bulbous end being pulled out of their boots, a cord at the narrow end jerked and the stick thrust down into the hatches that they slam shut and put their weight on. A hatch at the front opens and a man's head emerges. Smoke suddenly envelopes his head and he disappears back inside with his eyes big with pain.

The tank slows to a halt. Both hatches are lifted and the Sergeant and the Corporal slip into the tank. The turret traverses left, smoke and fire belch from the gun. Shortly after a glow lights up the side of the tank. We cannot see what it is that they have hit but assume that it is one of the other tanks.

They try to traverse the turret to the right but it comes up against one of the trees and stops [Mark it]. Immediately the hatches fly open and they leap out. The Corporal falls over then tries to stand but fails and lies still. We attempt to follow the Sergeant but there is cloud cover coming in - it obscures our view. We pan back to the tank but the cloud has covered that, too. Pull back for a wider angle and we see storm clouds building all over the area that we are watching. Clouds are always our enemy.

Sergei: You remember watching Begin's thugs planting the explosives in the first terrorist bombing against a civilian target? We never saw the King David Hotel blow because of the

cloud but we did see a few of the (reported) 97 British Civil Servants that were killed being carried out.

Me: I think that's all we're going to get. We can't go further back in time without getting severe distortions and pixelation. It would have been nice to get some of the First World War, though.

Sergei: Morris, you will never be happy with what we have. Let's look at the marks before we call the space information centre and have them move the lasers any more.

We are fortunate to have a license to move the lasers. Few people get the opportunity to do it. Of course, we are assuming that other people want to do it.

Sergei: How far out is the laser we were using?

Me: 419 light years.

Sergei: So that would (Sergei is speaking slowly as he calculates in his mind. He is good at this) make it 1944 and, clearly, winter. What was the first mark?

Me: The tanks forming up.

Sergei: We should, maybe, make a note that they are all T34/76's except the end ones that are /85's. No light tanks or any other armoured vehicles. No apparent ground troops, either. Odd. They were normally used for infantry support.

Me: Perhaps the infantry were held up because of the swamp.

Sergei: The swamp should be pretty well frozen over but,

with heavy packs maybe they just didn't want to risk it.

Me: Next mark?

Sergei: The 'black crows' remark.

Me: Ah, yes. According to our reception of the BBC Open University and the History Channel, we think that this refers to the Roman Catholic Priesthood who wore black costumes.

Sergei: Cassocks?

Me: Mm. Something like that.

Sergei: What about this 'oblivion' that he was referring to?

Me: Seems a very modern concept for the time. According to our previous notes, nearly 99% of people then believed in an ethereal deity that would confer a second life on them after death.

Sergei: Well, that came about because of the inability of a person to suspend thought or believe that thought would cease after death. Ergo, there must be a supreme being who controls these things and will grant another life. This was also useful in controlling people because this second life could be good or bad depending on how you had obeyed the will of the masters - or not, as the case may be.

Me: There are still people like that. The Islamist-Hindist war that has been going on in the North-West corner of the Indus sub-continent since the Great Freeze is based on that idea.

Sergei: True. The Islamists believe that when the last of them dies the World will end.

Me: Maybe it's true. They say their book is over seventeen hundred years old and has never been changed.

Sergei: Don't go soft on me now, Morris. We are digressing. What is the next mark - if we've finished with that one.

Me: Do you think the Sergeant was a believer in a second life? Was he being facetious or phlegmatic? He seemed to have less fear than the others.

Sergei: I suppose, by the comments he made, that he had already been through a lot of war and didn't really care if he lives or dies at that point. Perhaps he was just resigned to his fate. Whether he believed in a second life, or not, well - only he would know now.

Me: I wonder if he will miss the Corporal? It was pretty apparent that the Corporal was shot. They seemed to operate well together as a team. Now he is a team of one; how many do you think started out with him?

Sergei: It would appear that the penal regiments had around four thousand troops and ended up, at the end of the war, with approximately two hundred. Statistically, it is unlikely that the Sergeant survived.

Me: Even after such huge slaughter there was still a desire to kill, for more war. We have been looking at this for

a long time and we are still no closer to rationalising the need to kill other people who are 'different'. Nearly everybody - even then, agreed that it was bad. War is an evil, end war, make love - not war; all these cries have been heard but it makes no difference. Why? Where is the logic? Where is the point? So much could be achieved with the finance alone. We have achieved so much in such a short time but yet we could well have achieved so much more.

Sergei: Still it goes on. It is senseless and useless and unstoppable.

Me: The next mark is 'Cut-throats, killers and thugs'. They didn't look like killers and thugs to me. That one went under the tracks screaming like a baby. Odd, really, considering that he believed he was going to another life. Perhaps he doubted that there really was another chance; maybe he perceived the possibility, at the last moment, that this was all he was going to get and that it just wasn't enough.

Sergei: Perhaps it was the pain he was fearing. The Penal regiments were a last ditch effort to shore up the army. Hitler's Generals didn't trust them with too much weaponry so they had to steal most of what they had off the Russian army. Nearly all of them were pretty harmless types - pick-pockets and political prisoners mostly, given the choice of being hung in jail or being slaughtered for the Glory of the Reich by the Russian peasants. No training, just an order to get out there

and do your best, Son. No wonder the Sergeant referred to them as 'children'.

Me: Where do you find all this minutiae, Sergei. I can never find any of it. Are you sure you're not making it up?

Sergei: You can search the terrestrial analogue channels for the post-war years until the 'noughties' when they went digital and our information largely stops - at least, that source does. Then there's the radio which is audio only; there's some good stuff on there but not all of it is catalogued as yet. The radio is clearer than the television but, naturally, there's no visual information. Of course, I have access to a library of books and discs which is pretty useful once I learnt to decipher the script in them. Next mark?

Me: Well, it's the 'soul' thing again. I am confused here because I understood 'soul' to be a reference to a type of music popularised after that war.

Sergei: No. I suspect he is referring to the series of thought patterns that continues after death and becomes the 'next life' or the 'life here-after'. There are some Catholicists and Anglicists still around who will be able to explain it better than I am able to put it.

Me: 'Great Leader' must be another pseudonym for Adolf Hitler.

Sergei: Yes. Also known as '*Der Fuhrer*'. I suspect a

strong sense of sarcasm here. Hence the vociferous, but short-lived - if I might coin a phrase, objection from the patriot. Next?

Me: 'Mercifully swift'.

Sergei: There is no way of looking at this subjectively. No experiment to determine the dilation of time under extreme stress can be quantitatively assessed.

Me: True. Bearing in mind that being crushed by a tank will take the rest of that person's life how long will that appear to be to that person?

Sergei: You mentioned the Israeli terrorists led by Begin and the other fellow - Ben Gurion? Their victims had surprise of attack on them and so, very likely, found death swifter. These men, boys, had time to contemplate their end. How long did those few minutes take let alone the actual moment of dying.

Me: Possibly the Sergeant was talking to take his mind off his imminent death, to compose himself for retaliation - staving off the inevitable.

Sergei: Did he? We don't know because of the cloud cover. We know only that one of the men and the Corporal was killed.

Me: I think, as you mentioned the statistics of the thing earlier, it's unlikely that any of them survived for very long. We could always ask the Space Information Centre if they've got any cloud piercing equipment yet and look at it

again.

Sergei: That would mean moving the laser out another few light-days and losing more definition. I think, in any case, that they will say 'no' to both questions.

Me: Well, he would be dead by now, certainly.

[We both laugh]

Sergei: Next mark?

Me: This is the last one on the tape. The gun barrel hits the trees and the turret stops traversing.

Sergei: Ah! Not many of the turrets had electric traversing motors at that stage. Even then, a silver birch would probably be strong enough to stop it. Traversing was not very powerful. They couldn't move on because the gun wasn't straight and the driver would be dead in his seat and it would be difficult to get him out.

Me: So they had to abandon the relative safety of the tank.

Sergei: If it was burning inside they would need to get out anyway - the ammunition would very likely blow up and smear them both into paste inside.

Me: Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Some choice, eh?

Sergei: Right.

[A door hisses open and another voice sounds.]

Mum: Sergei, your Mother has just telephoned me to say

that you haven't done your homework. Earth 7 is now Terra-formed but you can't join the exodus unless you've passed your exams to enter Primary 1 so she is anxious to get you to your studies.

Me: But, Mum, why can't we go to Terra 7 with Sergei's family.

Mum: We are phased for Terra 9 - but you have the same problem with your exams so get your head down now. Good-bye, Sergei, see you later.

Sergei: Thank you, Mrs Schweitzer. Bye-bye, Morris, see you tomorrow, hopefully.

[Sergei's hologram disappeared as he switched off his transmitter on Moonbase 15. I was suddenly alone with Mum.]

Me: Why can't we live on the moon like Sergei?

Mum: Because there's not enough water there. We will get plenty of water when we move to Earth 9 - when its phasing comes up. For now we have to live here on Earth.

Me: But there's nowhere to go. In the old days there was room to go outside but now there's no outside unless we go to the war zone.

Mum: Patience, Morris. Patience. When your Dad gets back from the Atlantic with his mining bonus we'll have a holiday somewhere nice.

Me: Can we go to the war museum on Rigel? Can we?

[A siren sounds. We have to go down the shafts to escape

the nukes outside - just in case there's a crack in the shields somewhere. You would think, wouldn't you, that there would be somewhere other than the Indian Ocean that could harbour innocent, peace-loving creatures but, Mum says, the only other place left is the dual space port at Mumbai. Everywhere else glows too much to put the shields up.]

Mum: We'll see. We'll see. Do up your radiation suit and try not to get your fins caught this time. Hurry, the rest of the pod will be already on their way down.

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