

JUNE 14, 1944

As more force poured across the causeways that bridged the flooded Merderet River, the Germans who had fought so tenaciously began to pull away. Worn out and underequipped, the scattered regiments of the Eighty-second Airborne were withdrawn and organized once more. But there was no luxury to be found, little time to rest and refit. Within a few short days, the need for experience on the front lines became painfully apparent.

As part of the original plan, the Ninetieth Infantry Division had moved forward from their landing zone at Utah Beach and pushed right through the paratroopers' positions along the river. Adams and his weary squad had been pulled back to Sainte-Mère-Église, to watch with rising enthusiasm as the men of the Ninetieth, so many fresh legs and clean rifles, took their place. The Ninetieth would continue the push westward, Bradley's hard slice across the Cotentin Peninsula, isolating whatever enemy units remained north of that advance, the last resistance the Americans would face before they began their assault northward on the city of Cherbourg.

But almost immediately, the Ninetieth Division had problems. The fresh legs quickly bogged down, and when faced with their first test, their first confrontation with the German strongholds in the bocage country, the infantry seemed to succumb to paralysis. The corps commander, Joe Collins, began to understand what others across the Atlantic had once feared, that the Ninetieth had been woefully undertrained. Bradley realized that, for reasons no one at SHAEF could adequately explain, the leadership was lackluster at best. Almost immediately, Bradley ordered Collins to act, and Collins removed the division head, Major General Jay MacKelvie, as well as the regimental commanders most responsible for the lack of fire in their men. In their place, Collins inserted officers who had shown some combat initiative. But the error had been made, and what should have been a hard strike across the Cotentin had become instead a mish-mash of insignificant battles against an enemy who had been given time to regroup. Not willing to wait for the Ninetieth to find its spirit, Bradley reacted to the unexpected stalemate by authorizing Collins to call upon the most reliable and experienced troops he had in that part of the American sector: the paratroopers of the Eighty-second Airborne. Though many of the exhausted battalion and regimental commanders protested, Matthew Ridgway accepted the need for his paratroopers to return once more to the front. While the 507th and 508th would engage farther to the south, the men of the 505th would try to accomplish the job the Ninetieth Division could not complete: capturing the French town of Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte, the next major intersection on the roads that led to the far western coast of the peninsula.

SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE

JUNE 14, 1944

Adams hated Sainte-Mère-Église. Though the bodies had been mostly removed, the signs of the struggle were everywhere: blasted ruins of homes and shops, shredded parachutes splayed out over rooftops or rolled into filthy bundles in every corner. The workers of the Graves Commission had been efficient with the bodies of the Americans, but the enemy's dead were still scattered about, German corpses lodged in attics or on rooftops, snipers who were only found when their bodies began to decay. The men who did the awful work were mostly Negroes, assigned to the gruesome task of identifying and arranging the bodies for transport back to the coast or burying them in makeshift cemeteries around the town itself.

Adams had never served with a black soldier but watched them with curiosity, as he had as a boy in the dusty streets of Silver City. Negroes were rare in New Mexico, but they came for the work, the copper mines always looking for men to fill the gaps in their ranks, the backbreaking work that wasted the bodies of men like Jesse's father. Adams was twelve when he saw a black man for the first time, a hulking mountain of a man toting a fat suitcase, walking along the street with his small round wife. The white men of the town seemed to recoil at the sight, urgent whispers that the boy could not understand, low talk in the café that black men would bring a scourge no one seemed able to explain. But the Depression and the Dust Bowl brought more men from the north and east, black and white, desperate to earn a wage, seeking whatever opportunity would feed their families. The mine was prosperous, a rarity, and as the different races and cultures blended, most of the laborers discovered a halting respect for the men who worked beside them, their mutual survival more important than the color of any man's skin.

In basic training, the soldiers had been only white, and talk of Negro regiments and Negro divisions inspired rude insults and obscenities Adams couldn't understand. Anyone who knew something of history knew that there had been black troops in the First World War who had proven themselves beyond anyone's doubts, the Buffalo Soldiers of the 92nd Division and their counterparts in the 93rd. Talk had drifted through the camps that the Buffalo Soldiers were coming again, newly formed, would probably join the fight in Italy. Many of the paratroopers dismissed Negro soldiers with the matter-of-fact assumption that a black man would never have the courage to jump out of an airplane. It was a question that Adams had asked himself, and there was no answer. As far as Adams knew, none of the Negro enlistees had been given the chance. Now, in the blasted streets of the ruined town, the Negroes worked on the one job someone had deemed them suitable for: handling the dead. Adams studied them in spite of himself, had spoken to several and been surprised by the quiet dignity and confidence of men whose hands and uniforms were covered in death. If the black men despised their work or despised the officers who had put them there, Adams saw little of that. Instead, there was respect in both directions, the soldiers pointing out the 82nd's AA insignia on Adams's shoulder, sharing that same respect with the rest of the infantry who passed through the town. To the infantry, the men of the 82nd and the 101st divisions had opened the door. Every man in the Graves Commission knew that if the corpses were American, they were paratroopers.

"Hey, Sarge, there's mail back there, in the square!"

Adams looked up from his mess kit, struggling with a hard knot of gristle. "Mail? Way the hell out here?"

Unger held out a small blue square of paper. "Yep! Got a letter from my mama. I don't believe it!"

Adams spit out the offending lump of meat. "I don't believe it either."

"Lookee right here, Sarge! See? It's dated last month, so she doesn't know a thing about what we're doing. All kinds of stuff about Sally Lewis—that's a girl I was kinda hoping...uh..." Unger stopped, seemed to think better of divulging any more details. "Anyway, there's a whole truckload of mailbags. Somebody said they came through Utah Beach. You oughta go check. Maybe

there's something for you!"

Adams looked toward the large open square and could see soldiers gathering, one loud whoop, more men emerging from alleyways, the word spreading. He scooped out the last gooey lump from the small can of stew, swallowed it whole, and pieced the mess kit back together.

"You want me to clean that up for you, Sarge? You're not allowed to leave it dirty."

"I know the order. Fine. Here, clean the damned thing. Make it all shiny. I guess I'll go see what's going on. Maybe there's some mail for some of the other guys." The name punched him: Buford. No, please God. No family. Not now.

He pushed himself up to his feet, handed Unger the mess kit, and moved past a pile of twisted steel, the remains of a stone wall and a German eighty-eight, the barrel ripped apart. From the open square, men were coming past him, joyous surprise, anticipation, men with paper in their hands, one man crying. He saw the truck, officers holding the troopers back, keeping order, mailbags passing along a row of men, clerks and sergeants from each company, names calling out, eager hands. I'll be damned, he thought. The kid's right. They got us mail.

He saw Scofield, the captain with a wide smile, standing behind the mail handlers. Adams moved forward, more men flowing back past him, shouts and laughter, more tears, and Scofield saw him, waved him forward.

"Here, Sergeant! We've got some mail for the boys!"

Anything for me? The words stuck in Adams's throat, and he pushed his way through the throng, suddenly annoyed by the enthusiasm around him, even Scofield's smile digging into him. One man bumped him from the side, oblivious, his face buried in sheaves of paper, and Adams wanted to push back, forced himself to let it go, saw Scofield's aide, a corporal, fishing through one canvas bag, emptying it quickly, the names flowing out, one name now startling him.

"Lieutenant Pullman!"

"Here!"

Adams saw him now, the small thin man slipping forward, his hand out, taking the letter. Adams wanted to call out, felt a strange breathless relief. He pushed toward him. Pullman was reading the letter, somber, his face clouded.

"Lieutenant!"

Pullman looked up. Adams was surprised to see raw anger and then surprise on Pullman's face.

"Sergeant! You're alive! Thank God."

"Hell, yes, I'm alive. I've been within a grenade throw of General Gavin for a week. Where the hell have you been?"

"Right here, actually. I got hooked up with some of the boys from C Company, and General Ridgway had us working on snipers on the north side of town. I heard about the fighting at the river. Messy stuff. Glad to see you're all right."

Adams looked at the letter in Pullman's hands. "Everything okay, sir?"

Pullman folded the letter carefully, slipped into a pocket. "Not really. Don't worry about it. I'm damned glad to see you. I've caught up with a few of your squad. Had a little problem with Private Marley. A few of the boys found some Calvados or hard cider or something. Had to stick them all in a makeshift stockade. He'll be out by now. Probably have his tail between his legs and one hell of a headache."

"I wondered where he was. Don't worry, sir, I'll handle him. Stupid bastard."

"Easy, Sergeant. We need every man. Orders came this morning."

Scofield was there now. "That's all the mail for today. Sorry, Sergeant, looks like there wasn't anything here."

Adams turned, felt the urge to salute, old habit, held it down. The word had been made clear by Gavin himself: no saluting anyone this close to the enemy. An officer would be a perfect target for any sniper. Scofield was sliding his own letters into a pocket.

"It's okay, sir," Adams said. "Didn't expect anything. My mom's not much of a writer."

Scofield seemed to measure the statement, a silent moment; then he looked at Pullman. "Gather up your platoon, Lieutenant. What's your latest head count?"

"About thirty, best as I can tell. Sergeant Adams would make thirty-one."

"Not too bad, considering. Let's assemble in the street beyond that church. We're moving out at eleven hundred. The Five-oh-seven is already on the march, and we're protecting their tail. The enemy is all over the damned place, pockets of holdouts hunkered down in some pretty tight places. This hedgerow stuff is a damn nightmare, and the sooner we push out past it the better. Warn your men about snipers. Every man pays attention to the trees." He looked at Adams. "Well, hell, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir."

Scofield backed away. "I'll see you in twenty minutes. Need to check some details with Colonel Ekman."

Pullman saluted. Adams saw a quick frown on Scofield's face, wanted to grab the lieutenant's arm. Pullman was oblivious. "We'll be ready, sir. Let's go, Sergeant."

Scofield moved away quickly, and Adams knew why. He's cursing under his breath, he thought. No snipers today, though. Not here anyway. God help this idiot lieutenant. Ridgway sent him on sniper patrol and he didn't learn a damned thing.

Pullman began to move, and Adams followed close beside him, the square thinning out, men returning to their commands. There was laughter in every corner, men displaying their letters, loud talk, more of the whoops. Adams felt himself bristling, the sounds sharp and annoying.

"Sorry you didn't get any mail," Pullman said.

"Forget about it, sir. Not important."

"Well, that's your business. It could be worse. You could get a letter from your wife, telling you she's going to have a baby."

"Congratulations—"

Adams held the rest, and Pullman said, "Yeah, sure. I've been away for just a tad more than the required nine months. She's trying to convince me it's okay, that I'm still the father in *her* mind. I am, after all, the *husband*."

"Sorry, sir."

"So, your mother isn't big on letter writing? She big on being a mother?"

There was no humor in Pullman's question, and Adams thought, None of your business. Then he glanced at Pullman's pocket and thought of the letter, the man's anger. Hell, I owe him something. He spilled his guts to me, dammit.

"My brother's a Marine, sir. He's in the Pacific. I'm scared as hell for him. Pretty sure whatever's he going through is worse than here. Jungles and Japanese. Like fighting savages, from what I hear. Maniacs."

"Yeah. and over there. they're hearing about what kind of monsters the Germans are. Get hold of yourself. Sergeant. Nobody's

having a damned picnic. What's that got to do with your mother?"

Adams matched his pace with Pullman's, hiked the Thompson up tight on his shoulder, thought a moment.

"I think maybe I let her down by joining the army. My brother was all full of piss about the Marines, the elite fighting machine, all that. He's her baby, and I don't think she wanted to hear it. So she expected me to sign up with him, to look out for him. His name's Clay. He's three years younger, joined up when he was just eighteen. I tried to explain it doesn't work like that, the Marines don't care for somebody's big brother being a babysitter. Well, no, I didn't explain. You can't explain much of anything to either of my parents."

"You have a father? Never heard you mention him."

Adams sniffed. "We don't get along. He'd never write a word to anyone. Not sure he can even read. We've never been close or anything. He's not a nice guy."

"Sorry."

"It's okay, sir. Since I'm not wet-nursing my brother, and I'm not even a damned Marine, my mom expects me to make that up to her, I guess. Like I said, I can't help being scared for him. He's just a kid. Tough damn kid, though. Maybe it's why I joined the paratroopers. Show her I'm as tough as he is. Or maybe show him. If he's still alive, he's up to his ass in jungle rot, or malaria, or maybe some Jap prison camp. He gets hurt, or whatever else, she's probably gonna blame me. Only way out of that—well, hell, I guess I better go home some kind of hero."

"What? Sergeant, that's nuts."

Adams stopped, took a long breath. "Yeah."

EAST OF SAINT-SAUVEUR-LE-VICOMTE

JUNE 14, 1944, NOON

The infantry was still in place, holding their ground while the paratroopers pushed past. Unlike so many times before, there were no catcalls, no ridiculous insults, questioning why these men in baggy pants and tall boots dared to think of themselves as elite. Adams saw the faces of the men of the Ninetieth, soldiers whom the paratroopers now called ground pounders. They were not so different from the men in his own squad, young mostly, some with scraggly beards and dirty faces, grenades hanging on their shirts, the ever-present M-1s. But there was no swagger, no bravado. Adams had no idea what the infantry was going to do now: if they would follow a path the paratroopers would try to blaze or if they were going to be replaced by more of the troops still pouring across the beaches along the coast. For now, the paratroopers could only move ahead, seeking the enemy with slow careful steps, while, along the way, the infantry huddled in hastily dug trenches and foxholes and kept mostly silent.

The companies of the 505th were mostly intact again. The brief stay at Sainte-Mère-Église had given most of the regiments time to find their own, officers back on top, the units reorganized. There were yawning gaps in command, of course, appalling casualty lists from the fights along the river and the days of vicious combat around the town itself. Farther to the south and east, the 101st had endured the same scattered jumps and the same chaos, many of them picked off piecemeal or captured in small clusters by alert German infantry.

In Adams's own squad there were four missing faces, only eight men now who answered to him. Except for Buford, his other three missing men had likely come down in the water. Adams still carried the guilt of Buford's death, but talk of the missing men bothered him as well. He could not remove the memories of cries and splashes of helplessness. The others might only be found when the Merderet River was once again drawn down to its narrow banks.

As they advanced westward, they stayed off the roads, avoiding mines and booby traps. They pushed instead through the open fields, past one hedgerow at a time, climbing up and through the thickets, scanning and probing the field beyond. The men stepped now through tall grass, an untended field, no cows, no sign of a farmer. Adams's steps were slow and deliberate, with constant glances downward for signs of disturbed ground. There had been word passed of scattered minefields, mostly close to the wider roads. But there were no telltale markers, and he had heard the terrible surprises, distant thumps, one man's catastrophic bad luck. The mines were gruesomely efficient, usually wounding a man rather than killing him outright, so the screams would come, limbs torn away, astonishing amounts of blood. The medics would be there quickly, so many of them ignoring the danger in the ground beneath them as they scampered across. If the medics were luckier than the men they tried to help, they would reach the wounded men, only to find that their help was no help at all.

He guessed the grassy field to be two hundred yards wide, typical, his own squad in the center, advancing in a ragged line. Adams was slightly in front of his men, Pullman and the other sergeants doing the same, the three squads moving closer to another hedgerow. He still searched the ground at his feet; then, farther out, he saw the thigh-high grass suddenly gone, replaced by a ditch of open earth. The earth was fresh, a trench, thirty yards wide, stretching along the front edge of the embankment, someone's unfinished task.

He froze, raising one hand. The men knew the signal: Everyone halted, silent, and Adams pointed the Thompson, eased forward again, then two quick steps, a one-man charge, the submachine gun sweeping the trench. Empty. Thank God. He motioned to the others without looking back, knowing the sergeants would wait for his signal—Let's go, advance—and eased himself down into the trench, searching for wires, any kind of booby trap, careful lessons from Scofield and others who had watched their men lose a hand or an arm in careless souvenir hunting.

The trench was mostly clean, no smells but soil, and he saw footprints, small dugouts to one side, one empty tin of someone's lunch, flies skipping around it. Someone changed his mind, he thought, and decided this wasn't the place. Make a stand somewhere else. He looked back across the open ground, the tall grass, the trench well hidden. Thank you, whoever you were. For the first time since the gruesome fight at the causeway, he felt the stab of fear, the cold shiver in his chest, and stood in the trench, thinking of machine guns, what could have been hidden here, the horrific *rrrip*. He felt for the magazines pulling in the pockets on his pants legs and caught himself. Stay alert, you jackass.

The others moved up behind him, still spread out, began to climb down, then up, moving across the trench. They were silent still, the tall row of dense brush too close in front of them. No one's there, he thought. They wouldn't give us this nice little trench to use if they were on the other side of that hedge. He climbed up and saw Pullman down the line, watching him. Pullman pointed into the brush, made a short wave, and Adams took a breath. Yeah, I know. He nodded and moved forward.

The hedge was steep, the dirt embankment snarled in roots, all too familiar. Men were probing along the line as he was, seeking the opening, some kind of gap, and he heard a whisper, saw Marley, the big man wide-eyed, always afraid now, pointing into the

brush. Adams eased that way, saw daylight through the hedge, and climbed up again, saw the Thompson in front of him, crawling, slow and deliberate, the men in his own squad gathering behind him, a makeshift line. Adams crested the center of the hedge and scanned the open ground: another field, more grass, more silence. And then he saw the plane.

He slid down into the grass, kept his eye past the wreckage, any sign of movement. There was no smoke, the crash several days old, and he moved forward, closer. Keep low, he thought, good cover. The plane was only a few yards away, a burned hulk, small and, he knew now, a Piper Cub. It would have been an artillery spotter, flown by the insane dare-devils who flitted and darted over enemy lines like so many pesky flies. But the Germans knew, when the Cubs appeared, that artillery would follow; the pilots were using their radios to call back to the artillery officers the location of enemy troop positions, camps, placements of tanks or big guns. Adams ignored the men behind him and kept moving forward, pushing back the grass with the Thompson: more fresh earth, plowed up by the impact of the plane. There was very little intact, one wing severed completely, the wreckage scattered farther into the field, the tail hanging from the body at a cockeyed angle. There had been fire, the grass out beyond the plane flat and blackened, crew-cut stubble. It must have been raining, he thought, or else this whole damned place would have burned, so it had to be a week ago. He saw the propeller, bent and curled, fought the urge to look into the cockpit, but men were moving up close; he saw Pullman, crawling up to the plane, standing now, a low voice. "Good God. He didn't make it."

Adams couldn't avoid it. He stood as well, saw a single mass of black cinder, no face, no limbs, the man still at his controls. He caught the first smell now, something new, backed away, fought it, and said to Pullman, "Let's get out of here."

The lieutenant said nothing but moved out past the plane and stepped into the open swath of burned ground. Adams looked that way, thought, No, bad idea—and there was a whistle, a sharp thump, Pullman staggering. The crack came now, the distant sound of the rifle, and Pullman fell forward, his body limp, crumbling, facedown in the charred stubble of grass.

Adams called out, "No!" and dropped to the ground: another whistle, *crack*, a single popping sound, voices behind him.

"They hit the looey!"

Adams rolled to one side, pointed the Thompson forward, shouted, "Shut up! No one moves!"

He tried to see to the right, Sergeant Tobin's squad, had not noticed if they were through the hedge. He glanced up, a quick motion—no one—and heard voices behind the hedge, damn them! Too damned slow!

"Corporal!"

"Yeah!" Nusbaum responded.

"Get back to the hedge! The medic's with Tobin's squad. Wait for our covering fire."

"Okay, Sarge!"

Adams was shivering now, the ice rolling through him. He pulled the submachine gun close to his chest and glanced up over the grass, measured the field, thought, A hundred fifty yards. Where the hell did it come from?

"Anybody hear a direction?" he yelled. "From the side, or straight in front?"

"I think it was straight ahead, Sarge!"

"Yeah. Pretty sure!"

He raised up again, a brief look, then dropped.

"Okay, aim at those trees on the far side! In five seconds, give them hell! One clip only! Don't use up all your ammo. Give Nusbaum time to get back into the brush! You ready, Corporal?"

"Yeah!"

"Five, four, three, two...one!"

They all began to fire, and Adams sprayed the tree line across the field, knowing that Nusbaum was moving quickly. Then the firing quieted, the men dropping again, low in the grass. Adams was breathing heavily, heard Unger.

"The corporal made it, Sarge! You see anybody out there?"

"Shut up! We're not going to see anybody. That was a sniper. Probably alone. Everybody stay down. We've got to get around this burned ground, stay in that deep grass. Wait for my signal!"

There was shouting behind him, from the hedge, and now a voice. "Stay down! BAR!"

The gun opened up, spraying rounds over their heads: more voices, men moving forward from the hedgerow. He saw the medic now, the red cross on the man's shoulder, dull red on his helmet, but it wasn't the man he expected. The man was older, gasping for air. It was Major Brubaker, the battalion surgeon.

"Doc! What the hell you doing out here?"

The doctor was flat in the grass beside him, seemed shaken, held a medical kit above his helmet, useless protection.

"Came up behind you a ways back. It's my day for fun, Sergeant. Captain Branning took a bullet in the shoulder, and your medic fell back to help. Colonel Ekman's back there, and he told me to get up close to the men. He gave me a look I couldn't argue with. Where's the lieutenant?"

"Out past the plane. He tried to cross the burned grass and went down hard, not moving. I don't think he made it, sir."

"I'll decide that. First I've got to get to him."

"We'll give you covering fire. Wait."

"No. Won't need it. That's why they put this big damned cross on the bag. They won't shoot at me."

The man began to crawl forward, the bag held high above him, and Adams said, "No! Don't be stupid!"

But the doctor was still moving away. He stood upright now, held the bag high, moved out into the short stubble. Adams cursed to himself, rose to his knees, aimed the Thompson, nothing to see, just trees, saw the lieutenant's body, motionless, the man's neck twisted, a pool of blood. The doctor was there quickly, kneeling, and the thump came, the *pop*, and the doctor fell back with a grunt. He was sitting upright, and his legs began to twist, quivering, his arms reaching for the medical bag; and now the second shot came, the helmet popping off, the man spinning around, eyes staring, mouth open, blood and surprise and death. Adams fired the submachine gun at the trees, more firing from the others, loud curses, stunned shock. He emptied the magazine, dropped down again, the BAR now filling the air above him. He stared down, blinded by fury; he was a *doctor*, you goddamned savage! Then he raised his head.

"Hold your fire! Cease fire! Anybody see the shot? Any smoke?"

No one responded. Adams jammed a magazine into the Thompson. "Stay in the tall grass, go around this damned plane! As long as the grass is deep, we can cross this field! Unger!"

"Yeah, Sarge!"

"Stay back here, keep behind the plane, use it for cover. Watch that far tree line. That bastard's still there, and I want you to watch

