

**A BLOODY  
WONDERFUL  
WAR**

---



# **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

---

**Herb Hughes**



Books From The Pond  
2018

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, organizations, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 by Herb Hughes

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

First Printing: 2018

ISBN-13: 978-1984914798

ISBN-10: 1984914790

Books From The Pond  
1207 E. Forrest St., Ste. D-105  
Athens AL 35613

[www.herbhughesnovels.com](http://www.herbhughesnovels.com)

Cover art: Mutt Suttles

*Dedicated to the men and women of the American military. If  
only all wars could be fought this way.*



## Chapter 1

Moving his hands in slow motion, Corporal Vince Masini pushed against the thick veil of the jungle. With a light rustle, the shiny, dark green fronds slid to the sides. The Corporal could hear the constant thudding of bombs in the distance, pulverizing the ground one after another, over and over, a continuous grating on his nerves. Were the explosions moving closer? He thought so, but his ears were so deafened by the seemingly endless sound of bombs pounding into the earth, no doubt spewing up great torrents of African soil, that he was no longer sure.

In his immediate surroundings, the animals were unsettled. They chirped and squealed and grunted and whistled their agitation. They were tired of bombs and bullets. They were tired of war. This was their domain, their small private sector of the world, but their privacy had been taken away, invaded by man and his savagery. Once again.

Corporal Masini looked through the space between the fronds he had pushed aside. His eyes searched for any movement other than the myriad of bugs, large and small, buzzing and crawling through the steamy jungle. There, on the other side of the lush vegetation, he saw the olive green military tent.

One hand slipped down and patted the grenade hanging from his belt. It was old, the corroded surface telling of being left unused from who knows what past war, but it was live. Grenades rarely became impotent, even after decades. His other hand gripped the time-worn AK-47. Crudely applied camo paint was peeling and flaking off the stock. He lifted the automatic weapon and held it above his waist, wedged against his side and upper arm. Carefully placing his finger on the trigger, he stepped between the fronds and out into the open.

*“Red bird six on bimbo cigar hill...”*

The voice had come from a loudspeaker that hung limply at a corner of the lopsided tent, pointing more or less toward the ground.

Corporal Masini took a closer look at the tent. There were large streaks of muted colors, faded and mixed together, running in several

## HERB HUGHES

directions across the ancient, highly patched canvas. It almost looked like camouflage, but it wasn't. The colors were only stains.

Moments later the voice burst out again, *"Three walls in a wrecked turkey..."*

There was a bent, crooked antenna atop the tent, its tangled wire erratically looped over the duct-tape patched canvas. The wire disappeared down through the door flap, an access that was always partially open because the zipper was broken.

*"Ruby's rainbow has tattered toes..."*

Corporal Masini knew the tent was more or less dry on the inside, as long as you stayed away from the front flap and the few patches that still leaked. He knew because, as pathetic as it appeared, this tent was their barracks. It was also their HQ office and their mess hall.

The voice from the loudspeaker ended with: *"Brick ball through the snowflakes. Got it. Over and out."*

Private William "Flap" Ericsson stuck his head through the tent flap, his large ears, the reason for his nickname, wobbling as he did so. "Hey, Vince, I thought I heard you out here. What do you think about that? I don't know how it happened." The rest of Flap's lean, awkward body tumbled out of the tent. "What are you doing with the AK-47? Put that thing away. They're dangerous."

Corporal Vince Masini lowered his weapon and said, "Wandering around in the war zone. It's all right. The safety's on."

"The war zone? Are you crazy? That's against regulations!"

"I didn't go far. Besides, it's only against regulations in certain circumstances and at specific times. We would be required to go into the war zone if we were a real army. It's the when and where that's so tricky. But what did you mean? What do I think about what? And what happened?"

"Didn't you hear me on the radio?"

Vince stared at Private Ericsson a moment then said, "I heard you, Flap, but the only thing I understood was 'over and out.' When you're talking on that radio, it's all gibberish."



## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

“It’s only standard code. Why, it’s simple.” Flap rubbed his chin and mused a moment then added, “I don’t know why all the other radio guys need a computer to figure it out.”

Vince rolled his eyes and said, “I don’t have a computer with me right this sec. Try English.”

Flap shrugged his shoulders and said, “Sure, Vince. Our application to join the war as an official army was approved.”

“What? What application? I didn’t apply for anything. I don’t want to be an official army.”

“The message said the application was submitted by Private Lewis Freeman.”

“Lew?” Vince said. “What the hell? Get on the intercom and get him over here now!”

“I would, but he’s coming up right behind you,” Flap pointed over Vince’s shoulder. “He’d be here before I could reach the intercom.”

“Lew!” Vince shouted as he spun around, “Did you apply to be an official army?”

“Yeah, that was me. The Liberian Army in Exile, L-A-E. What do you think? Has class doesn’t it? I mean, the Liberians already have a regular army, but I came up with a little twist on it. A few centuries ago, my ancestors were living in Liberia before they were kidnapped and turned into slaves in America. As good a name as any, don’t you think?” Private Lewis Freeman shrugged.

“Why in God’s name do you want to be a real army?” Vince asked.

“I don’t,” Lew said. “They send failed applicants this nice consolation gift box. You know, U.S. citizen’s tax dollars at work. When we were in Little Tokyo the other night, one of the regulars told me about it. He said it’s a huge crate with some neat things like sausages, cheese, beer, chocolates, stuff like that. I mean, it’s the good chocolate. Individually wrapped and with nuts. Haven’t had anything like that since I left the hood in St. Louis.”

“I hope the package for approved applications is better,” Vince said.

“No,” Lew answered. “If you get approved, all they send is an official copy of the World Association of Warring Armies Regulations, the WAWA Rags. The damned thing is a foot thick and weighs a

## HERB HUGHES

whopping forty-nine pounds. Who the hell would want that, eh? So I did a poor job of the application on purpose, just to make sure it got rejected. When the box of goodies runs out, I've thought of another ten names to apply under. We'll be set for a year!"

"I hate to tell you this," Vince said, "But you did a poor job of doing a poor job."

"Huh? You're talking code like Flap. What does that mean?"

"It means they approved your application," Flap said. "We just got word. We are now the official Liberian Army in Exile. The WAWA Rags have been shipped. They're making the announcement on all the social media sites this week. Oh, we're also required to put a big sign in front of our camp. At our own expense, of course."

"Oh, shit! You got to be joking. That ain't the way it was supposed to go down, man. That means... ah..."

"That means we've got to start acting like a real army," Vince said. "We will have to get up early in the morning and make our beds, shower, and dress properly. And we'll have to observe military protocol. Not to mention, we will be forced to make regular forays into the war zone, with weapons and watchers. And if we get the kind of points I expect we'll get, considering we have no combat training whatsoever, we'll be dead last. By a landslide."

"Dress properly?" Lew echoed. He stuck his finger through one of the many holes in his fatigues. "This is the best outfit I've got."

"I don't want to go into the war zone," Flap said. "Little Tokyo is dangerous enough."

"Little Tokyo is more dangerous," Vince said. "But you won't have a choice about going into the war zone. They'll have inspectors all over us. They'll be crawling our backs trying to make us look and act like real soldiers. Smooth move, Lew."

A tinny, distant voice, interspersed with static, came from inside the tent.

"Got another message coming in," Flap said as he turned and stepped through the canvas door. When he answered the radio, his voice boomed over the droopy loudspeaker, "*Digging pinko clouds in the river box...*"

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“Maybe they changed their minds, and this is the rejection message,” Lew said.

“I hope so. Sounds like a mistake to me.”

“Why does Flap have to turn the loudspeaker on when he talks on the radio? Nobody here knows what he’s saying.”

*“Turtles into the yellow space between guitars...”*

“Maybe that’s the point,” Vince said. “Speaking of points, why didn’t you talk to me first? I could have done a better job of doing a poor job.”

*“Indigo gone with lovers from threaded butter...”*

“How was I to know? I’ve never had anything approved in my life. They even turned me down for social security disability when everybody else in the hood was getting approved. My cousin got approved, and he’s a professional wrestler. I figured getting rejected for this was a no-brainer.”

*“Slime with chunky pages over the oak log air. Over and out.”*

His eyes wide with excitement, Flap tumbled through the tent flap again. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes and no. Translate, please.”

“We’re getting a CO, a Colonel. A real, live, full-bird Colonel!”

“What?” Vince said. “Who’s sending us a Colonel? What for?”

“The Liberian government,” Flap answered.

“But Liberia has an army,” Lew said. “I checked before I sent the application. That’s why I had to add the ‘in Exile’ thing.”

“It seems the current government has sympathy for any of its citizens who were exiled by previous governments,” Flap said. “They’ve disavowed all responsibility for the exile and are providing us with a high-ranking commander to atone for the historical wrongs of prior governments.”

“But it was a joke. We weren’t exiled. We were kidnapped. You can’t say the Liberian Army in Kidnapation, so I used exile. I made it up.”

“Looks like they took it seriously.”

“So we’re getting a Colonel from Liberia? That’s raw, man. He’s going to train us for combat, show us the fine points of how to kill

## HERB HUGHES

people, and, worst of all, teach us how to march. This is down-home awful!”

“It’s even worse,” Flap said. “He’s not from Liberia. They couldn’t spare any officers from their regular army, so they hired a battle-hardened leader who has experience in numerous African campaigns, Colonel Thaddaeus T. Fattingham from England.”

“Oh, Sweet Jesus!” Lew said. “Another bossy cracker.”

“This is absurd,” Vince said. “We’re not an army. We put this camp together with scraps and trash. And, uh, some stuff we liberated. We’re all castaways. We’re not army sort of material. Besides, we don’t have enough soldiers for an officer at that level.”

“Maybe they’re going to send more soldiers, too,” Flap said.

“What?” Lew said. “Make us a real army?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I’ll tell you why not,” Lew answered. “We found this vacant lot along the war zone and set up our camp. Now we’ve got a nice, laid-back, make-believe army. The WAWA Council doesn’t know we exist and doesn’t bother us. Or didn’t. We get to drink at Little Tokyo every night, flirt with ladies from other armies, and we don’t have to go into the war zone and fight somebody else’s battles. That’s why not. Turning us into a real army will ruin everything!”

“Yeah, and if they want to turn the Liberian Army in Exile into a real army,” Vince said. “The first thing they’ll do is throw us all in the stockade. They’d figure out we’re trespassing in short order. They might even recognize a few pilfered items about the camp.”

“Oh, shit!” Lew said. “I hear the stockade for this war is huge. And they throw the prisoners in there amongst all those badass dudes with no guards around to keep you from getting your throat slit with a homemade knife. A guy in Little Tokyo told me once that every morning there was a line of hearses out front to take away the bodies of all the prisoners who got murdered during the night.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Flap said. “I don’t want to get thrown into the stockade.”

“Me, either.”

“What are we going to do?”

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

“Maybe it’s time to relocate,” Vince said. “We can find another vacant lot in another part of the war zone.”

“Yeah,” Lew said. “Start over as a new fake army. Nobody will know the difference.”

“But no more filling out apps to be a real army,” Vince said.

Private Lewis Freeman held his hand to his heart. “No more apps. Scout’s honor.”

“You were a scout?” Flap asked.

“No, man. I was a crip. But it’s sort of like the same thing. Both clubs stay out all night.”

“What’s a crip?”

“The crips and the bloods, man. Used to be a thing. It’s gotten more complicated now. And worse. A lot worse. Little kids are getting shot. I got out. I never signed up for that.”

“We need to move a long way from here,” Vince said. “Maybe the opposite side of the war zone. Don’t want to risk them finding us.”

“Hmmm... That means Little Tokyo is out.”

“No problem,” Flap said. “There’s a lot more bars than camps in this war. There will be several close to us no matter where we go. Maybe the next one will be nicer than Little Tokyo.”

“The public bathroom at the service station back in the hood was nicer than Little Tokyo.”

“Okay,” Vince said, “That settles that. Let’s start pack...”

Vince was interrupted by the sound of a jeep coming in fast. It screeched to a halt on the dirt drive mere inches away, sending billows of sand and gravel flying at them. They coughed and sneezed and waved their hands in front of their faces to ward off the fine spray of dust.

The jeep was shiny and new and had a variety of antennas, all angling more or less skyward. The tires, glistening with a dark black sheen, had full tread. The emblem of the World Association of Warring Armies was on the hood, the tailgate, and both sides.

On the outside, the emblem was ringed with a circle of white stars on a bright red background. The inside had hands in five different shades of skin color on a light green background. The hands were intertwined with each other, all holding a single burning torch. WAWA

## HERB HUGHES

INSPECTION was stenciled below the emblems in letters almost too large for the leftover space.

A woman in a tailored, tight-fitting officer's uniform, Captain's bars across her shoulders, stepped out of the jeep and stood there with her hands on her hips. "I'm Captain Nikki Christopoulos, WAWA Inspection. Who's in charge here?" she asked, though it sounded more like an order than a question.

Lew and Flap both pointed at Vince.

Vince made a halting attempt to salute then stared at his hand for several seconds. Finally, he pointed at himself and said in a squeaky, timid voice, "Me? Ah, no, no. It's not me. It's, ah, Colonel Fattingham. Yes! That's it! Fattingham. He's in charge."

"That's right," Flap echoed. "Colonel Fattingham. Our new CO."

"Yeah," Lew said. "That's the dude. The fat man."

"I will see him now," Captain Christopoulos said. There was a slight pout on her lips as she stared into each of their eyes in turn. Her stare was unrelenting, as hard as if made of crystal.

"Ah... He's not quite here yet," Vince said. "But he is deploying as we speak."

"By all means, please deliver a message for me," Nikki said with a clenched-teeth smile. "I have been watching you for quite some time. You are not an army. You are a disgrace. You can't even salute properly. You are nothing more than a bunch of misfits, bums, and thieves. And now I get this notice that you have entered the war as the official Liberian Army in Exile."

"Bad news travels fast," Lew said.

"None of you are Liberian," Captain Nikki Christopoulos said.

"Yeah, man," Lew said. "My whole family is from Liberia. We were, ah, exiled, a long time ago."

"You, Lewis Shaquille Freeman, never set foot in Liberia in your life. It has been more than a dozen generations since any of your family lived there. I, personally, do not consider that as being Liberian, especially since your ancestors were exiled from the Congo, not Liberia. They lived in Liberia for a few brief decades before being sold into slavery."

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

Flap said, “‘Shaquille?’ You never told us your middle name was Shaquille.”

“How do you know all that?” Lew said. “Hell, I didn’t know all that. It was mostly just family rumor.”

“I know everything about you, Private Freeman. You used to be a crip, but you screwed up. My, that’s a surprise, isn’t it? The bloods have a price on your head. Fifty thousand dollars. Dead. They don’t want you alive.”

“It was a misunderstanding,” Lew said. “That’s all. I’ve got nothing to worry about. My crip brothers will protect me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Nikki said. “Apparently you haven’t heard the latest. The crips also have a price on your head. Seventy-five thousand. They didn’t want to be outdone by their rivals.”

“What? My own homies? How could this happen?”

Nikki gave him a disgusted look and said, “Look at your track record and figure it out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nikki turned to Vince and Flap and said, “I know all about the rest of you as well. Corporal Masini, son of Adolfo Masini, the crime boss. You even screwed up being a bad guy. And William Ericsson, better known as Flap because of your ears. The son of a farmer from the endless cornfields of Kansas. You’re damn near an idiot savant. You can cipher faster than a high-end computer, but you can’t even figure out how to tie your shoes.”

“I can, too,” Flap said. He looked down at his feet. One shoe had loose strings snaking along behind. The other had strings tied in so many knots they would never be loose again. “Ah, sometimes.”

“You should have stayed on the farm. I have been watching all of you for some time. In fact, I was on my way to arrest your entire little pretend ‘army’ when I received the approval notice for your application. Throwing the lot of you in the stockade would have been quite a feather in my cap, but you have ruined months of investigation.”

“Months? We’ve only been here three weeks,” Vince said.

“A mere detail. This camp is a mess. Nothing around here is regulation.”

## HERB HUGHES

“Our budget is slightly on the slim side. We do what we can.”

“What you can is not good enough, Corporal. Negative five points.”

“We can get negative points?” Flap asked.

“You’re the first,” Nikki answered. Then she glared at Vince and said, “Oh, and another negative point for the inability to salute. That’s a total score of minus six. Out of the one hundred sixty-three countries taking part in the war, make that one hundred sixty-four countries now, you are dead last in the standings.”

“You can’t give us negative points,” Vince said. “Our CO isn’t even here yet. We just got our application approved. Give us some time.”

“Time? You’ll get time, all right. Mark my words, you disgusting rejects have only delayed your arrest. I will be watching you carefully, and I will have my revenge. If you prove to be the fakes I already know you are, I will personally make sure you spend the rest of the war, and the peace after the war, in the stockade.”

With that, Captain Christopoulos turned and stepped back to her jeep, hopping gracefully through the opening and onto her seat. She slammed the shifter into reverse then covered Vince, Lew, and Flap with another cloud of dust and gravel as she spun her wheels and sped out of camp.

“We haven’t set the first official foot in the war zone, and we’re already in last place,” Vince said. “Damn, what a bitch! I’d hate to come home to her every night.”

“Maybe,” Lew said, “But you got to admit, the bitch has a nice ass.”

“Nice ass or not,” Flap said, “She’s not the kind of woman you come home to. She’s one of those women who comes home to you every night. When she gets there, she makes you take off your kitchen apron while she puts on her leathers and pulls out her whip.”

“This is unbelievable,” Vince said. “Not only do we have to risk our lives by acting like real soldiers, but we’ve also got to prove we’re not who we really are. Or we’re all going to jail to get our throats slit.”

“Look at the bright side,” Lew said. “My app got approved; else we’d be on the way to jail right now. Damn! I did something right for a change.”



## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“We could move again like you were saying before her Highness came in,” Flap said.

“How?” Vince replied. “She’s watching us. She knows everything about us. We couldn’t set up anywhere without her flying in and arresting us. We’re stuck.” Vince shook his head and asked, “How many days before our new CO gets here? Maybe he can help. He’s a full-bird Colonel. Somebody at that level has to have some pull.”

“We’re supposed to pick him up at the airport at fourteen hundred hours this afternoon.”

“What!” Vince screamed as he looked at his Rolex watch, one that had been ‘liberated’ on the streets of New York. “Today? Fourteen hundred... That’s half an hour from now! We’re going to make our new, battle-hardened CO wait in the airport? Oh, my God!” He slapped his forehead. “Another disaster.”

“The airport’s only twenty minutes from here.”

“In a real jeep. We’ve got Beulah,” Vince said as he pointed toward the rust bucket parked a few feet away.

They all stared at the sad excuse for a vehicle. The more or less olive paint on the dented, rusted, and scratched body was faded and splotched. There were stain spots that would not wash off, along with several irregular patches of gray primer that covered who knows what other sins. The tires were bald, and the spare tire rack was empty. Both doors were tied shut with rope. Inside, the vinyl on the seats was cracked and peeling. In some places, it was missing altogether. There was no windshield and only one windshield post, on the driver’s side. Beulah had no top and, for good measure, there was no bottom in several places as the floorboard was severely rusted. Some of the holes were big enough for a shoe to fit through.

“Oh,” Flap said. “I forgot.”

“How the hell could you forget Beulah?” Lew asked. “She’s trash!”

“Be careful. You could hurt her feelings. Besides, she’s honestly ours. We didn’t steal her. She was abandoned. All she needed was love.”

“You’ll have to supply the love yourself,” Vince said. “We’ve got to go. Now! Where’s the rest of the platoon?”

“She’s washing her hair.”

## HERB HUGHES

“Go get her. Pronto. We need to get to the airport as fast as we can!”

Vince and Lew climbed into the front seat. Vince reached under the dash and touched the ignition wires together. They could hear and feel Beulah bump and grind, but the motor wouldn't start.

Flap came running back, Private Bobbie Winding following immediately behind him.

“My hair isn't dry yet,” Bobbie complained as she climbed over the door and fell into the back seat. “It'll get all frizzy.”

“No, choice,” Vince said as he touched the wires together again. “We can't keep the new CO waiting.” Beulah still refused to start.

“I don't want our new CO to see me looking bad,” Bobbie said.

“Only way to avoid that,” Flap said, “Is never meet him.”

“Shut up, propeller head!” Bobbie shouted. “When he looks at you, he'll think we're air force instead of army.”

Flap covered his ears with his hands and said, “Sticks and stones...”

“Can it, you two,” Vince said. “You think the new CO is going to put up with your bullshit? This guy has seen real wars, blood and guts and people dying. Hell, you'll be the first two sent to the stockade. But he'll probably have you both flogged first. You'd better learn to get along. Flap, get this damned jeep started.”

“Sure, Vince.” Flap hopped out of the jeep and opened the hood. He patted and wiggled the injector lines and sparkplug cables then kissed the radiator. “Try her now.”

Beulah roared into life, a thick column of dark gray smoke billowing from her tailpipe.

Flap closed the hood and jumped back into the jeep. “You just have to know how to talk to a lady,” he said.

“As if you had a clue,” Bobbie said. Then she turned to Vince and said, “My hair is going to be a mess. We need a top for this thing.”

Lew stuck his foot through one of the larger holes in the floorboard and said, “Seems to me we need a bottom first.”

Vince shifted into first gear. The grinding noise was so loud it drowned out Bobbie's complaints. Beulah slowly chugged out of camp,

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

bouncing across the gravel driveway as though the old jeep were driving on a trampoline.

## Chapter 2

War Memorial Boulevard was a six-lane divided highway where it wound its way around and through the sprawling military installations of Russia, China, the United States, and other large countries. It reduced to as little as a narrow, poorly-maintained two-lane road in the areas where the armies were few and small, what the locals called the “ghetto” armies. LAE’s camp was in this area, where potholes were plentiful, and the pavement was so narrow two large trucks could not pass each other without one of them edging off the road.

Beulah chugged along the narrow road that was so encroached by jungle on both sides that the canopy merged together overhead. It was dark and shadowy in the middle of the day, and had the feel of driving through a tunnel.

Little Tokyo was ahead on the left. The dilapidated bar was easy to recognize. It was made from hastily cut tree trunks no larger than four inches in diameter; corrugated tin that was covered with rust on both sides; and discarded pieces of construction lumber of various lengths, all too short so that they had to be spliced together to span whatever length was required. The bar was made only slightly more appealing by the darkness that hid many evils.

“Hey, let’s stop real quick,” Bobbie said. “A beer would be good.”

“Yeah,” Flap said. “I’d like one, too.”

“I’m glad to see you guys finally agree on something,” Vince said. “Unfortunately, we don’t have time. We’re getting a CO, remember? And he’s going to be officially standing around in the airport waiting on us in...” Vince consulted his liberated Rolex. “Nineteen minutes.”

Lew looked longingly at the bar as they bounced past and said, “Hey, I’ve got an idea. We could tell him we were on patrol in the war zone. We got pinned down by gunfire, only narrowly escaping with our lives. What’s an hour or so when you’re fighting a war, eh?”

“Pinned down? In this war?” Vince said. “Are you going to tell him that with beer on your breath? This guy’s been through real combat. You’re not going to be able to pull the wool over his eyes that easily.”

“Aw, crap. A beer sounded so good.”

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“Yeah, it did,” Vince said, looking back at Little Tokyo in the cracked rearview mirror. The pieces of mirror were slightly out of plane with each other so that he could see three views of the crude hand-painted sign out front. “The CO will be in a bad mood from having to wait. The longer he waits, the worse it will be. There’s no need making it worse. Let’s get this over with. We’ll get him back to camp, take our lumps, then make some sort of lame excuse and go back to Little Tokyo afterward.”

“Deal,” Flap said. The others agreed.

“But I’ll need time to do something about my hair,” Bobbie said. “I don’t want to look bad when we go out.”

“As if you had a choice,” Flap said.

“E-S-A-D, turkey.”

“What does that mean?” Flap asked.

“I thought you were the expert on code,” Lew said. “It means ‘Eat Shit And Die.’”

“Fiddlesticks,” Flap said. “If you want to impress the new CO, that’s not the kind of thing a good woman ought to be saying.”

“You wouldn’t know a good woman if she slapped you in the face, rat breath,” Bobbie retorted.

“A good woman slaps you in the face?”

“Hell, yes. Like this...”

Bobbie swung her hand around and slapped a startled Flap on his cheek before he could ward off the blow. Flap began to retaliate as Vince reached back to stop the fight. Flap’s arm was in full swing when it caught Vince’s arm, pulling Vince toward the back seat and causing him to swerve Beulah to the right as Vince’s left hand jerked off the steering wheel.

“Watch out!” Lew screamed.

There was a large, muscular man with dark hair, a hitchhiker, on the side of the road, straight in front of them. As Vince tried to free his right arm, the hitchhiker tossed his duffel bag in the air and dove for the jungle. Beulah barely missed the diving hitchhiker then bounced on the shoulder of the road for several seconds before Vince managed to get his left hand back on the wheel. He overcorrected, sending Beulah into a

## HERB HUGHES

sharper left turn than he intended. At that moment, the duffel bag came down and slammed against Beulah's radiator, shirts and pants and underwear flying in all directions.

An oncoming Humvee swerved off the road to avoid Beulah's wild twists and turns. As it did, it sent up a spew of dirt and grass and small limbs in a long spray behind it, covering Beulah, those inside, and much of the nearby pavement.

Vince finally got his right arm free and brought Beulah back to the right lane then hit the brakes. Bobbie and Flap tumbled forward, almost into the front seat. They fell backward on the recoil as Beulah came to a bald-tire screeching halt. Bobbie's face landed in Flap's crotch and she muttered, "Mmphfph."

Flap pulled Bobbie's head up by her hair and said, "That's disgusting!"

Jerking Flap's hands out of her hair, Bobbie said, "It sure as hell is, you stup..."

Before she could say anything else, the slick, new Humvee, now covered with mud and leaves from traversing the narrow, unpaved shoulder, came whizzing back in reverse and stopped beside them. The driver screamed something in a foreign language, but Vince only shrugged his incomprehension. The agitated driver shot them a bird then floored the Humvee, spinning tires briefly before flying down the road behind them.

"That was fun," Vince said, "You two almost got us killed that time. When the hell are you going to stop..."

"Almost got you killed?" the hitchhiker said with a thick accent as he climbed out of the jungle and brushed off his fatigues.

"What a hunk," Bobbie said, low enough so the hitchhiker couldn't hear.

"Hey, sorry," Vince called out. "I didn't see you."

"It was me you were not seeing?" the hitchhiker said as he pointed his finger at his barrel chest.

"Ah, you got a point," Vince answered. "It's a long story. We'll help you with your things."

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

They got out of the jeep and started gathering the hitchhiker's clothes, stuffing them back into the duffel bag.

"I'm Bobbie Winding," Bobbie said with her best alluring smile as she extended her hand.

"I am Joe, ah, Jones. Yes, Joe Jones. It is pleased to meet you I am, Mister Winding."

Bobbie jerked her hand back, mumbled "Big goon," then stomped back to the jeep and climbed into the back seat.

"It is something wrong I have said?"

"Oh, don't mind her," Flap said. "Typical woman. Overly sensitive."

"Her? Ahhhh. It is the problem I am seeing now. I knew not. She is so, so..." Joe reached up and held his hands in front of his chest.

"Flat-chested?" Flap said. "Yep, that's Bobbie."

"Where are you headed?" Lew asked.

"The airport. It is the first plane home I must needs be on."

"Where's home," Lew asked.

"Ah, home? Oh. Ah, Los Ang... ah, Ang... L-A. Yes, yes. That is it. LA is my home. It is the state where I was born."

Vince and Lew exchanged glances.

"We're going to the airport, too," Vince said. "If you can squeeze in the back, we'll take you there. It's the least we can do."

Joe looked at Bobbie pouting in the back seat and said, "It is a long ride this will be."

"Suit yourself, man," Lew said. "You can stay here and try to catch another ride if you want."

"No. I must go. The ride I will take. Please you... Ah, thank you."

"He's a big guy," Lew said to Vince under his breath. "You think Beulah can handle the load?"

"The airport's not far. This way we'll have somebody between those two idiots in the back seat, a buffer to stop the fights."

"Good point."

Joe dropped the hastily packed duffel bag in the narrow slot behind the back seat and climbed between Bobbie and Flap. It was a tight fit, but somehow the big man made it. More amazingly, somehow Beulah

## HERB HUGHES

managed to bear the load as they chugged and bounced their way down War Memorial Boulevard.

Two miles past Little Tokyo, War Memorial Boulevard widened to four lanes. Not long afterward they passed the camp for the country of Monaco on their right. The camp sign was attached across the three masts of a landed luxury yacht. The sign had a picture of a roulette wheel on the left and a pair of tumbling dice on the right. Below the huge gold letters saying “MONACO,” smaller red letters announced: “VISITORS WELCOME.”

“Man, I’d love to go in there and try my luck some time,” Lew said.

“You’ve got to have money before you can have luck,” Vince replied.

“And if we had money, we’d need to put up our LAE sign,” Flap said.

“Lay?” Joe questioned. “What is being a ‘lay’ sign?”

“The Liberian Army in Exile. We just got approved to be an army, and we’re on the way to pick up our new CO. We’re supposed to put up a sign saying who we are.”

“Screw the sign,” Lew said. “Let’s get some money and come back here to the casino. My application got approved. I’m feeling lucky.”

“We’ve got to go into the war zone, remember,” Bobbie said. “Better save your luck for that.”

“Why?” Lew said. “Nobody gets killed in this bogus war.”

“Flap’s afraid of the war zone,” Vince said. “But it’s the safest place in Africa. Outside the war zone, World War III is definitely dangerous. Last week the news announced that the one thousandth soldier had died. Another bar fight. Car accidents and bar fights are the only ways to get killed in this war.”

“I wonder if they included the people getting stabbed in the stockade in that one thousand number?” Flap said.

“Damn!” Lew exclaimed. “I should have stayed back in the hood. It was safer there. As long as you were indoors, all you had to worry about was the occasional stray bullet coming through the walls. But I still want to come back to that casino someday and get me some of those rich folks



## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

money. All we've got to do is come up with enough money to buy a handful of chips."

A few miles later Beulah managed to negotiate the turn into the airport by a large, well-lit sign that read:

### **Southwest Area War Zone International Terminal (SAWZIT) US Tax Dollars at Work**

The airport entrance road widened to fourteen lanes, each with a guard shack and a lowered metal barrier. All of the shacks but one were closed, and the line at that one was over twenty cars long.

"Oh, crap," Vince said. "We're ten minutes late now."

After they watched for a few minutes, Lew said, "Look at that shit! The dude is filling out a survey. All these cars lined up and no other booths open and he's filling out a multi-page survey on every damned car. We'll never get through."

Vince glanced around then said, "Screw this. He's got his back to us, and there's nobody else up there. We're taking the shortcut." He whipped Beulah's steering wheel to the right, and the ancient jeep bounced over the curb, crossed a grass divider, and then chugged through a small opening in a chain-link fence. Not far past the fence, they were on a concrete road again, headed toward the terminal.

"I don't think you were supposed to go through that fence," Flap said. "It was only open because they were repairing it."

"You wanted to wait in that line for another two hours?"

"No, but... Where are we going? This road angles to the right. The terminal's to the left."

"It's bound to come back around somewhere."

There was a growing sound behind them as Beulah barreled down the wide concrete road. The sound grew louder quickly, fast becoming a roar. Bobbie turned around to look and screamed at the top of her lungs. Flap shouted, "GET DOWN!"

They all ducked their heads as the roar became deafening. A huge jet passed directly over them. The remaining windshield post slammed to the hood as it was hit by the rear landing gear. It tumbled over and hung

## HERB HUGHES

limply to the side, connected only by the last tiny bit of brittle rubber weather stripping. They heard a monstrous screech as the jet touched down onto the concrete directly in front of them.

Lew held his hand to his heart as he said, “Oh, shit! I think I’m dead.”

“It is getting out of here I believe we should do,” Joe said.

“Fast!” Flap shouted. “There’s another one coming.”

Vince jerked the wheel to the left and Beulah jumped off the concrete runway, bouncing over the grassed field toward the terminal.

“MPs, man,” Lew said as he pointed back toward the tower. Two large black SUVs with lights flashing were starting to head their way.

“I’m a dead man,” Vince said. “They’ll put me in front of a firing squad then court martial my cold, stiff body.”

“There!” Bobbie pointed. “Between the dumpster and the building corner. That gets us back to Arrivals.”

Vince threaded Beulah through the small space Bobbie had pointed out. It was barely inches wider than Beulah, so tight the now dangling windshield post was torn completely off as it banged against the dumpster. People on the sidewalk stopped in their tracks as Beulah came bouncing through, navigating the crowds until it was back on the road. Vince did his best to get lost in the thick traffic around the Arrivals gates.

“They’re stuck,” Flap said. “The SUVs are too big for the MPs to get through.”

As Vince pulled Beulah into a parking place, he turned to Joe and said, “We can take you to the Departure gates as soon as we pick up the CO. We can’t keep him waiting any longer.”

Joe was already out of the jeep and pulling his duffel bag from behind the seat. “Okay, it is. Walking from here is what I will do.”

“It’s a long walk,” Flap said.

Joe waved his free hand in front of him and said, “Walking, yes, yes. Good for the health it is. Please you and goodbye.”

“Nice dude, but no sense of adventure,” Lew said.

“Speaking of adventure, we need to find the CO,” Vince said as he trotted toward the door. The others fell in behind.

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

As they walked down the halls, they saw a short, stocky old man standing in front of a wall. He wore a bright red beret that had a large gold feather sticking out of it. His plump face sported a ridiculously broad handlebar mustache, all gray. The mustache was wider than the man's face. He was wearing an old African safari hat with an ancient leather suitcase in one hand and a riding crop in the other. His uniform, safari tan shorts and shirt, held a chest full of medals with colorful but faded ribbons.

"Hey, old fellow," Flap said. "Where's the costume party?"

Bobbie and Lew snickered as the old man "Harrumphed" and turned away from them.

Flap stopped in front of the old soldier and said, "You've got a math problem, don't you? The Roman Numeral after World War is III nowadays, not I."

The old man looked back at Flap and said, "If you were in my army, you bloody insolent oaf, I'd have you drawn and quartered!"

Lew burst out laughing.

"You, too," the old man said. "The lot of you would be spending time in the stockade."

"Stockade?" Vince said. "Oh, yeah. Come on, guys. We've got to go."

Vince walked up to the smartly dressed clerk at the airline desk and said, "We're here to pick up Colonel Thaddaeus T. Fittingham. Has his plane arrived yet?"

A stern look on her face, the clerk lowered her head and looked over her reading glasses. She pointed her pen at the old man in the safari tan uniform and said, "I believe you were just conversing with the gentleman you are seeking."

Flap turned around and looked at the old man then said, "Bury me now and get it over with."

### Chapter 3

As they left the terminal, Flap, directly in front of Colonel Fattingham and walking backward, pleaded his case. “But, Sir, it was only a little joke. Just a small one. I wanted to, ah, do something. Humor, yeah, yeah. I wanted to welcome you with some humor. It’s been a terrible war, Sir. Surely you understand. We’ve only now come back from a rugged campaign. That’s why we were late. And it’s been so hard on us without an officer to guide us.”

The Colonel pursed his lips, seeming to think a moment, then said, “Quite right, young chap. In the face of a deadly campaign, humor can be exceptionally effective if administered properly. Your delivery could use some adjustment. And, perhaps, your subject matter. But I find your principle sound. You must be a chap from the colonies. Great jokers, that colony lot.”

Bobbie looked at Vince and Lew and said under her breath, “Colonies?”

When they reached Beulah, Vince said, “Here we are, Sir.”

“This?”

“Ah, yes, Sir. Our jeep is not in the best of shape.”

“It’s been a long, hard campaign,” Lew said.

“I can see that,” Colonel Fattingham said as he stared at Beulah. “Perhaps now that I’m here, we can find time to tidy her up a bit?”

“Yes, Sir,” Bobbie said. “We’ll get right on it, Sir.”

“Thank you, Private...” The Colonel tried to open the door but saw the rope snaking through the hole where the latch should have been and gave up.

“Winding, Sir. Bobbie Winding.”

“Thank you, Private Winding.” Placing one short leg on top of the door, the Colonel turned to Bobbie and said, “Be a good lad. Please give me a boost, young man.”

“Why, you!” Bobbie screamed. She reared her leg back. Vince put his hands out in front of him and shook his head. Bobbie ignored him as she kicked Colonel Fattingham in the butt as hard as she could kick. He tumbled into the front seat.

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

At that moment, automatic fire opened up, peppering the air around them with nonstop sound. Bullets were bouncing off the concrete columns and the concrete pavement as people dove for cover. They turned to see two men with machine pistols running toward them as Joe Jones jumped into the rear of the jeep and screamed, “GO! PLEASE NOW GO!”

Vince swung into the driver’s seat and touched the ignition wires together as Lew crawled over the Colonel and tucked down beside the console. Beulah, fortunately, seemed to have a sense of urgency. She cranked on the first try. Vince slammed the shifter into gear as Bobbie and Flap tumbled into the rear seat and huddled down beside Joe. Vince kept his head as low as he could while Beulah bounced and wiggled across the concrete pavement. Even though he worried about his foot bursting through the firewall, Vince pressed the accelerator as hard as he could. Beulah was too slow, so he zig-zagged across the concrete to evade the automatic weapon fire.

## Chapter 4

The satellite rotated as a panel slid open. A camera lens silently popped out. There would have been a high-pitched electronic “whoop” had the satellite not been in the vacuum of space. Stenciled on the side of the satellite in large white letters were:

**World Association of Warring Armies (W.A.W.A.)  
Committee for Ranking Army Performance (C.R.A.P.)**

The iris opened, taking in the central portion of the African continent. The video image began its projection to CRAP Field Headquarters in Africa.

“Image coming in now,” Private First Class Richard Slackbottom said from his overstuffed leather office chair in the War Room. Although the satellite operated continually, it had been offline for routine maintenance. Private Slackbottom, ‘Dickie’ in more informal circumstances, was bringing it back online.

Dickie was overweight but somehow managed to keep himself barely under the maximum allowed for WAWA military duty. Despite his constant battle with the scales, he took his military duties seriously, even routinely cutting his light brown hair in an old-fashioned crew cut. He did not want to be discharged for obesity, so he exercised regularly and cursed every bite of food and snack that found its way into his mouth, which was a lot of cursing.

The central portion of Africa filled the huge screen that covered most of the wall, everything but the bottom three feet. There was a small label on the bottom right corner of the frame around the screen reading “U.S. TAX DOLLARS AT WORK.” A smaller version of the same label was on the bottom of the Private’s leather chair, as well as all the other chairs in the room. And the table. And the computers. And virtually everything else in WAWA Headquarters.

Lieutenant Julia Thornbloom, a teary-eyed woman with medium length, straight dark hair, said, “Overlay war zones.” She alternately tapped her eyebrow with her right index and middle fingers as she

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

waited, a life-long habit that she rarely even noticed she was doing anymore.

A translucent red circle popped up in the middle of the screen, over the central portion of Africa. It was labeled BOMBER. Next, a purple ring popped up around the red center with the label JET FIGHTER. The colors stood out but were translucent enough so that the map behind them remained easily visible. The next ring, in green, was labeled HELICOPTER. One by one, colored rings continued to pop up so that central Africa looked like a strangely-colored target. After the Helicopter Zone, the circular areas were labeled, from the inside out: TANK, HANDHELD MISSILE, MORTAR, GRENADE, SMALL ARMS, and, finally, HAND-TO-HAND on the outside.

At varying distances outside the final ring, a wiggly line appeared in bright yellow. It was labeled WAR MEMORIAL BOULEVARD. This was the main road that encircled the entire war zone, though it was far from being a perfect circle. It was almost two thousand miles around the full length of War Memorial Boulevard.

In the more or less circular area between War Memorial Boulevard and the outside combat ring, the Hand-To-Hand Zone, national flags began to pop up. These represented the camps of the different countries taking part in World War III, which was almost every country in the world. There was little reason to stay neutral. In theory, your soldiers were never killed, at least not in the war zone. There were hundreds of regulations designed to protect soldiers from harm. Also in theory, every country, even the small ones, had a chance to win the war, thus being the country to establish world policy for the next twenty-five years, until World War IV could be held. But that was only in theory. As always, the Big Three – the US, Russia, and China – led the way.

Some countries were so poor they could not afford to hire soldiers or buy arms, so they applied to WAWA for financial aid. If they were found to be genuinely in need, and so far every application had been approved, they received a grant to allow them to pay soldiers and buy weapons. These grants were electronically deposited into the military bank accounts of the applicants. Afterward, they received a polite

## HERB HUGHES

welcoming letter explaining that their grant was “U.S. TAX DOLLARS AT WORK.”

As the graphics finished appearing on the huge screen, Lieutenant Thornbloom said, “Display the current standings from the top.”

A chart appeared:

Rank	Nation	Designation	Points
1	Russia	RUSS	905,379
2	China	CHIN	903,683
3	East Omaha Jr Computer League	USUCK	888,888
4	France	FRAN	457,623
5	Saudi Arabia	SAUD	432,245
6	Israel	ZION	416,978

Lieutenant Thornbloom screamed, “STOP!”

PFC Slackbottom punched the computer, stopping the display from going further. “Son-of-a-bitch!” he said as he looked at the screen. “Those damned kids broke in again. How the hell did that happen? The US is in third place, not them.”

“Oh! My! God! You were supposed to fix that.”

“I did. Then I put in a three-layered firewall, and, and...”

“Damn, Slackbottom. You’ve killed us. General Wharton is on the way up here right now. You know how mad he got the first time this happened. He got even madder the second time.”

“Yeah, it took thirty stitches to put my scalp back together.”

“This time? Oh, mother of pearl! You’ll be court-martialed and shot. And, damn you, you’ll drag me down with you!”



## Chapter 5

“Action already!” Colonel Fattingham exclaimed. “Bloody wonderful! I have been looking so forward to getting back onto the battlefield. This reminds me of the time I was sent to India. We were having trouble with...”

“That was not a sanctioned event, Sir,” Vince said. “The airport is not in the war zone. The regulations forbid weapons fire in areas outside the war zone.”

“Regulations? What do regulations have to do with it? This is war, soldier. The enemy can strike anywhere and at any time. Even in a heavily defended airport. You would do well to stay on guard at all times, if you do not want to get shot.”

“But, Sir, ah, we don’t get shot. We use a point system.”

“Point system? Whatever are you referring to, Corporal? No, never mind. That’s of no consequence. The only pointing you need to do is point me toward the enemy. We’ll string their intestines across the fields like so much fertilizer!”

Vince glanced at the others with his brows cocked but said nothing to them. He turned to the Colonel and said, “We do have to follow the WAWA Rags, ah, Regulations, Sir. This is World War III.”

“Indeed it is. And what a bloody wonderful war it will be! I knew it was coming one day, and I so hoped it would happen in my lifetime, while I was still able to command. God has granted my prayers. The attack at the airport was a minor skirmish, hardly even worthy of the name skirmish. They may have caught us by surprise, but we will make them pay for their deception!”

Vince’s eyes widened as realization sunk in. “Oh, yes, of course, Sir. It was a surprise attack. It’s a good thing Bobbie got you in the jeep fast enough to save you.” Vince glared at Bobbie.

“Quite,” Colonel Fattingham said as he rubbed his rear on the spot where Bobbie had planted her boot. “Perhaps we can be a little less forceful next time, Private Winding.”

Bobbie grunted.

## HERB HUGHES

Vince said, “Bullets were flying, Sir. Your safety was of utmost importance.”

“Thank you, Corporal. And Private, I suppose I should add.” The Colonel glanced around the jeep at everyone. “A beleaguered lot, I see. The campaigns must have been quite tough.”

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it, Sir,” Vince said. “And not having an officer, well...”

“That problem is resolved, Corporal. And I must say, with all due modesty, you now have the finest commanding officer who ever served in Africa. I have commanded troops through four victorious campaigns on this continent. If I were from the colonies, like you lot, I would have three purple hearts. But we British have not awarded wound stripes since World War II. Even wounded, however, I rallied my men and charged ahead. We won the day each and every time.”

“That’s amazing, Sir. We are honored to have you as our commander.”

“Quite. Now, Corporal, can we get this jeep up to speed? I am eager to get back to camp and meet the troops. I insist on talking to each and every one of you individually. Best way to get to know the men who are serving under you. And have them know who is leading them. I believe it was Napoleon who said an officer must know the men he’s fighting alongside so he can bury them with a clear conscience. Or was it Alexander the Great. No matter. It is always a good idea regardless of who originated it. I’ll meet with every one of you, one at a time. I don’t care if it takes weeks.”

“I don’t believe it will take weeks, Sir. We’re not exactly at full strength. Ah, the campaigns have been so brutal. They’ve been brutal for the jeep as well. She’s going as fast as she can.”

“That is sad. So sad. We are going to change all that, Corporal. Refresh and refight, I always say. We’ll take this whole blood-splashing, disemboweling mess straight to the enemy.”

“Yes, Sir, we certainly will.” Vince turned to Joe with a frown and said, “Private Jones, I do hope you did not get wounded during the attack. Do we need to take you to the infirmary?”

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

“Nyet, ni nada.” Joe’s eyes widened as he suddenly realized what he had said. He quickly stumbled over his words, “Ah, sorry, I mean. There is no need is being what I was saying. It is fine I am.”

“Do you know why the enemy singled you out for an ambush?” Vince asked.

Joe stared back at Vince and hesitated a moment before saying, “Best it would be if I gave a full report when back at camp we have returned.”

“I look forward to hearing it.”

“Poor man,” Colonel Fattingham said quietly to Vince. “He’s so rattled he’s got his words all tangled up and backward. The spilling of blood on a battlefield will do that to a man.”

“I suppose so, Sir. But we’ve got a brave group, what’s left of us. This particular recruit talks a little odd. It’s the area he’s from. America is so large. We’ve still got regional dialects.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that. Quite right, of course.”

As they bounced along War Memorial Boulevard toward the camp, Colonel Fattingham bored them with stories of his campaigns. They rounded the final curve as the Colonel was starting a new tale.

“After the island campaign, I was sent to southern Africa to take over the raggedest group of belligerents you’d ever hope to find.” The Colonel glanced around at everyone in the jeep then said, “The second raggedest group, that is. At any rate, I must tell you that Hannibal’s barbarians would have looked as though they were in evening dress next to these lads...”

Suddenly Vince slammed on the brakes and Beulah skidded to a halt in the middle of the road. “What the hell?” There was a crude, hand-written sign in front of their camp. It read:

***4 SALE***

***MODERATE SIZED ARMY CAMP***

***PRICED TO GO - INQUIRE INSIDE***

## HERB HUGHES

A few feet from the sign a young man in fatigue pants and no shirt, wearing a jock strap on his head to hold down his long, wavy hair, was leaning against a tree trunk. A filthy hand lifted a whole canned ham to his mouth, without the benefit of a utensil, and he took a huge bite, washing it down with the beer he was holding in his other filthy hand.

Vince pulled into the drive and stopped next to the sign. Everyone except the Colonel hopped out of the jeep. The Colonel was struggling to get his leg over the door as everyone walked away from him. “What the hell is going on?” Vince said as he ripped the sign out of the ground and threw it into the weeds.

“Boy, did you come along at an opportune time,” the young man said. “And you pulled the sign up to make sure nobody else buys it out from under you. Smart thinking, my good man. You must know what a real steal this place is.” The young man put his arm around Vince and smeared ham grease all over Vince’s shoulder. He waved his free hand around at the camp. “This is the opportunity of a lifetime for a small army like you. Or a few guys from a large army who need to get away from it all from time-to-time. Know what I mean?” He smiled broadly.

“What?” Vince said as he lifted the young man’s arm off his shoulder. “Who the hell are you?”

“Tommy Wayne Harrison. Tommy Wayne for short.” He stuck out his greasy hand, and Vince only stared at it. “Ah, of course. You want to get down to numbers before you shake. I knew I was dealing with a clever man the moment I saw you.”

“This is our camp,” Lew said.

“Ready to claim it, eh? I knew you’d have to have it,” Tommy Wayne said. “It’ll be perfect for you. I’ll write up some papers.”

Bobbie said, “Listen, One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest, what he is trying to tell you is that this camp is and has always been ours. Those tents belong to us. It’s where we sleep and eat. We already own this place. Ah, sort of. You are, right now, eating our ham and drinking our beer. In technical terms, that’s trespassing. And theft.”

Tommy Wayne lowered his beer and said, “You mean somebody lives in this pigsty?”

“Watch it, jock brain,” Bobbie said.

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

Colonel Fattingham finally managed to climb out of the jeep and walked over to where everyone was standing. He said, "What seems to be the problem, Corporal?"

"Chatting with one of the men, Sir. He was playing a little joke."

"One of the men?" Tommy Wayne said, his face showing his confusion.

Vince furrowed his brow and gave Tommy Wayne a quick short shake of his head. Tommy Wayne took the hint and kept his mouth shut.

"Very well," the Colonel turned to Tommy Wayne and said. "I realize the campaigns and the loss of life have been difficult for you, soldier, but your CO has now arrived. We are going to turn this army into a highly-trained, well-oiled, precision military machine." Colonel Fattingham glanced at the jock strap around Tommy Wayne's head. "Let's start looking like one right away. Please dress properly. We have a war to win!"

Tommy Wayne stared at Vince and silently mouthed, "WTF."

Vince gave him another quick, short head shake.

The Colonel turned to Vince and said, "It was a long flight from New Castle, Corporal Masini. Please show me to my quarters. Oh, and have mess prepare a spot of tea. Dash of cream and pinch of sugar."

"Yes, Sir." Vince turned to Flap and Bobbie and Lew as the Colonel was walking back to the jeep. "Hey, guys," he said low enough so the Colonel could not hear, "Clean everything out of the storage tent pronto and stash it in a corner of our tent. We'll sort it out later. I'll give the storage tent to the Colonel. He needs a private tent. Besides, we don't want him staying in the tent with us."

As the others ran off to take care of their mission, Tommy Wayne said, "A war to win? What gives?"

"Long story," Vince said. "We need soldiers. The pay's lousy, and the food's worse, but if you're wandering around selling other people's camps, what else have you got to do?" He stuck out his hand.

"Sounds too good to pass up," Tommy Wayne said. He reached out and took Vince's hand, and they shook. Vince stared at his now greasy hand a moment then wiped the ham grease on his pants as Tommy Wayne walked away to help the others.

## Chapter 6

Vince motioned for Joe to follow him, and they walked over to a corner of the camp, out of earshot of the tents. “The airport didn’t turn out too well, Joe. And those guys are still out there waiting for you. What do you want to do?”

“Perhaps it is the low I should be laying on. For some short time, of course. I must needs to stay, ah, how do you say it? Obskirt..., ah, obscus... Hidden, yes, yes, that is it. Hidden. That is being what I need at the present time. Your Lay army I could join. A good soldier I would make.”

“That’s a possibility. But if we’re going to have you around here, you’re going to have to come clean.”

Joe gave Vince a quizzical look then sniffed his own underarm. “A shower this morning I have taken. I smell nothing of the bad about my person.”

“No, not that kind of clean. I mean the truth. I’ve got to know what’s going on. Why were those guys after you at the airport? I don’t want anybody coming in here shooting up our camp. I need that full report you were going to give me when we got back to camp.”

“Ah! It is understanding, I am. But this attack. I know not what it was about. A mistake of identity it must have been.”

“Yeah, right. What did you do? Walk away from your country’s camp? Are they after you as a deserter or traitor?”

“Desert my country? Ah, America? No, it is without question I am saying...”

Vince threw up his hands and said, “You’re not being honest with me, Joe. And there’s nothing I can do to help until you tell me the truth. I’m not stupid, and you’re not from the US. So tell me what’s going on, or you can walk out of here right now and take your chances with the guys who are shooting at you.”

Joe turned and looked at War Memorial Boulevard then turned back around and said, “It is a woman, Ekaterina Molinski, I am running from. To Africa I came to get away. How is the word? It makes red on my face. I wish not to tell it.”

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“No need to be embarrassed. You wouldn’t be the first man in the world to run away from a bad relationship.”

“Relationship it is not being. Vodka is what it is.”

“Vodka?” Vince got a confused look on his face.

“Da. Much vodka. Ekaterina I meet. How pretty and how nice she is the vodka is telling me. But the next morning, it is lies the vodka has said. Very bad lies. And it is engaged to her she tells me we are. I know not what I can do. So I leave.”

“I’m starting to get the picture. You don’t remember proposing to her?”

“Nyet. I remember nothing of the night. Only that the beautiful princess I lay down on the bed with, in the morning was gone. This other woman, Ekaterina, it was my princess’s place she had taken. She wanted us that day to marry. I could not. When a lifetime with her I thought about, this woman so hard and mean and never smiling, the army I decided to join. All my rubles I take with me to the airport. Flying to Africa I am, but I found the Russian army not, before Ekaterina’s brothers found me. So away I have been running.”

“The guys shooting at you are her brothers?”

“Da. Vladimir and Nikolai.”

“I’ve got the picture, Joe. You’re not the first victim of something like this. Enough alcohol can turn a chronic bitch into a smiling princess. Unfortunately for the ladies, it works the other way around, too. Listen, we need soldiers. I doubt that her brothers know who we are or where we are, so this is as good a place as any for you to lay low. Welcome to LAE.” Vince extended his hand, and they shook.

“It is thanking you, I am.”

“You can thank me over a beer at Little Tokyo. Stash your stuff in the barracks tent. I’ll go make some sort of excuse with Colonel Fattingham then we’ll get everybody together and leave.”

Vince walked over to the Colonel’s tent and said, “It’s Corporal Masini, Sir, requesting permission to talk to you.”

“Please, do come in, Corporal.”

Vince stepped inside and saluted. “Sir.”

## HERB HUGHES

“This is, perhaps, not the best tea I’ve ever tasted,” the Colonel said as he sat his cup back down. “In fact, Corporal, it is bloody awful. Do you import it from somewhere else, another country?”

“We get it from the WAWA Commissary. I’d have to check the box, but I think it’s imported from the US.”

“No bloody wonder. The colonies have been trying to grow their own leaves ever since they threw all the quality tea in Boston harbor. They have yet to succeed. I’ve experienced some delightful African teas in my prior campaigns. Perhaps we could buy something local?”

“I’ll see what I can do, Sir. As a matter of fact, we need to go for supplies right now. I’ll put that on my list. It will be a longish ride to find a local tea store, so we’ll be gone for a while. Perhaps, after your long flight, you would like to lie down and rest?”

“Jolly good idea, Corporal. I believe I will do just that. I look forward to having a decent cup of tea upon your return.”

“Very good, Sir.”

Vince left the Colonel’s tent and walked over to Beulah to find everyone piled in and waiting on him. As he hopped over the tied-down door, in his best imitation of a British accent, he said, “Time to buy some tea, old chaps.”

“Tea? Oh, you mean Long Island Tea, that drink with all the different kinds of boozes mixed together,” Lew said. “No, man. I’m fine with beer.”

“Quite the contrary,” Vince continued in his fake British accent as he pulled out of camp. “I mean tea, plain old ordinary, everyday African-grown tea.”

Beulah bounced wildly as she entered the potholed gravel parking lot in front of Little Tokyo. The larger potholes still had water in them even though it had been a couple of days since rain had fallen. The sun was well into the sky, hours from sunset, and shining brightly, but, as usual, the bar was doing a brisk business. There were few parking spaces left.

Once inside, they pulled two wobbly tables together and rounded up six empty chairs. One table was a couple of inches below the other, but



## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

there were no two tables alike in the entire tavern. Several of the tables were nothing more than wood planks on top of concrete blocks.

The bar was composed of a line of ammunition crates, stacked four high, with plywood on top. A ragged string of cheap, rickety wooden stools with no backs was in front of the ammo box bar.

The waitress, an older Indian woman with a red jewel in her forehead, walked over to them and, without speaking, held her hands, palm up, in front of her as she shrugged.

“You got some sort of problem, Buddhette?” Tommy Wayne asked.

“She’s asking what we want,” Flap said. “Her English isn’t so good. I think her native language is Buddhism.”

“That’s a religion, bonehead,” Bobbie said. “Not a language.”

“You and I know that,” Flap said, “But don’t tell her. It would only confuse her.”

Bobbie rolled her eyes back and shook her head.

Tommy Wayne asked, “What brands of draft do you have, Buddhette?”

With an impatient, disgusted look, the Indian waitress stepped over to the bar and pointed at the only draft lever. There was a hand-written ‘X’ on a 3x5 card taped to the lever. She said nothing.

“So what kind of beer is that?” Tommy Wayne asked.

“We call it Brand X,” Vince said. “We have been faithful to good old Brand X every night for as long as we’ve been here. Not that we have a choice, of course.”

“What kind of bottled beer do they have?” Tommy Wayne asked.

“There’s a shortage of prepackaged beer in our little sector of the war zone,” Vince said. “The big armies get all the choices. We get Brand X.” He turned to the silent waitress and held up six fingers. “Six, please.”

She turned and held up six fingers for the bartender. He walked over to the draft lever and began the process of pouring the beer. It was cloudy and a little dark, but it was beer.

Before she brought the glasses to them, the waitress returned to the table and held her hand out for payment.

“First round’s on me,” Vince said as he pulled out his wallet. “Do you have any tea, regular old African grown tea?”

## HERB HUGHES

Without speaking, the waitress pointed at a stack of bags on a shelf on a side wall. The bags were labeled Kenyan Black Tea.

“I’ll take one of those, too,” Vince said as he handed her some bills.

“You know how good that first sip of beer always is?” Lew asked Tommy Wayne.

“Yeah, that first sip is great. If it tasted like that all the time, I’d be an alcoholic.”

“Little Tokyo’s beer is just the opposite,” Lew said. “The first sip taste like shit. It doesn’t start tasting good till the sixth or seventh beer.”

“The good news is,” Flap said, “It’s cheap. You can afford to buy six or seven beers.”

Tommy Wayne took a sip as soon as the wordless waitress set the beer in front of him. “You’re right,” he said. “It does taste like crap. I better hurry up and get to that seventh beer.” He turned the glass up and drained half of it.

By the sixth round, Brand X was starting to taste half-way decent.

“So when do we have to go into the war zone?” Bobbie asked.

“I’ll have to check the WAWA rags,” Vince said, “But I believe an army gets a five-day reprieve during a change of command. Getting a new CO when you didn’t have one before is sort of like a change of command. That should count. So we’ve got five full days starting tomorrow. But, thanks to Lew, after that we’ll have to gather the AK-47s and rumble through the jungle.”

“Hey,” Lew said, “Would you rather be in the stockade? I can always ask for the application back. Tell them we changed our minds.”

“We may be in the stockade either way,” Bobbie said. “As soon as whoever owns that land discovers we’re trespassing. We’ve got to do something about paying rent.”

“We can file for squatter’s rights,” Flap said.

“Do they have those in Africa?” Lew asked.

“I don’t know,” Vince said. “I’ll talk to the Colonel. Maybe he can come up with something to keep us out of prison.”

“Good idea,” Lew said. “I’ll buy the next round. Everybody ready?”

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

Five empty mugs slid across the table toward Lew. They had long since given up on the silent waitress, so Lew stood to walk to the bar. When he did, he bumped into another soldier who happened to be walking by. The man bounced into the bar stools and almost fell over.

When the soldier regained his balance, he screamed at Lew, “Hey, asshole! What the hell do you think you’re doing trying to knock me around?” He was a big, muscular man, obviously a weightlifter, and had a ‘gung-ho’ style flattop and a long, sharp-edged chin.

“What the hell do you mean getting in my way?” Lew said. “I was going to the bar to get more beer. That gives me the right of way.”

“What kind of bullshit logic is that? Why, I ought to kick your ass.”

“You better bring everything you’ve got. I’ll show you how we do it back in the hood, you mother you.”

The two men raised their fists and stepped toward each other.

“Careful, Lew,” Vince said. “We don’t need trouble. We’ve got a new CO to answer to now.”

“Gentlemen,” a third soldier said as he stood from his bar stool and stepped beside them. He was several inches shorter than the two combatants, slightly stocky, and wore glasses. “Please. There are better ways to settle differences. Violence is unnecessary. All you have to do is talk this out. I’m sure you’ll find you have a lot in common. You may even become friends.”

Ignoring the shorter soldier with the round baby face, the weightlifter said to Vince, “Won’t be any trouble. I’m going to lay his ass out with one blow. He can tell your new CO good morning when he wakes up.”

He pulled his right arm back. Lew did the same. At that moment the shorter soldier stepped between them and held his hands up and said, “I must insist that you stop.”

Both Lew and the weightlifter swung in the same instant. The shorter soldier was caught between their fists. His eyes rolled back, and his lids closed as he collapsed.

“Oh, God,” Bobbie said. “You’ve killed him.”

The big soldier leaned down and said, “Hold on. I’m a paramedic. Let me see.”

## HERB HUGHES

“A paramedic?” Lew said. “And all this time I thought you were only an asshole.”

“Shut up, Lew,” Vince said.

They gathered around the soldier on the floor. The weightlifter stood and said, “He’s okay. Vitals are fine. Just knocked out.” He turned to the bartender and held up two fingers. When he got the two beers, he sipped one as he splashed the other all over the face of the unconscious soldier. After he set the empty glass on the bar, he walked away sipping at his mug.

The beer in his face brought the soldier back to consciousness. He shook his head, drops of beer flying to the sides. “What happened?” he asked.

“You were the meat in the middle of the proverbial knuckle sandwich,” Vince said. He picked up the fallen eyeglasses from the floor and handed them to the soldier. “You okay now?”

“Ah, I think so. I guess.”

“Thanks for trying to keep things peaceful. Come on. We owe you a beer.”

Joe grabbed another empty chair as the others helped the soldier up and sat him on it. Lew had both hands full of mugs as he stepped back from the bar. He gave the first one to the soldier who had been knocked out.

“You got a lot of nerve,” Lew said, “Stepping between two big dudes like that. Most people would stand back and watch the action. What’s your name, soldier?”

“Ah, my name? Gosh. What is it? I-I don’t remember. I know I had one.”

The soldiers of LAE glanced at each other.

“What is it here you are doing?” Joe asked. “Perhaps your camp we can help you find.”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember what army I’m with. I know I’m here for the war, but I don’t remember where. It’s like it’s right on the tip of my tongue, but it won’t come out.”

“Check your pockets,” Tommy Wayne said. “Your ID will be in your wallet.”

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“Oh, yeah.” The soldier began searching his pockets. He laid twenty-four dollars in bills and thirty-eight cents in change on the table. There was also a comb, but no wallet. He checked his shirt pocket and pulled out a small notepad, but when he flipped through the pages, there was nothing written on them. The notepad was completely blank. He looked around at the soldiers of LAE and said, “That’s it. That’s all there is. I don’t understand.”

“Somebody ripped off the dude’s wallet,” Lew said. “It was that asshole paramedic, I bet. Didn’t like the guy from the moment I pushed him around.”

“Have a couple of beers with us,” Flap said. “You’re a little foggy from the punch. Ah, punches. You’ll remember who you are sooner or later.”

“Meanwhile,” Lew said, “We’ll call you ‘Peace.’ Anybody brave enough to do what you did deserves a good name.”

“To Peace!” Bobbie said as she lifted her mug.

“To Peace!” everybody echoed. They all took a long draw on the brown beer. It was starting to taste pretty good.

“What’s this?” Tommy Wayne asked as he picked up a dirty, brown piece of paper from the floor.

“Oh,” Lew said. “That’s mine.” He snatched the paper from Tommy Wayne’s hand and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. “Must have fallen out when I kicked that asshole paramedic’s butt.”

“That thing looked really old,” Bobbie said. “It was like old-timey parchment.”

“What is it?” Flap asked.

“It’s just a map. An old family map.”

“A map of Africa.”

“Sort of. Oh, what the hell? I might as well show it to you. It ain’t doing me any good because I don’t have a clue where it is.” Lew pulled the paper from his shirt and unfolded it then spread it on the table. The parchment was covered with hand-drawn lines in ancient, flaking brown ink. “It’s supposed to be a treasure map. My ancestors were named Maboso. They were the leaders of one of the biggest tribes in the Congo. Family legend says they buried all their treasure right here.” His finger

## HERB HUGHES

came down on a thick 'X' in the middle of the map. "Now, these two squiggly lines could represent a river. Or a creek. I don't have any idea about the scale of the map. I don't know what these humps are, either."

"Mountains, maybe?" Bobbie said.

"Or mounds," Flap said. "If it's a close-up scale."

"And as old as that map is," Bobbie said, "Those trees are probably long dead."

"That's it, man. And now you can see my problem."

Vince reached for the map and slid it directly in front of him. Everyone was silent as Vince stared at the ancient parchment. Finally, he said, "Guys, there's something familiar about this map."

"What?" was chorused several times.

"These humps are mountains. The trees aren't to scale. I think they represent forests, not individual trees."

"How do you know," Lew asked.

"Look at these strange loops this river makes." Vince looked up and glanced at the bar. Sure enough, there was a map of the war zone posted on the wall, as there was in virtually every tavern in Africa. He stood and walked over to the bar and pointed at the center of the map, at the area with the red translucent circle over it. "I've looked at this too many times."

Vince held up Lew's ancient parchment. It took them a moment going back and forth between the flaked-up, hand-drawn brown ink and the multi-color technological print of the war zone, but, one-by-one, they realized they were looking at two very different versions of the same thing. Lew's ancient map was an identical match to the bomber zone circle in the middle of the war zone map. The hand-drawn 'X' was at the exact center point of the circle.

Flap said, "Creepy creepers. Lew's treasure is in the middle of the war zone."

"The very damned center," Bobbie said.

"If it is," Tommy Wayne said, "It's been bombed to smithereens by now. They drop bombs on that area day and night."

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“But there’s diamonds and rubies and emeralds and stuff like that,” Lew said. “That’s what my grandma said when she gave me the map. Bombs can’t blow up diamonds, can they? Diamonds are too hard.”

“I don’t know,” Vince said. “Might scatter them all over the place.” Then he shrugged his shoulders and added, “How are you going to find out? Like Tommy Wayne said, they bomb that area day and night. You can’t get in there.”

“Wait!” Bobbie said. “Not every day. The first and fifteenth of each month they do reconnaissance flyovers to assess the effectiveness of the bombing runs. That’s how they assign points to all the different countries with bombers. There’s a twenty-four hour window twice a month when there’s no bombing.”

“That’s right!” Vince said. “I forgot.”

“All we’ve got to do,” Bobbie said, “Is go at the right time.”

“Go?” Joe asked.

“Why not?” Flap said.

“Wait a sec,” Tommy Wayne said. “Are you proposing we go to the center of the war zone on the first or fifteenth of the month and look for Lew’s treasure?”

“We’ve got to go into the war zone anyway, now that we’re an official army,” Flap said.

“Yeah, but the center?” Tommy Wayne said. “Grunts only go into the first few zones. We’d have to cross zones where foot soldiers are never allowed, where all kinds of bombs are going off. Hell, it would be suicide.”

“Maybe,” Lew said. “It’s sure a long way to the center. Each of the different zones is twenty miles across. The Bomber Zone in the middle has a twenty-mile radius. There’s nine zones. Let’s see... That’s a hundred and eighty miles of war zone to cross. With bullets and bombs flying all around. Man, that is dangerous! But it’s also a whole lot of treasure. Got to be worth hundreds of millions. Maybe even billions.”

“Whoever wants to go can split the treasure,” Flap said.

“You ain’t splitting my treasure!” Lew shot back.

“We deserve something for taking the risk to help you find it and haul it out.”

## HERB HUGHES

“Okay, but I get eighty percent. It belongs to my family.”

“Are you going to travel to the middle of the entire war zone and haul all that treasure out by yourself?” Vince said. “I don’t think you could even find it without the rest of us to help. And to make sure you get there safely. You need us. We’ll take three-fourths.”

“Sixty-forty. I’m the sixty,” Lew said.

“Good luck out there all by yourself,” Vince said as he lifted his Brand X to his mouth.

“Okay, okay. Fifty-fifty,” Lew said. “Final offer.”

“Is everybody in?” Vince asked. As he looked around, they all nodded their heads, including the newcomer, Peace. “Okay, Lew. You get forty percent. The rest of us split sixty. That’s ten percent each. Nice and even. Otherwise, you’re on your own.”

“Forty for me and ten for each of you?” Lew curled his lips and thought for a second then said, “Okay. Fair enough. There’s supposed to be diamonds as big as golf balls in that chest. And Gramma said the rubies and emeralds were the size of your fist. Forty percent of a whole hell of a lot is more than I can spend in a lifetime. I agree.”

He held his fist out in the middle of the circle they had formed. Everyone else did the same. They all bumped their agreement.

“Now,” Vince said, “We’ve got to plan this carefully. We’ll need supplies. Food and tools. And ammunition, just in case. Let’s see. A hundred and eighty mile trip through the heart of Africa will take time. We’ll need lots of stuff.”

“Yeah, and a truck better than Beulah.”

“And bigger than Beulah. We’ve got a lot of treasure to haul out.”

“Hell, two trucks. Maybe three.”

“How about a tank or two? Safe passage to the Tank Zone.”

“How the hell are we going to get tanks?”

“Apply for US assistance. We’re a deprived army, aren’t we?”

“As deprived as they get.”

“Hey,” Lew said. “I’ll do the application. I’ve got a knack for applications now.”



## Chapter 7

Sunlight crept through the scattered foliage of the trees, warming the ground as morning took root throughout the camp. Bobbie stepped out of the barracks tent. Vince was walking along the driveway and stopped to say good morning.

“What are you going to do with your share of the money?” Bobbie asked.

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,” Vince said.

“Oh!” Bobbie flapped her hand through the air in front of her. “I’m a city girl. I like my chickens on a plate with grill marks across them. Let’s pretend. What would you do?”

“I’m not sure,” Vince said. He looked at the ground and lightly bounced from foot to foot a moment. Then he looked back at Bobbie and said, “They say you can’t go home again. But maybe that’s what I’d do. Go back and try to make things right.”

“Make what right?”

“My dad. You see, he’s in prison... Well, it’s a long story.”

“No, go ahead. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“You know my family history. Hell, everybody does. It was all over the news when dad went to prison. What the news didn’t tell you is I’m the reason he’s there. It was my fault. He tried to teach me the family trade, but I wasn’t any good at it. I guess I was born with a conscience.”

“That’s not such a bad thing.”

“Yeah, maybe. But it’s not something a mobster needs to have hanging around his neck. I begged my dad to give it up, especially since mom had passed away. I said we could change our names and move, get away from crime and be regular people. That’s when he made the worst mistake of his life.”

“What was that?”

“He agreed with me. Mom’s death had hit him hard. He decided to leave the mob and live a normal life like she had always wanted him to.”

“But that’s a good thing. How did he end up in prison?”

“The other crime bosses knew something was up, but they didn’t know what. From their perspective, a crime boss doesn’t stop being a

## HERB HUGHES

criminal and disappear into the teeming masses, so they didn't buy the 'going straight' story. He knew enough to send them all to prison several times over. They knew that. They were sure he had cut a deal to spill the beans and disappear into the witness protection program, so they went gunning for him. They thought they had to shut him up. Permanently."

"Oh, no." Bobbie's hand went to her mouth.

"It wasn't true. We were going to make a clean getaway. That's all. Give up crime so we could live a normal life somewhere else, far away. We didn't make it. One of the bosses found us as we were packing the family car. He confronted dad right there on the street. I was still a teenager, young and nervous. I was afraid the other boss was going to shoot my father, so I grabbed dad's gun from the glove compartment and shot the guy. My dad took the gun from my hands and rubbed it off, then put his own fingerprints all over it and took the rap for me."

"But that was self-defense!"

"Yes. And that's what our lawyer pleaded, but the drug problem was severe at the time. Everybody blamed the mob for it, so the public mood was against us. The FBI considered it a chance to get rid of two crime bosses with one crime. They put their best prosecutors on it. My dad was convicted of manslaughter."

"That's terrible. You must be hurting inside."

"Yeah, it does hurt. I told him I couldn't let him go to prison for me. He said I had my whole life in front of me. He said his time was drawing to a close, and he wasn't proud of what he had been. If somebody had to go to prison, it would be him. He told me to get out and start a new life somewhere else, an honest life."

"How are you going to make that right?"

"I'm going to go back and tell the truth. A polygraph test will back me up. It'll get dad out of prison. With my share of the treasure, I can afford to hire the best lawyers in New York. I was a kid at the time, sixteen. Maybe they'll go easy on me. So what about you? What are you going to do with your share?"

Bobbie took a deep breath then looked up at the sky a moment. "I'd go to Paris."

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“Sightseeing? I hear it’s nice, but you don’t need to be rich to do that.”

“No, not sightseeing. Well, maybe some. But the best shopping in the world is in Paris. I grew up a dirt poor tomboy back in the Australian bush. The nicest clothes I had were hand-me-downs from my cousin in the city. Ah, my cousin was a boy, so you can imagine what I looked like. In Paris, I’d buy a whole new wardrobe of designer clothes... ladies’ clothes. And I’d get my hair and make-up done by the best in the business, the people who are famous for hair and make-up. Nobody would ever mistake me for a man again.”

Vince smiled and said, “Waste of money. You look fine like you are. And more like you than some puffed up model from Paris.”

“Hey, the first day I walked into this camp, you thought I was a man, too.”

“Ah, it was the light. Bad light that day.”

“There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“Obviously the glare from the sun, then.”

Bobbie waved her hand in front of her again, as if it would dissolve Vince’s comments. “Flap thinks I’m crazy, too. About Paris.”

“I think deep down inside you two love each other.”

“What? Love that propeller ear? Give me a break!”

“Hey,” Vince said, “Only lovers would fight the way you two fight.”

“Lovers and haters,” Bobbie said. “I think we’re in the second category.”

Colonel Fattingham stuck his head out of his tent and said, “Corporal, please have the men line up for inspection. It’s time I got to know the lot of you. I need to meet every single man and learn more about who I will be fighting alongside.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Very well. I will be out in five minutes.” The Colonel disappeared behind the tent flap.

Vince turned to Bobbie and said, “Get Flap and Lew. They’re in the mess. I’ll round up the others.”

## HERB HUGHES

Five minutes later seven soldiers stood in a ragged line. No two looked exactly the same. Bobbie wore full fatigues and had her short hair tucked under an army cap. None of the others wore fatigue tops, opting instead for a variety of dirty, ripped, and stained t-shirts advertising everything from rock and roll bands to the wearer's sexual prowess. Almost all of the fatigue pants had rips and holes here and there. Flap sported a wide-brim straw hat while Vince had nothing over his thick, dark hair. Tommy Wayne was wearing jeans with no shirt and, once again, had the jock strap on his head holding down his long, wavy hair. Joe, Lew, and Peace all wore battle helmets, but the three helmets hung at odd angles, no two the same. Several of them wore flip-flops, and Tommy Wayne was barefooted.

Vince was moving each soldier around trying to make the line slightly straighter when Colonel Fattingham, dressed in his formal khaki uniform, stepped through the tent. He had included the full load of ribbons and medals on the chest of his uniform, so many that little of the khaki uniform showed through. He wore a black beret with a long, silver feather.

Colonel Fattingham, Vince at his side, stepped up to Flap, the first man in line. "Soldier," he said, staring at Flap's straw hat, "What is the meaning of this?"

"Ah," Flap said, "Meaning of what, Sir?"

"We had to retreat in such a hurry," Vince said, "That we lost almost everything. Including some of our helmets. There was no time to pick them up."

The Colonel stared at Vince a moment then shook his head and stepped to the next person, Joe. He looked at Joe's purple t-shirt and said, "I suppose the men could not take the time to pick up their shirts?"

"Ah, fighting in the jungle, Sir. It was hot. And firing a weapon creates even more heat. Many of the men took off their fatigue tops to avoid having a heat stroke. We had to retreat so fast, there was no choice but to leave them. Surely you understand, Sir."

"Yes, of course. But his boots? Flip-flops hardly qualify as combat boots."

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

“Ah, it had rained, Sir. One of those great African storms. The ground became muddy. It literally sucked at our feet. Boots were lost, of course.”

“Harrumph.” The Colonel no longer spoke as he stepped down the line and looked at each soldier in turn. He silently glared at Lew, Bobbie, and Peace as he walked past them. When he came to the last one, Tommy Wayne, he stared at the jock strap then shook his head and turned around to Vince. “Where are the rest of the men?”

“I’m afraid the seven of us are all that’s left, Sir.”

“Seven soldiers? I was told I had an army to command, an entire army. Seven soldiers is not an army. It’s not even a platoon!”

“Ahhh...”

“Please step into my quarters, Corporal. We have a problem to discuss.” The Colonel turned on his heel and marched to his tent.

“Yes, Sir.” Vince dismissed everyone and trotted over to the Colonel’s tent, following Colonel Fattingham inside.

The Colonel slammed his beret down on his desk and said, “Bloody hell! Tell me, Corporal, how am I supposed to win a war with seven soldiers? And a slovenly lot at that?”

“Perhaps we could recruit more, Sir.”

“You’ve lost your whole army. Except for these seven chaps, and they hardly qualify as an army. They’re little more than a horde of misfits and outcasts, the leftover dregs. How could the campaigns have been that devastating?”

“I can’t begin to explain, Sir.”

“No need. I believe I answered my own question. Without a proper CO, your army was untrained and undisciplined. No wonder so many were lost. You have a top-notch CO now. Future campaigns will not be such disasters.”

“That’s a relief to know, Sir.”

“Oh, I must commend you on the new tea. Excellent! African soil works wonders with tea leaves. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. We need more men. Desperately. If the Liberians will not provide reinforcements, we need to recruit an army elsewhere. Do you have the marketing expertise to embark upon an effective recruiting campaign?” The CO

## HERB HUGHES

looked outside, through his tent flap, at the soldiers of LAE standing around on the drive talking with each other. “And, perhaps,” he continued, “Tidy this lot up a bit.”

“I will do what I can, Sir.”

“Yes, please. And right away, Corporal. I am ready to get back into action. It has been too long since I have been a part of the blood-letting.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Vince saluted and left the Colonel’s tent. As he walked over to where everyone was talking and laughing he heard the blare of the loudspeaker.

*“Welded water worms sucking leftover toads...”*

“All right,” Lew said. “Here we go. This is the answer we’ve been waiting for. Good old US tax dollars at work. I went ahead and applied for three tanks, Bradleys. In case they cut us back one. That way we’ll still have two plus that shiny new Humvee I put in for.”

*“Humpbacks flutter on foamy beer eggs...”*

“And you added all the other equipment we need, didn’t you?” Bobbie asked. “Backpacks and new camos and all?”

“Oh, yeah. All the way down to the flares. In case we need to signal someone. Or each other.”

*“Idaho hubs the fat beyond. Over and out.”*

“All right! Here we go,” Lew said as he rubbed his hands in front of himself in anticipation. He was smiling broadly.

“Congratulations, Lew,” Flap said as he hopped through the tent flap. “It’s a new record. Your application for military assistance was the first one ever rejected.”

“What? Rejected? What the... They can’t do that! Can they?”

“They can, and they did. No tanks. No Humvee. No ammunition. No clothes. No flares. No nothing. We’re totally on our own.”

“Doesn’t sound like we’ll go treasure hunting anytime soon,” Vince said.

“That’s like a big pile of donkey dung,” Tommy Wayne said. “We can’t do this without trucks or tanks or something.” Then he turned and pointed at the rust heap sitting on the gravel drive and added, “Beulah doesn’t count as something. No way would that rattletrap make it.”

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“Crap!” Lew said. “I nailed that app. What could have gone wrong?”

Tommy Wayne said, “We can always, shall we say, ‘borrow’ a few things from other armies.”

They heard the crunch of gravel and looked up to see dust flying into the air as a WAWA jeep turned onto their driveway.

“Not with her highness watching every step we take,” Vince said. “Looks like Nikki is coming to take some more points away from us. I wonder what we screwed up this time.”

“It’s the equipment app,” Flap said. “I bet we lose points for getting the first reject ever.”

“That jeep’s not moving fast enough to be Nikki,” Lew said. “It’s driving at a sane speed.”

The jeep stopped gently on the gravel drive. When the dust cleared, they could see that the driver was a man, not a woman. He stepped out and lifted something from the rear of the jeep then brought it over to where everyone was standing.

“Corporal Gunther of WAWA,” he said in a thick German accent. “Is Corporal Masini present?”

“That would be me,” Vince said.

“Special delivery for you, ya?” Corporal Gunther held out the package.

Vince took it. The box was so heavy he almost dropped it. “My God. What is this?”

“War regulations,” Corporal Gunther said.

“Oh, yeah,” Vince said. “The WAWA Rags. How delightful.” He turned and set them on top of Beulah’s hood. They heard the screech of metal bending as the regulations began to sink into the hood.

“Damn, that’s some heavy shit,” Lew said.

Vince hurriedly picked the regulations up and set them on the gravel drive, being careful to bend down with his knees and not his back. Then he said, “What a lovely gift. I am so thankful you took time from your busy schedule to bring it to me.”

Corporal Gunther looked quizzical and said, “It is my job. That is my schedule. It is what I am charged to do with my time.”

## **HERB HUGHES**

“And we thank you for it,” Bobbie said. “Don’t mind him. He just received bad news from home.”

“I am sorry to hear this,” Corporal Gunther said. “But thank you for letting me know, young man.”

Bobbie’s face turned red-angry as she screamed, “Jerk!” She pulled back to slap Corporal Gunther as hard as she could slap, but Joe caught her arm before it could go forward.

Corporal Gunther snapped back to avoid the blow that didn’t come.

“She’s more or less a woman,” Flap said. “And a little sensitive about it.”

“I am sorry. It was an honest mistake. I mean, she looks so much like a...”

“Arrrrggghhhhh,” Bobbie screamed as she struggled to get out of Joe’s grip. “Let me go you big baboon. I’m going to kill that sausage-eating shithead.”

“I, ah, must be going now,” Corporal Gunter said as he backed away. “I have other deliveries to make.” He turned and ran to his jeep. At that moment a large Red Cross truck pulled into the drive. Corporal Gunther swerved off the driveway to miss the truck, spewing up black jungle soil as he did. He flew onto the highway without so much as a glance for oncoming traffic.

“He’s driving like Nikki now,” Lew chuckled.

The Red Cross truck came to a halt on the drive. The letters stenciled on the side of the truck, below the ‘Red Cross,’ stated:

### **World Association of Warring Armies (W.A.W.A.) Medical Examination And Treatment (M.E.A.T.)**

A handsome man in his late thirties, wearing a sparkling clean white lab coat, stepped out of the truck. There was a scowl on his face as he pulled a brown leather medical bag and a computer tablet from the back of the truck then turned and walked toward them. The driver, also in a white lab coat, did the same.



## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

“I am Dr. Montage,” the handsome man said. “This is my assistant, Dr. Severson. We have been assigned the unfortunate task of performing your medical examinations.”

“What for?” Flap asked.

“That was my sentiment as well,” Dr. Montage said with a forced smile. “It seems you have recently been approved as a new army. All soldiers are required to have a complete physical examination before they are allowed to enter the war zone.”

“Are you going to poke your finger up our butts?” Lew asked.

“I have a four-battery flashlight in the truck,” Dr. Montage said. “I prefer to use that.”

“I don’t want no damned exam.”

“And I do not wish to perform your exam,” Dr. Montage said, “But orders are ord... Ah! What is this?” The doctor walked over to Bobbie and slowly looked her over, head to toe. Bobbie’s eyes grew wider and wider. She was beginning to show fear, but Dr. Montage stared straight into her wide-open eyes and said, “My dear woman, what, might I ask, is such a delicate flower doing in this cesspool of a camp?”

“I think I’m going to throw up,” Flap said.

The doctor glanced over his shoulder and said, “How do you put up with these barbarians. They must be a terrible annoyance.”

“Ah, well,” Bobbie said. “Thank you, Dr. Montage. You really think I look, I mean...”

“But of course, my dear. We will start the examinations with you. Please,” he said as he motioned toward the tent with an elaborate move of his arm. “After you, my dear.” He turned back to the others momentarily and said, “Physical examinations are private, of course. No one is to enter the tent. Under any circumstances! Dr. Severson, please ensure these men observe proper protocol and exhibit reasonable decorum.”

“Yes, of course, Dr. Montage.”

“What meanings are these words?” Joe asked.

“He wants us to wait out here and shut up,” Flap said.

## HERB HUGHES

As they entered the tent, Dr. Montage let his hand slide down Bobbie's back and lightly brush across the top of her hips as he led her to the nearest cot. "Ah, you are such a lovely desert flower, mademoiselle."

"But, we're in a jungle," Bobbie said as she swayed her rear to get away from the doctor's probing hand.

"Of course. How right you are. You, my dear, would be a flower in any environment. Now, we must remove your uniform so we can proceed with the examination. Please, allow me."

With a smooth, graceful move, the doctor pulled off Bobbie's t-shirt before she had time to protest. She quickly pulled her arms up to cover her breasts and said. "Sorry. They're, well, there's not much to them. Just, ah, sort of flat. No better way to put it, I guess. Everybody keeps thinking I'm a guy."

"How crudely unobservant of them. They only need look at your beauty. Breasts are for nursing babies, not men. French men nurse differently. You Americans are so over-occupied with breasts."

"I'm an Aussie."

"Australian. American. There is so little difference, eh? All of them are preoccupied with large breasts."

"The guys back home tell me my copious whoopee cushions are understuffed. Everybody I meet thinks I'm a guy. It's so exasperating."

Dr. Montage smiled warmly and said, "I have wonderful news for you, my jungle flower. I happened to have a pair of implants in the truck. I know the war does not provide you the time and necessities to prepare a more feminine face to present to the world, but these should be sufficient to avoid all future gender errors."

Surprise popped into Bobbie's eyes. "You mean a boob job? Right here? Right now?"

"But, of course. You have a, ah, situation that needs to be remedied so you can be a more effective soldier. I am a doctor assigned to the war zone. It is my duty to ensure you are an effective soldier. I have the appropriate solution."

"I don't have any money," Bobbie said.

As Dr. Montage's hands reached out and moved Bobbie's hands away from her breasts, he said, "Money is not necessary, my jungle

## A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR

flower. Being close to your beauty is payment enough. Now, I must make sure this will be suitable for you.”

Bobbie was unsure what to say so she said nothing as the doctor looked at and touched her breasts, pulling and pushing the tissue this way and that. Finally, he leaned back and said, “Yes. The implants I have will be perfect for you. But this cot is too low. I cannot perform an operation while bending over so far. We must raise it. Is there anything around here we can put under the cot to make it higher?”

“We’re a new army. We don’t have much. There’s an inflatable raft Flap found. We could blow it up and turn it upside down then put the cot on top, but we’d have to pump it up by hand. The automatic inflation canister was missing.”

“Hmmm. That might work. Do you have an air pump?”

“Sure. Right over here.”

While Dr. Montage and Bobbie took turns pumping air into the raft, everyone outside the tent talked and paced and waited.

“Hey,” Tommy Wayne said. “Look at that.”

The soldiers looked where Tommy Wayne was pointing. The erratically looped antenna wire on top of the tent was bouncing up and down. Soon, the top of the tent was bouncing along with the wire. Moments later, the entire tent was wobbling back and forth.

“That’s one hell of an exam,” Vince said.

“The doctors of France,” Joe said, “Perform exams unlike those of my country.”

“I don’t think I want one of his exams,” Peace said.

Everyone echoed the same sentiment. Minutes later the bouncing stopped.

Inside the tent, a red-faced Dr. Montage caught his breath then placed the cot on top of the upside down raft. “That was quite an effort, my Jungle Flower, but this will be sufficient.” He turned and stuck his head through the tent flap then spoke to Dr. Severson in French before disappearing back into the tent. Dr. Severson walked to the truck and began selecting equipment from the back.

“What are you doing?” Vince asked.

“We must perform an operation,” Dr. Severson answered.

## HERB HUGHES

“But Bobbie’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with her.”

“Dr. Montage has determined that this procedure is necessary for her future health and well-being. It is our charter to provide the medical services necessary for our troops to be at their peak performance.” He shrugged then stepped into the tent and out of sight.

“What the hell?” Flap said. “They can’t come in here and start operating on healthy people. I’m going to stop this!” He stomped over to the tent and began to step through the flap.

They heard Bobbie scream, “GET OUT OF HERE, EARHEAD!” Flap tumbled out of the tent as Dr. Severson jerked the flap closed behind him.

“What were they doing?” Tommy Wayne asked.

“I don’t know. Dr. Montage was holding up two strange wiggly rubber things. Bobbie was lying on her cot with no shirt on.”

“A boob job?” Vince said. “In the middle of the war?”

“A boob job?” Flap repeated. “You mean they’re going to try to make a real woman out of her?”

Dr. Montage stuck his head out of the tent flap and said, “Why are you standing here?”

“Why are you giving Bobbie a boob job?” Vince asked. “What’s that got to do with war?”

“Why, everything, of course!” Dr. Montage said. “As medical director of the Southwest Division of the war zone, it is my task to ensure all soldiers are in proper shape, both physically and mentally. These disgusting unisex uniforms you are forced to wear do absolutely nothing to enhance a female soldier’s femininity, thus making gender mistakes a common reality. Such mistakes are detrimental to a soldier’s mental well-being. I must correct this. It is my sworn duty. You need not worry. Private Winding is in the hands of an expert. She will be better than new in short order.”

“But she doesn’t have any money,” Flap said.

“Yeah, that’s a ten thousand dollar operation,” Peace said.

“American dollars?” Dr. Montage said. “That was many years ago, my incognizant friend. It is closer to fifty thousand today.”

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

“That’s inflation for you,” Tommy Wayne said. “In more ways than one.”

“We will not quibble over a few dollars,” Dr. Montage continued. “This surgery is imminently necessary for her continued mental stability, so US tax dollars will cover the cost. It is a much simpler procedure with modern day equipment. Why, she will be quite normal in four or five days.”

“Bobbie? Normal?” Flap said. “That’ll be a first.”

“What about complications?” Vince asked.

“I do not perform sloppy work,” Dr. Montage said. “There will be no complications. Now, run along. Go play war elsewhere.”

“We can’t,” Lew said. “Our equipment request was rejected. And it was a hardship request, too.”

“Perhaps you were not hard enough.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lew shot back.

With a disgusted look on his face, Dr. Montage shook his head and said, “Leave. We are operating here. We do not need an audience.”

“Weren’t you supposed to give us all a physical examination?” Peace asked.

“Shut up,” Lew said. “Let him forget.”

Dr. Montage glanced at each LAE soldier, one at a time, then said, “You are all quite fit to go into the war zone. In fact, you can go right now for all I care. Please leave!”

“Sounds like a prescription for going to Little Tokyo to me,” Vince said.

“I do believe you’re right,” Tommy Wayne said. “I can’t wait to drink more of that godawful brew.”

They all turned toward Beulah, but at that moment Colonel Fattingham stepped out of his tent and walked over to them.

“I say, Corporal, where are you and the men going?”

“We’re between tasks at the moment, Sir. We were going to the local tavern to have a little rest and relaxation.”

“Hmmm. Jolly good idea, Corporal. A spot of R and R every few months is excellent for troop morale. By the by, I’ve been meaning to

## HERB HUGHES

ask. Why is our jeep in such a dilapidated condition? It looks quite like it should be dispatched to the recycle lot.”

“No!” Flap said. “All Beulah needs is a little love. She’s still got lots of life left in her.”

“Love? That?” Colonel Fattingham pointed at the jeep, a questioning look on his face.

“I promise, Sir,” Flap said. “I’ll get her fixed as good as new. Someday.”

“Mechanic, eh? I shall be interested in seeing that resurrection.” He looked at Beulah dubiously. “Which begs the question, where is the rest of our equipment.”

“We’re just getting started as an army, Sir,” Vince said. “We’re a little short on things right now. Private Lewis Freeman is in charge of procuring the equipment we need, but he has run into, ah, a wall of bureaucratic red tape. We’re working diligently, however.”

“Perhaps I can cut through some of that red tape for you.”

“Worth a try,” Lew said. “It ain’t happening for me.”

“I will see what I can do. Shall we go, men? I could use a spot of R and R myself.”

“You, Sir? Ah...”

“Where is Private Winding? Isn’t he coming?”

“Let’s see, ah... Oh! Bobbie caught a piece of shrapnel in our last foray into the war zone. The doctors are here to remove it.” Vince pointed toward their barracks tent.

“Operating here? In the camp? The poor lad! It must have been urgent. He seemed fine earlier this morning. I’ll take a moment to check on the young man, bolster his spirits.” Colonel Fattingham turned and started walking toward the tent.

“Oh, you can’t go in there, Sir,” Vince said quickly as he ran to catch up with the Colonel. “The doctor gave strict orders. You’d have to be sterilized first, and they’re too busy with the operation to take time to sterilize you.”

“Oh, yes. I should have realized. Well, then, there’s nothing better between battles than sharing a drink with the troops. Wonderful morale builder. I’ll join you. Where did you say you were going? Little Tokyo?”

## **A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR**

What a quaint name for a refreshment establishment. That reminds me, have I ever told you about my time in Japan?"