

“Discipline”

by C. N. Nevets

My eyes stung from smoke and sweat. The village around me was obscured by a heavy cloud of discharge and dust, cigarettes and carbon. Our situation had moved from nearly hopeless into utterly futile.

“Rob!” I called out as loudly as I could over the rolling thunder of gunfire. “Rob, fall back!”

He looked at me, his face haggard and his eyes bleary. He did not seem to comprehend the specific words, but he did get the idea. He shouldered his carbine and slunk back to our bunker. Rob was the last of them.

I fell back and joined the others. The handful of us who were left. Of that handful, only Rob was itching to go.

“We needa finish, Sarge, we needa go back out there and finish the fucking fight.”

I looked at Rob and measured him. He looked old and worn out. His compulsion to fight was not blood lust. It was not patriotism. It was the exhausted man's need to get the job done so he could go home. That was all that was left of him.

“We will, Rob, we will,” I assured him.

“Now, Sarge. Please. Let's go. Let's get this done. Let's finish.”

It pained me to hear him begging with this sort of desperation. He was the youngest of the men. He'd just turned seventeen two weeks ago. He'd been in for a year. A year of the Pacific was enough to rob any one of their spirit, let alone a kid who barely even had a spirit. He shouldn't have sounded like he did. It was an old war horse's voice. Not his.

“Okay, Rob, okay,” I promised. I looked at the others. “We've really only got one way out of this. You boys know that.”

Rob nodded. “Let's do it! Let's go!”

A couple others nodded less eagerly. A couple stared blankly.

One guy shook his head. Byron. “No way, Sarge. No.”

I shrugged. “We're stuck, Byron. There's a wall of them all around us.”

“There's a village, Sarge,” he corrected me angrily, wagging his sidearm loosely in his right hand. “A village of people. Only some of them are soldiers.”

“I know.”

“It wasn't supposed to be like this, Sarge! The last war was supposed to be the last war. This was supposed to be us killing some Japs who killed our boys. Not like this.”

Rob spun on his fellow infantry men and cuffed him across the face. “Shut up! Shut up! Don't you wanna go home? Don't you wanna get back to your girl? Your ma? Your everything but this?”

“Not like that, I don't,” Byron answered, still wagging his gun.

“It's that or nothing!” Rob fired back. “It's go home or don't home, Byron, which is it?”

Byron's spine went steel, and his jaw set with masculine determination. “I guess it's don't go home then.”

The gun stopped wagging.

Before we realized it was even moving, it was against his temple and firing.

Rob's face was covered a backwash of Byron, but the kid who looked as old as any of the rest of us just turned to face me. "Okay, let's go. He was the only one said no. Let's get this over."

I just nodded silently and motioned towards the giant canisters and contraptions that lined one end of the bunker. I wanted to do more, to say more – but what was happening to Rob had already happened. There was no turning back. He'd needed discipline, he'd needed to be productive. He'd needed his mom's signature to enlist at sixteen.

"Point me in the right direction, Sarge," Rob begged as he and his partner Jonathan geared up and readied their flame-thrower. "Point me in the right direction."

I just sort of waved in a casual, Out There, way. "They're all around us, Rob."

"You got it, Sarge!"

Rob and Jonathan moved into action, and the next team followed soon after. I watched everything around us become consumed by liquid-fuel fire that turned houses, animals, and people into flaming nightmares. Discipline, perhaps. Productive? Maybe. Sixteen, seventeen? No more.

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[In Memoriam](#)



[Cuz, y'know, Memorial Day was Monday.]

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