

Lucky

By Christopher Nagle

They had been caught up in the Kiev encirclement net. What was left of the the 51st Soviet Rifle Division was now huddled behind a single strand of barbed wire, in the autumn rain, on the side of a hill with a muddy road going past it through a now destroyed collective farm complex. Looking east was the undulating steppe; its horizon hazed in smoke and still reverberating to the thud of ever more distant gunfire, as the Germans continued to sweep all before them.

“Where’s that big Ukrainian? I only saw him a minute ago talking to a German officer and now he’s gone with him! I didn’t know he could speak German! That bastard was always a traitor waiting his chance!”

“You remember Ivan used to stir him up by asking him about his home town and personal family stuff in front of the Commissar? Didn’t do to say did it....what happened where he comes from....What did they call it? The Holodomor?...., back in ’32, when the troops took the grain away and left them nothing. I heard about it while having a piss in an alley behind Red Square.”

“Pity Ivan couldn’t ‘ve unbuttoned his mouth. The Commissar would have had him in a punishment battalion faster than you could say Vladimir Lenin.”

“Shuddup Sev! What are those fucking SS trucks stopping here for? Oh Shit! Sevastian!

“Don’t panic Vas.....It’s OK.. They’re probably just stopping for a smoke.”

About an hour later, the unmistakable tearing sound of sustained machine gun fire could be clearly heard, just behind the hill.

“They’ll need to have to have a smoke soon. Even the spare barrels must be red hot by now. They’re goin’ to shoot the lot of us Vas.”

“Not all of us, ‘Comrade’.”

Comrade Private Vassily Tarasov got up and started to look over the crowd of men around them.

“Screw the Soviet Union and The Party and that awful prick who runs it! I hope the Germans string him up and all his lackeys with him. Why should we die for those areseholes? Where’s that bloody Ukrainian?”

Comrade Commissar Alexandropov hadn’t been separated from the rest of the troops for the usual ‘special treatment’ that was meted out to Communist Party people by the Germans. He was wearing a corporal’s uniform and a bloodied bandage round his head that obscured his face. During the confusion

of the surrender and being herded into the wire enclosure, he had managed to blend into another regiment where he wasn't known. It bought him a little time.

The fact was the front was moving so fast the Germans just didn't have time for the usually more thorough political 'weeding' process. Nor had they provided the resources to deal with the avalanche of prisoners either. It was easier to just kill everybody.

The Commissar 'corporal' was sitting alone, not three meters from Vassily and Sevastion, when he heard the Comrade Private's intended treachery. Anonymously he got up, as if to move from one spot of mud to another, but as he passed the budding turncoat, he grabbed him by the throat, spat in his face and started to throttle him.

"You miserable lumpen-proletarian scum! They are killing Soviet citizens indiscriminately! When they get to your home town or village, what makes you think they are going to spare your family and friends, as they take the land and turn what's left of the people there into their cattle!? You really want to help this plague spread itself around the world, so that it destroys working people everywhere? Have you no shame or patriotic feeling?"

He looked down the hill towards a little knot of field gray German and Soviet army brown uniformed men. The Ukrainian was with them, taking a proffered German cigarette. The Commissar forced the Comrade Private's head around to follow his view.

"He is going to become a butcher's apprentice and do the German's dirty work for them. He'll end up being worse than those SS men round the hill. He'll be up to his eyeballs in Russian blood, in no time at all. Do you really want to do that as the price of your life? Is that all it's worth? WELL IS IT?"

The nearest German guard had heard the commotion and moved towards the barbed wire. He aimed his machine pistol at the 'corporal', who duly relaxed his grip. He looked Vas Tarasov in the face and said in a lower voice that the guard couldn't hear, "Have you not the courage to stand with your fellows to the last, honorably, or will you disgrace yourself and your country forever by collaborating with its enemies? Choose so that every man around you can see the character that you really are. What is it to be? Tell me. Tell them".

Tarasov stared into the face of his assailant and just knew this had to be one of those party pricks he had so often hated and despised. He could denounce him now to the guard, but indeed he did feel ashamed. He'd seen what had happened to the Commissars who'd been caught a couple of days before; a three to four round burst into the groin and lower abdomen, then left to scream and groan for hours, just outside the wire. This man was taking a terrible risk with what little was left of his life.

What could he have been thinking of? He looked around at the sea of misery sitting and lying around him in pools of mud, blood and excrement,..... hoarsely coughed (The Commissar was only shirt fronting him now.)..... took a deep breath and spoke in a whisper.

“Death.”

“Louder Comrade! Shout it so that fuck down the hill can hear it!”

“DEAAAAATH!”

There were shouts in German and gesticulations from the guards to get up and move..... “Raus! Raus!”The remains of the regiment wearily got to its feet, or were carried, and filed slowly out of the wire enclosure on its last march to a flat area about two hundred meters away.

They started to sing the communist anthem, ‘The Red Flag’, not necessarily because they believed in Socialism, nor just to get up the noses of the Germans, but because it was a good song to sing for men who were about to die.

It did get up the noses of the Germans. Shots rang out and men fell, but the singing continued even louder, over and over, all the way to the killing ground, until it was drowned by the machine guns.

Death released them from German captivity. They were the lucky ones.

‘The Ukrainian’ soon led the life prophesied by the Commissar.

His German mother (There was a large and long standing German population in the Ukraine) had quietly taught her blond haired son her language as he grew up, which meant that after his defection, he was quickly absorbed into the SS as an ‘Aryan Volksdeutsche’ (foreign born ethnic German).

In the earlier phases of the war, he was involved in behind the lines anti-partisan operations and reprisals, and of course, Jewish round ups and mass shootings.

Watching his family and community die of starvation until he could stay no more without dying himself, gave him a clinical and detached view of death and killing. He saw and did a great deal of both, in circumstances that to an ordinary observer would have seemed like obscene apocalyptic grotesqueries from Dante’s ‘Inferno’. But the Ukrainian felt nothing. He might as well have been employed in an abattoir, or as an overworked game keeper doing culling work.

The odd thing was that in his travels he acquired a dog that used to go with him everywhere. He loved it and when it died, it upset him deeply. It had been the platoon mascot. The whole unit had had a soft spot for little ‘Storm Trooper’ Fonzi. His ‘funeral’ was a moving moment for them all.

Later in the war, when things started to go against The Axis powers, he was transferred to the front. The death and killing did not abate, but its burden was now more evenly spread. His almost

preternatural instincts for danger and dealing with it, that got him out of his homeland region during the famine, earned him the nickname 'Lucky Dumchuk' from his doomed storm trooper comrades, who, as the war progressed, fell like autumn leaves.

This instinct was not just a matter of learned experience, but very consistently focused observation and timing. The landscapes he moved through presented him with patterns and dissonances that had some of the characteristics of odor; like a gambler's 'smell' for the fall of the cards.

He made his luck and it rewarded him with fewer and lighter wounds than most. But there were times when it was only blind chance, iron discipline, skilled defense and the grim determination of his regiment that saved those who survived.

Eventually there were just not enough new recruits coming through the system to keep Lucky's regiment intact and so its remnants were used to bolster other equally depleted units elsewhere in the division.

He eventually got a 'cushy' job as a staff car driver because of his ability to keep his senior ranking passengers alive if they had to travel by day. By then the Luftwaffe had lost control of the skies, so day time travel was extremely dangerous. He would plan a journey like a rally driver would do, except optimizing for cover availability instead of just speed.

He had some near scrapes, but he never lost a car or a passenger.

At the end of the war, 'Lucky' Demanunchuk escaped with the remnants of his division in a fighting retreat out of the Soviet Eastern Sector and into the American one. SS men were at risk of being shot out of hand by the Soviet front line forces.

As they fell back the unit broke up; some of its personnel continuing with the intention of surrendering to the Americans, while others discarded uniforms and equipment and moved towards US lines with a view to finding places where they could infiltrate through at night.

The latter option was tricky, for even after the general surrender, SS units still shot 'deserters'. However, Lucky wasn't taking the chance of possibly being returned to the Ukraine by the Americans, so he quietly disappeared.

While probing the American zone, he fell in with another Ukrainian also escaping the Russians, who had been a 'guest worker' for the Germans. It took them four days to find a safe passage, but the other man, Anatole Pavlichenko, was unpracticed in the art of silent movement and use of cover. He was spotted by a picket and shot. Lucky dragged him to safety, but he died soon after.

At least that was the story that he chose to remember.....

Hidden behind the American lines and already thin, he deliberately starved himself for several weeks. He used the time to steal stationary resources to 'adjust' and 'distress' Anatole's identity papers sufficiently to help him pass his now emaciated person off as his late traveling companion. He bluffed his way into a refugee camp and in 1948, migrated to Australia to work on the Snowy River hydro electric scheme.

All the survival skills that he had acquired made him into a shrewd, ruthless and eventually wealthy businessman in The Lucky Country (his little joke), as well as a good catch for an Aussie girl by whom he had five children.

They never found out the truth about what their enigmatic father had done during the war.

His wife asked about his numerous scars.

"They were industrial accidents and allied bombing in Germany when the SS forced us to work through a raid. The factory was hit. The boss was decent and pressured the guards to let his doctor attend to the wounded among us, on the understanding they had to work the next day, or be shot. He managed to push that out to three days. Half of us made it."

She was also curious about the rather unusually positioned Ukrainian Orthodox Cross tattoo that was diagonally curved down his left upper arm, with dense roots growing out of its base, spreading back and disappearing into his armpit.

"My Orthodoxy is the root of my soul!"

Lucky 'Pavlichenko' died peacefully with his family around him, after a too-much-of-the-good-life heart attack in 1980. He got an obituary in the Melbourne 'Age' newspaper the following week, saying what a successful 'New Australian' citizen he had been.

His funeral attracted many mourners to the Orthodox Church that his money had helped to build, but it was not a deeply emotional occasion, with tears and displays of grief. Powerful he was, respected he might have been, but loved he was not; not really even by his family.

With them, he often used to be affectionate, generous and cheerfully pleasant, but these gestures emptied themselves into the shroud of silence and hesitation that beset him whenever anyone got close.

His wife, who had been on anti-depressants and suffering an eating disorder for years, felt freed at last from a man who had left her emotionally dangling and baffled. His children were only interested in the will. His business competitors and suppliers breathed a quiet sigh of relief at the passing of real

bastard. His over one thousand employees held their collective breath, because although he had been a bastard, he was their bastard, and a reliable one.

It was the fellow post-war refugee Jewish undertaker who laid him out who guessed what the tattoo and the scars meant and spat the word “SS!” into the face of the corpse, as if it were cobra venom. He recognized the cross design as a camouflage for the original blood group tattoo on the inner upper arm, used by the SS to facilitate rapid blood transfusions for its wounded personnel. This giveaway organizational signature was now hopelessly tangled in roots.

He said nothing about it, for what could he prove?

Lucky understood concealment. Others had tried tattoo removal or even double scarring to mimic bullet entry and exit wounds, to no avail. The beautiful and religiously uplifting work of art on his arm saved him from the hanging or long jail sentence some of his former comrades suffered.

It was his youngest daughter Olga who came closest to the truth when she went on a student tour of Russia in the later seventies. While walking around the edge of Red Square, she ran into an old one legged war veteran hobbling out of a side alley.

It was Vassily Tarasov. Partisans had found him under a pile of the bodies of his fellow prisoners, still alive, just. He survived the war, but the Vodka got him in the end.

She profusely apologized in tourist Russian. He smiled.

Her face looked vaguely familiar. He thought to say something, but she was a foreigner.

Lucky.

© 2010 Christopher Nagle