

Let Freedom Ring

Sergeant Burke leaned against the cold bunker wall behind him and closed his eyes. Guard duty was no joke, especially after a trek across the desert on a secret mission since five that morning. Burke's eyes were on fire and almost bloodshot, gritty with sand and exhaustion, tired after hours of intent staring across miles of glittering desert. The Kevlar helmet covered with a light coating of sand weighed the soldier's head down until his chin touched his chest. Oh why couldn't his mind stop thinking, pondering, wondering, deciding, reminding, remembering.

Beneath layers of armor and clothes, the soldier's skin was grimy with cold sweat and sand. Burke's hair, a deep wavy brown, was wet – despite the stale and icy bunker air. Pure exhaustion put weights on the man's shoulders; his M16 felt like a burning granite block in his left hand. Every muscle in his body was limp and moments away from total collapse. Yet still that unexplored sixth sense was awake, reminding, remembering.

The night was cool, almost cold, with a hint of some even colder presence. Out on the desert, the sand was hot almost to the touch. A slight rippling of moving air crept through the bunker windows stealthily on cold and silent feet. Above the man's head a tiny patch of deep sky pinpricked with crystalline stars spied in blinking calmly. The breeze was almost comforting yet very cold. Burke shivered. The slight breath softly lifted his sweaty hair, whispering mysteriously, then with a small sound passed on and returned to the blackness of the open desert night.

Burke raised his head and opened his eyes with a conscious effort. Bleary eyed he glanced around, confused. A subconscious instinct jerked the soldier upright. Concentrating on the task at hand, he shouldered his M16 stiffly, dragged his boots along the ground and smiled

grimly. He stretched and began pacing in and out of a streak of moonlight on the bunker floor. Once more he leaned up against the chilling bunker wall. One more hour to go he thought, lightly pressing the flat round button on his Timex watch. The bluish green light faded out after only a moment. The gentle snores and sighs of his sleeping comrades did not help Burke concentrate. By degrees the sounds faded. Stillness – total and absolute almost oppressive stillness – broken only by the guard's own breathing. His breath slowed, joining the rhythmic patterned breathing of the sleeping soldiers.

Burke did not hear the stealthy footsteps several feet above his bowed head; did not hear a slight metallic click; did not hear the sand swish and crunch under padded feet. But when a silver flash whizzed by his shoulder a strange urgency forced his mind to the present. The whole bunker suddenly came alive as the silver grenade flew towards the ground.

Burke' mind nearly exploded with intense concentration. Seconds suddenly stopped as the grenade flew towards the floor. Faces, thoughts, scenes flashed before the soldier's eyes.

The man knew he had only a split second to make the fatal choice.



It would take ten steps, a leap, so easy, so hard, so impossible, so desperately easy. It would all be over in a moment. And then, then what? But why should I relinquish my life? No one would blame me, could blame me. Intense trauma, psychosis, something like that. Or I could take three steps the other way. So easy. What a cinch. It would be too far away to touch me. Only the others. I could return home – missing a leg perhaps, but...

Then suddenly, a face almost as clear as daylight. A smell of vanilla pipe leaves. Strong yet gentle and work worn hands. A contagious grin. Twinkling deep sea gray eyes. Dad!? Those well remembered words on that fateful day so long ago, yet so near it felt like yesterday.

“Dad, don’t get yourself killed. Please, Dad. Be safe.”

A deep rumbling laugh.

“Don’t worry, Danny. I’ll come back. And if I don’t, I’ll be waiting for you. I have to do my duty, son. Today my duty is protecting my family and my country.”

A faraway look came into his eyes. Even his son could see the smoldering fire in those stormy sea gray eyes as the big fist clenched.

“I want my family to live in freedom and to love freedom. This country’s the finest place in the world. The only place I’ve ever been where a man can stand up for what he loves and believes in. Not the buildings, not the statues, not the politicians. It’s the ideals and rights and people that make up a country. I’m going to keep you safe and defend this country even if it costs -”

He knelt down looking straight into his son’s eyes, holding the little face in one gentle hand.

“That’s what it’s all about, son. Loving and believing in something doesn’t mean a thing if you’re not willing to die for it.”

That voice slowed and deepened until the last words rung in the boy’s ears like the voice of a deep bell. Then mists deadened the sound and obscured the sight, swirling into a new shape, a new scene.

Another face - Margaret, my young, lovely wife, smiling; those dancing eyes laughing and sparkling. Another face, strong and small. Deep blue eyes, rosy cheeks, boyish laughter. Little Timmy, trying clumsily to form a salute.

More faces... Private York, Lieutenant Gerald, Jonbiger, O'Halleran, Connel. Some laughing, some serious yet with a peace and calm about their faces. Others grinning comically.

Still others: children's faces lit up with joy and surprise; mother's faces, father's faces, sisters, brothers, families.

Finally, rising through the mist, the dome of the capitol, the great torch of liberty, the bell.

“It's not the buildings, not the statues, not the politicians. It's the ideals and rights and people of that make up a country. I'm going to keep you safe and defend this country even if it costs -”

Suddenly, the great emblems of freedom took on a life of their own. They wavered and

diminished. The surface of the bell was stirred by a strong wind then suddenly calm. One face, a man's face, the most beautiful of them all gazed up with a strong, searching, almost piercing glance. Suffering and death were written all along the face in deep lines and trickling blood. Yet a smile, grim and joyful, shone from those dark eyes. Two burning streaks of light, more intense than lightening, more brilliant than the sun yet held in the man's hand. A strong, gentle hand – work worn, pierced by a nail.

A grim determined smile slowly worked its way across the soldier's features. A smoldering fire started up in the sea gray eyes. Then the mist vanished.



Ten steps, a leap, so easy, so hard, so impossible, so desperately easy. All over in a moment. Then burning streaks of light, more intense than lightening, more brilliant than the sun yet held in the man's hand. A strong, gentle hand – work worn, pierced by a nail.

The piercing notes of a bugle cut through the air. To the wife's eager eyes, the notes ascended in shimmering sparkling notes all the way to the blue Heaven and her fallen hero waiting there. A young boy clutched his mother's hand, standing straight and tall. As the casket rolled by, his small hand touched his forehead in a perfect salute. He softly whispered, "Thanks. I love you, Dad."
