

THE COLOR LINE



a novel by
WALKER SMITH

Chapter 11

The messy business of trench warfare, together with the controversial employment of a weapon introduced by the Germans, noxious chlorine gas, were major strategic devices of the war. But more disturbing to the troops was the treacherous use of an invention originally intended to confine cattle on U.S. ranches—barbed-wire. All along the labyrinth of trenches snaking across the European countryside, barbed-wire had been quickly adapted by both sides as a barricade, but also functioned as a ground-level deathtrap. It was simply and respectfully referred to as “the wire.” Necessity dictated that raids and troop movements be conducted under cover of darkness, therefore putting soldiers at risk of stumbling into the dreaded metal spikes of the wire and becoming entangled like flies in a spider web. In the struggle to free himself, a soldier’s movement could be detected by enemy units monitoring the traps from a safe distance, tipping them off to his presence. Inevitably, gunfire followed within minutes. For this reason, the wire was feared more than any other single weapon of the Great War. It was almost always a terrifying prelude to certain death.

To Serval, the wire’s psychological effect was as bad as its bloody reality. During his first weeks in France, he waited out the nights in the trenches, longing for the reassurance of each sunrise as a milestone of survival. But as the fighting intensified, even that small joy was taken from him. He began to dread morning as nothing more than a revelation of night’s horror—countless bullet-riddled bodies hanging askew in the thorny wire mazes. To Serval, the image was a thumbnail sketch of two Great Wars, the one raging around him, and his own internal war. Even in the blessed silence of a temporary ceasefire, he often felt as trapped as the dead men consumed by the wire, who were sometimes extricated for burial, and sometimes left behind, depending upon the risk to the living.

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The night before their final push into the depths of the Argonne Forest, Serval and Red were both assigned to the late watch. The day had been one of the worst they had seen, with a staggering number of casualties, and watch duty gave them their only opportunity to talk since the previous day. They found each other in matching somber moods.

“Foggy tonight, huh?” Red said in a tired voice.

“Yeah.”

“Think it’s foggy enough to sneak a smoke?”

“Shit, Red! You holdin’ out on me. You got cigarettes?”

“Well, jus’ one, I think.” Red fished out a badly battered cigarette from his pocket and lit it. “You see Reynolds today?” he asked quietly, passing the cigarette to Serval.

“I saw him. He was ... pretty mangled. Tucker, too.”

“Oh. I didn’t see Tucker. Guess he didn’t get buried either, then.”

“That was their third raid together.”

“Yeah,” Red said. “They were a good team. Wonder what went wrong?”

The question was left hanging in a long silence, until Serval changed the subject. “Did I ever tell you about the time I took a joy-ride on that policeman’s horse in Manhattan when I was a kid?”

Red grinned and shook his head. “Naw. You never told me that one. Was that the same time you wandered around lost ’til your daddy found you in that tavern with the winos?”

Serval had to dig deep for a smile, but finally found one. “Naw, man. That was when I was six. I didn’t work my way up to stealin’ police horses ’til I was eleven.”

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As Serval’s unit prepared to move out the next morning, they were joined by several other units to form a massive battalion of reinforcements headed for the Western front. Serval watched row after row of men fall in, one behind the other, until he couldn’t see where they ended. For the first time since his arrival in Europe, he sensed a strong stirring of hope, because arriving with the new divisions was a new rumor: the war was ending. If this last push proved successful, the Allies would be in a position to demand German surrender.

Serval checked his ammunition and secured the straps on his knapsack as he scrambled to join his unit. A tap on his left shoulder stopped him, and he turned to face an unfamiliar American officer wearing captain’s bars on his sleeve. Serval saluted. “Yes, sir?”

The captain’s weather-burned face creased into a network of smile lines. “At ease, soldier. They tell me your name’s Rivard. That right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m Captain Welch of the 77th. I’ve got something here that might interest you, Rivard.” Welch swung his knapsack off his shoulder and reached inside, producing a bundle of fat

envelopes. “Looks like ladies’ lip rouge on the back of some of these. Thought you might be glad to get ’em.”

Serval grinned at the sight of his own name in Opal’s handwriting, and he quickly thumbed through the envelopes, counting them: twelve. “Thank you, sir!”

“It’s tough getting the mail through to the front, so when we were assigned to give you boys a hand, we caught double-duty—as mailmen. Got another delivery to make to your unit as a matter of fact ... You know a fella name of, uh ... Connor? Edward Connor?”

Serval shook his head slowly as he stared at the second bundle the captain had retrieved from his knapsack. “We lost Eddie Connor three weeks ago, sir. I think it was three ... Yeah. Three.”

Captain Welch gazed into the distance over Serval’s head for a few seconds, then stuffed Connor’s bundle back into his knapsack. “You sure, soldier? You saw him?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But was he—pronounced? Mistakes happen during wartime. Why, just last month we had a hell of a time trying to apologize to a family in Kentucky who was told their boy was killed. All that grieving—a funeral and everything—and it turned out he was just laid up in a field hospital. And I don’t have to tell you how often the dead can’t be identified.” He paused, and his voice softened. “How does a mother say goodbye to a dead son who’s only listed as missing? I’ll tell you ... she doesn’t. She keeps hoping—and wondering where her boy is. It’s just plain cruel, and that’s why I need you to be sure about this Connor boy—”

“Captain Welch, I ... I buried him, sir.”

The captain’s gray eyes suddenly locked on Serval’s, and they stared at each other for a long silent moment. Finally, Welch took a deep breath and extended his hand. “I’ll get the word to H.Q. so they can notify his family.”

Serval made no move to shake hands, and Captain Welch took a step closer. “I know, I know. Goddamn stupid order if you ask me. It’s war, and men are dying. White men *and* colored men. Even women and children ... But if you and I can’t shake hands, then none of this shit makes sense, does it?”

Serval shifted the bundle of letters to his left hand, then gripped Welch’s hand with his right. “No, sir. But with all due respect, sir, handshake or no handshake, this shit still doesn’t make sense. None of it.”

Captain Welch nodded. “Carry on, Rivard.”

“Yes, sir. And thanks again for the letters.”

Serval watched him stride away, and then broke the string on his bundle of mail. But before he had time to pull the first letter from its envelope, dated five months earlier, he heard the command to move out. Cursing the timing, he tucked the letters safely inside his shirt. His eyes instinctively searched for Red, and found him.

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An ominous silence hung over the front as Serval scrambled over the last rise of lumpy terrain into a deep trench with his unit. The sounds of shelling that had disturbed his sleep the night before were hushed, and neither the departing wounded nor the reinforcements spoke. Colonel Hayward exchanged quiet words with Sergeant Drew as he pointed out positions on the large map they held up. After rolling the map and tucking it under his arm, Colonel Hayward saluted the men and disappeared into his temporary quarters—a small dugout at the far end of the trench. Without a word, Sergeant Drew pressed his back against the muddy, sloping wall, then slid down to a sitting position. The other soldiers followed suit. Night had fallen, but a nearly full moon bathed the trench in its pale light, casting eerie shadows on the faces across from Serval. They were two neat walls of men, waiting in an eternity as quiet and still as death.

Serval closed his eyes. Only an hour earlier, when the unit had stopped for its last rest before reaching its destination, he had watched the gray winter afternoon sink into the distant silhouettes of charred trees in a serene, purple sunset. *If only I could freeze that moment and then multiply it, he mused, that would be peace. That's all it is—stringing a million quiet minutes together with no blood or screaming. No hate. I gotta tell Red. He'll tell me I'm crazy, but he'll think about it, and it's a nice thought.*

One of the men coughed, and a night bird cried out, as if in answer. Serval opened his eyes to find Red, and saw him staring up at something. “You hear that?” Red whispered.

A soft whistling sound suddenly became a piercing scream, then a thunderous blast that shook the trench, knocking great clumps of dirt out of the walls and sending the men sprawling.

“Gunnery! Commence firing!” Sergeant Drew shouted, as he began grabbing men by the arms. “Take your positions, boys! This is it!”

Within minutes of the first bomb blast, the night sky was illuminated by a hellish frenzy of fire. A new law was being passed in No Man's Land—unspoken but written in blood: Each foot of land was to be defended to the death by any man standing on it.

Serval felt the sergeant pushing him. “Rivard! Up and over the next rise—about thirty feet in front of us before the wire. There's a foxhole at two o'clock—you'll see the mound of sandbags. Get in there and do as much damage as you can to their front line. You and Hardy! Go!”

Red wedged himself between Serval and Hardy. “Sir ...?”

Drew nodded. “Yeah, you too, Watts. Now move!”

Serval scrambled out of the trench and crouched low as he ran, counting twenty steps and angling to his right. Suddenly, his right foot hit a sandbag, and he dove over it into a narrow chasm. “Red!” he shouted.

“Rivard?”

“Down here!”

Serval felt Red brush his shoulder as he fell in beside him, then heard Hardy grunt as he thumped against the trench wall. “Goddamn! I didn't even see it!”

“This ain't no trench,” Red moaned. “It's too shallow!”

Hardy stood up, then quickly crouched back down when a bullet whizzed past his ear. “Damn, Rivard! We're gonna get our heads shot off in this goddamn gopher hole!”

Another shell landed nearby, sending a spray of dirt and rocks rattling down onto their helmets. “Quit griping and get up here!” Serval shouted. “We gotta get them before they get us!”

The three men stood shoulder-to-shoulder for several minutes firing their weapons in the direction of a short line of continuous red blasts about twenty yards away. Occasional screams and groans rose over the roar of gunfire, and Serval wondered how many of his shots had hit their marks. As he watched the deadly, purposeful skill of his own hands reloading his rifle, something broke in his heart. “You can be proud of me, Daddy,” he muttered. “I'm a good killer. Gainful employment with the U.S. Army.” He choked back the feeling and scrambled up alongside Red to fire at a trio of advancing Germans. But before he could squeeze the trigger, another bomb blast shook the ground and Serval was thrown back, completely disoriented. If not for the familiarity of his position in the trench, he would have had no conception of north, south, east, or west. He reached for Red's outstretched hand and regained his footing.

Hardy pulled his helmet down low on his forehead and shouted, “This is goddamn suicide! I’m goin’ back!”

“Back where?” Serval shouted.

“Back to the *real* trench where Top and the gunners are! Out’a this goddamn shallow grave!”

“Wait, Hardy! At least...”

Before Serval or Red could stop him, Hardy was out of the trench. “Cover him!” Red screamed. They fired several rounds in rapid succession, and Red turned around.

“Did he make it?” Serval asked as he reloaded.

“I think so,” Red murmured. “I hope so. You think we should go back too?”

Serval glanced over at Red. “Man, I’m so goddamn scared right now, I don’t think I could run.”

Red nodded. “Me too. So I guess it’s just you and me—allies.” Serval took a deep breath and held it to steady his aim, then squinted at the target area as he squeezed off a round. “Yeah. Allies.”

Over the next few minutes, the fighting escalated, and Serval suddenly slid down and jerked his left hand off the barrel of his rifle. “What the hell you doin’, man?” Red shouted.

Serval shook his head. “Louder! I can’t hear you!”

“I said what the hell you doin’? What’s wrong with your hand?”

“It went to sleep! Look out, Red!”

Red dropped to the dirt, and a projectile whistled over his head. Before he could get to his feet, two French soldiers rolled into the trench, knocking him on his back. “Damn!” Red shouted.

“Pardon!”

After scrambling to his feet, one of the French soldiers sighed impatiently as he blinked at Serval and Red. He was evidently dismayed that they were Americans, but managed to convey the urgency of his message in broken English. Motioning upward and to his left, he spoke haltingly: “Colonel Hayward—he say za order! Ah ... we—we move out. We go! Now!”

Serval and Red exchanged a glance, then nodded at him. As he climbed out of the slippery trench behind Red and the two French soldiers, Serval winced at the familiar aching feeling of adrenaline pumping into the muscles of his legs. He stumbled over something soft and motionless, and knew from experience that it was a body, probably dead. In the bright light of a

succession of blasts, he couldn't suppress the urge to look down. He gritted his teeth at the sight of a man with his head and the left half of his torso completely blown away. The remaining right arm was still jerking in a death spasm, and Serval went cold, remembering Captain Welch's words: *How does a mother say goodbye to a dead son who's only listed as missing?*

Serval was screaming even before he dropped to his knees. "Aww, damn! Who were you, goddammit?! What was your name? Where— where's your goddamn dogtags?!"

Red's repeated shouts finally snapped him out of it. "Rivard! Rivard! Hurry up!"

Serval scrambled blindly over a rise of dirt into the open, which was a vortex of pyrotechnic chaos. He blinked in disbelief at flames streaking through the air like horizontal lightning and bombs erupting with volcanic force. Something hot and wet splattered his face and sleeves, and he stopped in his tracks. *Oh, God ... God! It's raining blood ... Somebody's blood ... Please make it stop ...*

The whistle of crossfire startled his legs back into action and he hurried to keep up with Red and the others. The French soldier in the lead gestured and began to move to his left, but his companion shouted something in French and headed to his right. Red hesitated, and Serval wondered which one he would follow. But an abrupt rattle of a rapid-fire machine gun sent Red straight up the middle into an alley of darkness—the only area that was not blazing with live ammunition. Serval did his best to follow, but stumbled. He struggled to his feet and ran a few steps to catch up, but Red was suddenly gone.

"Red! Red!" he screamed. His next intake of breath brought with it a sudden acrid odor, and his eyes, nose, and throat began to burn. He began to cough as he turned in a circle, blinking and rubbing his eyes to clear his vision. He finally spotted what looked like Red's silhouette a few feet ahead, and shouted again, "Red! Wait!"

The bombing had ravaged the terrain with deep crevices, causing him to stumble several more times as he ran in Red's direction. He made one desperate lunge, but was abruptly clotheslined by two strong arms grabbing him around the neck from behind. When Serval's back hit the ground, his feet flew out in front of him, and he felt the sharp sting of the wire cutting into his ankles and calves. At that moment another blast lit up the night, and he saw a man directly in front of him, hanging like a macabre marionette puppet in a massive tangle of barbed-wire. Serval froze, taking it all in at once: the gore of a gaping chest wound and a familiar pair of eyes staring death. It was Red.

Serval offered no resistance when he was yanked roughly out of the wire's spikes, even as they tore several gashes into his legs. He felt himself being dragged for some distance, and then falling with a thump into the darkness of a muddy foxhole. Hearing the sound of a match scratching against a rough surface, he rubbed his eyes and blinked. In the glow of the matchlight, he peered warily at the giant Negro looming over him.

“You awright?”

Serval nodded, unable to speak.

“I tried to stop that fella you was yellin' at, but he jes' jumped at the wire 'fo I could snatch him up.”

Serval fell into a fit of ragged coughing, and rubbed his throat. “Must'a took ya'self a swallow a'that gas,” the stranger said. “But don't worry. It be downwind from us now.”

The match burned out and both men were suddenly aware of an eerie silence. An occasional gunshot rang out, but, for the most part, the fighting had ceased.

Serval sat quietly in the dark as the stranger cleaned his cuts with water from his canteen. He felt the heat of tears streaking down his face, but made no attempt to wipe them away. Reaching inside his shirt, he clutched at Opal's letters, still unread, but even they held no power to comfort him. Red had been lost to the wire, and he had died alone.