

Cairo Salutes

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HE FLINCHES WHEN he hears it. Outside, not far away, the barking and pining of a dog. Inside, he manages to remain silent, save for his troubled breathing and occasional grunts of pain.

He is in a wheelchair with a khaki sheet draped over his back and shoulders, like a cloak. He is wearing pyjamas with the seams of the sleeves and trouser legs cut to widen them. His left leg and foot are heavily bandaged, as are both his forearms and hands. He has gauze taped around and below the right side of his neck, and crepe bandage wound around his head, holding gauze across his forehead and eyebrows. Lighter bandaging and dressings cover his right ear and much of his face, with breathe-holes cut for his nostrils and mouth. His eyes are not covered. They can be seen clearly as he raises his head to listen and look in the direction of the unhappy animal.

His name is Harry Ackerson. His rank is Catering Sergeant. He has been wheeled in to the makeshift courtroom for this particular phase of questioning. Nurse Colette Durand stands at his side.

“... and range?”

“Six hundred twenty.”

“Set six hundred.”

“Rog’ that! ... Six hundred ten, six hundred five, six hundred... and set!”

“On my command ... hold ... hold ... fi—”

The British tank-gunner fired, instinctively numbing his reflexes to the pulverising sound-shock of detonation. He let his body loosen – enough only to give himself into the Sherman’s violent recoil.

The shell struck the oncoming Tiger tank, ripping off its right track and drive sprocket.

The German tank-gunner also fired, but half a second too late – just as the Tiger lurched sideways. Its cannon shell blasted off at an angle and buried itself in a sandbank two hundred yards away.

The Tiger couldn’t be steered forwards or back. Its Commander screamed down to the gunner and driver:

“Reload! Reload! Rotate left thirty! Schnell! Schn—”

Before he could finish the order, a rocket from a swooping fighter plane blew the tank’s turret away – and the top half of his body with it.

The ruptured rectangle of metal and flesh spun seventy yards through the air before it too slammed into the desert sand. The turret hit first, leaving the barrel pointing into the sky. To the British infantryman who watched it come down it looked ridiculous. Like some giant snorkel! But his attention was back on the decapitated Tiger. He was already calculating. Artillery fire and tank and airplane strafing was everywhere. More tanks and German infantry were coming. An ignored tank wreck could offer more protection and a better vantage point than his temporary trench-hole. No time for thinking twice about it. He grabbed the flame-thrower, hooped its feed tube over his shoulders and set off on a crouching run towards the smouldering vehicle.

Only yards from the Tiger, he stopped short. A severed human leg rose up from the top of the tank. It was being thrown. It arced into the air, bounced off the hull and fell to the ground before him. A second one was tossed after it.

A muscular figure with blood-streaked hair and a soot-covered face pushed himself up from the torn opening where

the tank's turret had been. He clambered on to the flank of the hull and got to his feet, swaying as he did so. When he saw the infantryman he stilled himself and stared at the man, wide-eyed and unblinking. The whites of his eyes shone out against his blackened skin and the glistening red liquid trickling down his forehead. The infantryman saw only an expression of lunatic wildness. Calamity ran like a chill up his spine. His own eyes widened, and fear clenched his cheekbones. It didn't occur to him that this projected a similarly maniacal grimace to the German.

The two men gaped at one another until the German went to say something. He opened his left hand in an involuntary gesture as he did so. The infantryman immediately raised the flamethrower and shot off a venomous plume of fire at the man. Firing more in reaction than intent, his aim was not good. But the swirling tip of the flame-stream still reached and wrapped itself, whip-like, around the German's right ankle. It burned into his boot and gaiter on contact, and flared upwards along the thinner fabric of his trouser leg. He screamed as he tried to twist his upper body away from the fire swirl, and half-leapt, half-fell from the tank to the ground.

He landed awkwardly on his side. Straight away he threw up his free arm in a defensive gesture:

"Surrender! Surrender!" he shouted, "Please not shoot! Bitte! Take prisoner!"

Then he winced violently and turned to his burning trouser leg. He clenched his jacket cuff to the palm of his trailing hand and stabbed at the flames. He jerked around again and wailed at the infantryman.

"Bitte, bitte, Englisher, my leg is fire! Most pain! I am surrender. All my others dead. I am only loader man. Please to God help me!"

Tomorrow's flatbreads would be ready soon after midnight. Harry had laid out the dough pats, forty a-piece on each of the eight large baking trays, then loaded the trays into the catering unit's three big bread ovens. He'd been paddling bread and

cake trays since before the war when he had his own bake-house, so the muscles on his left upper arm and right lower arm were noticeably developed in relation to the rest of him. He'd often get ragged about it if he walked around the camp in short sleeves.

"Been kneading the officers' bread Harry, or beating your monkey again?" they'd say. Or "Who've you been spanking this time, Acker, eh?"

Harry might chuckle to himself if anyone came up with an original jibe, otherwise he'd just huff and shake his head to let the pranksters know he thought their jokes corny. Sometimes, with the more stupid or thick-skinned ones he'd pretend to sneer and show them the finger.

In his presence, Harry's kitchen assistants never commented on his arm strength, or said anything else personal about him. They were POWs. They knew not to. He wouldn't expect it. He recognised all three of them were strong enough to lift a loaded tray on the oven paddle – especially POW Klaus Begemann, who had well-developed arm muscles also. But the POWs understood that lifting and balancing a paddle and loaded tray to chest level, manoeuvring them into a fire-hole without hitting the oven door, its side walls or the roof of the oven cavity, and doing this quickly enough to minimise heat loss – all took considerable skill. It was bakers' law in this kitchen that Sergeant Harry Ackerson trusted no-one but himself to do this thing. There was an occasion when he had delegated the job to Klaus – when Harry was off ill and had no alternative – and he did use Klaus to roll the dough pats; but otherwise, Klaus and POWs Rolf Ziegler and Gunter Hansen could do the other things.

After loading the ovens Harry had finished off the kitchen wash, scouring and rinsing the larger serving trays and cooking pans, the tureens and ladles. Now he was leaning back against the sink unit, drying his hands on his apron, and listening. The sounds of clunking wash-buckets and mopping in the store-room had ceased and the POWs were in conversation. Harry didn't understand German but he gathered from the tone and interplay of their voices that they were discussing a problem.

Rolf and Gunter seemed to be urging Klaus, their rank senior, to agree with them and to act in some way. The voices stopped, then Klaus stepped through the bead curtain doorway.

“My Rolf and Gunter have finished all things, and I too, mein Sergeant. But there is a place of hard grease and dirt upon the floor. Next to the stacking of cooking-oil drums and bully-beef tins. We cannot make this clean without I must ask you for more strong detergent.”

Harry cursed under his breath. He'd been tipped off to expect an officers' spot inspection in the morning, so he'd already watered down what remained of his detergent ration for the extra cleaning. He needed everything tickety-boo, but he also wanted to finish early. This was the night he'd promised to take young Gunter into Cairo to see the belly-dancing. Though all three Germans had completed their stint in the store-room all the more enthusiastically, they were still tight on time. And time could be a problem. Disguising Gunter as one of the regular Tommies off to the 'entertainment' district for the evening would be easy enough. He'd done it with the others, and for the usual three ciggies, the supply-room Private had lent him the extra greatcoat and battalion beret he needed. That would get Gunter past the MPs. But if they were too late to walk out with all the other lads the gate sentry might spot something. It would need at least another four woodbines to buy his silence. No argument, they'd have to get this grease up, and pronto.

“Right Klaus, we need to do a hurry-up then. There's no 'strong' detergent. Tell Rolf and Gunter to dry these pans and ladles and put them away, and you mop this floor for me. Do it with water and vinegar. I'll see if I can scrounge some paraffin from the Transport lads. Be back in five minutes.”

It took Harry nearer twenty minutes. Almost all the paraffin available had been commandeered by the outer defence units for their trench lamps. What was left had been securely locked in the Garage Sergeant's office for the night. Harry had to wait while the Garage Duty-Private syphoned a quarter-gallon of petrol from a senior officer's Jeep, in for a suspension repair. Two more ciggies and the promise of an extra chocolate ration.

When Harry returned he found the Germans seated round

the prepping table, partly-drunk mugs of tea in front of them. There was a full one waiting for Harry, at his empty chair. Klaus was leaning back on the other chair, smoking a roll-up. Rolf and Gunter were sat on upturned boxes, both perched forward with their elbows on the table. Gunter was noticeably red-faced, and he looked down at the floor when Harry came in. Rolf had his hands crossed and spread across his cheeks and mouth, but his eyes were laughing. With a covert wink and nod Klaus signalled to Harry that they'd been having fun with the youngster. Harry guessed they had been teasing him about what he was going to see that night. The lad was almost certainly still a virgin. Harry smiled knowingly at the two older men. Then he looked around the kitchen. He nodded a couple of times, gesturing and confirming his approval on seeing the freshly mopped floor. It looked spotless and already nearly dry. The electric fan had been brought in to help the warm, evening air circulate over the wetted surface.

"Good initiative, Klaus," he said, without looking back at the German.

Harry stood holding the fuel can, still eyeing up everything. He rubbed his chin with his free hand for a second before speaking:

"Tell Rolf to mix some more water and vinegar and have a go at cleaning the transom windows above the sink units."

Rolf heard his name and looked puzzled until Klaus translated for him, then he looked at the windows and nodded. Gunter knew some English, so he got up straight away when Harry suggested he should go fetch the overcoat and beret from the bunkhouse.

"Best if you're ready to go, lad, soon as we've topped this cleaning."

Gunter headed for the kitchen door. Rolf began to busy himself at the sink. Harry started towards the store room, gesturing to Klaus to come with him. Klaus pinched his roll-up, dropped forward off his chair and came with his limping gait around the table.

The German narrowed his eyes and shook his head to himself as he followed the Englishman and studied him from

behind. He realised Harry had issued Gunter with the instruction to go the bunkhouse to allow the boy an escape from his embarrassment.

“Some day I will have to acknowledge this unassuming Englishman and his unexpected decency,” he told himself. “This Sergeant Harry Ackerson is in charge of us because this is wartime and we are the Allies’ captives. Yet, somehow, he never makes us feel anything less than his equals.”

Klaus thought back to an incident six months earlier. Harry had been absent for two days, apparently with a nasty bout of ‘Mummy’s Tummy’. A Corporal from a different Catering unit had been assigned to oversee them. On Harry’s return the man reported that he had seen Klaus feeding scraps to a scruffy-white terrier that hung around their kitchen block. Harry had looked displeased and told the Corporal he would deal with it, so Klaus had expected a scolding. But when the man had gone, Harry sat Klaus down, gave him a cigarette and thanked him for taking care of the dog. It turned out Harry had been secretly feeding the stray himself. He called the dog, ‘Luckyboy’.

Klaus wondered what his parents in Freiburg would make of this tale when he was finally repatriated. Especially after their loss of the house, and the injuries his mother’s sister had suffered, all as a result of British bombing. And what of the Brandt family, and the Krugers, whose boys, Willie and Michael, had died that grim death beside him when their Tiger had been hit? What would they say to Klaus, the only one to climb out of the pulverised panzer alive, if he was to tell them not just of the valour and sacrifice of their fine sons – the thing they would be so desperate to hear – but also of his positive experience in captivity from an enemy Englishman?

Inside the store-room Harry walked to where the oil drums and meat tins were stacked. He spotted what looked like the grease patch on the floor and pointed at it. Klaus nodded.

“It’s probably leakage from the oil drums that’s hardened over time,” Harry said. “These tins don’t always have perfect seams and the delivery blokes aren’t that gentle with them. It should fetch up with this...”

He leaned forward and carefully poured some of the petrol

along the length of the patch. Then he stood up and produced two cleaning rags from his pocket. He tossed one to Klaus.

“You start that end. I’ll start this.”

Klaus knelt down and immediately smelled the petrol.

“This is not paraffin mein Sergeant. It is gasoline!” he said, concern in his voice.

“I couldn’t get paraffin. But this’ll do the job.” Harry grinned and rocked his arm back and forth. “Come on Klaus, get that brawny arm moving!”

They both set to, rubbing away at the grease. It was softening, but the floor was rough concrete so their rags began to tear and it was difficult to get into its little indents and crevices. Harry leaned back, stretched himself and cricked his neck from side to side.

“Better fetch us some wire-wool, Klaus. And bring a couple of old pointed meat knives. I’ll soften the stubborn bits with more petrol. We’ll scrape and scour it. We can’t do any more than that.”

Harry mimed the arm movements again, this time overplaying the stabbing and prising actions.

Klaus laughed and said “Jawohl Herr Sergeant”. He mocked a Nazi salute, purposely holding out his cleaning rag, dropping it, and imitating Harry’s arm action as a clown’s repeated, but failed attempts to catch the rag on its way to the ground. Harry laughed too. “Go! Schnell!” he said, pointing with his own rag at the store-room doorway. It was one of those moments when things clicked between them. Klaus pressed on his good knee to push himself up, then walked out of the store-room exaggerating his limp, knowing Harry would be tickled by his playfulness.

As Klaus picked two knives from the cutlery draw, Gunter came back in. The greatcoat was slung over his arm, but he was already wearing the battallion beret. Rolf noticed first and wolf-whistled. Klaus turned and was about to add a mickey-taking whistle himself when he heard a short squeak in the store-room, then a longer ‘wroomp’ sound that completely captured his attention. It was palpable, dull-noted and low-forming at first, but accelerating into a louder, dominating air

gush that engulfed things. Klaus knew in an instant what it was, and in the next, he felt the horror coming. He became at once nauseated and breathless, and wavered off balance. He dropped the knives and swayed back against the metal worktop. His eyes rolled and the confusion started, but at the same time the 'help words' came to him. He didn't realise he was shouting them out loud in the kitchen:

"My hands! Get to my hands!"

He was already clenching his fists, forcing himself. He'd been here before and was getting practised. A part of him knew what to do now.

"The hands! The words and the hands!" he told himself. "The Me that moves them! Got to hold... hold on to the understanding. It's only a panicking mind. That isn't Me! I am the true... the one that does the understanding! Got to let the horror go. Let it pass. Mustn't hold it! Be alright then. Alright ... after the long second's passed."

In the other long seconds he'd been through, his hold on spatial reality, not only on his mind, always loosened. That was how the horror came. He knew he was about to go through it again, so he told himself again:

"Breathe Klaus, breathe in and let it pass you!"

The room had sentience but couldn't hold to its bearings. It lurched about, rising and plunging, zig-zagging its lights – everything meant to unbalance and dazzle him. It blurred its parameters and distances. He lost the sense of having things to hold on to. He was spinning between hallucinatory corners, doorways and shadows. Then everything suddenly in-folded. This was the shock point, the stomach-sickening moment when his trauma memory seized him and all self-volition would rush from him. He tried to focus on the breath he had just taken. His body convulsed as he did so...

...He was there again, trapped and choking in the blackness of the fume-filled, metal coffin... buried under bodies... his comrades' smouldering, torn-apart bodies!

...But something else was there. A voice he seemed to know about,

inside him, telling him that it was he that had air in his lungs, he whose fists were clenched. He who knew how to get out of this. He heard himself using the voice. It was He, Klaus.

“I move you now. Got to breathe, Willie! Forgive me, Michael, I get past you!”

As he spoke, Klaus looked down for his hands. He saw instead someone else’s, on his forearms. Rolf’s hands. And he realised Rolf was speaking at the same time as he was, saying something to calm him:

“... passed now, Klaus. You hear me, kamerad? It is over.”

Barely had he grasped Rolf’s words and realised his panic attack had passed – that he was breathing fully, back in control, aware of everything around him – than he was recalling and running over the sounds he had heard in the storeroom again. It was not a squeak, but a man’s shriek he had heard, followed by a loud, ricocheting, clanging noise. It was Harry who had cried out. Then the other sound must have been the petrol-can Harry had been holding – crashing and bouncing on the store-room floor? But, it wasn’t ‘then’ ... it was just now. Now!

Klaus raised his hands and smacked both of his cheeks. He looked up. Rolf and Gunter were standing together now, only feet away, staring at him with the same concern on their faces as he imagined was on his. The petrol-can exploded just as the three of them turned towards the store-room. The initial bang reverberated into a fracas of other violent sounds as flying metal struck ceiling and wall, glass shattered, and cooking oil burst from drums, ignited – and spattered a shower of fire over a screaming human. For Harry Ackerson was screaming – just as Klaus Begemann was shouting, and was swinging his gammy leg, loping towards the store-room as fast as he was able.

“Gunter, get help! Rolf, water!” he cried.

Burning fuel smoke and the smell of burning flesh hit Klaus as he entered the opening. His eyes smarted and he gagged, but he shouted for Harry. A gurgling cry came back. Klaus stepped blindly towards it. He made out a ray of light entering the room from a broken window. Smoke was curling up the beam. Harry was at the bottom of it, slumped on the floor with one leg stretched in front of him, the other bent awkwardly beneath

him. His extended trouser leg, shirt front and sleeves were on fire. Smaller flames were spitting and streaking up the side of his face and around his ear, and part of his hair was smouldering. His eyebrows were black smudges below peeling skin, and his lips and nose a mess of red raw flesh, mucous and oil smears.

“Mein Sergeant,” Klaus said, conscious immediately of how quietly he had spoken.

Harry groaned. His eyes were screwed shut but he lifted his face towards Klaus’s voice and said, “Help ... me”.

Klaus had on his cotton kitchen jacket. He ripped it off and smothered it around Harry’s arms and upper body to starve the flames of oxygen. Using his forearm, he tried to do the same with the sizzling hair and skin around Harry’s neck and ear, but Harry shrieked at the touch. Klaus spat two drools of saliva on the area instead. He turned to beating out the flames on Harry’s trouser leg. Burning oil in the cloth stuck to the skin of his palm and fingers, but the pain brought the thought to him that this scorching was endurable compared to the searing-hot blast of a flame thrower, and he ignored it. He was worried though that he was starting to choke from smoke inhalation. He had to get Harry up, but how was he to do it? Just then the two of them were showered with a bucket of water! Rolf was behind him.

“Help me Rolf! Get the other side of him!” Klaus spluttered.

Harry howled as they hoisted him to his feet, but they managed to keep him conscious enough to put a little weight on to his less injured leg. This made it easier to steer him back to the kitchen. There they laid him carefully on the floor. Rolf made a pillow with a folded towel and slid it gently under Harry’s head. When Gunter arrived with the Duty Officer, Klaus had just spread the borrowed greatcoat over Harry. He was leaning in close to Harry’s face, telling him that the medics would soon be there to give him something for the pain.

The Officers’ dining room had been re-organised for the inquiry. Divisional Commander Lesterly sat at the centre of the

top table with one of his Lieutenants and the battalion Padre to one side of him, and the Major of the Medics' core on the other. Sub-Lieutenant Fenton of the Military Police was acting as court interrogator. Seats for Klaus, Rolf and Gunter were positioned in front of a side table. Only Klaus was standing. Due to his seniority of rank over the other two, and his better command of English, he was answering most of the questions.

"So, Lance-Corporal Begemann ..." said Fenton, avoiding the German titular rank name, 'Obergefreiter', that would credit Klaus with a slightly higher status. "We have heard from Corporal Jones, Duty Officer on the night in question, that after hearing an explosion in the catering unit and being alerted by POW Private Hansen, he rushed to the kitchen and found you and your other compatriot leaning over Sergeant Ackerson."

He passed a cursory glance at Rolf and Gunter.

"Corporal Jones also says that you were holding – no indeed – 'pressing' someone's greatcoat over Sergeant Taylor. Over his face as well as his body. I put it to you that you, Lance Corporal, saw and took the opportunity to murder Sergeant Ackerson, a man rightfully your superior, in rank, and in responsibility over you as a prisoner. You knew he was using petrol in the store-room and you threw a match or a lighted cigarette on to the floor beside him to ignite it. This story of a spark from his army boot is pure invention. Who would believe such a thing?"

Fenton turned towards the Inquiry Commander and three officials alongside him. He raised his hand and made an exaggerated gesture of putting the tips of his thumb and index finger very nearly together:

"A tiny spark!" he said, with sarcasm.

Klaus was struggling to keep up with the speed of the Sub-Lieutenant's words and to comprehend the full meaning of what the man was saying. As he did begin to grasp the seriousness and implications of Fenton's accusations he turned pale and started to shake his head. Rolf and Gunter understood less of the interrogator's words but they had sensed the vindictiveness in his delivery. Now they could see the anxiety in Klaus's reaction. Rolf tapped Klaus's arm to ask what was wrong, but Klaus pushed his hand down without looking at him. Instead,

he was trying imploringly to meet eyes with the Padre – whose own expression was almost as pained as Klaus's. Then quickly, he turned to look directly at Commander Lesterly:

“Nein... nein. No!” he shouted. “This is not true, mein Commandant!”

Fenton made to continue and the Commander rapped the table for order. The Padre leaned forward to say something to him but Lesterly raised a hand to stop him.

“No, Charles, please, wait a moment.”

The Padre sat back in his seat, biting his lip. He exchanged pointed looks with the Major from the Medics' core, who also seemed uncomfortable.

Having gained the silence, the Commander addressed Klaus and then Fenton.

“Obergefreiter Begemann, you will keep your voice down if you please, and you will wait for Lieutenant Fenton to finish what he is putting to you. You will be given the chance to reply. Now, Lieutenant, say what you have to say if you will, but I believe it would be more fitting if you were to, to, let's say, slow down your delivery and moderate your tone a tad.”

“Yes of course, Sir. I will try to do that, Sir,” Fenton replied. He turned back to Klaus, and spoke his words slowly but firmly.

“I submit to you, Mister Begemann, that you thought you would get away with killing Sergeant Ackerson if you made it look like an accident. And further, I put it to you that when Sergeant Ackerson managed to drag himself out of the fire, you and those two men beside you tried to asphyxiate him. You thought we would conclude that the fumes from the fire killed him. You told POW Hansen to run off for help to fool us all into believing you. But when Corporal Jones turned out to be nearby, he appeared on the scene so quickly you were thwarted in your cowardly little game. And now you would have this Inquiry believe that you were trying to save Sergeant Ackerson...” Fenton paused then said, “...have us believe that you prisoners, ‘German’ prisoners... prisoners of war... act like heroes... towards your captors—”

Before Fenton could finish or Klaus could respond, the Padre spoke up. He looked indignantly at the Commander:

“I’m sorry Peter, Commander, but I must interject. I wish to put a question to Obergefreiter Begemann. Please do not make me insist on it.”

Lesterly stared back at the Padre, at first without speaking – though his cheeks twitched. Then he nodded:

“Very well, Charles.”

He signalled to Fenton to sit down for a moment. The Padre stood up. Klaus was still incensed, visibly trembling – struggling to hold his tongue and compose himself. The Padre took a few moments, then spoke:

“Obergefreiter Begemann, Klaus. I have only one question for you. It is really for all three of you. Please tell me honestly, what kind of a relationship did you have with Sergeant Ackerson?”

Klaus swallowed at the question. His breathing faltered with emotion; his chest rose and fell and he blinked away the tears that filled his eyes. Though he gave his answer to the Padre, as he spoke it, he turned to face Harry:

“He was... he is, our best friend.”

Klaus stood to attention and saluted Harry. Rolf and Gunter immediately stood up from their seats and also came to attention. They too, saluted in Harry’s direction.

No-one in the courtroom spoke, but everyone turned to look at Harry. He was staring across at Klaus and trying with difficulty to raise his bandaged right arm. The nurse understood what he wanted and placed both her hands under his arm as he raised it, as close as he was able to, into the soldiers’ salute position.

Harry whispered something to the Nurse.

“Nurse Durand. Please repeat to the court what Sergeant Ackerson has just said to you,” Commander Lesterly asked.

“He tells me, monsieur,” she smiled, “He said we are both bakers!”