

LAST RITES

Written by

Gary Howell

garymhowell@gmail.com

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FADE IN:

EXT. ARDENNES FOREST -- MORNING

A STEADY SNOW falls on a platoon of American soldiers. They are scattered about in numerous shallow foxholes along the edge of woods that face a large clearing.

The soldiers appear weather-beaten, dirty and exhausted.

SUPER: Ardennes Forest, December 24, 1944

LIEUTENANT DENNIS CAHILL, 26, moves about the bunkers. Tall and wiry, he not only is a lieutenant, but also a PRIEST. He wears the collar of the priesthood with his uniform.

As he stops by each foxhole, he offers coffee, cigarettes and words of encouragement for each of the platoon members.

He comes upon the foxhole occupied by Privates BAUER (20) and STEINBERG (21). The two huddle together under a blanket as they try to stay warm from the sub-freezing temperatures.

CAHILL

Hey, guys...interest either of you
in some coffee?

BAUER

Morning Padre. Yeah, sure.

Bauer holds out a dirty tin cup. Cahill pours a small amount of coffee in it.

CAHILL

How 'bout you, Steinberg?

Steinberg nods. Cahill pours him some as well.

STEINBERG

Thanks, Lieutenant.

CAHILL

Sure...get you anything else?

STEINBERG

A ticket home would be nice.

Cahill smiles broadly. He pats Steinberg on the shoulder and steps out of the foxhole.

CAHILL

I'll see what I can do.

LT. PERRY (O.S.)

Lieutenant Cahill!

LIEUTENANT LEWIS PERRY (25), a platoon leader, quickly approaches the foxhole occupied by Steinberg and Bauer. He is clean-cut, built like a linebacker.

PERRY

You need to vamoose, Father. Krauts are on the move. Be on us any minute now.

(to the others)

Bauer, Steinberg, our orders are to hold this position for as long as possible. Maintain proper fire discipline, understand?

BAUER

Yes, sir.

Perry moves on to the next foxhole. Cahill looks to Bauer and Steinberg.

STEINBERG

(mumbling to himself)

Fuck me.

CAHILL

Care if I join you guys?

BAUER

What? Didn't you hear the lieutenant? He told you to get the hell out of here.

CAHILL

I'd rather be here, if you don't mind.

Bauer and Steinberg look at each other as if Cahill has lost his mind.

BAUER

Good place as any to die.

STEINBERG

No shit.

Cahill jumps into the shallow hole. He lays on his stomach on Bauer's left and looks out to the clearing. A low rumble is heard in the distance.

STEINBERG (CONT'D)

I'd like having you here a lot more if you were carrying a weapon.

CAHILL

(nods)

I'm sure you would.

(MORE)

CAHILL (CONT'D)

Maybe I would too, but I'm sworn to recognize the sanctity of life. To carry a weapon, even to defend myself, flies in the face of my own religious convictions.

STEINBERG

Yeah? Well, those bastards heading this way are killing guys like me because of MY religion.

CAHILL

Understood.

BAUER

Hey, I'm Catholic, Padre. You tellin' me the Church says I can't kill some fuckin' Nazi if he's shootin' at me?

Cahill stares into the clearing. He listens to the roar in the distance.

CAHILL

Not at all. The Catholic Church believes that to legitimately defend the common good of society, in some cases you have to kill an aggressor if it puts you in peril of your own life.

STEINBERG

Damn straight you do.

The RUMBLE in the distance grows even louder now. Bauer checks his ammunition supplies. Steinberg places a couple of grenades in front of him on the edge of the foxhole. Squad leaders move up and down the line, shouting instructions.

In other foxholes, soldiers ready themselves. Two Sherman tanks move into position along the forest line.

BAUER

Lieutenant, you really should be back at the CP. There's about to be a serious shit storm rainin' down on us.

CAHILL

I appreciate your concern, Bauer, but I can't do my job from back there.

STEINBERG

(smirks)

Gotta have you around to administer
Last Rites to all the poor saps about
to get fucked over.

BAUER

Shut up, Steinberg.

CAHILL

Something like that.

STEINBERG

Yeah?

Steinberg leans over on one side and stares hard at Cahill.

STEINBERG (CONT'D)

Will you give them to me?

BAUER

Why don't you give it a rest?

CAHILL

I'm don't know if you're serious or
just jerking my chain, Steinberg,
but the Canons of the Catholic Church
won't allow that--you being Jewish.
Only those baptized into the Catholic
faith can receive the Sacrament.
Christians of other faiths can receive
the Rites, just not the Sacrament.

STEINBERG

Figures.

Steinberg takes a deep drag from his cigarette and holds his
breath for five seconds, then blows out a perfect smoke ring.
It floats upwards through the snow.

BAUER

Sending up smoke signals?

STEINBERG

Yeah--hope there's an Indian tribe
nearby that can come rescue us.

BAUER

Too fuckin' late for that.

They sit in silence for a moment. Bauer blows into his hands,
which are covered by ratty, torn gloves, then picks up his
rifle.

BAUER (CONT'D)

Jesus. My hands are so fuckin' cold
I can't even feel my weapon.

STEINBERG

No shit. My dick feels like a
popsicle.

Cahill laughs at this. Again silence, then Bauer turns to
Cahill.

BAUER

(in a low voice)

Can you perform Last Rites for me
now?

CAHILL

(smiles)

I would, but you have to be in danger
of imminent death before I can
administer them.

BAUER

Doesn't get any more imminent than
now, I would think.

Cahill pats Bauer on the back.

CAHILL

You're gonna be fine, Private...you
too, Steinberg.

Cahill reaches into his satchel bag and pulls out a rosary.

CAHILL (CONT'D)

But I *will* pray for you, just in
case.

BAUER

Thanks, Padre.

Cahill fingers the rosary, and cuts loose with a litany of
prayers.

The ROAR across the clearing intensifies.

From another foxhole comes a shout.

VOICE (O.S.)

Here they come!

On the far side of the clearing, several Panzer tanks burst
into the open, followed by halftracks and an entire company
of ground forces. Several low WHISTLES are heard that get
predominantly louder and higher-pitched with each passing
second.

PERRY (O.S.)

INCOMING!! TAKE COVER!!

Soldiers burrow themselves into foxholes as the surrounding trees burst into flames and the ground all around them explodes. The bombardment is intense, and in the midst of the shelling, agonizing SCREAMS can be heard from all along the defensive perimeter. Several voices cry out for a medic.

After a minute of the firestorm, it ceases. Two medics run amongst the foxholes to tend to the injured. The screams of injured men are loud and agonizing. Cahill grabs his bag and jumps up from his position.

CAHILL

I'll be back!

BAUER

Are you crazy?

Steinberg watches Cahill run off.

STEINBERG

Damn fool. Can't save anyone's soul now.

About 20 yards away, Cahill leaps into a bunker and kneels next to a couple of wounded soldiers. A medic works furiously on them, but then looks at Cahill and shakes his head. Cahill administers the Last Rites for the soldiers as the medic moves on to another foxhole.

The artillery bursts have barely ceased before bullets start kicking up the snow covered ground among the American soldiers. The Panzers direct their fire at the Shermans, and the American tanks are quickly taken out of action.

A fierce fire fight begins as the German soldiers quickly approach the forest perimeter. Bauer and Steinberg squeeze off shots in rapid succession. Mortar rounds start to fall all about the Americans.

For twenty minutes a back and forth barrage of fighting continues, and soldiers on both sides continue to drop in the snow. Their blood forms a stark contrast with the white ground cover.

The mix of machine gun, tank and mortar fire rises to a deafening roar. The German soldiers are almost in to the American perimeter. Lieutenant Perry moves quickly along the line, head down, and barks a single order.

PERRY

FIRST PLATOON!! FALL BACK!! EVERYONE
FALL BACK!!

Cahill continues to administer Last Rites to fallen soldiers. Perry notices this.

PERRY (CONT'D)
 Goddamnit Father! We've gotta get
 out of here! That's an order! Now
 go!

Cahill nods and holds up a finger as he finishes the
 Sacrament. Perry moves on down the line.

Cahill jumps up and follows about 20 paces behind Perry.
 Perry reaches Bauer and Steinberg's foxhole.

PERRY (CONT'D)
 Back to the CP! Let's go!

Bauer and Steinberg don't hesitate. They grab their weapons
 and jump up to retreat. As they do, a long machine gun burst
 from the German lines cuts down Perry, Bauer and Steinberg
 in quick succession. Cahill dives to the ground six feet
 away.

CAHILL
 MEDIC!!

Cahill looks over his shoulder. Anyone who is still able to
 function is in full retreat into the forest. He crawls over
 to the motionless bodies. He checks: Perry, dead. Bauer,
 dead. Cahill then turns over Steinberg, who is face first
 in the snow. His eyelids are barely open, but he notices
 the eyes move slightly.

CAHILL (CONT'D)
 Steinberg. Listen to me, Steinberg.
 Stay with me. It's going to be okay.

Cahill hears the voices of German soldiers over the gunfire,
 which now begin to die down as the Americans are in full
 retreat. He looks up and see Germans about fifty yards away.
 They cautiously approach his position with guns raised, firing
 at the retreating soldiers.

Cahill bends back over Steinberg. Steinberg tries to mouth
 something, but can't. Blood oozes from his mouth and down
 his neck. He moves his eyes and they fixate on the rosary
 in Cahill's bloody hand.

Steinberg and Cahill's eyes connect, and Cahill understands
 what he wants. With a slight hesitation, Cahill dons his
 stole, kisses it, then bends over Steinberg and makes the
 sign of the cross.

CAHILL (CONT'D)
 Through this holy unction may the
 Lord pardon thee whatever sins or
 faults thou hast committed.

The slightest hint of a smile on Steinberg's face. He mouths
 the word "Shalom," then dies. Suddenly, from Cahill's right--

VOICE (O.S.)
 (in German, with
 English subtitles)
 Up! Up!

Cahill turns his head and sees ERICH KOCH (20), a German private, with a Gewehr rifle pointed at Cahill's head. Cahill slowly rises to his knees, his hands in the air. Koch notices the stole and the rosary, and for a moment there is no movement by either of them. Koch then breaks the silence.

KOCH
 I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were--

VOICE (O.S.)
 Private Koch! What are you doing?

Koch is startled by the voice of OBERLEUTNANT HEINRICH STUEBEN (26). Steuben moves quickly up to Koch and points his Luger pistol at Cahill while he stares hard at Koch.

STUEBEN
 You know our orders, Koch! No prisoners!

KOCH
 But sir, he is a Priest...

STUEBEN
 Then he is a dead Priest.

Stueben quickly fires two shots into Cahill's chest. He slumps backwards and falls next to Steinberg.

STUEBEN (CONT'D)
 Now keep moving or I will shoot you as well!

Koch looks at Cahill only briefly, then quickly moves on, visibly shaken. Koch follows behind.

The majority of German soldiers move deeper into the woods. A few medics tend to Germans wounded in the fighting.

A solitary figure, LEUTNANT JOACHIM SCHWARZ (28), moves among the German bodies scattered around the battlefield. Eventually, he makes his way to Bauer's foxhole.

Schwarz stands there silently, as he spots Cahill on the ground, his stole wrapped awkwardly around his neck. He still clutches a rosary in a bloody fist as he stares into the snowy sky. He recites a prayer in a low, shaky voice, almost a whisper:

CAHILL
 Hail Mary, full of grace.
 (MORE)

CAHILL (CONT'D)

The Lord is with thee...Blessed art
thou amongst women, and blessed is
the fruit of thy womb, Jesus...

Cahill coughs. Schwarz kneels next to him.

CAHILL (CONT'D)

...Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray
for us sinners...Now and at the hour
of our death...Amen.

Cahill looks up at Schwarz. For a moment he is confused.
Then there is a glimmer of recognition as he spots the collar
of the priest around Schwarz's neck. He smiles slightly and
with as much effort as he can manage, he makes the sign of
the cross with his hand a couple of inches off the ground.

CAHILL (CONT'D)

Please...

Schwarz nods, kneels next to Cahill, then pulls out his own
stole, kisses it and makes the sign of the Cross. Cahill
closes his eyes as Schwarz begins.

SCHWARZ

(in German, with
American subtitles)

Through this Holy Unction, and through
the great goodness of His mercy...

FADE OUT: