

ONE

*19.00 hours. Wednesday 18th September.
Bergen-Hohne. West Germany.*

There were six empty bottles on the table in front of the three men. The Chieftain crew's driver, DeeJay Hewett, was leaning forward supporting his head with one hand as though in deep thought, but the fingers of the other were drawing large circles in a pool of spilt beer. Inkester, the gunner, rescued his packet of cigarettes as the pool spread, and stared around the canteen. He could see other men of Bravo Troop, drinking and chatting; a few watched a video film on the television, but the tables nearest Hewett, Shadwell and himself were unoccupied, as though the three of them had some kind of contagious disease.

Eric Shadwell, the loader, said wearily: 'Well, you've done it for yourself this time, DeeJay.'

DeeJay Hewett slapped his palm down into the pool of beer, splattering it messily around the table. 'He bloody asked for it, the long-haired git.'

Shadwell grimaced. 'You didn't have to belt him so hard. Anyway, you could 'ave waited until we met him one night up at Angie's Bar...I've seen him drinking there with his mates.'

'Wrap it up, Eric.' Inkester held the damp cigarette packet towards DeeJay. 'I'd 'ave bloody hit him, too, only DeeJay got there first. Look at the fucking mess the bastard made of Bravo Two. Bloody amateurs! They ought to keep amateurs

out of tanks...especially bloody Dutch amateurs; the Dutch ought to stick to growing tulips! You want another beer?' Inkester didn't need to wait for a reply, he twisted himself out of his chair and walked over to the bar. He could sense some of the other crews watching him; fine lot of mates they all were! Just because there was a bit of trouble, they didn't want to know. Once it all blew over they'd be fine again, even congratulate DeeJay, buy him drinks; the Dutch weren't popular with British tankies at Bergen-Hohne, but right now no one wanted to be associated with the incident, even remotely.

Inkester carried the bottles back to the table and handed one to each of the two men. They drank for a few minutes in silence and then Hewett sighed, shrugged his shoulders and said: 'Well, I suppose that's the end of my bloody leave.'

'Aren't you getting married next Saturday?' Shadwell asked.

"Course he bloody was, you daft twit,' said Inkester. 'It's fucked everything, hasn't it?'

Neither Inkester nor Shadwell had witnessed the fight. It had all happened quickly. They had been returning from the gunnery ranges with the rest of the troop when the Dutch tank had driven straight out of one of the camp entrances and into the side of Bravo Two. The unexpected impact had startled them, jarred them as Bravo Two swerved suddenly and there was a heavy crash and the squeal of tearing metal. By the time they had climbed out of the Chieftain there was an unconscious Dutch conscript lying on the ground and Sergeant Morgan Davis, Bravo Two's commander, was dragging an enraged DeeJay away from the man as a group of Dutch military police ran from the guardroom swinging their

batons. The police wanted DeeJay in their cells, but Sergeant Davis knew what that would have meant for the British trooper. He almost threw DeeJay back inside Bravo Two and slammed down the driving hatch, then he argued with the police until Lieutenant Sidworth, the troop leader, arrived.

Davis had been angry with DeeJay, but he could understand his feelings. DeeJay Hewett, like himself, was a professional, and he had the same professional's appreciation of the tools of his trade; Bravo Two was DeeJay's tank, at least, that was how DeeJay viewed it. And most of the Dutchmen were conscripts! A tank wasn't the same thing to them, they only worked with them for a short while, not long enough to really appreciate them; their casual attitude to soldiering showed in untidy uniforms and the length of their hair. But Davis knew it was important to remember they were allies, and good fighters; they had shown that in the past. An incident like this would breed bad feelings and the Bergen-Hohne camp wasn't large enough to permit the incident to be ignored. Regrettably, Lieutenant Colonel Studley, the commanding officer of the regiment, would be forced to make an example of Hewett.

'They're still fighting,' said Eric Shadwell.

'Who's fucking fighting now?' Inkester scowled. Shadwell had a habit of picking subjects out of the air and it wasn't always easy to follow his line of thought.

'The Jugs. I heard it on the news.'

'They've been fighting for the past three days...more,' Hewett drained his bottle. 'Yugoslavia's not our problem. Been askin' for it ain't they, just like bloody Poland.'

'Well, the Yanks are helping them,' added