

# Rank

By Bill Wolfe

My father is a Bird Colonel, so waiting in the General's antechamber ain't nothing new to me. I'm in for an ass-chewin', and I know it. We either screwed the pooch—big time—or we're all heroes. And even though I'm just a snot-nosed Private, I'm the only one of the survivors who can talk, right now, so I'm going to be the one in the hot seat. The word FUBAR was invented for my situation. It reminds me of the time I got caught playing hooky from school, and Dad found out. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I'm not worried. I'm sweatin' bullets. It's just home turf. The GS says the General is ready for me.

Wish me luck.

“At ease, Private. And have a seat,” he says after I report in and he returns my salute. Of course, he keeps me standing at attention for a minute while he pretends to study a sheet of paper in his hand. I learned these tricks at my Daddy's knee, but that doesn't mean they're not effective. Despite the AC, I feel the sweat trickle down my back as I take the only other chair in the room. Metal fold-up. His is leather, and looks like it weighs a ton.

“Now, Private, I've read your report, and I've reviewed the recordings that Lieutenant . . . M'Benga made during your patrol, so I'm familiar with the basics. Good report, by the way. Much better than I'd expect from someone who's only been in uniform for a few months.”

“Thank you, Sir.” I'm waiting for it. First the compliment. That makes 'em relax, a little. Now comes the stick.

“So tell me, Private. . . .In your own words. . . .What in Hell's holy name were you fine soldiers thinking when you violated orders, broke radio silence, and started shooting the hell out of a cave that was so small it wasn't even on our best maps of the area? I don't know whether to bust you all out of the Service or give you all medals.”

I'd thought about how I was going to explain this. I know what worked with Dad, and I figure the General is the same. Well, here goes nothing. My career either ends right now, or I'll be a Corporal by the end of today.

“Sir, do you know why our squad's callsign is Bloodhound?” He isn't expecting me to answer a question with a question, and it rattles him, though he covers well.

“Go on, Private. I'm listening.”

I take a deep breath. “It's Sarge, Sergeant Trollier, Sir. He's the reason. The first thing any new recruit or new officer in our Division learns is that you never play poker with Sarge. Not for money. Some of us have to learn the hard way, but we all learn it.”

“Son, I don't see what this has to do with anything, but I'll give you a chance to explain.”

Which is just what I was hoping for. “Sir, Sarge can smell a bluff. I mean literally smell it. It’s like he has a built-in lie detector and a gypsy crystal ball, all-in-one. You can’t fool him, ever. He can tell if you’re lying, or sick, or dogging it by your smell alone. When Corporal Lansing came back from leave, Sarge took one whiff and told him someone in his family had cancer. Sure enough, when he called home he found-out his mom had been diagnosed, but they didn’t tell him because they didn’t want him to worry.”

“I’m beginning to understand, Private.” And I can tell he does. “So. . . . the day of the patrol?”

“Well Sir, it was a routine RECON patrol. All we knew was that they were moving HQ forward, since we’d been driving the Sku-Doleen back so fast. This valley would have been perfect for it.”

“In hindsight, a little too perfect.” I wouldn’t have said it out loud to a General, but he’s right. The Skuds had been drawing us toward that place for a year, at least. It would have been a massacre, if it weren’t for Sarge.

“The wind was at our backs, so Sarge didn’t smell them until we were in the trees. He knew they were there, they were all around us, but we couldn’t see anything. Those hidey holes that they built were perfect. We never did find one, till they all opened-up after we hit the cave where the one conscious Skud was bunkered. You have to give them credit, Sir. It was a beautiful ambush. Ten thousand of their best shock troops in armored suits, all zonked-out with hiberzine, barely breathing, maybe one heartbeat an hour. All just waiting for the wake-up signal. We’d have our HQ working and staffed in two, maybe three days. That one Skud in the cave wouldn’t have been found, we couldn’t even see it till we were right up on it.”

“Private, I know it wasn’t your decision, but do you know why this wasn’t called-in, at this point?”

“Sir, we were under radio silence for the patrol. We knew that Sarge was right, but violating orders just because one of us smelled them? No visual sighting, no actual contact?. With all due respect, General. . . would you?”

“Point taken, Private. Continue.” It isn’t a request.

“Well Sir, Sarge literally sniffed-out the cave where the Skud was hiding, that one had the code that woke the rest of them and when we hit him, he hit the button. That’s when the sh. . .”

“Understood, Private. I have an idea what happened next.” I can’t frakkin’ believe what I was about to say. To a General, no less. Dad would have a conniption.

He sits there for a few seconds, pondering. Decision time.

“Your squad sprung a trap, and ruined the Sku-Doleen’s whole day. Medals it is, Corporal Tanner.”

Two stripes in three months. Dad’s going to bust a gut.

“Dismissed.”

“Yes Sir!”

The End