

## **A SAMPLE FROM CARDINAL POINTS: RICE'S FOLLY**

Captain Hollingsworth walked about a mile from the battlefield and then sat down on a low cairn of rocks that seemed to have been piled by man. He wanted to consider the cairn, to decide whether it was one of a chain of markers which might lead him out of the desert, and he scanned the surrounding country carefully in every direction in the hope of seeing another cairn. But none was apparent from where he sat, and so he just sat on, miserable, nerves raw so that his head couldn't keep still but kept turning, frightened eyes continually imagining movement, ears tricking him with sound which didn't exist. In the distance the transport still smoldered and thin columns of smoke ascended in a hundred different places.

Hollingsworth tried not to look back on the scene of destruction. In less time than it had taken him to reach this cairn, a battalion had been wiped out of existence.

Hollingsworth tried not to think of death and dying, but his thoughts seemed held to the subject. Everything had happened so swiftly, and even now, several hours after the event, he was still dazed and shocked by what had happened.

He had been sitting in the cab of a three-tonner carrying his platoon supplies at the time of the ferocious German attack. The thrill that was spiced with fear at the

thought of entering the fabulous Libyan Desert had long ago given way to boredom and a recognition of the fact that desert travel was the most uncomfortable way of spending several hours that a man could devise.

The glare had given him a headache, and for much of the time he had found himself riding with his eyes closed, marveling at the ability of his driver to keep going and even to find breath to swear at every obstacle and every need to change gears. When the attack came, his first realization of it was when he heard his driver shout wrathfully, "What the hell!" and his truck swerved violently.

Even so, Hollingsworth opened his eyes without haste, his mind too dulled by monotony to react quickly to any stimulus, and he saw they were travelling within inches of one of the big gun-towing Matadors. It swerved away instantly, but Hollingsworth had a momentary impression of a terrified face staring down at him from the higher Matador cab, and he also realized that the other vehicle, in spite of its big gun, was travelling at reckless speed.

Automatically Hollingsworth put wrath into his tone and shouted, "Get back into line, you!" Then he saw that other vehicles were charging past him in reckless confusion, and stopped shouting.

Now Hollingsworth heard the sound of gunfire, and at

once his driver shouted, "We're being attacked! We ran into Rommel!" and immediately the truck lurched forward with greater speed as the driver accelerated madly. Headache and discomfort were forgotten as Hollingsworth held on to the door and tried to adjust to the situation. They were under attack, though he could see no sign yet of the enemy through the rising cloud of dust that obstructed vision in every direction. What did an ack-ack battery commander do in such an emergency?

Hollingsworth shouted, "Pull out of line when you can!" but vehicles were charging parallel with him, several abreast, like a stampede of fear-crazed elephants, others were crowding close behind, and it wasn't easy to cut across and get out of the dust cloud. For a few minutes they fled on, the noise of overstrained engines a deafening tumult across the desert, disaster threatening at any minute as they crashed recklessly over every obstacle, the platoon stores behind them dancing in frantic and noisy confusion as they bumped over the uneven ground.

Then a truck which had overtaken them in the first rush crashed - one moment it was traveling at great speed, the next its front wheels had dropped into a hole and the truck stopped dead. Hollingsworth saw it was the truck carrying the predictor and height-finder, and the instrument numbers in it were hurled against the cab front or over the low sides with a violence which told of

broken limbs and even of death. Hollingsworth even thought he heard cries of agony as they hurtled past.

The accident opened up a gap as other vehicles swerved away from the wreck, and Hollingsworth shouted again to his driver to pull round, and gradually they cleared the stampede. As they came out of the dust, the driver slowing on Hollingsworth's orders, the battery commander stood up so that his head and shoulders appeared through the trap in the cab roof. He looked round, again hearing the sound of gunfire, but now much more heavily.

It was difficult to comprehend the situation, even though their truck was now out of the dust cloud. There was too much confusion, too many vehicles charging in every direction across the broad and comparatively level desert. Then Hollingsworth began to see further disaster.

Far back, where 1020 and 1056 Batteries where, came the sound of gunfire, and now Hollingsworth realized that several trucks were burning and one exploded with a roar that echoed and re-echoed in slow majesty across the scrubland. Aghast, Hollingsworth saw fast-moving vehicles, like cowboys in Western films herding their steers together at round-up time, he thought. Hundreds of guns and vehicles caught in a trap, milling together in blind panic, it seemed to Hollingsworth even at that distance.

Then Hollingsworth saw tanks roll in to join the German armored cars, and he knew their case was hopeless.

Panic caught and held the battery commander. He saw how most of 1055 Battery vehicles had almost overtaken him and were charging on - all but two or three which had crashed, one of them beginning to burn, little figures running away from it and disappearing in the rolling screen of dust. His hands thumped madly on the roof top, while he shouted, "Drive on! Drive on! For God's sake, step on it!"

The driver responded so savagely that Hollingsworth was hurled against the side of the trap, bruising his ribs and making him cry out with pain. The man must have heard the cry, for Hollingsworth heard his frightened shout - "You been hit, sir?"

Hollingsworth dropped into his seat, gasping and rubbing his side. "No. I caught myself on the trap . . .

They were with the stampede again, engulfed once more in the gritty, choking dust, but almost at once the pattern of flight was changed. Trucks began to charge in every direction, frantically seeking escape from an unseen enemy; a Matador went right across their front bumper, so that they hit the rear wheels of the 90 mm gun in tow, but fortunately were deflected clear of the gun barrel and suffered nothing more than a violent

bump to themselves and their vehicle. The rattle of machine-gun fire assailed them, but still Hollingsworth saw nothing of the enemy because of the dust.

Then something banged against the cabin side by the driver and in fascinated horror Hollingsworth saw shreds of metal tear out of the door on the driver's side. For a moment the significance was ignored, and then blinding truth sent his panic soaring to new heights. They were under fire.

His driver was screaming, half-standing, turning. His bare body was ripped open, bone showing among mangled flesh, blood pouring on to his oil-stained shorts. He fell on Hollingsworth, while Hollingsworth shouted and tried to push him away and felt the man's blood hot on his bare arm and knee. The truck was slowing, beginning to turn in a sharp crescent, and then the engine died.

Hollingsworth fell out of the truck just before it stopped, fell on his face and came instantly to his hands and knees and stared up at the open doorway, where his driver was beginning to topple out after him. The man wasn't screaming any more, and Hollingsworth thought, "He's dead!" Dead, the man who had been driving him a moment before. Dead, the man who had driven him thousands of miles in North Africa. Dead, this man whose letters he had censored, who had written with a stubby pencil only a few short days

before, "Take care of yourself, Molly. It won't be long before it's all over. Look after the kids." Two kids and Molly, and now . . . death.

For a few seconds Hollingsworth forgot the danger of his position, forgot about the enemy who could destroy life so easily. There was the blood staining his arm and leg, and he revolted frantically to the unclean touch of it. His hands grappled for sand and rubbed it on his limbs to get rid of the sticky liquid. Blood! It felt like some foul disease on his skin, and he had to cleanse himself before he did anything else.

Then a vehicle roared by him, so close that sand showered against the truck as it skidded round in a tight circle. It was an armored car bearing German markings, so close that Hollingsworth could see the faces of the men through their visors for an instant. He rolled under the truck, his reaction to danger instant and surprising to himself, but the armored car ignored him and went on after more profitable game.

Hollingsworth crawled out and looked around, fear demanding flight, yet reason controlling the wild impulse of his limbs to go running away - anywhere. Now he saw that 1055 Battery was being destroyed, too, enemy vehicles appearing in all directions, their guns pouring merciless fire into the lumbering, fleeing American transport.

He saw men leap from trucks and start to run, and then they went sprawling as machine-guns caught them in flight. Some of the men he recognized.

Hollingsworth saw other men dying, or falling wounded, and then panic overcame caution and he started to run away from the wrecked three-tonner. Not many yards away he fell into a hole and hurt himself so badly that for a while he could only writhe and hug his bruises and gasp for air in his suddenly deflated lungs. The shock curbed his panic, and when he had recovered he decided to stay where he was while he estimated his chances of safety. Very cautiously his head came above ground-level and he looked around.

Dust and sweat were in his eyes, so that he had to rub them with his shirt-sleeve before he could see clearly. Then he realized that blood stained the sleeve, and he felt nauseated, realizing it had come from his dying driver. He was trembling now, his nerve gone, not wanting to look out on to the battlefield, yet knowing he had to force himself to do so.

The battery was nearly totally destroyed by now. For several miles there was nothing but carnage and destruction, with fires raging and smoke clouds, black and oily, adding to the drifting dust. Explosions were frequent as ammunition exploded, and once a truck blew up with such violence that Hollingsworth felt the impact two hundred yards or more away, and fell to the



bottom of the hole in panic.

In the next half-hour he saw many Germans. At first truck loads of infantry came sweeping in, their troops pouring out and running in and among the wreckage with rifles and automatic weapons at the ready. There was little firing from them, however, as if they encountered poor resistance, and after a time a round-up of prisoners began.

Hollingsworth saw men with their hands raised being marched together into groups which were covered by the machine-guns of armored cars. Horror tightened round his heart, and he wanted to shout out in protest, because these were the men he had known since training days back in the States; they were very ordinary Americans, but suddenly they were his friends - all of them, even the men who had tormented him so that he had to discipline them. And suddenly pity and sorrow for his comrades of all ranks were overwhelming, so that he cried out as he crouched there - not crying in fear for himself, but out of misery for the bewildered, unhappy men out yonder. He wanted to rise from his hole and go running to join them, to share whatever adversity might be theirs, just as all these months they had shared the good as well as the hard times together. And yet he could not move, an instinct of preservation holding him there, so that he lay with his head on his dirty arms and sobbed until he was exhausted. Then he began to think of escape.

All at once Captain Hollingsworth realized he was alone. All in an instant it seemed as though the desert in every direction had become deserted of human kind save for himself, and stiffly, bruised and aching, he climbed out of his hole and stood erect.

He looked round, cautiously at first, and then, sure there was no trap, suddenly certain there were no Germans lurking about to pick up stray survivors, he began to walk towards the wreckage of his battery's vehicles. He was frightened, and fear mounted with every stride so that he could feel the hackles of his hair rising. Fear of being alone, fear of being the only man left in a world of heat and sand and fiery destruction. In all his army career there had always been men about him, too many men at times, so that he had craved for privacy but had never found it. Now that he had it he felt unutterably lonely, longing to see someone, the lowliest of fatigue men - anyone. But they were all dead who remained and they repelled him by their dead looks, by the stare of their lifeless eyes, and the horror of their twisted and broken forms.

Hollingsworth was limp with exhaustion by now, gradually becoming aware of his craving for water and the effect of the sun's hot rays on his body. He walked away, found a truck which had not been burned out and took a water-bottle from the seat by a dead driver. The water did him good and seemed to abate the fever of

his mind, and as he looked round he thought there was one thing he could do and that was to record the names of all his dead comrades. If he survived the desert, at least his information would be helpful.

For an hour, steadily growing more tired, Hollingsworth trudged from one ruin to another, repulsed by what he was having to do and yet forcing himself to do the job thoroughly. The list grew. Twenty-eight men dead in their battery alone, though he knew others must have died in the flames of some of the burning vehicles, and doubtless there would be more deaths among the wounded who had been rushed away.

Hollingsworth found Major Nelms and his driver, and they were the last. Then he started to walk south. He didn't know why - he had some idea that in that direction lay an airfield and it might be his nearest place of assistance. Just when the sun was dipping towards the featureless western horizon, a depressing thought came to him. If the airfield was in operation, then surely he would be able to see planes landing and taking off; because he was sure the attack had been made on the battalion when they were within ten miles of the place, and in this level waste ten miles was no great distance for a man's good eyes.

Hollingsworth spotted the cairn, hope rose - and steadily fell again. He sat on the rocks, head drooping, thirst raging, but he dared not use up his water supply.

He had wept before, but now he was drained of all emotion. He was lonely and lost, and he wanted to sit here and rest and perhaps never move another stride further. For a while, Captain Hollingsworth gave up.

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