

OVER THE TOP

by Mark Bellusci

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CHARACTERS

WELLSLEY-SMITH - A diminutive man of upper English class.

JENKINS - A working-class Englishman who struggles to feed his family and accepts his lot in life as always taking orders from people like WELLSLEY-SMITH.

MACK - A big, brash, good-natured Australian who does not follow rules or formalities, yet is liked by everyone.

FRITZ - A career German soldier who is easy-going and lonely.

FRENCHIE - A shell-shocked Frenchman who does not participate with the others and mostly just sits in a catatonic trance.

COLLINS - A boisterous, sometime-vicious Canadian who enjoys the hunt and has no tolerance for the waiting, boredom and intolerable conditions of the trenches.

JONES - A strong-willed black American soldier who is frustrated by always being forced into menial, hard labor and yearns for action.

2 ACTS, 1 SCENE

SETTING

WORLD WAR I trench in Somme, 1918, the last year of the war. The temperature is regularly around 35 degrees. The trench is muddy and has standing water (PRODUCTION NOTE: Mud could be simulated with shredded brown paper, or even packaging "popcorn" painted black or brown.) The men's discomfort is evidenced by the effects of continuously living in cold mud, i.e. shivering, uncomfortable muddy clothing, raw skin, etc. They regularly show their discomfort by scratching, adjusting wet clothing, huddling for warmth, and cursing.

AT RISE

(Stage is dark except for a spotlight on WELLSLEY-SMITH, who enters the stage smartly in his fresh military outfit. He takes centerstage and faces the audience.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Congratulations, men. You have been selected to lead this Somme offensive, which will unleash our full strength on the enemy. They will face the wrath of the world's ... greatest ... fighting ... force!

(As the men cheer, WELLSLEY-SMITH pulls out a chart that reads:

"Why we fight:

honor

glory

country

family

comrades

God")

These are the reasons we fight, men. As long as you remember them, you will stand strong, even on your darkest nights.

(Cheers, which die down as stage fades to black. After a pause, there are bombing sounds, as well as a corresponding strobe light that alternately illuminates the stage and then returns it to pitch black. After a few moments, WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS struggle to enter an on-stage trench, which is muddy and has six inches of standing water. JENKINS is limping. They crawl, shoot at the enemy, cover each other, then dive into the trench. The strobe light effect makes it look like a series of photographs. After they enter the trench, the bombing continues for a moment, then gradually subsides. There is pitch black for a few moments, then a dim light, depicting the advent of dawn. WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS are exhausted, tattered and drifting in and out of sleep. JENKINS has noticeable blood on his lower leg. WELLSLEY-SMITH awakens suddenly and assesses the situation. He then rouses JENKINS.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Jenkins! Stand to. It's dawn!

JENKINS

(Jumping awake.)

Yes sir!

(JENKINS is in the process of standing, but WELLSLEY-SMITH tackles him.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Slowly. Can't lose the last soldier in my command.

JENKINS

Aye, sir.

(Both men slowly inch their way toward the top of the trench. WELLSLEY-SMITH grabs a stick and tentatively raises it above ground level. It evokes no response from the enemy line, so both men cautiously peek over the edge.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Down.

(They both pull back into the trench.)

No raid this morning. We'll wait for reinforcements, then--

JENKINS

You think we'll be here awhile, sir?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Not likely.

JENKINS

Never seen nothing like it.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No--

JENKINS

Never could imagine that much ... death.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Shaken, but trying to hide it.)

Yes ... it did seem ... but they did not die in vain. The generals chose our company to --

JENKINS

Begging the captain's pardon, but it wasn't just our company. Everyone who was up there was, well...

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Out with it, corporal.

JENKINS

Well, we was mowed down, sir. Thousands and thousands, cut in half --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There must be a strategy. The enemy--

JENKINS

Fritz is right where he was when we started. We didn't push him--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

They took casualties --

JENKINS

How do you know, sir? We never even saw them--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Emphatic, ending that topic of conversation.)

How is that leg?

(Beat.)

JENKINS

Oh, it's just a flesh wound.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well, tend to it properly. Don't want an infection out here.

JENKINS

Right, sir.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS unpack their gear. JENKINS tends to his leg, although it is difficult to clean since everything is muddy. Lights fade to black.)

(Lights up to dim. The sound of rain. Both men are huddled under their coats, shivering.)

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP TO DIM

(WELLSLEY-SMITH is hunched over his soggy manual and JENKINS is again trying to clean his leg wound, but

having little success due to the mud. He winces as he touches the area, then pulls out a flask. Suddenly, WELLSLEY-SMITH puts down the manual and rips his shoes off, desperately scratching the bottom of his feet.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Blasted fungus!

JENKINS

Maybe if you could dry them out--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And where would you suggest that?

(JENKINS shrugs his shoulders and returns to his flask. He is about to drink, pauses, and looks at WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

JENKINS

Would you like a spot, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Hmm?

JENKINS

Rum.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I never touch it during-

JENKINS

I just thought, with your feet and the conditions--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

All the more reason to avoid it. Alertness may save our lives.

JENKINS

Right.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You should avoid it as well.

JENKINS

I would, sir, but it helps me keep warm.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Illusory.

JENKINS

Aye, sir.

(He turns away from WELLSLEY-SMITH and sneaks a large gulp before putting the rum away.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

How are the rations?

JENKINS

Well, we've got some biscuits left -- although they're a bit soggy. And tea. And the rum.

JENKINS (CONTINUED)

(Sotto voce, to himself.)

Thank God for the rum--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Bacon?

JENKINS

None left.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(With alarm.)

No more ba--?

(Recovering quickly.)

Well ... tea and biscuits have kept many a soldier alive for years, in worse conditions than these. Why, father was--

JENKINS

Are there?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What?

JENKINS

Conditions worse than these?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well, sure. Father led platoons in many a desert.

JENKINS

Wouldn't mind a bit of sun right now.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Easy to say now, corporal. But father told me some harrowing tales indeed. At least we've got the ... the biscuits. And ... the tea.

JENKINS

Right, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Of course, it's all temporary. Once the reinforcements arrive, we'll be stocked with beef, beans, and maybe even dry clothes.

JENKINS

Hope so.

LIGHTS DOWN.

LIGHTS UP.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH pulls from his gear and displays the now-tattered "reasons we fight" sign. He pauses and reflects on the sign. After a moment, JENKINS also reflects.)

JENKINS

What do you think, sir?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Hmm?

JENKINS

Do they still apply?

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Forced enthusiasm.)

Of course they apply. Now more than ever.

JENKINS

If you say so.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Testily)

Not because I --

(He sighs as he regains his composure, then continues pedantically.)
This sign carried father through many a campaign, as it will carry us.

JENKINS

Your old man, he was--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

A general in this same unit thirty years ago.

JENKINS

Hmm.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Discipline, strategy and esprit de corps are what he preached -- as exemplified by his sign.

(Preparing to read the sign.)

You see, we--

JENKINS

That's all right, sir. I've memorized--

(WELLSLEY-SMITH stares off into the distance, as if giving a speech, and is therefore oblivious to JENKINS' doubtful comments. JENKINS sighs, knowing he is about to be given the same speech again.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Pointing to each line as he reads.)

We fight for: honor. It has been an honor to lead the men into battle.

JENKINS

But everybody's dead.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And to still be alive to continue bringing the fight.

JENKINS

Just the two of us?--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Which leads to the glory we shall see when the enemy relents.

JENKINS

Don't look likely--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Which will make our empire even stronger.

JENKINS

How can losing all these men make us --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And our families proud.

JENKINS

I hope mine isn't starving--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

It will be a victory for us all.

JENKINS

(Looking around to emphasize the absence of comrades.)

"All?"

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And blessed by God.

JENKINS

I'm starting to wonder.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There now, don't you feel better?

JENKINS

If you say so, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Exactly. Now let's --

(The sound of footsteps can be heard from offstage. Both soldiers grab their guns and aim them in the direction of the footsteps. MACK enters the trench from stage left. He sees the two men aiming their guns and raises his hands submissively.)

MACK

Whoa whoa whoa! Friend!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Name and rank!

MACK

John McAlister. Sergeant, Australian 393 division. Those are more effective when you point them to the other side.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS lower their guns.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Approach, sergeant.

MACK

Call me Mack, mate.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Call me captain, sergeant.

MACK

(To JENKINS.)

Ah, one of them, is he?

(JENKINS shrugs.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I, sir, am Captain Wellsley-Smith of the British Expedition Force, the greatest--

MACK

Greatest? You seen what happened out there?--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

If I ever hear -- blasted!

(He again rips his boots off and scratches his feet,
which are raw.)

MACK

Trench foot got you good, eh?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Never mind that! If you disparage the British Expedition
Force again, I shall have you court marshaled.

(He gingerly dons his boots.)

MACK

By who? I ain't in your army.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Allied rules specifically state--

MACK

(To JENKINS)

He still quoting the rule book down here?

JENKINS

Everywhere.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

The highest ranking officer assumes command of all unattached
soldiers in his vicinity.

MACK

(Sighing.)

Whatever.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Now, why are you here.

MACK

Sent to reinforce the Brits at the front line.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(To JENKINS.)

You see? The reinforcements have arrived--

MACK

(Looking around.)
So where's the rest of your lot?

JENKINS

We are the lot.

MACK

They told me there was a company--

JENKINS

Lost 'em.

MACK

You too?

JENKINS

Massacred, line after line after--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We weakened the enemy severely.

JENKINS

So the captain says.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And one good push from our reinforced company--

MACK

The three of us?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

When we receive a full contingent of fresh troops --

MACK

(Laughing.)
Fresh. There's a word I haven't heard in awhile.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

One more smart comment and I'll file a report.

MACK

Yeah, plenty of places to file them around here.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's it. Corporal, make a note that Sergeant McAlister--

(JENKINS fumbles for his pencil, then finds that it doesn't write.)

MACK

Mack--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant McAlister is to be reported for improper attitude towards an officer--

JENKINS

Sir?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What?

JENKINS

It ain't writing--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Blast it, isn't anyone prepared to act like a soldier?

JENKINS

What with the mud and everything.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Handing JENKINS a pencil.)

Here. Now please note that,

(JENKINS now searches for paper that isn't muddy and can be written upon.)

on today's date -- what is the date?

MACK

The 17th.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Thank you. On the 17th of--

JENKINS

Begging the captain's pardon, sir, but the paper isn't--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Of all the bloody...

(He reaches into his pocket for paper.)

Must I do everything?

(He is also having trouble finding decent paper.)

A simple command has turned into a--

MACK

Tell you what: if you're still alive when this thing ends,
I'll remind you to report me.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Fine. Make a note of that, Jenkins.

JENKINS

With what?--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Just! -- Just remember it.

MACK

You checked Fritz's position lately?

(While WELLSLEY-SMITH responds, MACK tests the German reaction by raising a stick above ground level and carefully peeking out of the trench.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Of course we have!

MACK

You spoken to him?

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

To ... the enemy?

MACK

They're only twenty meters away.

(Yelling to the enemy line.)

Oy, Fritz?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Blasted, sergeant, are you trying to get us killed?

MACK

Fritz wanted us killed, we'd already be dead.

(To German line)

Fritz? You there?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are risking our lives!

MACK

Tight little bugger, hmm?

JENKINS

Well --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I don't know who you think you--

MACK

Fritz?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Stop that immediately, or I shall--

FRITZ

Ya?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant, do not--

MACK

Sprechen Sie Englisch?

FRITZ

Ya.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I will place you under--

MACK

Relax, Smittie.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Smittie? How dare you--

MACK

Just laying out the rules with Fritz.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Have you forgotten there's a war?

MACK

You seen what I seen, you'll never forget.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Then use your head and--

FRITZ

English?

MACK

God no. Australian, mate. Don't insult me--

FRITZ

But you speak--

MACK

Yeah, I speak English, but I ain't--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

For the love of God, would you please desist --

FRITZ

How you are?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Sotto Voce.)

He's trying to discern our--

MACK

Fresh as daisies, mate. And yourselves?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

If you insist on continuing this--

MACK

Now look, I been pretty nice so far--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Nice?--

MACK

Seeing how you lost your mates and everything. But I'm getting tired of--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I cannot believe --

MACK

Military school rules in the middle of ... this.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Following them can save your--

FRITZ

English? What you have?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You see? He's checking our military ordinance.

MACK

(To FRITZ.)

We got smokes, bacon, bis--

JENKINS

You have bacon?--

MACK

Biscuits, uhhh...
(To JENKINS.)
What you got?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We are not trading with--

JENKINS

Tea and biscuits.

MACK

That all?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Corporal!

JENKINS

He asked, sir.

MACK

No meat? You boys is worse off than I thought.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We're surviving quite nicely, thank you--

MACK

What about rum?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are risking--

JENKINS

That we have.

MACK

Ever try schnapps?

JENKINS

Heard about it, but--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Why is no one listening to me?

MACK

That's Fritz's secret weapon. It's what keeps him strong.

(Yelling to FRITZ)

We got rum. You got schnapps?

FRITZ

Ya.

MACK

Trade the rum for it.

FRITZ

Perhaps tea as well?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are forcing me to--

MACK

Throw in some Turkish coffee.

FRITZ

Ya.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Corporal, I want this man reported--

JENKINS

Begging captain's pardon, but I heard this is the way things work down here.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But it's the enemy!

MACK

And they still will be, after we trade. In the meantime, this trench won't be so hellacious with a little schnapps.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I assure you, sergeant, this trench is quite temporary.

MACK

Been in these holes four years. Rats'll get out before we do.

FRITZ

English? We deal?

MACK

(To WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

Well?

(JENKINS and MACK both look at WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

JENKINS

Please, Captain. I hear this schnapps can warm a man's innards, even out here.

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Sighing.)

And how are we supposed to "trade" without getting shot?

MACK

We put our lot together, they put theirs, one of us meets one of them. Since you boys are new to the game, I'll do the face to face.

FRITZ

English?

(JENKINS and MACK look at WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Relenting sigh.)

It's your suicide--

(The next two lines are said simultaneously.)

MACK

Right.

JENKINS

Thank you, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But I'll not risk Jenkins or myself to save you.

MACK

No need to.

(To JENKINS, as WELLSLEY-SMITH turns his back to them.)

All right, what you got?

(JENKINS pulls out tea and a canister of rum. MACK pours a portion of the rum into his canister, and puts the tea in his pocket.)

MACK

Oy, Fritz, let's raise heads, my count.

FRITZ

Ya.

(MACK gets ready to do so.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are walking to your execution.

MACK

What's one more dead grunt to Fritz compared to rum and tea?

(To FRITZ.)

Let's go.

(MACK slowly raises his head, then waves. He then points to an area in no-man's land, in which the two will meet.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

My final warning: we will not--

MACK

Right.

(He goes over the edge. After a moment, JENKINS peeks over the top.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Get your head down! Do you want to be shot?

JENKINS

Awww, Captain, got to have a little look-see.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I don't understand why everyone is so eager to die!

JENKINS

There's Fritz!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I refuse to hear about these ... shenanigans--

JENKINS

First time I really seen one of them ... he's just another bloke.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I don't care.

(Pause as JENKINS continues looking, and WELLSLEY-SMITH is intently trying not to show interest, but does not succeed.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well blast it, man, what is happening?

JENKINS

They're shaking hands.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Shaking hands with the enemy: I never--

JENKINS

And they just exchanged packages.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Ludicrous--

JENKINS

And now they're talking ... and laughing!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Oh, this is too much--

JENKINS

He's coming back now.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And this is how things are done at the front?

(MACK comes over the top and back into the trenches.)

MACK

Still in one piece.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Finished trading confidential infor--?

MACK

Yeah, I told him how to make a hot toddy.

(To JENKINS.)

Come on, let's start the morning off right.

JENKINS

(Looking to WELLSLEY-SMITH for permission.)

It has been a rough stretch, Captain, with--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Frustrated.)

Oh, if you must ...

(JENKINS and MACK pour the drinks. They look at WELLSLEY-SMITH and hesitate.)

MACK

How about it, mate?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Never while on--

MACK

Going to be in this hell hole a long time.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No we're not. When the reinforcements come--

MACK

Then you can court-martial me. Till then,
(He holds out a drink to WELLSLEY-SMITH.)
drink with me.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well ...

JENKINS

It'll warm you to the bone, captain.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Sighing in submission.)

If it helps the morale of the men.

(He takes the cup from MACK.)

(They toast.)

MACK

Here's to heaven in hell.

(They drink and sigh collectively. WELLSLEY-SMITH coughs from the strength of the drink.)

Better than a French whore in a feather bed.

JENKINS

How do you like it, captain?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Still coughing.)

Well, it does offer a degree of warmth.

MACK

Oy Fritz! Nice job on the schnapps.

FRITZ

And to you and your hot toedies.

MACK

That's "toddlies."

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Sarcastic.)

We've become chatty with the enemy -- wonderful.

(Pause as they finish their drinks.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I'm going to scout the area, see what intelligence I can gather.

MACK

You do that, Captain. Jenkins and I will discuss strategy.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH leaves.)

Let's freshen these up a bit.

(MACK pours more schnapps into each glass.)

Fritz knows a good drink. Got to give him that.

JENKINS

Aye.

MACK

(Noticing WELLSLEY-SMITH'S sign.)

Here, what's with this sign?

JENKINS

That's the captain's, passed down from his father -- some war hero in the colonies. Says it keeps the men focused on the mission.

MACK

Does it?

JENKINS

The all died too fast to find out.

MACK

Then I guess you and me are the men.

(Holds up the sign to him.)

You feel inspired?

JENKINS

(Hesitantly.)

Well ...

MACK

So let's write one that does.

(MACK pulls out a pencil. He is about to write over the sign, but is interrupted by JENKINS.)

JENKINS

Captain's pretty particular about his sign.

MACK

Then we'll use the other side.

(MACK flips it over and writes as he speaks.)

"Why we fight" means nothing down here. The question is, "why we live."

JENKINS

Why we live?--

MACK

As in, "Why don't we just put a bullet in our mouths and end this shit?"

JENKINS

Come on, who would --

MACK

Give it a little time, mate.

JENKINS

Captain says we won't--

MACK

Captain's got a lot to learn. Now tell me why you want to stay alive.

JENKINS

There are a million reasons--

MACK

Humor me.

JENKINS

Well ...

MACK

Tell you what, I'll start.

(He writes as he speaks.)

"A chance to get out in one piece."

JENKINS

Well, sure. That's obvious.

MACK

Nothing's obvious down here. I for one am not going home if all the parts aren't working ...

(He looks down to his own crotch.)

Know what I mean?

JENKINS

Uh--

MACK

Your turn.

JENKINS

Because I like to.

MACK

Okay.

(MACK writes "Likes to live.")

And I'll add:

(He writes as he talks.)

"Mates."

JENKINS

Mates?

MACK

The blokes next to you, the ones who become your blood. Got to keep your sorry asses alive.

JENKINS

Hope so.

MACK

What else?

JENKINS

Uhhhh, God?

MACK

Hmm, not sure on that one.

JENKINS

What, God has to be on our side, right?

MACK

Got a funny way of showing it.

JENKINS

I don't --

MACK

Let's put Him on hold. Give me another.

JENKINS

Me family.

MACK

There you go. Wife and kids?

JENKINS

Wife - and a little girl, Sarah, two years' old.

(He pulls out a carefully folded drawing and hands it to MACK.)

I made this myself.

MACK

A beauty, she is.

(He hands it back.)

Well, not a married man, but I've got me own love interests.

(He writes down "Pretty French Whores.")

You tried them?

JENKINS

Like I said, I'm married.

MACK

No problem, they take married blokes.

JENKINS

I won't take them.

MACK

Ah, you don't know what you're missing. Pretty, perfumed, young--

JENKINS

I don't believe in paying for it.

MACK

Normally, I don't either. But I haven't run into many cuties in the trenches.

JENKINS

I'm committed to me wife--

(WELLSLEY-SMITH returns.)

MACK

All commitments are put on hold in wartime. It's a regulation.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What is?

JENKINS

He's saying it's okay for a married bloke to be with a whore-

-

MACK

A French whore.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's ludicrous.

MACK

Section 5649b, paragraph 4--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Section 56?--

MACK

(Quoting.)

"A married man is herewith permitted to partake in the carnal pleasures of said individual females who charge a service fee for said activities -- particularly those of the pretty French whore persuasion."

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Pulling a manual out of his gear.)

What section is?--

MACK

Won't find it there.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This is the official manual--

MACK

You need the official Trench Monkey's guide.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There is no such--

MACK

You didn't get a copy?

(He pulls out a disheveled newspaper.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What the?--

MACK

One of our finest editions. Proud to contribute to that one.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Scanning the newspaper.)

A Moron Survey?

MACK

A hotly contested battle.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

"Leading the pack: Winston Churchill?"

MACK

His "Stupidity in Gallipoli" campaign pushed him to the lead, but it's tight.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are slandering an English commander--

MACK

Don't worry, the race isn't over yet.

(He pulls out a pencil.)

In fact, your votes can help push break-a-leg Haig into first place with his "Too dumb in Somme" campaign.

JENKINS

Break-a-leg Haig?

MACK

You'll be lucky if that's all you break under his command.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Throwing the paper to the ground.)

I will not tolerate--

MACK

(Picking the paper up.)

Hey, that's me only--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Morale-sapping gallows rag papers.

MACK

You know the work that went into that?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Perhaps if you put the same effort into battle preparation--

MACK

Oh, I'm prepared. It's the top brass that needs the work.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

They are the finest military minds that --

(Noticing the sign.)

What happened to my sign?

MACK

Oh, I updated it for you.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You desecrated--

MACK

Relax, mate, it's on the other side.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Turning the sign over.)

And that's the side that will be displayed. These reasons worked for father, and they will work for us.

MACK

Whatever reasons your old man fought for don't apply here.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Must you be so--

MACK

(Yelling.)
Oy, Fritz?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant!--

MACK

What's happening over there?

FRITZ

Same as you: nothing.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Would you please stop conversing with--

MACK

Helps to know who you're up against.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are violating--

FRITZ

Are you finished with the bombing?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Don't answer--

MACK

More to come, mate. Ready to go home?

(WELLSLEY-SMITH sighs and turns away in exasperation.)

FRITZ

We are home. And you?

MACK

I'd imagine we'll be here till we boot you from those trenches.

FRITZ

Or we boot you. Either way, I hope something happens soon. I am tired of mud.

MACK

Mmm hmm. How long you been here?

FRITZ
Three years.

MACK
Always at the front?

FRITZ
Ya. I am shootsharper.

MACK
That's, sharpshooter.

FRITZ
Ya.

MACK
Well, keep it to yourself. No reason to get picked off just for scratching my arse.

FRITZ
Then be careful where you scratch.

WELLSLEY-SMITH
(Angrily.)
See here, we are marksmen ourselves, so you'd better be careful --

FRITZ
Acch, such hostility. We are only talking--

MACK
You're right, mate. We'll work something out.

WELLSLEY-SMITH
Regulation 665 point 3 specifically prohibits negotiating with the enemy--

MACK
It's been revised in the Trench Monkey.

WELLSLEY-SMITH
The Trench Monkey is not--

MACK
Relax, we're not giving anything away.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Almost to himself.)

Father would have never tolerated--

MACK

(Yelling to Fritz.)

So we're not going to pick each other's heads off for no reason, right?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But this is war--

MACK

We'll save the killing for the major battles.

FRITZ

Ya.

MACK

Good.

FRITZ

But this is a promise only I can keep. I cannot speak for my more "excitable" comrades.

MACK

How will we know when it's you or them?

FRITZ

This is my post, so I will be here. If others are sent, I will greet them loudly.

MACK

We'll do the same.

FRITZ

What about bathing?

MACK

What have you got?

FRITZ

When the rains come, there is a watering hole between us.

MACK

When do you want it?

FRITZ

I would prefer afternoons.

MACK

We'll take mornings.

FRITZ

Ya.

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well, have you finished your little get-together?

MACK

For now.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Then perhaps we can be soldiers for awhile.

MACK

Why not? Plenty of time for everything.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Thank you. Now, the first thing we'll do is shore up this trench.

MACK

Why? Looks like every other trench.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Looks can be deceiving.

(He carefully inspects his surroundings.)

These walls could use a little bolstering. Jenkins, I'd like an additional buttress on top -- a meter or so should do fine--

MACK

Hang on there, mate. You're going to make him do all that shoveling?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Not just him, sergeant.

MACK

(MACK chuckles.)

Not expecting old Mack to be doing make work, are we?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We'll all do what is required.

MACK

What is required is staying alive.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

A bolstered trench can help you do just that.

MACK

If anything, it'll help kill us.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

How could?--

MACK

All that loose dirt above us when the bombs hit. Could smother us.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But standard trench procedure--

MACK

Doesn't work with bombs like these.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Britain's highest military minds have established--

MACK

Look, if you're not going to listen to experience, that's your choice.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Exactly. So start--

MACK

But ask Old Mack to dig his own grave? Sorry, mate.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Are there any orders you do listen to?

JENKINS

Begging the captain's pardon sir?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What?

JENKINS

Well, seeing that Mack ain't keen on digging, I'll take care of it, and he could do something else.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This man is --

JENKINS

Captain, he's all we got.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

The reinforcements--

JENKINS

Until they come.

MACK

(Chuckling.)

You boys have fun, and I'll see what I can get from the poor stiffs what was here before us.

(MACK gets ready to leave. Angrily, WELLSLEY-SMITH rises to his feet.)

I did not dismiss--

FRITZ

Bank! Bank! You are dead, English.

MACK

And that's why we stay friendly with Fritz.

FRITZ

Heads down, please. Many angry comrades here--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Angry? What in bloody hell do you have to be angry about? You're on our land!

FRITZ

Your land? You are English, no?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

The French are our allies. And if you think--

FRITZ

No, English, I do not think. I do what they tell me. To think now would be unhealthy, yes?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

It is your fault that--

FRITZ

That is why we have our arrangement. That is why you are still alive.

(MACK smiles at WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Rather loudly, to MACK.)

Poppycock. He'd have to be a an amazing shot to --

FRITZ

Ahh, but I am. Ask the men buried below you.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Do you have nothing better to do than to listen to us?

FRITZ

No. Do you?

MACK

Just make-work.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant!--

MACK

(To FRITZ.)

I'm going to look for stuff to trade, and I'd like me head to stay on me shoulders, right?

FRITZ

Ya, but be careful.

(MACK follows the trenches offstage.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(HE sits, again removes his shoes and desperately scratches his feet. Then, Sotto voce to JENKINS.)

As soon as those replacements arrive, I will personally see to that man's capture.

JENKINS

Aye, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Keep digging, Jenkins. It could save your life.

(JENKINS digs while WELLSLEY-SMITH continues inspecting the trench.)

FRITZ

Bank! Bank!

(WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS instinctively cover themselves in the trenches.)

You are dead, English!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What is he talking about? We are well protected--

FRITZ

(Sotto voce, with urgency.)

Go back to your trench before you get us all killed.

JENKINS

Who is he--

(He prepares to peek over the edge of the trench)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Careful, this could be a ploy.

(JENKINS raises a stick above the edge to draw fire. When none comes, he tentatively peeks into no-man's land.)

JENKINS

My God, there's a bloke out there!

FRITZ

Please! Go to your trench, now!

JENKINS

He's a Frenchie.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Obviously a ruse by the enemy.

JENKINS

Begging captain's pardon, but it seems kind of strange to send your own into no-man's land in broad daylight.

FRITZ

You are forcing me to shoot.

JENKINS

Fritz?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Corporal, what are you--

JENKINS

Just going to ask him, sir.

FRITZ

Please, English!

JENKINS

He seems as upset as we are. And seeing how we've already established our relationship--

FRITZ

They will execute me!

JENKINS

Fritz, what are you up to?

FRITZ

What am I?-- he is your man.

JENKINS

How do we know he's not yours?

(MACK returns carrying a skeleton.)

MACK

What's going on?

JENKINS

A Frenchie out there, ranting like a lunatic.

MACK

Well, pull him in.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Not so fast! He could be a spy.

MACK

Why would Fritz spy on us? He already knows everything we--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Never underestimate --

MACK

(Dismissively.)

Ahhh.

(To FRITZ.)

Oy Fritz, he one of yours?

FRITZ

No! Now bring him in before we are all killed!

MACK

Right.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Don't fall for--

MACK

Phhh.

(He peeks over the edge.)

Going up now, Fritz.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant!--

FRITZ

Quick, others are coming. I will shoot, but miss.

MACK

Damn well better.

(Instinctively covering his crotch.)

French whores making a living off these parts.

FRITZ

Hurry!

(MACK goes over the top. JENKINS scrambles to cover him.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Jenkins, I will not have you killed over an obvious ruse.

JENKINS

Just protecting me own, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Gunfire is heard.)

I warned him--

(MACK comes back into the trench, escorting FRENCHIE, who is mumbling.)

MACK

A little too close, Fritz!

FRITZ

You are in one piece, ya?

FRENCHIE

(Frantic, manic, off-kilt.)

C'est le mien. C'est le mien.

(He tries to climb out of the trench.)

MACK

Whoa, you're not going anywhere.

FRENCHIE

Non, c'est le mien.

MACK

English, mate. You speak--

FRENCHIE

Mine. This land. It is mine.

JENKINS

Take it easy, now. Fritz is right over the top.

FRENCHIE

He has stolen my land!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Yes, the French people have--

FRENCHIE

Not the French people. Me. My family.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What are you--

FRENCHIE

Our farm. It was here. It was beautiful. Now, look!
(He gets up to leave again, but is restrained.)

MACK

Going out there is suicide.

FRENCHIE

I am already dead.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Where is your unit?

FRENCHIE

No more unit. No more trenches, no more bombs! I return to my land.

(He gets up to leave, but MACK and JENKINS hold him back.)

MACK

Relax, mate.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This man is a deserter. Regulations specifically state --

MACK

You've already got me lined up for the brig -- add him to the list. In the meantime, get him a spot of schnapps.

(JENKINS makes the drink and gives it to FRENCHIE, who merely holds it despondently.)

MACK

What's your name?

(Beat.)

FRENCHIE

Guy La Plume L'homitage L'enfant de--

MACK

We'll, uh -- we'll stick to Frenchie, right?

FRENCHIE

It matters not to me. I have no life.

MACK

Drink that, and you might rediscover it.

(FRENCHIE drinks hesitantly at first, then downs the remainder. He then calms to almost a catatonic state.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Notices the skeleton for the first time.)

What in hell?

MACK

Another reinforcement.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

My God, man--

MACK

Slim's his name. He's volunteered his moral support--

(MACK pulls out a bag and takes out some meat for himself.)

and a large ration of dried beef. He hasn't had much of an appetite lately.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Have you no decency?

(He throws the food to JENKINS, who eats ravenously and passes some to FRENCHIE, who also eats.)

MACK

Here, is that any way to talk about a volunteer whose rations are keeping you alive?

(JENKINS offers the beef to WELLSLEY-SMITH, who hesitates, then eats his share.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Grateful for the meat but guilty about it.)

But you've desecrated a grave.

MACK

We live in a grave -- for the boys before us, and probably for most of you.

JENKINS

Us -- but not you?

MACK

Well--

JENKINS

You make it sound like you're protected.

MACK

I don't like to talk about it, but, yeah, I've been chosen.

JENKINS

Chosen?--

MACK

Look, I ain't a religious man, but whatever power's running this sick show has decided to keep me around.

JENKINS

And this ... higher power you pray to--

MACK

I don't pray.

JENKINS

Then how do you know you're chosen?

MACK

Because I can see what's in front of my face.

JENKINS

And that is?

MACK

When we landed at Galipolli, there was seventy-three of us from home.

JENKINS

Mmm hmm.

MACK

We fought together in what the generals called the "last great battle" of the war.

JENKINS

That's what they called our --

MACK

What an honor it would be, they said, for us boys to win the war.

JENKINS

They told us too--

MACK

We were strutting like peacocks. We figured, bash a few heads, then have a parade.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(To himself, ruminating.)

For the glory ...

MACK

For the fun of it. So off we go on these big ships. Planning our strategies: who covers who, who goes first, who gathers the prisoners,
(He chuckles at the memory.)
who finds the whores.

(Beat.)

JENKINS

And?

MACK

(Derisively snorts.)

Ducks in a pond, that's what we was. The whole bloody lot of us, cut down before we touched ground.

JENKINS

It's like us--

MACK

We never even saw the Turks.

JENKINS

Like fighting ghosts.

MACK

All the boys I got to join up, slaughtered as they stood next to me. So crowded on the ships, they couldn't even fall down.

JENKINS

(Recollecting, to himself.)

Never even saw who was shooting.

MACK

And there's old Mack, in the thick of it all and not a scratch.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You were lucky.

MACK

It's not luck when you're wearing the guts of everyone around you.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Not everyone dies, sergeant. We are proof of that.

MACK

And the rest of your mates?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Unfortunately, they--

JENKINS

They was exterminated.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Watch it, corporal.

MACK

What, we're all the same here. Let him say his peace.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There cannot be dissension among the men.

MACK

The men? There's just three -

(indicating to GUY)

and a half -- of us. And who knows how long you'll be here.

JENKINS

Wait a minute: we was in the same position you was. So if you're chosen, we are too.

MACK

Maybe ... but there usually aren't that many chosen in the same trench.

JENKINS

Who said?

MACK

You got me. Fate, luck, the stars--

JENKINS

God.

MACK

(Sarcastic.)

Who, yours or Fritz's?

JENKINS

There is only one God.

MACK

But Fritz--

JENKINS

Fights for the devil.

(Beat.)

MACK

Oy Fritz?

FRITZ

Ya?

MACK

You have a God over there?

FRITZ

I have a general, I have a captain, and then, ya, I have a God.

JENKINS

The one true God would not watch over a murderous lot like yours.

FRITZ

God says you are the murderers.

JENKINS

You attacked--

FRITZ

We took back--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's it, no more God talk!

(Beat.)

We should be preparing for the final offensive, which will--

MACK

(MACK chuckles.)

Oy, Fritz?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant, do not--

FRITZ

Ya?

MACK

You, uh, you got more boys coming?

FRITZ

I don't know--

MACK

Nah. Otherwise you wouldn't be there all the time.

FRITZ

And you? Where is your relief?

MACK

Same place as yours.

FRITZ

Ya.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Don't listen to him. We have hundreds -- even thousands -- of men coming.

MACK

Awww, mate, why are you lying?--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

So you should surrender while you still can.

FRITZ

Surrender?

MACK

He's a regulation bloke.

FRITZ

Ahh. They can be difficult, ya?

MACK

At times.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This is ludicrous--

FRITZ

Tell him I am grateful for his offer. But for now, I stay here, until my captain -- or God -- tells me--

(A gunshot is heard from offstage.)

MACK

Who the hell?--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I did not order--

FRITZ

You shoot at me?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Looking up and down the line.)

Who bloody--

FRITZ

We had an arrangement!

MACK

Wasn't us--

FRITZ

And you try to kill?--

MACK

We didn't--

(COLLINS enters, crouching and on the hunt, trying to
line up a better shot at FRITZ.)

Who are?--

COLLINS

Keep him distracted.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Put that gun down!

COLLINS

Almost got him.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I said--

COLLINS

One clean shot--

FRITZ

Why do you shoot?

MACK

We're trying to figure it out--

COLLINS

(To FRITZ.)

Everything's fine, eh? So why don't you come out and we'll-

MACK

(To FRITZ.)

No! Stay where you are!

(Wrestling the gun away from COLLINS.)

COLLINS

Are you crazy?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

At ease!

COLLINS

But he--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Name and rank!

COLLINS

(Disbelief, then exasperated sigh.)

Collins, Michael. Sergeant, Canadian Third Division.
Reassigned to shore up the line.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Where's the rest of your unit?

COLLINS

(Indicating FRITZ.)

He choked them all.

JENKINS

Gas?

COLLINS

Middle of the night, wind was right. Woke up gagging.

JENKINS

Your masks --

COLLINS

Got mine on in time. I was one of the lucky ones, only have
burns on half my body.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

The others?

COLLINS

Half of them died right there. The others were too busy breathing to fight. Only two of us walked away.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

So where's--

COLLINS

Picked off by Fritz snipers -- who you clowns are protecting!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We're not protecting, we're--

COLLINS

Would've gotten him by now.

MACK

And then he's replaced with four others.

COLLINS

So I'll pick them off, too.

MACK

And then they'll pick you off, and it'll be one less Canuck, a few less Fritz's, and what the hell's the difference?

(Then to the skeleton.)

Right, stick?

COLLINS

(Noticing the skeleton.)

What the?--

MACK

Stick, our mascot.

COLLINS

What kind of --

MACK

(MACK has gone behind the skeleton and manipulates his arms as he does a ventriloquism act.)

Say hello, stick

(In a different voice.)

Hello. Want some beef?

COLLINS

Lunatics. I'm fighting with lunatics.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

He is a bit eccentric, but--

COLLINS

So we're friends with the enemy, we fight each other and we play with stiffs. I must've been killed in that gas, and this is hell.

MACK

This is hell, but you didn't die to get here.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This is not hell. This is an honored company of the British Expedition--

COLLINS

Where's the rest of --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I am Captain Wellsley-Smith, the commanding--

COLLINS

So you're responsible for collaborating with the enemy?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well --

MACK

That's my doing.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

It is certainly not.

MACK

But I did--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I am responsible for the actions of my men.

COLLINS

A regulation boy, eh?

MACK

A bit, but we're working on him.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We have a temporary truce with the enemy while we await the final offensive.

COLLINS

(Looking at the scarce group.)
With what?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

With the fresh troops that are on the way--

(CONNORS and MACK laugh.)

MACK

He gets off a good one every now and then.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I am sure there is a plan.

COLLINS

And it includes men suffocating in their own spit?

JENKINS

(To MACK, sarcastically.)
Sounds like he's been chosen, too.

MACK

Hmm.

COLLINS

Chosen for what?

JENKINS

To live.

MACK

Problem is, there can't be that many chosen in the same lot.

COLLINS

Why not?

MACK

Because then we'd be able to walk straight through Fritz's lines without a scratch.

COLLINS

That's crazy.

MACK

Of course it's crazy. That's why we can't all be--

COLLINS

Then you be chosen, and I'll be a chooser.

(He peeks over the trench top and sets his sights on FRITZ.)

MACK

Just have a schnapps and relax.

COLLINS

Schnapps? Where'd you get?--

MACK

A little negotiation.

(MACK gestures with his eyes over to the German front.)

COLLINS

You're taking gifts from--

MACK

Gifts? That bastard nearly cleaned us out of rum.

(COLLINS shakes his head in bewilderment. JENKINS prepares cups for all. MACK holds up his glass in toast. They all follow, except FRENCHIE.)

MACK

To the chosen among us: here's to staying alive, if not sane.

(They drink.)

COLLINS

(Begrudging admiration.)

Well, it does have a taste to it.

MACK

Course it does.

COLLINS

(Taking another sip.)

All right, Fritz lives.

MACK

Right.

COLLINS

But if I see anything suspicious, I'll kill him.

MACK

Absolutely. Swirl that around a bit -- smoothes the taste.

END OF ACT I

ACT II

LIGHTS UP

(Darkness. All are sleeping except JENKINS, who is on watch. FRENCHIE's ramblings become worse, and he starts screaming in French.)

FRENCHIE

Non! Non! C'est le mien.

JENKINS

Easy, mate.

FRENCHIE

(Delusional.)

Enlevez ma terre.

(FRENCHIE rises and prepares to go over the top. JENKINS pulls him back.)

JENKINS

He's at it again!

COLLINS

Jesus!

(The other men awaken and wrestle FRENCHIE to the ground.)

FRENCHIE

Non! Non!

FRITZ

English?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Relax!

FRITZ

English?

MACK

The usual, mate.

FRITZ

Ya.

FRENCHIE

Ma terre--

MACK

Right, right, we know.

(FRENCHIE begins to relax. The others slowly release their grip.)

MACK

Just a couple of hours sleep, that's all I--

COLLINS

He's going to get us killed--

JENKINS

Can't fight if we can't sleep.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

As soon as headquarters re-establishes communications, I will have him sent--

COLLINS

(Dismissively.)

Ahhh.

(COLLINS and JENKINS try to go back to sleep, while FRENCHIE sits despondently.)

MACK

It's a shame, really.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Yes, the man has lost his--

MACK

All the sane boys who weren't chosen, while this daft one is.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Please, sergeant, no more talk about being chosen.

(He turns his back on MACK and goes to sleep.)

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP

The men are despondent and bored. After a moment, JENKINS pulls out a drawing of his daughter and looks at it. He turns his back on the other men and cries silently. WELLSLEY-SMITH notices his heaving shoulders and approaches.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Is your leg?--

(WELLSLEY-SMITH sees JENKINS looking at the picture.)

JENKINS

Fine, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Placing a hand on JENKINS' shoulder.)

You will see her again.

JENKINS

Thank you.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Almost to himself.)

As I will see father, and he will finally be proud.

JENKINS

Yes sir--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

My command, my accomplishments -- without his influence, his money, his pity.

JENKINS

He must have been tough to--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

{Almost like confiding in a friend -- for the first time.)

A legend in his time. A war hero, a financial tycoon. His only disappointment ...

(Beat and a sad chuckle.)

well, I haven't quite measured up to his--

JENKINS

I don't see why he would--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Embarrassed at revealing too much, then back to the official optimistic tone.)

But that will all change, when I -- when you and I -- return from this successful campaign.

(Beat.)

No, there has been enough death around us, Jenkins.

JENKINS

That there has.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You and I will not be apart of it.

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP

(All the men are in gas masks except MACK. WELLSLEY-SMITH walks on-stage, closing his pants as he does so. He sees the men in masks and runs frantically for his gas mask.)

COLLINS

Hurry!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

From which direction?

COLLINS

Mack's.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH dons his mask, then notices that MACK is not wearing a mask.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Are you crazy? Why aren't you?--

(MACK emits a long, loud fart. The other men groan in objection.)

MACK

Doesn't seem to bother me.

(The men groan.)

COLLINS

Of course it doesn't. They're your farts!

(WELLSLEY-SMITH angrily removes his gas mask.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You are toying with equipment that could save your life!

COLLINS

What do you think it's doing now?

MACK

Don't know what you're all complaining about--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

All of you, off with those masks!

(MACK farts loudly again. The men groan. Even
WELLSLEY-SMITH winces.)

My God, man.

MACK

It's those biscuits, I'm telling you.

(MACK farts again and receives yells of protest from
the others as lights fade.)

Come on, it's not that bad.

(Yells of disagreement.)

LIGHTS DOWN

(Darkness. The men are sleeping while COLLINS stands
guard, but is only semi-conscious. MACK begins
talking in his sleep.)

MACK

Why?

COLLINS

Oh Jeez.

MACK

Why am I?--

COLLINS

Mack!

MACK

They're all dead.

COLLINS

Mack! You're babbling!

MACK

Did I kill them?--

COLLINS

You're killing me!

MACK

What do you want from me?

COLLINS

(Shaking him.)

To shut up!

MACK

(Waking up.)

Wha? Where am--

COLLINS

(Looking to the sky, to himself.)

Just give me one quiet hour, that's all I--

JENKINS

Wasn't your fault, you know. What happened to your mates.

MACK

I know that, when I'm awake.

COLLINS

Then stay awake and stand guard, so the rest of us could sleep.

MACK

Fine with me.

(MACK goes to guard position while the others go back to sleep. After a moment, FRENCHIE starts yelling in his sleep.)

COLLINS

Jesus Christ, will all you nuts shut up!

(He buries his head in his hands as FRENCHIE'S rants continue.)

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP

(Rain and thunder can be heard. Lights up dimly. All the men are desperately seeking shelter and warmth during a torrential downpour. They shiver violently in the cold mud. There is no dialog other than cold grunts, teeth chattering and occasional cursing.)

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP

(Lights up slightly to very dim. The men are sleeping and snoring. WELLSLEY-SMITH is on guard. Suddenly, COLLINS jumps up and brushes something off him.)

COLLINS

Get off me!

(He picks up his gun and starts shooting at the bottom of the trench while screaming.)

(The following lines are said simultaneously as the men scramble for their guns.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What?--

MACK

Where are they?--

JENKINS

Jesus!--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I can't see--

(The men start shooting over the top of the trench without aiming.)

COLLINS

Fucking rats!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Hold your fire!

(The men listen for sounds from the enemy line.)

I didn't see--

JENKINS

(Sotto voce.)

Where?--

MACK

(Sotto voce to COLLINS, with urgency.)

Where are they?

COLLINS

They're crawling on me, nibbling at me -- eating me alive!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I don't see--

MACK

Where's Fritz?

COLLINS

How the hell do I know? These goddamned rats!

JENKINS

Awww Jesus!

MACK

You fucking idiot!--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You'll get us all killed!

FRITZ

English? What is happening?--

MACK

Bloke went off his rocker.

FRITZ

Our arrangement--

MACK

Still there.

COLLINS

All over me!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Is anyone hurt?

COLLINS

I'll blow them--

MACK

You shoot that gun again and I'll execute you.

COLLINS

Fucking rats.

MACK

Deal with it.

(The men start to settle down. After a pause, COLLINS again nervously brushes things off of himself.)

COLLINS

Get off me!

MACK

Shut up!

(Lights fade to black.)

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP

(Above the trench are the men's guns, which are used to prop up their clothing. Other than FRENCHIE, the trench is empty. Suddenly, the men come running in dressed only in their undershorts. They are wet and clean, and shake the excess water off with their hands.)

MACK

Jesus, Jenkins, never knew you was white.

JENKINS

Very funny.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

God, it feels good to be clean.

MACK

Oy Fritz, your turn.

FRITZ

Ya.

(Offstage, a splash is heard. The men get their clothes. As they dress, they watch FRITZ bathe in the no-man's land watering hole.)

COLLINS

Look at that. Big tough Fritz, and he's got a pecker smaller than Smitty's.

(Chuckles from all but WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I am more than adequate in--

MACK

Oy Fritz, where's your pecker?

FRITZ

It is cold, ya?

COLLINS

You Fritz boys ain't packing much, I'll tell you that.

FRITZ

We pack more than enough to keep our women happy.

MACK

No wonder you have big guns. Got to make up for your small-

FRITZ

Staring at my schlong: you have been without the women too long, ya?

COLLINS

At least we have the tools to do something with them.

FRITZ

Or is it with yourselves?

COLLINS

(Reaching for his gun.)

Nobody calls me--

MACK

(Calming and stopping COLLINS.)

Relax, we're just having fun.

COLLINS

It'd be so easy to--

MACK

Go dry off.

COLLINS

(With disgust.)

Ahhh.

LIGHTS DOWN

LIGHTS UP

(Thunder is heard in the darkness, with occasional lightning flashes. The set slowly lights to dim gray, representing a bleak dawn. MACK is on watch.)

MACK

Wakey, wakey. Another beautiful day.

(The sleep-deprived men sluggishly grab their weapons and work their way to the top. WELLSLEY-SMITH, while trying to move quickly, must scratch his feet often. JENKINS winces and checks his wounded leg, which he hides from the others.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Let's go!

(The men sluggishly grab their weapons and take combat positions.)

COLLINS

Nobody's moving in this weather.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This is exactly when the enemy would--

MACK

What, steal our mud?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We can never let our guard down.

MACK

(Since there is no attack, the men come down from the combat position.)

Right, from now on, we'll split it up -- a couple of us up at dawn while the others sleep.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(He winces from the itchiness of his feet.)

Well ... I'll ... consider that ... at least until ... the reserves--

(He tears off his shoes and scratches his raw feet.)

JENKINS

You're going to pull your own skin off.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Do you think I have a choice?

(He continues scratching as the men return to their usual morning routine.)

MACK

Who's got the tea?

JENKINS

(Trying to get a fire going.)

Be awhile in this weather.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Hell.

(Beat as the men rub and strike themselves to generate warmth.)

MACK

Hey, let's have a match.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

A what?

MACK

A football match --

JENKINS

Football?

MACK

You know, get the blood running.

COLLINS

How are we supposed to kick a--

MACK

Not that pansy football. Real football.

(Pulling an Australian football out of his bag.)
Australian football.

JENKINS

You can't kick that.

MACK

Sure you can. But not all the time. This football, you hold.

COLLINS

Where's the challenge in that?

MACK

Try holding it while getting tripped, tackled, headlocked and buried.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Is this a game or a bar fight?

MACK

A little of both. And while you're trying to tackle me,
(He holds the football and fakes a few moves)
I'll be giving you me famous Sydney shuffle.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Seems silly to me.

MACK

Better than kicking that boring round ball.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Surely you're not comparing your hooligan diversion to the royal game of football?

MACK

You mean the game where nobody scores?

JENKINS

It takes dexterity and skill--

MACK

In your feet, which would be fine if we were apes.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Apes? Why that's--

MACK

Come on, let's see what you got.

COLLINS

(Getting up.)

Just to shut you up ...

MACK

Right, so I'll take Jenkins, you take the captain.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Oh no, I--

COLLINS

Why do I get stuck with him?

(Indicating WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Are you implying--

MACK

You need a fast little guy to get outside.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I happen to be a --

COLLINS

(Looking at their small trench.)

What outside?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I was captain of the club golf team.

MACK

Besides, Jenkins is lame.

JENKINS

I can still--

COLLINS

Jenkins knows how to mix it up. He's a working man.

(Indicating WELLSLEY-SMITH, with disdain.)

Him? Phhh.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

If you are implying that I lack virility, I --

COLLINS

To you, roughing it is pouring your own tea.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That settles it. I will not play with--

MACK

Right, so I'll take him, and you take Jenkins. Slim will be one goal post,

(He props the skeleton on one side.)

and Frenchie the other.

COLLINS

What are--

MACK

Frenchie, mate. A favor?

(He goes to FRENCHIE and helps him to his feet.)

Just stand like this.

(MACK places FRENCHIE's hands above his head.)

Now hold that ...

(FRENCHIE continues holding his hands up.)

Right, so--

FRITZ

Bank! Bank!

MACK

It's all right, Fritz. Just a bit of football to get the blood running.

FRITZ

Football? You have room to kick--

MACK

No, no, no. Real football. With tackling and grabbing and-

FRITZ

Sounds barbaric.

COLLINS

No Fritz calls me a barbarian--

(Reaching for his gun.)

MACK

(Calming him and making him put down his gun.)

Save it for the match.

(COLLINS reluctantly puts down his gun.)

So let's scrum.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What?

MACK

Scrum. We put the ball down,

(He does so.)

then the beefiest boys -- me and Collins -- try to get it back to our teammates, who try to run it or kick it past a goal.

COLLINS

Whatever.

(MACK places the ball on the ground. HE and COLLINS line up on both sides, with WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS behind each player.)

MACK

On three. One ... two ... three!

(MACK and COLLINS wrestle for position, while WELLSLEY-SMITH and JENKINS try to get the ball at their feet. JENKINS finally pulls away with the ball, and COLLINS blocks for him. MACK slips by COLLINS and goes after the limping JENKINS, while COLLINS takes the opportunity to forearm and flatten the unsuspecting WELLSLEY-SMITH. MACK wrestles the ball away from JENKINS. He turns and begins holding off the slow moving JENKINS. COLLINS also tries to get at MACK, but can't get past JENKINS. Unbeknownst to the others, WELLSLEY-SMITH lies unconscious from COLLINS' blow.)

MACK

(Using JENKINS to hold off COLLINS.)

The hell are you, Smittie?

COLLINS

(To JENKINS.)

Out of my way!

(COLLINS pushes JENKINS aside and rushes MACK. MACK struggles to hold him off. He finally gives COLLINS a shove, and creates enough space to quickly kick the ball in FRENCHIE's direction. The ball lands outside the trench.)

MACK

Score!

COLLINS

What are you talking about?

MACK

The ball went right through Frenchie's arms.

COLLINS

You're crazy!

MACK

It was a perfect kick.

COLLINS

(Indicating no-man's land.)

Then how come it landed out there?

(Beat.)

MACK

Wind took it.

COLLINS

What wind? There's no--

MACK

Ask Frenchie.

COLLINS

He barely knows where he is, let alone where the ball--

(Gently putting FRENCHIE's arms down.)

MACK

Frenchie, where'd that football go?

(FRENCHIE says nothing.)

COLLINS

He's not going to --

MACK

(Even though FRENCHIE hasn't said anything, MACK acts as if FRENCHIE is whispering to him.)
Right down the middle? No kidding.

COLLINS

Stop bullshitting--

MACK

Then ask the captain. He wouldn't lie.

COLLINS

Now I know the captain didn't see it.

MACK

And how do you --

(He sees WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

What the? --

COLLINS

He didn't land too well.

MACK

(Trying to revive him.)

You cold-cocked him.

COLLINS

He said he was tough.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Coming to slowly.)

What ... who ...

JENKINS

Easy, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Rubbing his jaw.)

My--

MACK

It was supposed to be a friendly game.

COLLINS

I barely touched him.

MACK

Pretty tough with the little guys, aren't you?

COLLINS

Tough with anyone.

MACK

Think so?

(The two come together until the dazed WELLSLEY-SMITH interrupts.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's enough.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH gets between them. Pause as both men stare at each other.)

MACK

(Breaking into a smile and playfully pushing COLLINS.)

That got the blood running, eh?

(COLLINS snorts and turns away.)

So where's the tea?

(JENKINS is tending to his leg and oblivious to MACK's question.)

Jenkins?

(MACK goes over to look at his leg.)

How is that?--

(He is disturbed by what he sees.)

Jesus.

JENKINS

It's all right.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH comes over and looks at the leg.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Why have you been hiding that?

JENKINS

I haven't--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I'm sending you back.

JENKINS

Just have to air it out--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's gangrene. Do you want to die?

JENKINS

You think I have a better chance with those butcher doctors?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There are some things they're good at. A simple cut, a pair of crutches.

JENKINS

And then what? A one-legged gimp doesn't get work in a factory.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There will always be work for a man like you, one leg or two.

JENKINS

Tell that to the cripples of London.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You will get work, if I have to see to it myself. Now get that leg ... treated.

JENKINS

Don't think I could make it back.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Then they will come to us.

MACK

But --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No, this has gone on long enough! No reinforcements, no rations, no supplies.

COLLINS

(To MACK, surprised and impressed with WELLSLEY-SMITH's rebellious tone.)

Listen to him.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(To MACK.)

Sergeant, report to headquarters and --

MACK

Whoa whoa whoa. That's still no-man's land out there.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Jenkins' life depends on it.

(Beat.)

MACK

But we don't even know where headquarters is.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

They told me it would probably be two lines back.

MACK

The same blokes what said there'd be reinforcements?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Are you going, or am I?

(Beat.)

MACK

If -- if -- I find them, and I'm still in one piece, what am I supposed to say?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That we need a medic. And slickers, rations -- and rum -- and bloody reinforcements!

MACK

Right.

(He looks around.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What are?--

MACK

(Yelling to Fritz.)
Oy Fritz, getting me ball.

FRITZ

Ya.

(MACK climbs over the edge. As he does so, COLLINS takes a shooter's position.)

COLLINS

Just one clean shot.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Sergeant.

COLLINS

The day will come.

MACK

(MACK returns with the football.)
I'm off.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Keep your head down.

MACK

Hey, I'm chosen, remember?
(MACK exits. Pause as JENKINS prepares the tea.)

JENKINS

Tea's up.

(The men begin eating and drinking. After a moment, JONES arrives, startling the unsuspecting men.)

COLLINS

Who?--

JONES

Looking for Captain Wellsley-Smith, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Yes?

JONES

(Salutes.)

Jones, Corporal, U.S. 92nd. Just ran into your man out there.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Why are you?--

JONES

Sent to reinforce your line, sir.

COLLINS

(Chuckling.)

A Negro Yank. There's your reinforcements.

JONES

You have a problem with --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

He has a problem with your numbers, or lack thereof. Are there more coming?

JONES

I'm the only one they wanted to get rid of.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Get rid of?--

JONES

Because I'm here to fight.

COLLINS

Join the club.

JONES

Ain't in that club. They expect us to unload boxes -- well I ain't come this far to do the same shit I did at home. So they sent me here -- and that's fine with me.

COLLINS

(Chuckling.)

Just wait.

JONES

So when do we attack?

(JENKINS and COLLINS chuckle.)

COLLINS

Would've seen more action unloading boxes.

JONES

What, you think I'm just gonna sit in this mud hole?

JENKINS

Could stand if you want.

JONES

I'm here to fight.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

As soon as more reinforce--

JONES

(Indicating the German line.)

How many out there?

COLLINS

One.

JONES

One?

COLLINS

One.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We're not sure exactly, but --

JONES

Then why'd you say one?

COLLINS

Because we talk to him.

JONES

You talk ... to the--

COLLINS

We not only talk with him, we trade with him, we bathe with him, we --

JONES

With Fritz?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

We don't bathe with --

JENKINS

See, Mack started --

COLLINS

Get a load of this.

JONES

Mack? The one I saw out?--

JENKINS

Yeah -- A smooth operator, he is.

COLLINS

He set up ground rules with--

JONES

But that's --

COLLINS

Conspiring with the --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

The sergeant's strategy was to ascertain the position of the enemy.

JONES

Okay, so now you know. Why don't you just kill him?

COLLINS

Who, Mack?

JONES

No, Fritz.

COLLINS

(Amused and resigned.)

Don't ask me.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

If we kill him, he will be replaced by a reinforced enemy who will take advantage of our limited numbers.

JONES

But if we kill him, we could take his position and hit Fritz from his own line.

COLLINS

This group doesn't fight with anyone but ourselves.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This group will fight when ordered -- which will happen as soon as headquarters launches a coordinated assault--

COLLINS

Bullshit.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You heard Jones: the Americans have arrived.

COLLINS

But they ain't--

(MACK returns. He is unusually somber.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Did you find--

MACK

Spoke to some blokes a line back.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

So the medics are--

MACK

They're not coming.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What do you mean they're--

MACK

Can't spare them.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But we have a wounded man here--

MACK

That's what I told them.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And?

MACK

And they gave me iodine. Told me to apply it --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That will not do! Jenkins needs medical attention!

MACK

That's what I --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Then we will transport him ourselves. We'll need a stretcher--

MACK

No good.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

They wouldn't give you a bloody stretcher?

MACK

They would.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Then why didn't you?--

MACK

Because there's nowhere to bring him.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But you just said--

MACK

They're moving out.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's not possible.

MACK

That's what they said--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But we've weakened the enemy. One more push and --

MACK

All I know is, the boys behind us are on their way.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Ludicrous! The B.E.F. never retreats--

MACK

Said Fritz is launching a major offensive.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No, I refuse to believe--

MACK

Said the lines won't hold, so they're retrenching twenty kilometers back.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But the enemy is ready to fall!

(Beat as everyone gives WELLSLEY-SMITH skeptical looks.)

Jenkins, you saw it.

JENKINS

All I saw was us being massacred, sir.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

If we were retreating, we would have been apprised.

MACK

If ... they wanted us to retreat with them.

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What are you saying?

MACK

They said Fritz must be slowed so new trenches can be dug. And a few of us front-line boys have been "chosen."

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But that's--

(COLLINS chuckles bitterly.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(To COLLINS.)

I fail to see the humor--

COLLINS

Well what do you know, you and Mack was both right: those geniuses have a strategy, and we are chosen.

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

This can't -- we've just received another reinforcement,
which would not happen if--

COLLINS

(Emphasizing the singular.)
Reinforcement.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

More Americans are on the way. Jones said --

COLLINS

They ain't coming here.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Of course they're --

COLLINS

Ain't going to waste young bucks on us.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Jones--

COLLINS

Is all we'll see, because he's got no unit.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But we're a unit. I command the B.E.F. Twenty-third infantry
--

COLLINS

And you damn near lost everyone.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

If you are implying that I was responsible for--

COLLINS

Numbers don't lie.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Progressively defensive and angry.)
How dare-- they ordered me to ... to press the attack, even
after I said it was futile. They said we were about to break
through.

COLLINS

They been saying that since--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Crescendoing in near hysteria.)

They said lives had to be sacrificed for this decisive--

MACK

Easy, mate--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

And now I am being blamed for following orders?

FRITZ

What goes on, English?

JONES

(Jumping into position.)

Was that?--

COLLINS

(Calming him.)

Our friend.

MACK

(To FRITZ.)
It's all right.

(JONES peeks over the edge.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No, there must be a ... I did nothing wrong. What would father... I--

(Beat as he frantically scratches his feet.)

MACK

Oy Fritz?

FRITZ

Ya?

JONES

(To COLLINS.)
Man, you white boys really do stick together.

MACK

(To FRITZ.)
You, uh, fixing to advance?

FRITZ

To where?

MACK

To here.

FRITZ

Why? Our trenches are better than yours.

MACK

Not just here, mate. Past us. You know, the big push and all that.

FRITZ

Big push? I have not heard--

COLLINS

He's lying.

MACK

Fritz, you on the level?

FRITZ

I have no reason to lie.

COLLINS

Other than to kill us.

MACK

Notice anything unusual over there?

FRITZ

Ya, my schnapps does not taste so good after your rum. We trade?

MACK

Soon enough.

FRITZ

It is very good, your rum. No wonder you can stay in those miserable trenches.

MACK

And yours are better?

FRITZ

We are Germans, yes?

MACK

He's got a point there.

JONES

All the more reason to take it.

COLLINS

Yeah!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No. Not until I know what's going on.

MACK

I just told you--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Father always said: there are some orders you need to receive face to face.

(He packs his gear.)

MACK

Better hurry. They're pulling out fast.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Jenkins, can you make it back with me?

JENKINS

Don't see how, sir.

MACK

No one there to help him anyway.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Bloody ludicrous! I'm going to give them a piece of my mind!

COLLINS

(Chuckling.)

Have fun.

(JENKINS leaves. Pause.)

JONES

So what do we do now?

MACK

Standard procedure.

JONES

Which is?

COLLINS

We wait.

JONES

And then?

JENKINS

Wait some more.

(Quick black out, then quick lights. This happens a few times with men in different positions, unsuccessfully trying to get comfortable in the cold mud.)

JONES

Shit!

(Jumping up from his reclined position and then
pacing.)

Didn't come this far to freeze my ass off in the mud!

MACK

(Getting his football.)

How's your football?

JONES

Football? I ain't got time for--

MACK

Time's all you got.

(To FRENCHIE.)

Frenchie, if we may ...

(MACK helps FRENCHIE to his feet and positions him to
be a goal post again. He positions the skeleton to be
another goal post.)

JONES

What are--

MACK

Me and Jenkins will kick your--

JENKINS

Uhhh, Mack?

(Gestures to his leg.)

MACK

Right, then I'll take on the both of you.

COLLINS

You're crazy.

MACK

I've been holding back on you boys -- till now.

JONES

I ain't playing no stupid --

MACK

You said you wanted action.

JONES

But not --

MACK

This'll get you ready for the real thing.

JONES

I don't--

MACK

Right, I get the ball first.

JONES

(Sighing.)

What we got to do?

MACK

Tackle me -- if you can.

JONES

That all?

MACK

(Gets into a ready position.)

Set ... go!

(MACK tries to run through the two men, but JONES, who is strong and aggressive, flattens both MACK and COLLINS immediately.)

MACK

Ugh.

COLLINS

Get off me!

JONES

That the game?

MACK

(Masking his pain.)

Basically.

COLLINS

You don't flatten your teammate!

MACK

Right, so let's try Collins and me against you.

JONES

Whatever.

MACK

What you do is--

JONES

Run past you, then the quiet guy.

MACK

Or you can kick it through his--

JONES

Won't need to.

COLLINS

We'll see about that.

(They line up.)

MACK

Set ... go!

(MACK and COLLINS rush JONES, but he easily sends them flying and runs by FRENCHIE as MACK and COLLINS lay stunned.)

JONES

That all you got to do?

COLLINS

Shut up.

MACK

Send him against Fritz, war'd be over tomorrow.

JONES

Then what are we waiting for?

MACK

All in good time, mate.

JENKINS

You ever seen action?

JONES

What's to see? You run at them, you aim, you shoot.

JENKINS

What if you never see them?

JONES

What are you?--

JENKINS

All we seen is mates dropping.

JONES

So y'all just sitting here, waiting to die.

JENKINS

Waiting for the captain.

COLLINS

Dying comes on its own.

MACK

For some of us.

JENKINS

But not for Mack.

COLLINS

He's chosen.

JENKINS

Bigger plans for Mack.

COLLINS

He's going to rule the world.

MACK

Have your fun--

JENKINS

Or at least trade with it.

MACK

(To JONES.)

Hey, speaking of trading, what you got?

JONES

What?

MACK

What kind of goods?

JONES

(Looking through his sack.)

I don't know ... coffee, bacon, beans.

MACK

Booze?

JONES

You think the army's going to give booze to a Negro?

MACK

Why not? You're just another stick in the mud.

JONES

But I'm a black stick.

COLLINS

(Derisive chuckle.)

Well, at least they let you fight for them.

JONES

Ain't fighting for them.

JENKINS

Ah, just want to give Fritz the old what-for, eh?

JONES

I don't give a shit about Fritz. They tell me to fight him, so I fight him.

JENKINS

Then why are you?--

JONES

Wanted to do something besides lifting boxes. Of course, I get here, and the first thing I do is lift boxes. Even war don't change things for the Negro.

COLLINS

Hell, with the massacres we've seen, we're more Negro than you.

JONES

I seen plenty of death.

JENKINS

Not like this.

JONES

Seen knifings and lynchings. This just another look at it.

MACK

Looking at it's one thing; jumping into it's another.

JENKINS

Yeah, don't you want to see your family again?

JONES

My family? Best thing I can do for them is die. That way, I be a war hero, and maybe they'll treat my kids right. Give them an education, not make them work in the--

(WELLSLEY-SMITH returns, looking dazed.)

MACK

You find them?

(No answer from WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

JENKINS

Captain?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

They're gone.

MACK

That's what I--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

The second line, the third line, the camps, gone.

COLLINS

I always said it: our generals will get us killed faster than theirs.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Ruminating to himself, a sad chuckle.)

I was going to prove father wrong.

COLLINS

(To the others.)

Now he's in our war.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Still to himself.)

But as always, he's right: I will never amount to anything.

COLLINS

Well, I'll tell you one thing: no way I'm gonna die sitting here. Taking some Fritz's with me.

(COLLINS goes for his gear. A moment later, JONES does the same.)

JONES

Any time you're ready.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Snapping out of his reverie.)
You will do nothing until I order--

COLLINS
I don't take orders on how to die.

WELLSLEY-SMITH
I am still the commanding officer, no matter what --

MACK
Here, here, all this talk of death and dying. It's downright depressing.

COLLINS
I ain't going out alone.

MACK
Who says you're going out? Oh sure, it's a tight spot, but that ain't new to any of us. We're here for a reason. Got to be a reason.

COLLINS
Still living in fantasyland.

MACK
Who knows, maybe all of us are chosen.

COLLINS
Not for long.

MACK
We'll see. In the meantime ...
(He pulls out his football and tosses it to COLLINS.)
Let's go.
(Protestations from the rest.)
Come on, me and the captain'll kick your arses.

WELLSLEY-SMITH
Sergeant, I am in no mood for--

MACK
You're still alive, mate. You want to stay that way, get your mind off your old man and the bastards what stranded us.

COLLINS

Nah, it's too rough for his type.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Rising to the challenge, looking directly at
COLLINS.)

No, I think I will play.

MACK

There's a mate.

(MACK moves the skeleton and FRENCHIE into place, then
places the ball on the ground.)

MACK (CONTINUED)

Go!

(MACK picks up the ball before JONES and COLLINS can
react. He then runs behind WELLSLEY-SMITH. As with
last time, COLLINS rushes WELLSLEY-SMITH, but this
time, WELLSLEY-SMITH forearm him in the nose, which
sends COLLINS reeling back into JONES. MACK
capitalizes on the bedlam by kicking a field goal
vaguely in the vicinity of FRENCHIE. Again, the ball
sails into no-man's land.)

MACK

Score!

JONES

What? That was nowhere near--

MACK

Right through his arms--

FRITZ

(Overlapping these conversations is the voice of
FRITZ, who is loudly greeting another German soldier
in German.)

Velkommen, Capitan.

COLLINS

(To WELLSLEY-SMITH, while holding his nose.)

The hell are you doing?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Playing football.

COLLINS

You cold-cocked me.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Playing by your rules.

(COLLINS stares at WELLSLEY-SMITH, who holds his stare.)

JONES

That ball never went near--

MACK

Right through his arms, clear as--

(COLLINS goes for his rifle. As he does so, WELLSLEY-SMITH pulls his sidearm from his holster. Both men aim their guns at each other.)

JENKINS

Jesus!--

JONES

Whoa!

MACK

All right! Everyone calm down.

JONES

(Chuckling.)

Hoo whee!

COLLINS

Nobody cold-cocks me.

JENKINS

He was protecting himself.

MACK

Come on. We're all on the same side.

COLLINS

Who cares? We'll all be dead tomorrow.

MACK

Not if you're chosen.

JONES

And if you ain't, at least take some of them with you.
(Indicating the German line.)

COLLINS

They ain't the ones I want.

JENKINS

What you got against him?

COLLINS

He's the one that did this to us.

MACK

If he was, you think he'd be in the mud with us? He'd be in
a cushy--

COLLINS

He's one of them, I'm telling you.

JENKINS

(Pulling his own gun on COLLINS.)

He's one of us!

MACK

Hey--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Easy, Jenkins.

JONES

(Chuckling.)

White folks all looking to kill each other. And you call us crazy?

COLLINS

They told us to save the world and get paid and get laid and be heroes.

MACK

I know, mate--

COLLINS

And look what they did.

JENKINS

They did it to him, too--

COLLINS

It's his type that done it! Their dreams of glory, making poppa proud -- all built on our blood.

MACK

He's not one of them.

COLLINS

But he thought he was. Till they fucked him. Now he's just another pissant.

JENKINS

Then why are you --

COLLINS

Who gave them the power to end my life? I want a ... a reason. A reason I'm being executed. And if not that, a face I can blame. Can spit at before I die. Because I

COLLINS (CONTINUED)

never go down without a fight and -- Goddamnit, I don't want to die!

(He breaks down and lowers his gun. Everyone relaxes. WELLSLEY-SMITH viciously scratches his feet.)

(Pause.)

MACK

(With forced cheerfulness.)

Right, time for cocktails. Jenkins, would you do the honors while I get the ball?

(He goes over the edge.)

JENKINS

Hey, you didn't --

MACK

Fritz, just getting me --

(Shots ring out. MACK screams. The men scramble to their guns and return fire.)

COLLINS

Goddamn it!--

JENKINS

Mack!

MACK

(Offstage.)

Can't feel --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Get back here--

MACK

Me legs!

COLLINS

Cover me!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You can't--

(COLLINS goes over the top, but an increased barrage of gunfire sends him scurrying back.)

COLLINS

Shit!

(Both sides trade gunfire for another few moments.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Hold your fire!

(They stop firing and await German return fire. There is only silence.)

(The following few lines are Sotto Voce.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Mack?

MACK

(Shocked.)

Oy.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Can you move?

MACK

Not me legs.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Then crawl.

(There are sounds of barbed wire metal scraping and grunts from MACK.)

MACK

Stuck in the wire.

COLLINS

Hang on, we'll try to ...

(He puts his helmet on top of his gun and raises it above the top of the trench. As soon as he does, firing erupts from the German side.)

Bastards are using him as bait.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Sotto voce.)

Mack!

MACK

Mmm.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Have to wait until dark. Can you hang on till then?

MACK

I have a choice?

COLLINS

I told you not to trust Fritz.

MACK

You think I want to hear "I told you so's" now?

(Pause.)

Oy, Fritz!

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Urgent whisper.)

Don't draw attention to--

MACK

Got to know.

(To FRITZ.)

Fritz?

FRITZ 2

(A different voice than usual.)

Ya?

MACK

Where's the other?

FRITZ

(Despondent.)

I am here.

MACK

What in bloody hell are you?--

FRITZ 2

(Second German voice.)

Protecting ourselves from barbarians.

MACK

What happened to our arrangement?

FRITZ 2

Arrangement?

FRITZ

(Nervously, in fear of other German soldier.)
There was no arrangement.

MACK

What, we deliver a bad batch of rum?

FRITZ

(Nervous chuckling.)
You are delirious, English.

COLLINS

You bloody goddamned conniving--
(He begins shooting.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Stop!

(COLLINS and JONES look at WELLSLEY-SMITH.)
We cannot afford to waste ammunition on--

FRITZ 2

While we talk you shoot? Barbarians!

COLLINS

You have the balls to call us--

FRITZ 2

From now on, there is no more talk!

COLLINS

Before I die, I'll gut you both.

(Blackout.)

(Lights up to dim, portraying dusk. The men are alert
and awaiting full darkness.)

JENKINS

Captain?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Hmm?

JENKINS

Need a favor, sir.

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well?

JENKINS

I wrote this letter awhile ago. It's for Sarah.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Mmm hmm.

JENKINS

It tells her -- well, seeing how we're -- it tells her --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I --

JENKINS

In case, you know ... In case I don't--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No, it's too early for that.

JENKINS

Still, I'd feel better if you held this.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well, if it makes you feel--

JENKINS

It will.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Well ...

(He takes the letter.)

You're a lucky man. Father did not approve of my fiancée, so I have not been blessed with--

JENKINS

Don't know if it's a blessing anymore.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But you have a daughter--

JENKINS

What kind of world did I bring her into? Soon no father--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No--

JENKINS

No money. Best I can hope for is that me wife remarries and Sarah gets a good home -- even if that letter is the only thing she'll remember me by--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I don't want to hear that. I am beginning to see the validity in Mack's thinking -- perhaps we are all chosen to-

FRITZ

(Urgent whisper.)
English!

(The men quickly get their guns and come to ready positions.)

COLLINS

(Sotto voce, to MACK.)
Don't answer.

FRITZ

English!

MACK

Oy?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Whispering.)
Be quiet, Mack.

FRITZ

Why didn't you listen?

MACK

Listen to what?

COLLINS

(Sotto voce, as he pulls out his knife and prepares to sneak over the top.)
Keep him talking.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Collins--

COLLINS

I'm gutting that bastard, no matter what you say--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

There will likely be more of them.

COLLINS

Not if he's talking to us.

(He leaves before WELLSLEY-SMITH can say anything else.)

FRITZ

I spoke loudly like we agreed. Why did you not listen?

MACK

Didn't hear nothing.

FRITZ

Because of your stupid, stupid games!

MACK

Just a friendly football--

FRITZ

You must leave quickly. We advance soon.

MACK

So we've heard.

FRITZ

Bombing is to begin now. Reinforcements are com--

(He gives a muffled scream. A moment later, COLLINS reappears at the top of the trench.)

COLLINS

(He spits demonstrably.)

That's for your arrangement. Help me get Mack.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH and JONES join COLLINS in no-man's land offstage. A moment later, bombing begins. JENKINS lays at the bottom of the trench for cover, while FRENCHIE jerks in a fetal position. After a moment of intense bombing, the dirt that JENKINS had shoveled at the top of the trench caves in on him. There is so much mud that he cannot dig himself out. All that is visible is JENKIN'S arm. It moves frantically and desperately. Shell-shocked, FRENCHIE never notices. JENKINS' arm slows, then stops. After a beat, JONES, WELLSLEY-SMITH and COLLINS return to the trench, dragging MACK, who cannot move his legs and has a large blood stain on his lower back. They take cover. After a few more moments, the bombing stops. COLLINS, WELLSLEY-SMITH and JONES get their guns and prepare to defend against a German attack. They line up at the top of the trench. After a moment, COLLINS pulls back.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

They'll be coming any minute--

COLLINS

Nah.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Of course, they--

COLLINS

They'll step on us when they're ready -- probably at dawn.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But the book says--

COLLINS

Haven't you learned by now to forget the book? Roaches like us ain't worth the effort.

JONES

Well, this roach is taking some of them with him.

COLLINS

I'm with you.

MACK

Me too, as soon as I get the feeling back in me legs. What about you, Jenk?--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Where is?--

(WELLSLEY-SMITH notices the mud and JENKINS' exposed arm.)

Jesus!

(He quickly starts digging at the mud around JENKINS' arm. The others frantically join him. They clear his face and try to revive him.)

Breathe!

(The men soon realize JENKINS is dead. Pause.)

The last man in my command.

MACK

Nothing you could do.

(Beat.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Those embankments.

MACK

You didn't know--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

I murdered this man --

MACK

Come on --

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Like I murdered the others.

MACK

Not you, the generals did this--

WELLSLEY-SMITH

That's why they didn't send reinforcements.

MACK

Now look: Jenkins is dead and that's that. He simply wasn't chosen to live -- if it wasn't the mud, it would have been the gangrene or a sniper's bullet or starvation or any of a million things.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Father was right, I'm not a leader. I cannot send anyone else to their death.

COLLINS

That's already been decided. Just a question of how we do it.

MACK

Speak for yourself.

COLLINS

How you going to get out of this when you can't even walk?

MACK

Made it through worse, and when I get the feeling back--
 (He frantically feels around his legs, trying to determine if there is any feeling. There is none. Beat.)
 Well, it can't be too bad. I mean, I'd be in a lot of pain if ...

(Somber looks and averted eyes from the others, who recognize the gravity of MACK's wound.)

Yep, old Mack has not been chosen to die in this trench -- not after all I've been through. Be more than a few pretty French whores out of business if ...

(He feels his crotch area, more frantically as he realizes he has no feeling there.)

Fuck!

(Feeling the dampness from the blood of his own back.
Looking at the blood on his hands. Then resigned.)

How bad is it?

MACK (CONTINUED)

(Silence.)

How bad is it?!

COLLINS

Ain't good.

MACK

(Shivering now.)

But I don't feel no pain. Just cold.

(Shivering is more pronounced.)

I was ... cho--... When did it get so cold?

(COLLINS hands MACK a blanket.)

MACK

I wasn't meant to ...

(Beat, then MACK notices the captain's sign and gestures to it.)

Can I?

(JENKINS listlessly gets it, reads it and hands it to MACK, who reads the side he wrote, then chuckles derisively. He then takes a pencil from his pocket and slowly crosses off all the listings other than "Mates.")

That's all I got left. And I lost most of them, other than you blokes, who I barely know. But I did kick your arses in football, didn't I?

COLLINS

You cheated like a bastard.

(A sad chuckle and a pause. MACK hands the sign back to WELLSLEY-SMITH, who reads his side of the sign, then tears it. Pause.)

COLLINS

Well, I ain't going to be buried alive in this shit hole.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You go back now, you'll be shot as a deserter.

COLLINS

I ain't going back. Going right at Fritz, take a few of them with me.

JONES

Let's do it.

(COLLINS and JONES gather their gear in silence.
COLLINS then looks at WELLSLEY-SMITH.)

COLLINS

(To JENKINS.)

You coming?

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Listlessly.)

Seems to be all that's left.

(Beat as WELLSLEY-SMITH sluggishly begins to rise.)

COLLINS

Goddamnit, if you're coming, you come as a Captain.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

No, I'm just another soldier--

COLLINS

Bullshit. You came in as a Captain, you go out as a Captain.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

But--

COLLINS

It's your unit, now lead it.

(Pause, then WELLSLEY-SMITH shows a small glimmer of a grateful smile.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Slightly more upbeat.)

Right ...We shall launch our assault from--

MACK

I'm coming, too.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Impossible. You can't--

MACK

You're not leaving me here.

COLLINS

We can't carry--

MACK

Just get me out there. I'll cover your charge.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

You'll be stranded--

MACK

(A heartfelt plea.)

Please.

(Pause.)

WELLSLEY-SMITH

What about Frenchie?

MACK

Leave him food and supplies, the poor...

(Rueful snicker and headshake as he stares at the despondent FRENCHIE.)

Whoever's doing the choosing has a perverse sense of humor.

(Pause.)

Come on.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

Right.

(WELLSLEY-SMITH bows to one knee and says a prayer. JONES follows suit. COLLINS looks on with disdain.)

MACK

Don't think He's here anymore.

COLLINS

And if He was, I wouldn't give Him the satisfaction.

WELLSLEY-SMITH

(Tearful, to himself.)

Good-bye, father. Sorry.

MACK

Only thing you've got to be sorry about is not telling your old man to piss off.

(COLLINS and JONES mutter agreement. Beat.)

COLLINS

Well ...

(They shake hands and carry MACK over the top. All are now offstage except for FRENCHIE. What can be heard from offstage is MACK firing his gun, which draws return fire from the German line. Then comes shooting and screaming from WELLSLEY-SMITH, COLLINS and JONES. This lasts a few moments, until there are grunts and screams from the three. MACK continues shooting until his bullets run out.)

MACK

(Derisive chuckling.)

Chosen.

(There is one more shot, followed by a gun dropping. In the distance are the sounds of the advancing German army. FRENCHIE just sits, crying, covering his ears and rocking.)

END