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## **The Execution of Private McGuffin**

Clay Mountcastle

The firing squad assembled as the glow of dawn colored the far horizon. There were six of them, all in pressed uniforms with shiny buttons and polished boots. They mumbled softly, yawned, and lit cigarettes that burned orange in the fleeting darkness. Clouds of frozen breath rose above their heads as they huddled closer together. One coughed violently.

Less than a mile away, in a windowless room surrounded by a brick blockhouse, laid Private Ewell McGuffin. He slept peacefully on a straw mat, a calm expression on his face that looked a shade younger than his twenty years. There was no indication that he was to be shot dead within the hour. To the uninformed observer, the scene would have appeared completely and perfectly serene. But, like the dawn, the end to such serenity was rapidly approaching.

This tranquility did not extend to the firing squad, where one of its members fidgeted with his rifle in the morning cold. He took a seat on the hard, sandy ground and looked up at the other five.

“I’m not going do it,” he said out loud. None of the others seemed to notice. The cougher hacked again.

He spoke louder. “I’m not shooting.”

This time the five other soldiers looked down at Corporal Riley Trudeau. Cigarettes glowed and somewhere not too far off a shrieking bird announced the sunrise. The group considered Trudeau, his legs crossed with his rifle in his lap. Eventually one of them spoke.

“Come again?” It was Silas, the broad-shouldered, iron-jawed sergeant. It was more of a demand than a question.

“I’m not going to shoot him,” the corporal repeated.

The following seconds felt heavy and the standing soldiers looked at one another, eyebrows raised.

“Quit joshing, boy,” Silas grunted. “It’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Well, you best be joking because you’re sure as hell not going to just sit there while the rest of us do the job.”

Trudeau didn't flinch, "You do whatever you want, but I'm not shooting McGuffin." It was light enough for the others to see his face, and what they saw led them to believe he was sincere. Silas settled his large frame down on one knee in front of Trudeau.

"Alrighty, Corporal," he said through clenched teeth, "I'll play your stupid little game. Go ahead and tell us why you won't be shooting today."

"Because it's not right."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes, Sergeant. That's a fact. At least, it is to me."

"And why, pray tell, should it matter whether you think it's right or wrong?" an increasingly irritated Silas asked, "You give the orders around here?"

"No. No, I don't," Trudeau said.

"You're goddam right, you don't. You follow orders, and when you are part of the firing squad, those orders are to shoot."

"Not today."

"And why the hell not today, boy? You gone soft? You scared?"

The members of the squad knew that was not the case. Based on Trudeau's performance in the bush over the last few months he was anything but soft. He had killed more guerrillas than the others combined. He was a lethal marksman and on more than one occasion had displayed the kind of ruthlessness in combat that made his comrades both envious and a bit wary of him. There was a rumor that he had once scalped a tribal.

Trudeau stared straight back at Silas. His expression was stone, "No, I'm not scared, Sergeant. I just don't feel like putting a bullet into a man that doesn't deserve it. I don't care what the orders are."

"Doesn't deserve it? McGuffin killed that farmer, killed him cold."

"The same farmer that kept guerrillas in his barn? Same farmer that alerted them every time our column left the outpost? The same farmer that came at McGuffin with a machete?"

"Or so he says," Silas said.

"No reason not to believe him."

"The prosecutor didn't, eh? Neither did the commander. Machete or no, McGuffin killed a citizen. And you know damn well we can't do that. That's how the tribunal saw it and that's why he's going to pay the price in..." Silas pulled a pocket watch out of his jacket, and held it

close to his face, “fifty two minutes. And, yes, you will be on that line.” He returned the stopwatch to its pocket and crossed his arms.

Trudeau sighed slightly and looked toward the brightening horizon. A ribbon of pink was cutting across the sky towards them. “Tell me, Sergeant,” he said, “what are we doing here?”

A frustrated Silas ran a meaty hand over his sunbaked face. “Stop playing stupid, boy. We are going to carry out our orders and then go back—“

Trudeau cut him off. “No. What are we doing out here, in the dusty bush? In this worthless country, fighting these tribals. What kind of war is this?”

Silas looked over his shoulder at the others, as if seeking a translation. They shrugged in unison and returned to their smoking, but their uneasiness was easy to sense.

“I’ll tell you,” Trudeau said. “This is a war that cannot be won, at least not by us, no more than you can win a war against a swarm of mosquitoes. They won’t stand and fight, won’t take to the field against us in any true numbers, and won’t ever surrender. There’s not much prospect of any kind of win for us here, Sergeant. Unless, of course, we kill them all. That’s the only way. We’d have to kill every last one of them, which by the way, I’d have no problem with. I’d quite enjoy it, actually. But you know as well as I do that our gentleman’s army has no stomach for that.”

“Be careful who you are calling a gentleman,” Silas said. “And killing them *all*, eh? That’s mighty big talk. You’ve got quite the pair of big britches on that one, boy. Ever heard of a war crime?”

“Ever heard of extermination?” the corporal responded. “That’s what you do with vermin. That is how I’d classify the people out here: sneaky, dangerous, and eager to bite us in the ass. They want us dead, all of them. And for war crimes, these tribal savages don’t follow any law. Why should we care about our own?”

“Because we are better than savages, boy. Look here, nobody hates these bushwhacking guerrilla sonsabitches more than I do,” Silas said. “But you can’t just go running around killing the whole lot of tribals. We’re not the Mongols. We have virtues.”

Trudeau glanced down and the rifle resting in his lap and scratched the back of his head. “The Mongols reigned for nearly two hundred years,” he said calmly. “I prefer the wicked victor to the virtuous loser.”

It was Silas' turn to sigh, a large gust of exasperation. He stood up, dusted his pants off, and straightened his kit. He loomed over the still seated soldier, his rifle tucked under his arm. The sergeant's tone was more menacing than before.

"Enough with your philosophies. Blah, blah, blah. It don't matter what you think about right or wrong or whatever type of fight we are in. The fact is, boy, you wear the uniform. That means you follow the goddam rules. And the rules say you are going to get your ass up, and march over to that blockhouse and fire on command. You don't have to like it, you just have to do it."

The purple shadows around them had given way to bright orange sunlight. The dawn execution was rapidly approaching and the mounting tension among the squad was palpable. Every eye was on Trudeau. He didn't move. It seemed that Silas was about to erupt when Private Womble spoke up, surprising everyone including Womble. The thin, gangly soldier had a disturbingly large adam's apple that bobbed considerably whenever he swallowed.

"I'd say the corporal has a point," Womble said nervously. "Aren't we supposed to kill as many of the enemy as we can? And that farmer that McGuffin bayoneted seemed to be in league with the guerrillas for sure."

"Shut your mouth, doofus!" The glare that Silas cast in Womble's direction could have shattered glass, "Don't you be adding to this horseshit."

The squad was indeed surprised again when Womble persisted, "Maybe the tribunal didn't get all the facts. Perhaps we should go to the regimental commander. It seems like McGuffin could have been justified." He shook a bit as he spoke.

Silas exploded, "I said shut up Womble, or I'll stomp you into the dirt! What's wrong with you? Enough of all this nonsense. We are soldiers, if you have forgotten. Soldiers follow orders. Soldiers don't sit on their ass and question the merits of this order or that. We are not thinkers, goddam it, we are trained killers. And if that means killing one of our own for violating the rules then that is what we do. Cowards find excuses not to carry out orders."

Womble retreated a step or two and fell silent. Silas then spun around and pointed his finger at Trudeau, "Now, get up. Get up this second or, by God, I will shoot you myself!"

One of the squad members gasped and the cougher let loose a sudden barrage of deep hacks strong enough to turn his lungs inside out. Trudeau looked up at the enraged sergeant and smiled. His voice was eerily calm, "Then you'll have to shoot me, old man. You'll have to pull

back your bolt, load a round, and snap that bolt forward. Point that rifle right here.” Trudeau held a finger to his forehead. “Point it and pull the trigger. Show us all what a real soldier does, Sergeant. Blow the back of my head off in the name of good order and discipline. But allow me to be clear. I am not shooting anybody this morning. I’ll kill as many guerrillas, bushwhackers, or untrustworthy farmers as it takes to fight this unwinnable war, but I won’t kill McGuffin. I won’t.”

Silas looked down on Trudeau, his finger still firmly placed against his forehead, and began to shake. He gripped his rifle with both hands, knuckles white, and uttered a low growl. The other four soldiers began to step away from Silas, keeping their eyes locked on him. Even the cougher was quiet.

Silas turned and gazed at them, wild-eyed, trying to freeze them in place. In his glare they saw not strength but desperation. At that moment Silas knew he was losing the squad and they in turn knew that he had lost. Trudeau, sitting still as a chunk of granite, was now their anchor.

“Get yourselves together!” Silas barked, “We have our orders! We are moving to the blockhouse.”

But his words sounded more like a plea than a command. Nobody moved. A sudden, frigid breeze kicked up a cloud of sand that brushed over them, dusting their polished boots and shiny buttons. They squinted and shivered but remained in place.

“Cowards!” Silas hissed, “Pathetic, insubordinate cowards.” He looked over all their faces but, to his dismay, none averted their eyes. He had indeed lost.

In a very deliberate manner and without another word the sergeant straightened himself, turned on his heels, and marched off quickly toward the blockhouse. Except for the occasional cough, the squad watched him go in silence. Trudeau looked up from his spot on the ground and watched the morning sun climb into the waiting sky. He closed his eyes and let it warm his face.

Three hours later, Private Ewell McGuffin was executed behind the blockhouse, shot dead by a different firing squad. His body was deposited in an expedient grave dug in the dry soil and covered with a pile of jagged desert rocks. The administrative report on his execution filed by the military clerk that evening stated simply, “Violated the rules of war.” The sun set over the dusty landscape that evening much as it had risen, colorfully and quietly.