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## WAR IN PEACE

*Edward Amejko*

**R**ECOLLECT. It was at the time before redeployment really began rolling. Not so long ago, at that.

"This is your post, number three. You beat the pavement from here to that corner there where the light is."

The sergeant of the guard was impatient to leave.

"Post number four is on the other side of the building," he continued. "There's another guard over there, if anything should happen."

The sergeant moved away, then remembered something.

"And another thing. Take a pot-shot at anybody hanging around. That's the only special order the captain gave. Don't question anybody; shoot. There are signs all over town telling the Krauts this area is off limits. Anyway, it's after curfew; so nothing will happen. But just in case, follow the order because sure as hell *you* won't have a chance to answer any questions," he added. "You'll be relieved in four hours."

Pfc. Jennings' eyes followed the sergeant as he walked away in the early darkness.

These sergeants, they get excited about everything, Jennings told himself. He studied the building which he was guarding, and was amused. It was a long one-story structure. Even in the darkness, it showed signs of time and war. All along the length of it were windows, most of them with the glass completely broken out.

A worthless building in the land of Germany, ridiculously the subject of guard duty in the early hours of the night—Jennings felt satisfaction in being able to be amused by the situation. It was amusing but not completely idiotic, for this was the Army—the Army of a Pfc.

He had gone through the wintry nightmare of the Ardennes. He

was among the first who had followed on foot when the armored units broke through into the Rhineland. Now, alongside a dilapidated building, because he was ordered to do so, he was walking guard as he had walked it long ago during basic training.

He and his buddies had never foreseen this, the period of waiting which was sandwiched in between the end of the shooting and the time when they would go home.

He right-shouldered his M-1 rifle and slowly walked toward the corner where the light was shining. Four hours to go, back and forth, back and forth. But it was not dull, for his mind was active. His thoughts had become good companions during these days when guard duty had become a regular assignment.

His thoughts were nothing but musings and reverie. They were not deep, nor were they penetrating. He sought no underlying reasons or causes for being where he was or doing what he was doing. And for this too he was thankful, for those in his outfit who were thinkers were also the chronic grippers. He waited calmly and patiently for the day which no one could hurry along—the day when the men of his organization would be officially notified that they were on alert for shipment to the United States. It would come, and no amount of fretting would bring it even an hour sooner.

He reached the corner, shifted the rifle to his left shoulder, and retraced his footsteps.

The others, like DiCorsa, Williams, Jonesy, and Oblensky, forgot many things and lost them in the maze of their gripes.

He was lucky to have gotten through it all, unscathed and alive. Luck, and nothing else. A mortar shell could have fallen on the spot where he clutched the earth as well as two hundred yards off to the side where some other private, corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, or captain lay hugging the earth.

No, it was not too much for his pride to walk guard and to wait, even though he guarded a building which most likely was worthless.

Every man must put his own thoughts in order.

He had no argument with DiCorsa, Williams, Jonesy, and Oblensky. What they said was true, he told himself; there was no doubt about that. Men who are waiting for shipment home are doing nothing but busy-work. But it was forgotten that they couldn't all be sent home at once; that was true also. Here again it was a matter of luck, like pulling numbers out of a hat. A few, perhaps one or two from each

division, were lucky enough to attend school. Others would see something of Europe, ripped and unripped. But for most it was guard duty and more guard duty. And it could be worse, as it was rumored about other outfits. There could be KP in addition to guard. And there could be hours of close order drill and manual of arms in addition to KP. And the C. O., the adjutant, the S-3 officer, and many others could think of much more too.

Airports, billeting areas, buildings—they had to be guarded or they didn't. It all depended on your way of thinking. As far as he was concerned, even the puddles in the road needed guarding.

In putting everything in its place in his mind, to give meaning to his own scheme of things, he could find no place for only one small item. Never before, outside of combat guard patrol, had he been ordered to shoot any and all intruders.

He discarded the thought by reassuring himself that sergeants get excited over any little thing. For that matter, captains did too.

He was becoming tired of walking his short tour, but inwardly he felt an emotional coziness in the still unique sense of security. The comparative safety of walking guard! And it was really not so long ago that each day, each hour, each moment was an uncertain one.

War and combat soldiering were now only matters of recollection in conversations and yarns.

He paused for a moment at the corner, looked about, then walked again. His M-1 rifle of ten pounds seemed to become heavier. He carelessly balanced it at the stock in his palm, as if sauntering through his favorite spot in the woods.

It was amusing to think what an erroneous idea most people had of war, especially of the warfare of the individual foot-soldier.

They knew that war is shooting. But being familiar only with the shooting of a hunter, they allowed the analogy to falsify the picture. Thinking about it, he smiled to himself.

They think you shoot at the enemy like you shoot at an animal, a deer, for example, he mused,—that you lie in wait until you "see" your target and opponent. Further, they imagine that your patience is rewarded and that you fire to hit that one particular enemy.

He had never gone to Officers Candidate School or studied military strategy, but he knew that it wasn't the hunter and the hunted. It was the pounder and the pounded.

Walking guard was tiresome.

He went into the shadows and squatted, resting his back against the building which, for some nonsensical reason, he was guarding.

The fact that he was doing what he shouldn't be doing didn't bother him. The Army required many unreasonable things of its men. Just that afternoon, Mac, his buddy, told him how he had guarded a heap of refuse from the officers' mess hall.

Even a rookie of four months in the Army knew that a little malingering was due him.

Jennings placed his rifle between his buttocks and held it in place with his knees, using it for an improvised seat. The cool night air aroused in him a sudden desire to smoke. He cupped the flame from his lighter and held the lit cigarette the same way.

Despite his effort his eyelids slowly closed. Almost immediately, he became conscious of a shadow flitting across him. It was as though he had seen it through his eyelids. His first fear was that his negligence would be discovered. He quickly crushed his cigarette between his thumb and finger and got up on one knee.

For a moment he presumed he had fallen asleep and had imagined the sensation. But then he saw a figure dart across the roadway to the side of the building.

The figure was not noiseless or elusive as a genuine prowler should be. His heels struck the pavement loudly in the otherwise silent night and he had not avoided the light at the corner.

He was in civilian clothes and, therefore, not a "friend."

As if realizing his previous mistakes, the intruder now hunched up against the wall of the building, striving to conceal himself, it seemed.

Don't question anybody; shoot!

Jennings recalled the special order as though the sergeant were there saying it at that very moment.

Instinctively, Jennings raised his rifle and had the figure within his sights. He hesitated before unlocking the rifle. Just a few minutes ago he had been thinking . . . yet here he was taking careful aim at a man.

Don't question anybody; shoot!

The figure remained motionless. Jennings lowered his rifle slightly. The man could only be a native of the town, innocently. . . . But why was he sneaking about? And why was he violating curfew? The sergeant said the townspeople had been warned that the area was off limits.

The building might be a storing place for ammunition. The prowler might be one of the diehards and might have come to blow up the building and everything around it, including Jennings. The building might be loaded with any number of things. Otherwise why would the sergeant have given such an order?

Yet. . . .

He couldn't shoot a man down like . . . a deer. It would remain with him forever.

The war was ended. He had to give the man a chance to explain himself.

"Who's there? Halt!"

The words rang out before he himself realized he had made the decision to shout them.

With hands outstretched, the figure spun around and stood erect at the wall briefly, as if facing a firing squad. Then, like a mechanical toy that is released after being wound up, he darted headlong across the road away from Jennings and the building.

The action was all that was needed to bring to Jennings' mind the realization that he was a soldier on guard duty with an order to fulfill. Quickly he aimed at the fleeing man's right shoulder, pushed forward the safety with his trigger finger, and fired.

The prowler twirled, almost fell, regained his balance, and unsteadily ran on with no intention of halting.

Jennings knew what he must do. He took careful aim a second time at the man's back, just as the figure rushed toward the shadows, and fired again.

Jennings, with his rifle at ready for use again, rushed to where the man had fallen. He pulled the man over on his back. The prowler was not young. His face was lean, with protruding cheek bones, and he was shabbily dressed.

Jennings heard the guard on the other side of the building shout, "Sergeant of the guard, post number three!"

The words were picked up and repeated by another guard, farther away, at a post Jennings didn't know existed.

The sergeant and two others were not long in arriving. The sergeant bent over to examine the man and asked, "What happened, Jennings?"

"This guy, he was sneaking around, like he shouldn't. He couldn't have been up to any good. I. . . ."

"Right through the back and out the chest," the sergeant said. "Deader than a stiff."

"He was sneaking around and I had to shoot," Jennings said as if trying to explain a wrong.

"Good," the sergeant broke in. "That's what you were supposed to do."

The sergeant turned to his two companions.

"Hobson, go down to Medics and tell 'em to pick up this Kraut. Ollie, you take over this post till next relief. And you come down to headquarters with me, Jennings. We'll report."

Jennings followed the sergeant along the wall of the building. He puzzled over the events which had occurred from the time he had sat down to rest and to smoke.

They walked on in silence and rounded a corner of the long building.

"Why do you suppose he was sneaking around?" Jennings asked, perplexed.

"Most likely trying to steal some stuff," the sergeant answered.

"From this building? You mean there was something valuable in there?"

"Naw, just a shipment of rations. Mostly canned stuff." The sergeant added, "The Krauts get the news around fast."

Neither said any more. With one stroke, it seemed, Jennings' thoughts, which previously were so well arranged, now were disorderly and confusing. All at once, there was a batch of new meanings. And yet there was no meaning.