

A father's search for his estranged son plunges US Army Major Ab Johnson into a pivotal battle, the outcome of which could determine the fate of Paris and the outcome of the Great War.

Ab Johnson has one last chance to reconcile with his son, Jack, a marine second lieutenant who is heading into the worst conflict in human history. Second lieutenants don't last long in the killing fields of France. Ab's quest leads him from the backrooms of Paris, through command posts, and to the front lines during the Battle of Belleau Wood. He confronts French petulance and American inexperience as he struggles to help organize an army medical system swamped with casualties during his desperate search.

Ab's story intertwines with those of an arrogant surgeon who sees war as opportunity, a navy corpsman searching for his place in the world, and a marine private full of fighting spirit and patriotism. They confront their destinies in a grueling fight filled with chaos and heart-stopping fear.



**Novels of the Great War** 

John F Andrews



### **AWARDS**

2025 Colorado Authors' League Book Awards: Winner in Historical Fiction, post 19<sup>th</sup> Century

2025 Eric Hoffer Book Awards: First Runner Up: Historical Fiction Short list: Grand Prize Finalist: Da Vinci Eye Award (Cover Art)

2025 Independent Press Award: Distinguished Favorite in Military Fiction













### **REVIEWS**

This is one for the war buffs, and particularly those who enjoy Marine Corps lore. Andrews captures the pain of war in muscular prose . . . clearly knows the period—and particularly the era's medical practices—but he largely eschews the usual tragedy of WWI narratives . . .

### Kirkus Reviews Verdict: "GET IT".

---- Kirkus Reviews

This is a remarkable book. . . . I could smell the cordite and the stench of the detritus of war. This book is a wonderful tribute to those military medical professionals who worked in terrible conditions to administer first aid to the Devil Dogs at Belleau Wood. Highly recommended.

----Colonel William T. Anderson, USMC (Ret), noted USMC WWI historian

Andrews takes the reader into the action and makes you feel as if you were there, experiencing the horrific scenes of war along with his characters. . . . Highly recommended.

----Historical Novel Society Magazine

There are many comparisons to be made to both fiction and non-fiction works based on WWI, but nothing stands out so much as Remarque's classic title ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT. ...anyone who enjoys historical war stories will love this book. Moreover, this novel transcends its genre and will likely have wide appeal.

### ----**RECOMMENDED** by the *US Review*

John F. Andrews's OUR DESPERATE HOUR is a vivid, thoroughly researched, and powerfully told story of the horrors and cruelties of World War I. Its immediate, personal intimacy and emotional intensity will pull the reader in and refuse to let go.

---Indie Reader

Indie Reader Star Rating: 5.0 Stars.

#### Reader review:

### 5.0 out of 5 stars Powerful book

This powerful book takes us on a journey into the battlefield in France during WW I. If you like historical fiction, the details in this book make it seem like you are standing right there. . . . It was simply hard to put the book down.

The author's stories are beautifully written, making the characters and events come to life! And these stories do need to be told. His well-researched historical fiction certainly accomplishes this. The two other wonderful books in this series are *An American Nurse in Paris* and *Dogs Don't Cry*.

---Linda Asadourian, Amazon reader

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, events, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogue concerning those people are fictionalized and are not intended to depict the actual persons, events, or change the entirely fictional nature of this novel.

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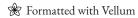
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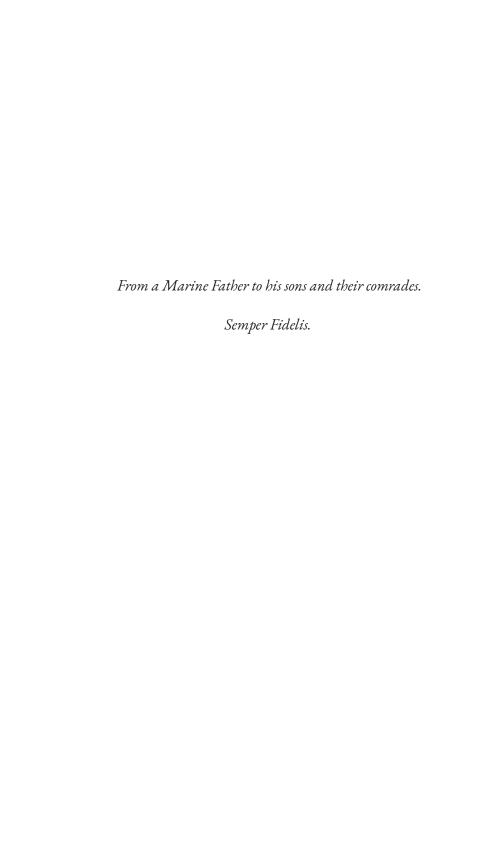
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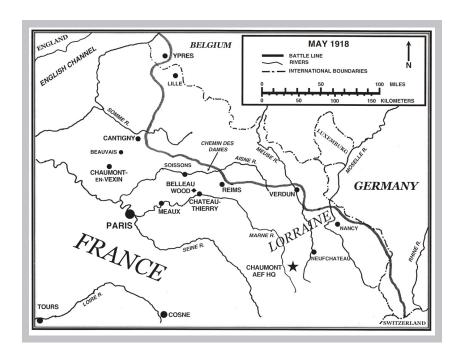


# **Foreword**

This is a novel, not a history book. It is a work of love; an ode to Marines, to all the Americans who fought in World War One, their "docs", and their families.

# **Map of France**

# Location of The Battle Front in May, 1918



# **Chapter One**

### Major Albert "Ab" Johnson, US Army Reserve

Paris, France Thursday, May 30, 1918

The army lied to me. And I think it's about to get worse.

My old friend Ira Cunningham—now Major Cunningham,
US Army Reserve—charges toward me with a scowl that tells me my
arrival is unwelcome. His fists are clenched. I overpay the cabbie who
brought me from the train station to get him out of my hair.

Ira stops two feet from me. I face him and narrow my eyes. Do I extend a hand or duck?

"We've gotta to talk." Ira glances back at the building behind him. "Now. Not here."

I snatch my luggage and double-time it to keep up as he leads me into a café two doors down. Empty sidewalk tables and paper tape crisscrossing the windows to prevent them from becoming shrapnel flash a warning. The war is near.

Wary faces glare at us when we enter. The waiter frowns as he takes an order. The chef, wearing an immaculate white double-breasted chef's coat, apron and striped trousers hustles us to a window table away from

the other patrons. I order two coffees, black, since Ira's French is embarrassing.

Ira's eyes don't stop moving. He's winding up.

Before Ira can say anything, the waiter sets two china cups of strongsmelling coffee in front of us.

My hearing goes haywire.

A thunderous explosion blasts the air from my chest.

Then—nothing.

# **Chapter Two**

### **Major Ab Johnson**

**P** ain pounds like a spear stuck between my nose and the back of my skull. Blood floods my throat. I'm choking and cough out a mouthful. The only smell is blood. Muffled shouts and screams barely make it through my ringing ears. The world is black. I try to open my eyes but they're caked with something—sand, dust?

Where am I?

How did I get here?

What's all the yelling? I can't make out the words.

My head is trapped. I can't move. Something solid pushes my face into a flat, hard surface.

My arms and legs pulse with an electric current.

Each beat of my heart sends a new jolt through my head. Each shot of pain stops coherent thought.

It means I'm alive. But where?

The weight pushing my head down disappears. Hands grab under my arms and yank me up. I hazard a blink. No luck. I reach up to rub the dirt from my eyes. One touch to my nose launches another lance through my skull. I try blinking but the world's a blur.

"Ab, can you stand? We gotta get out!" That's Ira's voice, as though he's shouting through a pillow.

I reach up and try to brush off my eyes without touching my nose. I blink. The blur is less, but none of this makes sense.

We're in a room. Ceiling collapsed. My face was pinned to a table in a pool of blood, coffee, and plaster dust. There are chairs, fractured coffee cups. I glance to my side and see two unmoving legs wearing striped trousers protruding from beneath a collapsed ceiling beam. The chef.

The café. Having coffee. With Ira.

"Get out!" Ira shouts.

A woman moans, holding a screaming child. A man limps away from his table holding a napkin to his bleeding head.

I grab a napkin and wipe the dust off my eyes and then hold it ever so gingerly beneath my nose. A gob of blood chokes me, and I spit it out. Ira pulls me through the shattered doorway toward an intact building stoop.

"We should go back, help the others," I shout above the ringing in my ears.

"All you'll do is bleed on them. Come on."

"What was that?" My hearing is returning, but my ears still ring.

Ira leads, picking our way over debris and shattered glass. My brain's never felt this way—thoughts dull, slow, uncertain. Ira pulls a chair over to the stoop leading into an intact building and guides me into it. It looks like a Parisian café chair. I glance back and see toppled chairs and tables in front of the former café now buried in debris. How the hell did we get out of there?

Things are making a little more sense. I'm in Paris. I blink and take in the surroundings. The buildings along the street—Paris. To my right, where we were, is a rubble pile with the remnants of walls around a smoldering crater in the center. Stones, bricks, plaster, and glass extend onto the street. A chunk of blasted wall crushed the roof of a cab. The cabbie's beret sits on a head turned at an unsurvivable angle.

I tip my head back, but everything spins.

Bile mixes with the blood in my throat, my brain too numb to be anything more than a bystander. I spit out another mouthful of blood. It's as if I'm watching through a dusty looking glass.

"Close your eyes. Let me clean up your face," Ira shouts, his voice now clearer.

I hold the napkin under my nose while Ira wipes off my face. I try squeezing the nose to staunch the bleeding. A shot of pain stops me.

Ira's face is in front of me, inspecting me with a frown. I've seen that expression before. Where? Chicago. When one of our friends, a fellow reporter, was tortured by the Mob and dumped, barely alive, in front of the Tribune Tower.

Okay. I'm Ab Johnson and this is Ira Cunningham, and we're in Paris. Got that much. The way he's looking at me tells me I look like hell.

I can see better now. I'm hurt, a building has blown up, Ira's in an army uniform—a major. I blink.

Uniformed army soldiers and officers erupt from the building to my left like bats from a cave. One small man in a navy uniform shoots past into the rubble to stand by a man cradling a young girl in his arms. I know that officer but can't remember his name. A scarlet stain surrounding a void on the center of the girl's pink-and-white-striped pinafore brings bile into my throat. A little girl torn apart by shrapnel, held by a man who must be her father.

"Trudy, here!" Ira shouts.

What's she doing here? Ira's daughter, Trudy, cute as ever, petite, porcelain skin and black hair in an Army Nursing Corps uniform and cap. She inspects my face and takes over holding the napkin to my nose.

The navy officer stoops down and touches the child's neck while saying something to the distraught father, shakes his head, and shouts, "She's dead." His name's Arthur. A navy surgeon. Where did I meet him? The man holding the girl pleads in French and grabs Arthur's left leg. Arthur jerks his leg free. "She's dead—there's nothing I can do," he shouts. The father continues to beg for help as Arthur rushes away.

A woman I recognize—Alice Simmons—picks her way through the rubble with an army captain. Taller than most of the men around her, slender, with auburn hair in a loose bun, Alice is Trudy's best friend, from Minneapolis. A journalist with an RN. My son Jack's friend from college. They kneel next to a woman whose right arm is a mangled mess,

blood spurting. An older man, a colonel, joins them and squeezes the woman's arm with both hands.

Arthur rushes over, shoves the colonel away, and grabs the arm above the elbow. The colonel nearly trips as he staggers back, his face red with rage. The captain gives Alice his belt. Alice encircles the arm with it and pulls it tight, speaking with Arthur, nodding. The captain uses a short board to support the shattered wrist.

There's a little less fuzz in my ringing ears. I blink. I must look terrible—I see it in Trudy's eyes. She's been Jack's chum since childhood.

Jack. *Jack*. That's who I need to find. That's who I came to find. But he's not here. With the goddamned Marines—somewhere. This isn't the place I'll find him. But how do I know that?

I lean back in the chair, Trudy holding the napkin to my nose. Ira steadies me with a hand on each shoulder. I'm a bystander. One of the wounded. A casualty before I can even report for duty. Useless.

My fog is clearing a little.

Bells clang, engines roar, and hoofbeats echo as emergency vehicles approach. A horse-drawn fire engine pulls to a stop. The crew wades toward the smoking center of the ruin, pulling a hose. A motor ambulance screeches to a halt, followed by two more. One crew takes away the man still holding the child, pleading, crying. Another crew loads the woman onto a stretcher and hurries her away, followed by Alice. Arthur—what the devil is his last name?—and a captain approach. It seems to take Arthur a moment before recognition dawns on his face. "Let me look at you, Major Johnson."

Trudy eases the napkin away from my nose. Arthur and the captain inspect my face, telling me to blink, move my eyes, open and close my mouth. "Nose is broken," Arthur says. "You'll have to get to a hospital."

I once watched a doctor *fix* the broken nose of a union leader who had been roughed up by mine goons back home in Butte, Montana. I want no part of that. "I'm sure I'll be okay. Just need a washcloth and some aspirin." I try to pop my ears—sound is still muffled.

"No. It has to be fixed. That's an order," Arthur says.

"Lieutenant, I'm not sure you can order a major anything other than a drink at the officers' club," I say.

"But I can," a voice next to us says—the colonel Arthur shoved away from the woman. "Local hospitals'll be jammed." The colonel turns to the captain. "Take him to the American Hospital in Neuilly." The colonel glares at Arthur. "Lieutenant, Junior Grade, do you make a habit of interfering with fellow physicians in the middle of life-threatening events? *Never* do that again." Arthur's face is red, I'm guessing more in anger than embarrassment.

The captain returns. Ira and Trudy help me to an idling Dodge staff car. I keep the napkin to my face to catch the blood. My head feels full as I bend down to get into the rear seat.

Ira slides in next to me. "What would Helen say if she could see you now?"

# **Chapter Three**

### **Major Ab Johnson**

hat would Helen say? I'd get an earful from the woman I love, wife, mother of a son I belittled at the wrong moment. "She'd repeat her parting comments to me at the train station. That I'm an idiot and that I better get my head out of my keister, pronto." The driver grinds the gears and pulls away from the curb. "She told me that no son should go into war without the full support of his father. I tried to explain my reasoning about Jack's mistake when he joined the Marines, for the hundredth time. She'd hear none of it."

"Some of your comments about the Marine Corps were bad, Ab," Ira says.

"Well, I'm not wrong, in my opinion," I say. "But I should have kept my mouth shut. At least Helen and I agree on that."

Jack, why the hell did you have to go and join the Marines?

It's coming back to me. I'm in the army, again. Left Butte, Montana —home, work, Helen—and rode on a troop ship to France. I was supposed to go to a nice safe job in Tours. Helen demanded that I find Jack, to reconcile before it's too late. That should have been easy from there. Then new orders sent me here. I fumble at my inside coat pocket. The orders are still there next to my France roadmap. I can feel the lump of my wallet in my back pocket.

I glance down at myself. My army uniform is peppered with white powder streaked with blood. I'll need to change it before reporting to duty.

Where's my luggage?

Oh, yeah. I got out of the cab in front of the American headquarters building. Ira came up to me, saying there was something important he had to talk about. I carried my suitcase and garment bag into the café and set them down next to our table.

Then the explosion.

"Some welcome, Uncle Ab," Trudy says.

I'm not her uncle, but she's called me that since she was a kid.

"Ira, does this have something to do with what you needed to talk with me about?" I ask.

"Part of it, old friend," Ira says. "And by the way, powdered with flour, you do look old."

"Go to hell," I mutter. He looks like a snowman, covered with flour and plaster dust. "Is it safe to talk here?"

"I know Private Haskins, who's driving," Ira says. "He's in the necessary loops. I want everyone in this car to not repeat what we say."

"Uncle Ab, what's the last thing you remember?" Trudy asks.

"Train station, getting the Paris edition of the *Times*, reading it while waiting in the cab line. Seeing that navy surgeon, Arthur Beck, butt in front of me. Beck's luggage. I remember that. Italian leather, soft as butter, tan. The *Times* reported the fighting is to the north, well away from here."

"Ab, you know better than to believe everything you read in the papers." Ira chuckles.

That coming from a man who was an associate editor of the *Minneapolis Star* before we rejoined the service. Two newspaper editors in our mid-forties hoping to have one last wild moment before dotage droops our chins. Ira was promised a position in the press office. I was guaranteed a liaison position with the Services of Supply headquarters in Tours, a good hundred and fifty miles south of here.

Idiots. Ira and me.

Naïve idiots.

We were a couple of well-meaning, patriotic suckers who volun-

teered to rejoin the army at an age when we should have known better. My old man warned me when I joined the first time, after college—never volunteer. He meant it with some irony, but he was right. We're an army family—Grandpa, Dad, me, my younger son, Oscar. But Jack bucked tradition and joined the damned Marines. The last time I saw him was at Quantico. The day I should have been filled with pride while pinning the brass bars on his shoulders. But I had to blab. To tell Jack that the Marines are a bunch of peacocks who look good in a parade but have never won a war. That his grandfather would roll over in his grave. Dad and I never respected the Marine Corps. Well, they are peacocks. I told him he should request a transfer to the army. I could pull a few strings. Okay, maybe I was a little over the top, but now he's headed here. I have to find him, reconcile somehow. I can't have him going into battle with those words ringing in his ears. Helen made that clear. "What the hell's going on here?" I ask. "I thought Paris was safe."

"As any mirror will now attest, Paris is unsafe," Ira says. "I'm pretty sure that was a welcome present from the Kaiser's Paris Gun."

"I haven't seen anything about that in the papers," I say.

"Ah, now you know what I've been doing since I got here," Ira says.

"Okay, tell me what I need to know."

"The French put a moron named Duchene in charge of their Sixth Army. He's the brother of someone important. The Sixth defended the Chemin des Dames area, northeast of here. It was supposed to be an impregnable fortress in a quiet zone. Well, to coin a new word, the Germans pregged it. General Nolan, the head of our intelligence section, personally warned them that the Germans would attack there. Duchene was insulted that an American presumed to have intelligence. It turned out that *le general* was the one lacking that, in both senses of the word. The Germans cut through the French faster than Sherman through Georgia. Over thirty miles in the past week. They're somewhere northeast of here, depending on their progress yesterday. They could be here in as little as a week."

"A week?" I ask. "Are you sure?"

"Could be two if they stop to sample the wine. A few exhausted French units are trying to delay the inevitable. They have no reserves

left. Don't tell the Germans, but there's nothing but staffers between Meaux and Paris."

"What can we do?"

"Not much. We only have four divisions ready to fight. None of them are anywhere near here. The First is fighting in Cantigny, and the Second is moving up to reinforce them. The Third is far to the south, and I'm not sure where the Fourth is. Perhaps in Lorraine? The rest are in various stages of training. They'd be nothing more than range targets against seasoned Germans. Hell, the Germans have a hundred divisions on the western front. The French aren't telling, but word has it that ten to twenty German divisions are in this offensive. Imagine—twenty seasoned German divisions against a few thousand staffers running around protecting their asses."

Ira's words lie on me like a shroud.

# **Chapter Four**

### Lieutenant (junior grade) Arthur Beck, US Navy Medical Corps

I t takes a good fiver minutes to scrub the blood off my hands in the first-floor men's room after they let us back into the building. I'd gotten as far as Lieutenant Colonel Tuttle's office and no sooner set my suitcases down than the explosion forced us to evacuate. I take off my coat and shake out the dust. Damn it, I got some blood on my sleeve. Probably from that man with the dead girl. Couldn't he see my job was to tend to the living?

The rush to get here this morning was a waste. Jumped the cab queue at the train station, paid the greedy bastard a fiver to push it so I'd be here for my eight o'clock meeting with this fellow, Tuttle. I don't get why I was routed here. I volunteered to come to France to work with George Crile's surgical research center—which is not in Paris. I need to get there.

Now I stand here, my uniform soiled and bloodied, my spare in the suitcase. I'm a sight. And off to a great start. These people don't know what they're doing if the medical care I saw outside the building is any indication. No emergency equipment, not even a simple tourniquet or dressing. Of course, I managed to tee off that colonel when I got him out of the way so I could properly compress that woman's brachial artery. Hell, for all I know he's a psychiatrist.

Though, I suppose he wasn't doing a bad job of it. Heat of the moment.

I head up one flight to Tuttle's office. The clerk and two other men sweep up dust that coats the furniture and floor. "As I said before, I'm Lieutenant Junior Grade Beck. I have—had—an eight o'clock with Lieutenant Colonel Tuttle."

The clerk blows dust off an appointment book, opens it, and frowns. "Sorry, sir. You've been bumped to eleven hundred."

"Why wasn't I told?" The audacity. Bumped?

"A colonel and a general wanted him in a meeting. They outrank you. And they're army, sir. You'll have to wait. Officers' men's room is down the hall. With respect, sir, you look like you need to clean up. Shower there, too, if you want, sir. Have faith—the hot on full gets lukewarm after five minutes." He looks at my bags and smiles. "Nice luggage, sir. Navy issue?"

They're custom-made Italian leather, from Milan. Not that this ignoramus would know the difference.

I take my suitcases to the officers' restroom, where I shower in the tepid water, shave, and put on my clean uniform. By the time I get back to Tuttle's anteroom, the clerk and his fellows have the place in order, though still dusty. I wipe off a guest chair with my handkerchief, sit, and try to focus on my upcoming meeting.

I slip one of my medical books out of a suitcase, take a deep breath, and open it to George Crile's chapter on contaminated wounds. I want to make sure I phrase things like George would when I meet Tuttle. But the words are little more than smudges of ink. The force of the explosion still echoes with each beat of my heart.

Two army officers enter, talking about the Paris Gun. Oh no. The colonel I pushed out of the way to save that woman with the hand trauma. He's in his forties, fit-looking, with a trim mustache and short light-brown hair. The other has silver oak leaves on his shoulders—a lieutenant colonel. Tuttle? He's about five-ten, similar build as the colonel, around forty, with dark brown hair and a thin, long face. I set the textbook down.

The colonel stops and stares at me for a moment and then walks into the office. I'm in the doghouse if he's in charge. He wasn't doing a

bad job but who in their right mind wouldn't want the best surgeon in the area to take charge?

"Anything in my office damaged in the blast?" the lieutenant colonel asks.

"No, sir," the clerk says. "The papers on your desk were scattered, but I got 'em back in order. Lot of dust, but the boys and I cleaned her up pretty much. Cleaning crew'll have to do the rest tonight."

"Good work," the lieutenant colonel says.

I clear my throat. "I'm Doctor Arthur Beck. I have an appointment with Lieutenant Colonel Tuttle. I assume that's you?"

He appraises me with an impatient scowl and turns to the clerk. "Get that new major down here toot sweet. What's his name?"

"Johnson, sir."

"If I may," I say. "Major Johnson was injured in the explosion. They took him to the American Hospital to fix his broken nose. He may not be available yet, but I am."

"This place is going to hell. Sit, Lieutenant. I'll deal with you later." He glances down. "Nice suitcases. Italian?" Tuttle walks into the office and shuts the door.

This is not a good start.

## Chapter Five

## Major Ab Johnson

Dull pain pulses between the front and back of my head like a pendulum as the morphine wears off on my ride back to head-quarters. Ira took off as I waited at the hospital, and Trudy stayed behind while I argued with the doctors, who wanted to keep me for observation. I have to report for duty. And find my suitcase and garment bag. Where did they go in the chaos?

The only thing about the building that says "American" is the flag above the entry door, which is up a stoop. In America we'd call the entry "second floor," but in Paris it's the first. The building where Ira and I attempted to have coffee is a jumble of debris with a trickle of smoke rising in the center like a simmering volcano. The fire brigade and others are picking through the remains of the once handsome building. Three blankets tied at both ends lie near the former café—corpses waiting for removal.

I could have been one of them. Ira, too. Less than a degree of windage and an untold number of Americans could be lying there.

I mosey over to the ruins and ask a fireman if my bags are inside. He goes into the café and comes out shaking his head. "It's a mess in there, sir. But I don't see any luggage."

Stolen, I suppose. This is Paris.

I'm stiff as I walk up the steps to enter the American headquarters building. A corporal sits at a reception desk in the lobby, where American soldiers scurry back and forth along with suited men who I assume are reporters. I approach the corporal.

"Help you, sir?" The corporal asks.

I hand him my orders. He reads them and snaps his fingers. A private hustles over like a glorified bellboy.

"Take Major Johnson to his new office, three-thirty-seven."

"My suitcase and garment bag were in the café in the building that blew up. I checked, and they're missing."

"I'll alert lost and found, sir," the corporal says. "No guarantees. It is Paris."

"Any place I can get new uniforms?"

"There's a supply depot way on the south side of town," the corporal says. "I can put in a requisition if you give me your size." He chuckles. "You know, too-large, large, mediumish, and too small. Nothing tailored like that navy uniform I saw earlier. Sheesh, and his suitcases? Musta cost more than I make in a year."

"Order me large of everything and I'll hope for the best. Two sets." I follow the private up two flights of stairs and along a well-lit hallway with white walls and a terrazzo floor. The smell of three kinds of tobacco smoke permeate the humid, still air. The transoms above the doors we pass are wide open, I suppose in the hope of some air movement. Hope is cheap.

The private opens a green wooden door to a room with no transom, extending a hand. What the hell? He must have worked at the Ritz before joining the army. "Your new digs, Major." He hustles off before I can complain. At least he didn't demand a tip.

The windowless room must have been a broom closet. It's maybe six feet square, filled with a battered wooden desk and a single elderly desk chair. A two-drawer filing cabinet is jammed between the desk and the far wall, if I can use the word "far" figuratively. Holes in the walls speak of previous shelves. I'm not certain the desk chair would pass a safety inspection. The flaking dark gray paint and bare ceiling bulb support my assumption it was a closet. If this is how they treat their majors, I'd hate to see what the lieutenants and NCOs work in.

I take a deep sigh, survey my new kingdom, and test the chair with my hand.

Is this a joke? I didn't expect a palace, but a janitor's closet?

The chair threatens to collapse as I slump into it and think about the events leading up to this moment.

I came over on the SS *Caserta* and landed at the port of St. Nazaire, where most of our troop ships dock. No sooner did my boots kiss my ancestral French soil than a private handed me orders directing me here. For what? The orders didn't say. The outfit is G-4-B, sanitary train. I'm clean—well, not now—but not sanitary and don't know much about trains. I have a bad feeling about this. I'd been promised that position in Tours when I signed my contract.

Sucker.

Idiot.

Me.

Should have known better. This is the army, after all.

So I head to the men's room to see what I can do to improve my appearance. Once there, I stand before a mirror, inspecting a visage that reminds me of a prize fighter who should have retired. One way past his prime. My hair needs a cut, the dust adding more salt to my brown pepper. Blue eyes seem more prominent when surrounded by raccooneye bruises. My nose sports a new bandage, packing protruding from each nostril above a fat upper lip. I shake out my coat one more time. Ira got most of the flour dust out of it while the doctors worked on my nose, but it's still filthy. The bloodstain on the front is the worst part. If I try to wash it off, it'll look like I dove into a pool. If I don't, they might call a medic to see if I have a chest wound. It's a lousy idea to report to a new post in a uniform that looks like I've just left a battle. I'll hope they forgive me.

A private rocks from foot to foot as I near my office. "Sir, um, you're Major Johnson, right?" I nod. "Lieutenant Colonel Tuttle wanted you in his office a while ago."

I follow the private. We pass Beck, pacing the hall outside Tuttle's office. He's hatless, wavy black hair neatly trimmed and face clean-shaven. His sharp, angular features are more striking than handsome. *Intense*—that's the word for the fellow. Beck glances at me, his face

drawn in frustration. He's in immaculate navy blues that must be custom tailored. About five and a half feet and probably no more than a hundred twenty-five pounds in his shoes. Must be early thirties. And here I am, forty-six, a good six inches taller but at least sixty pounds heavier. Wish I could say it's all muscle, but who am I kidding? I should have asked for an extra-large uniform.

"Thanks for the help earlier," I say.

"Hope they gave you something for the pain."

"Codeine pills. Said aspirin might worsen the bleeding," I say.

"I agree," Beck says. "Meeting with Tuttle?"

"On my way now."

"Remind him that I'm still waiting for my audience with him. He's made me wait an hour and my patience is running thin."

"Oh-kay." I shake my head. *Audience?* I recall several conversations with Arthur during our Atlantic crossing and was disappointed at how little he knew about the military. I figure the naval officer training program has been shortened in the rush to get doctors into uniform. Makes me think of Jack and his comrades being rushed through Marine officer training. I sigh.

As I enter the office, a colonel and a lieutenant colonel stand with their backs to me, looking out a window, one pointing at something in the distance. I assume the lieutenant colonel is Tuttle. The bird colonel is the one who sent me to the hospital. I stand at attention, suck in my gut, and salute. "Johnson, Major Albert, reporting for duty, sir."

"That navy lieutenant told us you were injured." Tuttle faces me, brow knitted.

I tell them about the morning's activities.

"I hope that isn't your only uniform," the bird colonel says.

"Sorry, sir," I say. "Someone stole my luggage after the explosion."

"Okay, we'll give you a pass for now, but you don't want to show up anywhere except a battle in that uniform, Major," the colonel says.

"For what it's worth, I asked the corporal at the front desk to order me a couple new ones. He didn't say when they'll get here. I'm sorry, but I'm stuck with this one until then."

"Major, you look like crap," Tuttle says. "Were you knocked out?"

"Yeah," I say. "But I had to report and get to work."

"Mind a little fuzzy?" Tuttle asks.

"Yeah, that too," I say. "But it's getting better." Well, that's a lie. My ears still ring, and I'm having a hard time hearing the colonel, who's soft-spoken. And my brain is still at least half-full of cotton. Other than that, and my nose, I'm in top shape. It's bad when you start lying to yourself. Worse if I start to believe my lies.

"I was stuck in a meeting with our French counterpart and his minions all morning. Missed the excitement here." Tuttle picks up a pipe from his ashtray. He pulls on it twice to revive it and lets out a stream of smoke. "Oh, for Christ's sake, sit down before you collapse. Want me to send for a cold pack?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"You're one of the oldest majors around." Tuttle frowns at my personnel file. "Forty-six. Hell, you're older than either of us. How many times did they pass you over for promotion? Should I worry about your competence?"

Before I can answer, the colonel holds out a hand. Tuttle passes him the file. The colonel lets out a slow breath. "Unimpressive record. Commissioned after college. Journalism major? Trained in the Quarter-master Corps, served at the War Department for a year and a half, then the Paris embassy staff, then out. Montana National Guard two years later, out in '14. Why the hell did you rejoin?"

My pulse jackhammers the middle of my face. I wipe sweat from my brow. "I've been asking myself that since St. Nazaire. Patriotism. And, I suppose, the desire to make a difference. I do know supply and French. I was one of the main translators when I worked the embassy. My mother's side is French. I've spoken it since childhood. I understand the language and people as well as any American can, I suppose. They guaranteed me a post in Tours, on the Services of Supply headquarters staff."

"Well, that's another lie the army told you," Tuttle says. "I hope your French is better than your predecessor's. What kind of work did you do before you rejoined our blessed army?"

"I'm a journalist. Got a job with the *Chicago Tribune* after the army, then Associated Press, Paris bureau for two years. Moved to Butte, Montana, where I still live. Crime beat. Worked my way up to associate editor at the *Butte Miner*."

"Butte?" Tuttle frowns. "Isn't that a hundred miles beyond the edge of the earth?"

"Great place to be a reporter—plenty of crime, corruption, and shenanigans. Great fishing and hunting."

"You're old enough to have sons in the service."

"Yes, sir. Oscar's twenty-one, a second lieutenant at Fort Knox. Jack's twenty-two, a Marine second lieutenant."

"That's too bad," Tuttle says. "I mean about Jack." He takes a pull on his pipe, as though considering his next words. "Don't mention that he's a Marine to our army brethren. Touchy subject around here."

"Marines handle drunken sailors while the army wins wars," the colonel says.

Almost my exact words to Jack. A pang of anger surprises me. It's one thing to say it myself, but to hear someone else cut down Jack's unit... I struggle to keep my face neutral.

Tuttle takes another puff and blows a smoke ring. "Oh, I assume you've guessed that I'm Tuttle. First name's Arnold. Our boss here is Colonel Sanford Wadhams. If we keep you, I'll need to know what to call you. Al? Albert? Bert?"

"Ab, sir."

"That'll set you apart from the other ten thousand Johnsons," Wadhams says. "What do you know about medical supply?"

"Not much. But a crate's a crate. Ammo or bandages, same process."

"Know the difference between Liston and Thomas splints?" Wadhams stares daggers into my eyes.

"No." I look away.

"Sinclair skate? Jones splint?" Tuttle narrows his eyes.

"Sorry, sirs. I am a fast study." Though my mind is moving at a snail's pace right now.

"Great. I didn't want anyone who knew their job." Tuttle's face flushes. "Look, if you order a hundred crates of Thomas splints without specifying arm versus leg, and all we get that month are arm splints, it matters. A lot. It's as bad as supplying a regiment carrying Springfield rifles with British .303 rounds." Tuttle gazes out the window. "After we got rid of that fool who thought he spoke French,

we needed a supply jockey who could, so here you are. Shit. We're running out of time." Tuttle shrugs at Wadhams with a hopeless expression.

Wadhams glares at me and hands the file back to Tuttle. "All things medical and sanitary fall under G-4-B, from the surgeon general to the privates digging latrines." He stands and walks to the window. Tuttle studies my file while Wadhams continues. "The priority on shipping has been troops, bullets, and guns. Medical is short of *everything*."

Tuttle closes my personnel file with a snap. "Along the way, you'll hear the term *sanitary train* to describe what we do. Don't be fooled—it's neither sanitary nor a choo-choo."

"Sirs, I'm sorry they didn't send you someone with medical experience," I say. "That's not my fault, however. I volunteered to come here to do liaison work in Tours, where a crate really is a crate. Can you give me a thumbnail sketch of what I need to know?" A sinking feeling worms through my chest.

"Okay, but it's a big thumb," Tuttle says. "We're a temporary branch office. Our headquarters is in Chaumont. Our zone of operations will be in the Lorraine region when we have enough divisions ready to fight. Our temporary assignment is to coordinate the medical support for the Second Division. They're about to join the First in a fight around Cantigny, north of here. I've heard it called a *warm-up* before they get into anything big. After that, they move to Lorraine, where we're building our base hospitals. Forward of the base hospitals will be the evacuation hospitals and then the field hospitals and then the ambulance dressing stations. Those are as close to the front as we can safely drive our few ambulances."

"Few?" I ask.

"Shipping priorities, like I said." Tuttle takes a puff on his pipe. "Your job will be liaising with our French counterparts. Some are great —I have a lot of respect for the French medical community. Some of their military medical folks are . . . well, arrogant dunderheads."

"I got to know a few of the officers with the Eighth Evacuation Hospital," I say. "They came over on the SS *Caserta* with me last week."

Tuttle gazes out the window. "Each division is supposed to have four evac hospitals. We have four divisions ready to fight but only two

evac hospitals. At this moment we don't have one fully functional base hospital."

"What about the Paris hospitals?"

"Off limits. The French don't want American casualties here. Pershing doesn't like the congestion and the distance from Lorraine."

"A friend of mine in intelligence told me the fighting is getting closer." I point at my nose.

"Intelligence doesn't share much with us," Tuttle says. "However, my eyes tell me the French government is fleeing Paris like rats from a sinking ship. You met the Paris Gun up close. Things will become interesting around here very soon."

"I understand that the Second Division is half Marine," I say.

"Yeah. I wish that wasn't the case, but we're so desperate for infantry that we'll take what we can get—for now. Again, I caution you, don't sound too friendly toward the navy or the Marines."

I chuckle.

"What?"

"Lieutenant Beck is waiting for his *audience* with you. He was the only navy medical officer on the transport ship I came over on, so he stuck out like my nose does now. He talked as though he was God's gift to medicine. One of the doctors in Evac 8 knew him in Chicago, where he earned the nickname *Hot Shot*. Had the worst case of seasickness on board. A couple of the army doctors offered to hydrate him rectally."

"I plan to insert my boot in that part of his anatomy," Wadhams says.

## **Chapter Six**

## Lieutenant (junior grade) Arthur Beck

I t's almost two-damned-o'clock, and my stomach is grumbling. These clowns have made me wait three hours. Nobody makes me wait like this. Nobody.

The only friendly face I've encountered while I paced in the hall was Ab Johnson. I glance at my watch again and rub the back of my neck, working out a kink. What's so important that I have to wait? Are they doing this on purpose? This is ridiculous. Don't they know who I am?

Tuttle's secretary finally summons me. Tuttle's office is large, though not expansive, with a well-worn oak desk and an empty leather desk chair. The full colonel sits in one of the two wooden guest chairs, his back to me. Ab Johnson stands as the clerk hands him a cold pack. Ab is half a head taller than me, heavyset in a way that seems to be on the overweight side of vigorous. His graying dark brown hair is longer than most of the other officers. Before the injury, his face reminded me of some of the cops and reporters I've met—strong jawed, blunt, neither handsome nor off-putting. The bruises forming around his eyes make their sky blue almost luminous. Ab nods toward Tuttle, who stands at the window.

I snap to attention with a click of my heels and salute. "Beck, Lieutenant Junior Grade Arthur, reporting for duty, sir." My cousin, Hans

Ochs, had drummed one military fact into me—when in doubt, click your heels and salute. Hans was a lieutenant in the German Army when I lived with his family during my two years in Frankfurt. Hans had brimmed with military zeal, assigned to an elite unit. I gaze at the wall, an equal distance between the colonels.

Tuttle moves from the window and walks behind me, as though inspecting me. I remain rigid, holding the salute. The man makes a full circle, stands in front of me, and waves a hand near his forehead. Not a German salute. "Nice uniform. At least the navy knows how to do one thing right."

"Lieutenant Beck," the colonel says. "The only reason I don't personally ship you back to the States in a rowboat is that we're desperate for surgeons. You allegedly are one."

Allegedly? My face is hot. Does he know who he's talking to? I'd like to give him a piece of my mind but better not. He could be the head of this whole program—chief of service sort of thing. I I need to be careful.

I let my right hand down, not sure if I should assume the pose of *at ease* or *attention*. The second would be right in the German army, but here? The navy skipped all of this for the doctors it was rushing through at Great Lakes Naval Station.

An explosion rescues me.

It seems to be at least a few blocks away. The other three rush to the window and lean out, leaving me like an abandoned bride. A shudder ripples through my gut as I remember this morning's experience.

"That's the fourth today," Tuttle says. "Sounds like it hit to the north."

The colonel and Ab return to their seats. The lieutenant colonel sits behind the desk, opens a file, and peruses it. The office feels airless despite the open window. A horse-drawn wagon careens past on the avenue, its bell clanging, men shouting in French—probably a fire engine.

"I'm Tuttle. Lieutenant, I don't normally handle personnel matters for the navy, but your egg is now in my basket. You were supposed to join your regiment a week ago, and they're rather put out about your failure to report for duty."

The colonel looks up and shakes his head. "No excuses. Repeat after me. *No excuse, sir.*"

My jaw tightens. This isn't my fault. I'm a surgeon, for God's sake, not the moron who wrote the orders. Tuttle circles his right hand in a *come-on* motion. I raise my chin.

"No excuse, sir."

"Good. Now what's the reason for your late arrival?"

"It's not my fault. I arrived in St. Nazaire on the twenty-third and reported to the personnel office. They made me wait there until yesterday due to the low priority of my orders."

"Sir," The colonel says with a sharp edge. "I don't know what they taught you, but you end sentences to a superior officer with the word *sir*. Get used to using it."

"Sir."

"Navy teach you to salute like that?" The colonel has turned in his chair, his eyes locked on mine.

My heart won't slow down—this is like the first time I presented a case at grand rounds as a student. The colonel's eyes are fixed on mine. How can he stare this long without blinking? It's not my fault. Sweat trickles along my right temple. "No . . . sir." I need to shift the conversation somewhere—anywhere—else.

"Don't click your heels like that again unless the Kaiser wins." The colonel sighs. "I know we're rushing officers in, but did the navy teach you anything about the customs of the service?"

"No . . . sir."

"I'm Colonel Wadhams, by the way. I have the privilege to command this unit and now, you. Has the navy improved their uniform standards?"

"Sir, the uniforms in my size didn't fit very well. My tailor made it." My heart will not slow. I take a deep breath and ease it out.

"Just one problem." Wadhams looks at Ab, who shrugs. "Everyone seconded to the AEF is supposed to wear an army uniform. You could get by with that in the ports, or at a navy hospital, but not where you're going."

"Where do I get one . . . sir?"

"The quartermaster of the unit you report to," Ab says, intoning as though he has a bad cold.

Tuttle reads from the file before him. "Impressive resume, Lieutenant. Bachelor's and master's degrees in bacteriology from the University of Chicago. Several years of research and multiple publications, then med school at Rush." He pauses and reads. "Internship and surgical training at Cook County Hospital. Now on staff at Cook with an assistant professorship at Rush."

"When did you join the navy?" Wadhams asks.

"Five months ago. They needed an urgent faculty replacement at Naval Station Great Lakes."

"That where some fool taught you that German salute?" Wadhams's eyes bore into me.

"No, not that." I need to keep the years I lived with Hans's family in Frankfurt, Germany, under the carpet. It was a great opportunity at the time, doing research with Dr. Paul Ehrlich, one of the top microbiologists in the world. But Ehrlich supports the Kaiser's war with Germanic passion. And Hans is now in the Kaiser's army. Damn it—I joined the navy to shed the stain of being German-American. My academic career will suffer if there's any question about my loyalty.

"Why are you here in France?"

"George Crile recruited me to work in his research unit here. They wanted to include a navy surgeon."

"Major Crile." Wadhams frowns. "Get used to using rank rather than the first names of your superiors, Lieutenant."

"Your navy has seen fit to transfer you to the Fifth Regiment medical staff," Tuttle says.

"The Fifth Regiment? Is that a different research unit?"

"Sir. Use that more."

"But I had a deal."

"Sir," Wadhams says.

"Sir." I'd understand them treating me like this if I were a medical student—hell, it's the way I treated the students all the time. But I'm not a student, I'm the best surgeon in this room.

Tuttle frowns. "Our section is responsible for the Second Division sanitary train. You do know what a division is, don't you, Lieutenant?"

"No . . . sir. Well, I know it's a big unit, but no detail. They taught us a little about ships. Uh, sir."

Tuttle crosses his arms against his chest. "I'm feeling like a tutor for a couple of idiots." He sighs. "Okay. Our divisions have twenty-seven thousand troops with two infantry brigades and support elements. The Third and Fourth Brigades are the infantry components of the Second Division. The Third Brigade is army, the Fourth is the only Marine unit in my army. Each brigade has two regiments. The Fourth Brigade of Marines is composed of the Fifth and Sixth Marine Regiments. A bell in your head starting to ring, Lieutenant? Navy doctors and corpsmen take care of the Marines. That's where you come in."

"How many hospitals do we have?"

"None," Wadhams says. "All the hospitals are *army*, staffed by *army* medical. Navy doctors run the regimental and battalion aid stations for *your* Marines. The only surgery you'll do is hemorrhage control. Stabilize the patient and ship him to us—we do the fancy stuff."

That's a ridiculous waste of my time. "Any GP can do that. I'm a fully trained surgeon. Look, there's been a big mistake. George—I mean, Major Crile—is expecting me. All of this other business, including this meeting, is making me late. I have important research to begin there. Sirs."

Wadhams bores his eyes into me. "You're with the Fifth Marine Regiment. You want a transfer, take it up with them."

Distant thunder draws my eyes to the window. I blink, trying to focus, unsure what else to say. These people are nuts. My orders are screwed up. They can fix it, but won't.

Tuttle goes to the window. Wadhams joins him and points. "That hit farther away. Do you think they have more than one of those guns?"

The bells, motors, and hooves of emergency vehicles grow louder outside. Wadhams faces me. "Lieutenant, the following is not my role, but out of a sense of *collegial* courtesy . . ." He sighs. "How many navy uniforms did you see as you wandered around this building over the past few hours?"

"None."

"Good," Wadhams says. "The American Expeditionary Forces are under the command of the United States Army. The army isn't a bit

happy to have a Marine brigade in France. That is a *gentlemanly understatement*, mind you. The Marines and your navy colleagues are not welcome here. You're under army command now. We don't intend to include the navy in our medical system beyond *your* care of *your* Marines. Lieutenant, when the history of this war is written, navy medical will get nothing more than a footnote. The Marines won't even get that if General Pershing and the Second Division commander, Major General Bundy, have their way."

More emergency vehicles clatter and clang outside as my disbelief grows with Wadhams's words.

"Major Johnson and I are driving up to meet with the Second Division medical staff in the morning," Tuttle says. "My clerk will assign you an overnight billet. Report here at zero-five-hundred hours with your gear. You'll ride with us, then we'll hand you off to them. Dismissed."

I look at the other officers. Ab Johnson says, "That means go to the waiting room, talk with the fellow at the desk there, and he'll tell you where to spend the night. Be back at the front door before 5:00 a.m."

My face is on fire as I tear the lodging chit from the clerk's hand, pick up my suitcases, and storm out the door. I won't stand for this.

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## ABOUT JOHN F. ANDREWS

John F. Andrews is the award-winning author of the *Novels of the Great War Series*, including *Our Desperate Hour*, *An American Nurse in Paris*, and *Dogs Don't Cry*. He writes from the perspective of a service family member and critical care physician to craft unique stories based on real events. His characters struggle shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the real heroes of WWI as well as showing the plight of civilians caught in one of the most horrible conflicts in human history. His novels are stories of struggle, survival, hope, resilience, and love.



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Marcel and Geneviève must find a distant relative, Cousin Henri, who lives near Paris. However, they have never met him, are not sure of his last name, and don't know his address. Abby is the key—Henri is her former owner, though she begs to differ on the "owner" concept. If anyone can find him, she can. The teens confront their worst fears while seeking refuge amid the chaos of war, armed only with their faith in Abby.

Dogs Don't Cry