

Prologue



January 21, 1944

1100 Hours

Able Company Command Post, West Bank Rapido River, Italy

The time had come.

The lieutenant could hear the squeal and clank of the tracks, but through the smoke and the fog, he could not yet see the tanks. It was only a matter of minutes.

He blew his breath out and shook his head sadly. It was all over. There would be no reinforcement from the other side of that bloody river, and his first command—less than four hours old—was coming to an inglorious end.

Surrender.

It was inconceivable, but...there it was. To fight on would accomplish nothing. Nothing, he thought. They would all be dead within minutes, and the lieutenant knew that there couldn't be an attempt to rescue his company for hours. Maybe days.

The company commander was dead, not that he'd been any help, and the company had less than a platoon, maybe a squad, left of soldiers that were able to fight. *But fight with what? Fists against armor?* The ammunition was nearly exhausted and consisted entirely of a few rifle magazines and a handful of grenades. There were no more rounds for the machine guns and the mortars. The precious bazooka rounds hadn't even survived the crossing. Even if they were fully armed, a platoon or a company, or even a whole battalion, would not even scratch the German defenses. It was such a terrible waste.

First Lieutenant Sam Taft had contemplated death— both before and during this terrible battle, but he didn't dwell on his mortality. He was an optimist by nature and had always focused his thoughts on going home after the war was won. He had never before considered giving up, his pride had never even countenanced the notion, but he found that however distasteful, he really had no choice.

Sam didn't think of himself as a soldier. He was a rancher, ripped from his life in South Texas by the war, and he wanted with all his heart to return to his wife and never set foot on a battlefield again. At least he didn't want to think of himself as a soldier, but he was. A good one, and a good, conscientious combat leader despite his disdain for military life. He had never before shied away from difficult decisions, and he wouldn't now.

"Sergeant Kenton!" Sam called out over the shattered valley floor to his platoon sergeant, who was now the acting top sergeant of the company.

"Yes, sir?" called back Kenton from his shell crater.

"It's time."

The sergeant slammed his fist into the mud, cursed, and then nodded. He had come to the same conclusion.

So had the Germans. A tank entered the battlefield from somewhere out of the haze and then at first cautiously, then openly, panzer grenadiers emerged from the smoke and began to round up the Texans. Any will to fight further melted away.

Deeply ashamed, Sam laid his rifle next to the body of Mark Christian, his radioman, and stood up with his hands over his head. For the soldiers of Able Company, the Battle of the Rapido River was over.

