

THE ACCIDENTAL WARRIOR

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THE ACCIDENTAL WARRIOR

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The Accidental Warrior

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Dedication

For L.W.W.
With love and gratitude.

Acknowledgements

Alfred, Lord Tennyson has his Ulysses declare, “I am a part of all that I have met.” Before Tennyson, Lord Byron admits in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, “I live not in myself, but I become/ Portion of that around me.” And before Byron, the brilliantly analytical John Donne observes wisely, “No man is an island.”

Accordingly, anyone attempting an artistic reflection of reality necessarily filters the effort through a lifetime of experience with people and events. I acknowledge, therefore, all whose thoughts, writings, and actions have made me what I am and my work what it is. I am indebted to my kind and supportive agent, Patrick Wright, Esq., and to those “front-line editors” who read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions: Dr. G. R. Vela and Dr. Don W. Smith. But because thoughts, writings, and actions of even the most wise must be restricted and distorted by my own limitations, as a flawed radio will distort the clearest signals, any defects in the work are mine alone. Like Milton’s Eve, I don’t always take good advice.

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“...if way to the Better there be, it exacts
a full look at the Worst.”

In Tenebris

Thomas Hardy

PROLOGUE

At ten-hundred hours on Thursday, 17 August 1939, a young German *Obersturmführer* knocked lightly on the office door of *Generaloberst* Franz Halder, chief of staff of the German Army, Central Headquarters in Berlin, and walked crisply across the room, stopping two feet from Halder's desk. He did not salute the general, nor did Halder, preoccupied with writing in his diary and characteristically determined to show his own high position by ignoring the presence of a subordinate, acknowledge his aide's presence. The young officer quietly placed a sealed, official document on the desk and stood back. When the general continued to ignore both the aide and the document, the young man cleared his throat to indicate to his superior that he needed to be acknowledged. Only then did Halder glance up at the document and notice that it was from Heinrich Himmler, chief of Hitler's *Schutzstaffel*, the *SS*, the Nazi Party's own police force. As the aide turned and left the office, Halder frowned and broke the seal on the document.

“*Mein Lieber Halder,*” the memorandum began, “My dear Halder, I require a supply of twelve Polish military uniforms,

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all with appropriate and authentic insignias. You will, under the strictest security, please to find, procure, and deliver the items unto my aide within one week. *Heil Hitler!*” The message was signed, “Heinrich Himmler.”

Halder’s eyebrows raised in surprise at the odd request. Himmler had not mentioned why he wanted the uniforms, and Halder had no information on the matter. But if *Herr Himmler* wanted Polish military uniforms, then he would get them.

General Halder picked up his telephone and got through to one of his senior officers in eastern Germany, ordering him to use strict security to locate the uniforms, inspect them for authenticity, and send them to Berlin within the week.

Having set in motion a process that would give Himmler what he wanted, Halder turned back to his diary and wrote a brief note concerning the peculiar order from his dangerous superior.

ONE

The fence posts extended due west across the Texas ranch as far as the eye could see. Paul Hunter lined up the last one in the row before he set it firmly in place. The new cedar post joined the straight line as Paul scraped a hill of caliche into the hole around the new post with his scuffed boot and tamped it down with his pry bar, watering the caliche unintentionally with the sweat dropping from his brow. Checking the alignment with the other posts and then turning ninety degrees to check the vertical position, Paul pushed more caliche into the hole and packed it down. Stopping to rest, Paul shucked his dusty hat and wiped the sweat from his head, brow, face, and hatband with a large bandanna. That done, he twisted the sweat from the soaked cloth, stuffed it back into his pocket, and leaned on his shovel. The summer of 1939 had been hot, and even into the middle of August there was no relief. Paul had been repairing fence posts since shortly after sunup, replacing them when necessary. And now the sun was just under a hand above Flat Rock Mesa rising from the landscape in Southwest Texas—just about six o'clock, with dark some three hours away.

Paul walked wearily over to the wagon, threw his shovel and pry

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bar into the wooden bed with a clatter, and took his wool-covered canteen off the seat. The water was warm but it was sweet, and it cut the dust that had seemed to coat his throat. Jamming the cork back into the metal container and tossing it under the wagon seat, Paul picked up his pliers and claw hammer and walked back to the fence.

He stretched the top barbed wire onto the new pole and drove a staple to secure it, keeping it tight with his pliers levered against the pole. He then secured the other wires and checked them all for tightness.

“Well, that’ll hold till I get back,” Paul muttered to no one in particular. The mule, Daisy Mae, turned to look at him. She had been standing since sunup. Sometimes she found a bit of shade while Paul had tended fences, but mostly not. Every few minutes during the last hour, the usually patient mule had begun wandering a step or two towards the barn. Finally, Paul had had to catch her up and turn the whole wagon around to face west, away from the barn. Daisy Mae was not a troublesome animal, but the day had been long and hot, and the mule, having been around Paul since he was a boy, figured he might need a hint now and then that home was that-a-way.

“Okay, old girl, you’re right. We’re done here. We can go home now.” Paul put the hammer and pliers into a canvas bag in the wagon. Then he dug into the pocket of his jeans to pull out the few metal staples he had left over and put them into the bag as well. They had been digging into his thigh all day. He was more than happy to get rid of them. He pulled off his gloves and slapped the dust out of them before pulling them back onto his damp hands.

Climbing with some soreness and considerable weariness up on the wheel and then into the seat of the buckboard, Paul took the reins and leaned back wearily on the wooden bench. As he looked west over the familiar land, he let his eyes wander slowly over the vast stretch of pasture, hills, mesas, and arroyos that lay before him to the horizon. Just to the south of Flat Rock Mesa a small hill, Outlaw Knob, seemed to serve as prologue to the Davis Mountains lying far to the west. The land to the right of the mesa was flat pasture covered with rough grass. Gracing the pasture,

as though added for some holiday decoration, were yucca plants, some in bloom. Here and there were gatherings of ocotillo cacti, with their wine-red blooms, and the tall, stem-like strawberry cacti, with their red blooms on the tips. Near the natural springs and seeps, dark green trees and bushes grew in profusion along the path of the water, until the dusty earth overpowered the inadequate supply of moisture. Cattle dotted the landscape as far as Paul's eye could see, looking like a normal part of the scene. They belonged to this land and the land belonged to them.

Paul reflected on how familiar this land was to him, this land he had known since his earliest days. The Hunter family had lived on and with this land for three generations, and to Paul no place on the earth was more beautiful, comfortable, more right. It was a hard land, with its droughts, everlasting dust, its rattlesnakes, centipedes, scorpions, and its damned rock-hard soil that prairie dogs somehow seemed to find a way to dig holes in to break the legs of horses and cattle. But these things were merely natural barriers for the men and women of the Pecos Frontier, set somehow to test the spirit of those who lived on the land. They were elements to be dealt with, and it was a mighty poor example of human who could not find a way to cope with a rogue longhorn, a thieving coyote—either two- or four-legged variety—snake, scorpion, or suchlike. Paul loved every part of it, every minute of it.

Except maybe tending fences. That was hard, dirty, endless work. Instead of turning the work over to a crew of hired hands, Paul had insisted on hitching up Daisy Mae, climbing aboard the wagon, and tending to this onerous task on his own. If someone had asked him why he would do such work himself when Hunter Ranch had more than twenty ranch hands, Paul could have explained. Whether or not the interrogator would understand his explanation was another question. When he was young, ten or twelve, Paul and his friend Jerry would ride their horses to the foot of Outlaw Knob and spend the day climbing to the top through the tough grass and sandburs, around the cacti and insects and snakes. The climb was difficult, taking a couple of hours; and once on top they would tie a red bandanna on the big yucca plant growing on the highest point, and glory in their achievement.

Sally Hunter, Paul's mother, looking at the dirty, exhausted

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boys when they returned from their adventure, would each time ask, “Paul, Jerry, why in the name of Sam do you waste play time climbing to the top of that hill?” Usually, Paul and Jerry would just grin at each other and repeat the answer they had heard John Henry, Paul’s father, give, “Sal, they climb the damned thing because it’s there.” But once, when he dragged in alone after an especially tough climb, he tried to answer his mother directly and honestly.

“Mom, Jerry and I figure that we need to show, ourselves mostly, that we can do it. If other people can do it, we need to know if we can, too. It wouldn’t be right *not* to climb it. And we never stop before we get to the top, even if we get tired or fall and get hurt or get tangled up with a cactus. We need to get to the top. And we always do. It just wouldn’t be right not to.”

And that was why he had tended the fence today. He glanced at the row of fence posts once again and saw that they were straight and strong. He had reached the top again.

Lifting the reins, dirty and tired Paul tugged gently on the left one and turned the mule to head for home.