

## Shell Shock

“Get up you fat sack of shit!” Staff Sergeant Malloy screamed at the crumpled figure of a soldier cowering on the bell tower’s landing. “If you don’t get your lazy ass up these stairs, we’re both going to die!”

Private Dillon’s large frame rocked back and forth uncontrollably, silently mouthing words to himself as mortars rocked the tower. Dillon wore thick, leather earmuffs, claspings them tightly to his head. Malloy approached the distressed soldier and slapped his face with the back of his hand in a move that seemed so efficient, he must have done it hundreds of times before. Towering over the private, he yelled as loud as he could.

“Dillon! If your worthless ass don’t pick up this ammo and start heading up those stairs you won’t have to worry about the Krauts shooting you, I’ll do it my god damn self!” Malloy enunciated the words clearly, mimicking his speech with hand signals as you would to a person hard of hearing.

After making his threat, he curled his fingers into an imaginary gun, mimicking the way he would put a bullet in Private Dillon’s heart if he could not pull himself together. There was nothing in Malloy’s cold, blue eyes to indicate any hyperbole.

“I can’t believe Captain Newman gave me this nutjob private to assist me in this mission. Now let’s go!” Malloy said, dragging the soldier to his feet. He grabbed the private by the shoulders and started banging him against the wall of the tower. “Let’s go!” Malloy banged the private’s head against the concrete wall with each word.

Seeming to snap out of his trance, Private Dillon looked around confused and then began picking up the bandoleers of ammunition that lay scattered around his feet. It was heavy, even for him, but he began climbing the stairs following the angry Staff Sergeant.

The mission was simple. To Malloy, they always were. A German Brigade was advancing on their position from the east. Staff Sergeant Malloy’s objective was to stop the advance. Cpt. Newman briefed him twenty minutes earlier, right after the first mortars began to fall. Malloy was to take a sniper team to the bell tower with 2000 rounds of ammunition. The mortar fire was only the start, every soldier on the ground knew that. After their defenses were weakened and the soldiers were hunkered down, the Germans would surely advance with every soldier available.

Malloy was not surprised he was chosen for such an important task. He was certain he was the best shot in the Brigade, maybe even the division. But why Captain Newman chose Private Dillon to be his spotter was a mystery to him. Sure, he worked like an ox, but he was never the same after his platoon's first ambush. He became shaky, easily startled, and in a perpetual state of anxiety. That's when he began wearing the earmuffs.

These earmuffs were not for the cold, but rather to protect the ears of artillery men when they fired their big guns. After he started using those, Dillon was still a mess, but he was serviceable as a cook or a paper pusher. If their company was at full staff, they would have surely sent him back to the states on a section eight discharge. But after losing so many soldiers, they could not spare a single man. That's how he wound up working in Cpt Newman's office. SSG Malloy figured all the real soldiers would be needed to protect the line in case of breach, so he had the leftovers.

After ten brutal minutes of climbing, and many more slaps, Malloy and Dillon finally made it to the summit of the tower. Dillon immediately dropped off his load of ammo next to the ledge facing the most likely avenue of attack and crawled to the corner with his hands over his ears again. He rocked back and forth mouthing words to himself. When a mortar landed especially close, he would bang both his hands violently against his head, letting out a silent scream.

"You did your job fatty. Now watch the master work." Suddenly the mortar fire stopped, and it became incredibly peaceful. The sun was shining, the grass was green, and the air smelled subtly of the farms just outside of town. Birds were chirping in the distance.

"Here it comes," SSG Malloy thought to himself. Then, almost as if on cue, small arms fire began.

SSG Malloy quickly crouched in front of the ledge, placing his M1917 Enfield next to him. He took out his green portable radio from his backpack and began to speak, "Captain, this is Malloy. We are in position. The attack is commencing now. Waiting on your orders, over."

"Good job, Malloy. Now I want you to listen to me very carefully. Are you listening Staff Sergeant?" The Captain's voice squawked back over the small green box.

"Awaiting your orders!" Malloy replied, annoyed.

"Take off Private Dillon's earmuffs."

"Say again, over," Malloy replied in a confused tone.

"Listen to me you bastard. Remove Private Dillon's earmuffs immediately!" Captain screamed. "That is a direct order. If you don't listen to me, I'll have you court marshalled myself!"

Angrily, Malloy approached Private Dillon and crouched beside him. "What the hell is going on Private?" Malloy shouted. Dillon made no reaction. "What the fuck is going on Dillon? What is Newman talking about?" Malloy screeched again even louder.

Again, Dillon made no reaction, infuriating Malloy even further. Frustrated Malloy once again slapped the private, knocking the earmuffs from his head. The earmuffs hit the ground.

Abruptly, the look on Dillon's face drastically changed. The sound of machine gun fire, German screaming, and bullets ricocheting off concrete filled his ears, swirling like a tornado inside his head. Malloy was taken aback by the change of Dillon's demeanor. Dillon's eyes became focused and filled with hate.

As soon as his earmuffs hit the ground, his shaking stopped and his breathing steadied. Almost mechanically, Dillon sprang to his feet. He dove in front of the ledge, grabbing the Enfield with a speed Malloy never thought possible from such a large frame. Dillon took one steadied finger and wet it by putting it in his mouth. He stuck the finger outside the window, feeling the wetness evaporate in the wind. Simultaneously he began adjusting the scope and spinning the elevation and windage like tops with his other hand. Dillon then unboxed the bandoleers of ammo lining the magazines neatly to his side. Carefully, he peaked his head over the ledge of the window.

A German soldier began breaching the fence 600 yards to the east. Private Dillon took aim at the soldier's head and fired. The shot landed square between the German soldier's eyes. Malloy sat back amazed. A group of three soldiers began running towards the compound on the bridge to the north east. Dillon slightly turned and fired three times. One after another they dropped in a span of seconds with gunshots dead between their eyes. Malloy's blue, steely eyes widened with shock.

"How is he doing this?" Malloy wondered to himself, his jaw literally hanging open.

Shot after shot German soldiers began dropping from incredible distances, distances Malloy thought would be so impossible that he would not attempt them himself. One shot looked to be from over 800 yards away, far past the weapon's maximum effective range. After hundreds of shots rang out, Malloy heard the first clear words to ever come out of the private's mouth.

"Ammo," the private grunted. Staff Sergeant Malloy was in such a state of shock that the word did not even register. "Ammo!" Dillon bellowed.

Malloy scrambled frantically on his knees, unboxing the rest of the ammo and placing the magazines carefully lined up along Dillon's right side. Dillon loaded a magazine and continued to fire. This continued for hours until the retreat began. Silence once again filled the air.

Astonished, Staff Sergeant Malloy rose from the floor of the tower and surveyed the scene in front of him. Standing in a pile of dozens of empty magazines, Malloy observed close to 600 dead, German soldiers surrounding the tower in clusters. Each one had a bullet placed in his head with surgical precision.

"Captain, the Krauts are retreating. The base is saved!" Malloy exclaimed into the radio with a relieved tone.

The Staff Sergeant dropped the radio and walked over to the private. Dillon was still crouched at his post, observing for more enemies, oblivious to the retreat. Malloy bent down beside the private, patting Dillon on the back. "Good job Private, good job," Staff Sergeant Malloy said, filled with an undeserved sense of pride.

Startled by the unexpected touch, the private stood and pointed his weapon at Malloy. For a moment, their icy eyes met. Dillon fired. Just then a garbled transmission could be heard coming through Malloy's radio.

"Put the muffs back on, Malloy. Do you hear me? That is a direct order. Put the earmuffs back on!" Cpt Newman yelled into his radio but received no reply. SSG Malloy was no longer there. Newman sat in the chair of the command center placing his head in his hands. "God damn it you cocky bastard. He wasn't carrying your ammo," Captain Newman mumbled to himself. "You were carrying *his* rifle."