The Reservist - a Foxhole Story

Chapter One: Dull Weekends

My experience of the war, is that it’s pretty boring. Almost two years since being drafted, and I’ve handled a rifle for nothing but target practice, and firing drills. The most we do, is dig foxholes, collect war materiel, and grow barley. The trenches north of Cal’s Pass are so extensive, half the time is being spent to maintain them. Not like they’ll ever see use.

Confused? Oh, yeah. I guess I should explain a bit. I’m a reservist. The Warden alliance instituted the reservists at a time when the fighting south of the pass encroached particularly close to the border, and concerns that everyone would need to answer the calls to arms made the generals concerned if those away from the frontlines would be suitable enough soldiers.

The result? Us. Whenever a unit is depleted at the front, a reservist unit is send up to takes it’s place. If the harvest needs to come in this week, we get the job, and scythes are handed out. Trenches… already mentioned. Although there is the other kind, but the stench is enough to fill the rest of the words out. Worst duty a squad can get assigned.

It’s been 15 or so years since the conception, and at best, it seems like we haven’t been needed. Commanders continually seem to underestimate the shooting skills of the recruits. We all know how to fire, clean, and strip a weapon. The rogue exception is rare. Half of us live in the rural countryside, hunting, scaring off wolves, hunting the hunters, sending thieves into the afterlife, and so on. We know how to handle a gun, and hit what we want. The system is so aggravating.

It’s time like these, I wonder, how we’re doing on the front. We aren’t allowed to fight, not unless we get surprised, but that’s pretty rare. The closest we get to the front, is hauling away bodies, and picking through the dead. Deposit the useless shit into a refuse heap, and onto the next empty battlefield. More piles to fill. Never ceases to surprise me that the piles are gone--just gone--when we return to the battlefield wakes.

Interesting enough to keep us from going mad from boredom. If we’re enlisted for five consecutive years, we usually get released back to our homes. If we’ve been reassigned to the combat teams, assignment usually takes longer. They tend to prioritize the ones with missing limbs and holes over the relatively intact soldiers. Another industry they keep us busy with: box making. Really big box making. Usually though, after five years, we’re on the descending slope of our prime. Unless you’re one of the kids that enlisted at sixteen. Fools.

Only three more years, and then I’ll be released. It’ll be nice to wake up without a whistle in my ear, and the occasional non-lethal grenade the officer threw into the room. Or someone set up as a tripwire to scare the shit out of the next guy to walk into the barracks, or go out and take a leak. So many laps we could have avoided.

Only three more years. God help me.

The date at the top of the entry read March 16, 2137. Jack closed the book, ensuring the ink was dry first--or close enough. He didn’t particularly care one way or the other, just so long as he could read it when he came back to it.

He could see his mother’s piercing eyes looking at him, saying that the insurance that nothing be ruined is the highest ideal to achieve. He chuckled at that. When shearing sheep, and milking cows, he couldn’t agree more. When writing entries with a running pen into a journal … well, at least it got written down.

It was ultimately a dull Saturday. The barracks was empty. Mostly. Most of the other guys had gone into the city and surrounding towns to get drunk and find a pretty girl. Those staying this week, had done that the previous week, when it was snowing, and they didn’t get very far because of it. Instead of arriving in the city for the afternoon, they stayed in a small town, finding liquor and girls all the same. Jack and company were just a lot colder for the entire experience.

So, of a barracks that could hold 30, there was only four of them. One fellow, a heavily built guy further down the rows, was reading a book and lounging back. Bill was his name. The other two were playing chess. Jeff, the tall and lanky one, was dragging a palm over his face, while Henry, a short and blond fellow, was chuckling. Few people won against Henry in chess.

All of them were wearing their winter gear. The barracks were only heated half of the time during the week, and the weekends usually never were heated. Far as it concerned command, the soldiers had all they needed to stay warm, and weren’t exactly expected to stay around in the barracks. The fuel could be better used elsewhere, like keeping the kitchens ready, and the pantry, if not warm, above freezing. The best they could say, the barracks was better than the mess. If we wanted heat, we collected the fuel ourselves. If we wanted anything beyond the leftovers from the week, we also were left with the initiative to scrap it up ourselves.

With nothing to do, besides perhaps write a bit more--he had already stopped for a reason--Jack collected his rifle and two clips of ammo. If he was lucky, he’d catch a deer in the surrounding woods. If he wasn’t, he’d find a scrawny rabbit. If he was really unlucky, he’d run into the wolves, but they usually avoided men. They knew what happened.

Trudging out into the snow, and then into the woods wasn’t too bad. The spring melts were arriving, and with it, the mud, but the roads north of the Pass were still paved and in decent condition. Following the roads out of the encampment and into the countryside let would let him walk as far as he wanted--given he can run fast enough to be back for the Monday drills.

A few birds sang songs around him, giving the forest less of a dead feeling. It’d still be a few weeks until spring touched the trees. Until then, the birds offered company. And the mud.

Jack wandered through the trees, passing through a few clearings, and following a few trails. The problem with attempting to hunt near the base--everything has practically been hunted to extinction. It was rumored that shotguns were specifically removed from bases near forests, to keep the bird population somewhat intact.

Still, he did find a rabbit after a while. He had rose up over a hill, and spotted the tiny creature next to a rancher’s fence post. Lying down a good 20 yards away, he leveled the rifle, and began to control his breathing, and waited for the rabbit to stop it’s hurried movements briefly. When it did, there was the sharp *crack* of the gun, and the small creature fell over, with only a small shudder as the life left it. He made sure to cleanly kill it with his knife, before putting a paw through a bowline knot, and slipping it tight.

For a few hours more, he wandered about, hoping he might get another chance at a rabbit. He wasn’t so lucky. He had considered crossing into the rancher’s fields, but thought better of it, and cattle were still easily spooked by gunshots.

With some resignation, Jack returned to the base, the sun touching the horizon as he walked into the base. With purpose, he made his way to the kitchens. The cooking staff, while not entirely gone, had a skeleton crew, who were equally hungry for something other than rice and mushy vegetables. At the sight of the rabbit, they perked up from their cook pots and stoves. They knew they wouldn’t get the best meat, but wherever the cooks were drawn from, they apparently had stomachs of iron. They would discuss in great detail what was in the food--specifically, where it came from--, and would swap recipes while most soldiers that overheard tried to stop heaving. The only policy that was relevant, was who skinned the animal. The skinner kept the hide, to turn it into the canteen, who exchanged the various pelts for varying amounts of money, depending on the quality, and the time of year. Most of the city folks didn’t know how to skin a pelt, and didn’t know what to do with it. They also didn’t learn about the exchange, until they observe someone else do it.

Jack wasn’t in the mood to deal with the hide, especially one so small. He handed the entire rabbit to one of the cooks, and in no time had the meat cooked, and Jack was enjoying a hot meal. Every bite was filled his chest with warmth, and he didn’t mind the sharp pain when he stuck a still scalding piece on his tongue. Not a lot at least.

He wandered out of the kitchens as the crazy cooks began to make their strange concoctions out of the rest of the animal. He really didn’t want to know how they planned to prepare the heart.

Wandering about, he eventually found a bench, and sat. The wind rustled some of the branches of a nearby tree, but otherwise it was calm. Warm too, now that he thought of it. Wind must have died while the rabbit was cooking. He felt tired, sleepy. A long day, not particularly productive, but satisfying. He digested that thought for a few more moments, and then stood up, intent on returning to his barracks.

That didn’t happen. First, through his stupor, he noticed the growl of an engine, which was strange, because no one would be returning until tomorrow afternoon at the latest. The second, was the sound. It wasn’t the constant low growl the trucks made. It was loud, and sounded like it was approaching. Turning to the source of the noise, Jack waited.

The biker was apparently in some hurry. He made a ludicrously sharp turn, and the bike threatened to flip over. It didn’t though, because of the sidecar, and the man sitting in it. Both had scarves and goggles, but a bit of frostbitten flesh peaked out where the wind had taken the scarves out of their place. They hardly stopped, and continued down the line of buildings until they reached the HQ. They dismounted, the passenger running straight up and into the door. The driver dismounted more slowly, gloved hands wrapping themselves around himself. He curled up next to the engine block, which must have felt like hell itself if he was so cold. Jack approached curious.

Generally, there’s always an officer on duty, even on weekends, and with the duty rotating around. Mostly though, they just sit inside, reading a book, or playing cards with the others staying on base. Jack reached the door, but didn’t step inside. He glanced over at the huddled form of the warden driver, and doffed his coat, and moved towards the driver. The driver didn’t notice until he felt the weight settle.

“Th-th-thank-ks. Off-f-f-fly c-c-col-ld … ow-out … here,” he said, stuttering over every word. His accent was familiar. One of the western coastal folks. They didn’t handle the cold all to well.

“Less than you might imagine. If though you’re pushing that,” Jack indicated the bike, and sat down in the snow next to him. “If the bike’s going at it’s max, I suspect you’d be frozen out of your wits. ”

“Hah. Yeah. It … wasn’t .. great.”

“I bet. What news from the front?” It was a better request than asking what dragged him up here going 50 without protection. He probably couldn’t answer it.

“Upper Heartlands again … lost … The Collies threw a lot at us, and the battalions were slowly whittled down. At least though, the front into Umbral is successful, somewhat.”

“Glad to hear that.” Jack leaned his head back onto the seat. Another setback. The war seemed endless. One step forward, another back.

The door of the officer opened, and the duty officer stepped out, glancing down at the two soldiers, one huddled next to the rapidly cooling engine, covered in another man’s coat, with the owner of the coat next to him. It was a strange look, but understanding in a limited way. 2Lt Charles had once been with the infantry and knew what it was like.

Jack quickly scrambled to his feet, and gave a nod to his CO. He was technically off duty, but he suspected that was about to end very quickly given the present situation. He didn’t snap a salute, but stood ready at attention. His CO glanced at the driver, and then back to him before speaking.

“Corporal, please lead the staff sergeant to the kitchens and get him some food. He’s done well. Get him a bunk and a fire going too. When you’re finished, return to my office.” There was a certain heaviness to the way his eyes held him as he issued the orders. Jack shook off the thought and snapped a salute.

“Yes, sir.” He helped the other soldier stand, and lead him towards the kitchens. He was merely shivering, but he was cold enough to the point he’d almost stopped walking. Jack just pushed him along to keep him moving. Eventually, he pushed him through the kitchen door, and gave his instructions to the cooks, whom were eating the remains of the rabbit still. It looked like there were bits of another animal in it too. The cooks responded quickly, and gave up one of their chairs for the SSgt. Jack meanwhile grabbed a load of logs and started a fire in the messenger barracks.

The messenger barracks usually is small, only enough for a half dozen men, but rarely was their need of the of it in a reservist base. It was cold inside the barracks, and the door cracked when he opened the door. He considered the ill will he might receive from the officers, before backtracking and racing to his own barracks. Through the door, and to the fireplace, he shoved the logs in and carefully primed the fire. Birch and twigs caught the flame, and the heat washed over him.

“Bill, can you watch the fire? Keep it going, Charles’ orders.” He hardly waited for the reply, and ran back out, and back to the kitchens. The cooks and the driver were eating, slowly as the fire was beginning to die for the night. A token fire would be maintained all night in the wood stove, but no more.

“Sir, barracks number five down the first row has a fire lit. Warmer than the messenger barracks.” The guy nodded, still shivering, but less than he had previously. “Can one of you guys ensure he gets there?” One of them nodded. Jack grabbed his coat from begin the SSgt, and donned the coat before stepping out into the night.

Unlike before, he didn’t rush to the HQ like he had with his other tasks. Jack wanted a brief time to consider what he might be doing. Really though, he had no idea. A pair of messengers come screeching out of the dark, with the driver and passenger half frozen, purpose the only thing driving them on. Jack looked up to the starlit sky and offered up a quick prayer.

He stepped into the HQ, shutting the heavy down behind him carefully. The officers were warmer than the barracks, but not by much. The officers at least weren’t wearing their winter coats while signing papers, and managing supply orders.

Another difference: the officers had access to electricity. There wasn’t much, so they weren’t getting warm baths every day and had the compact building lit up like Capitol Fair, but there was some small lamps over every desk, alongside unlit candles.

Jack stomped the snow and mud off his boots, as much as possible anyways, and walked down the short hall. Charles office was tucked in the back, and it was the only place with a light on or lit. As he closed the distance to the door, he could tell it was candlelight. Charles was generally very cheap.

Inside, was the messenger, and Charles. Jack stepped in, and gave a salute. Nothing special, but in the company of strangers, it was a safe move. Charles glanced up at him, muttered, “at ease,” and waved at a chair beside the stranger. Nervously, and with a sinking feeling, he sat down.

“So,” Charles began, a pair of spectacles were removed by a hand in a swift movement. “The 154th and 157th reservists platoons will be assigned frontline duty. You’re needed to post up the notices on the barracks, and to ensure everything is cleaned by dawn Monday. Some of the base trucks will ferry you down, but after that we’ll be using frontline equipment.” He spared a glance at the stranger, whom wore warrant officer first class markings. He was frostbitten along the ears and nose, but he held himself rigidly.

“Yes sir. Which unit will we be replacing?” Jack asked. The sinking feeling had found a bottom. ‘Bout as deep as he expected.

“The 27th,” said the stranger, in a grim voice. His eyes didn’t leave the face of the officer. “All but three squads were wiped out, the remaining with heavy injuries and two still fit for combat. Barely.” Jack looked at Charles. Charles looked back, a look reflecting in each’s eyes. The WO1 wasn’t done. On a slightly cheerier tone of grim, he said“luckily, the logistics arm of the company was intact--mostly--so only two platoons will be needed to replace the unit.”

The 27th Company, was a military unit steeped in tradition. Some of the finest fighters consolidated into their ranks over time. They had almost legendary stories of their victories, near defeats, stands, and sieges. They had been thought of as undefeatable, and were the reason we’d pushed the Colonials out of the Deadlands, and had them on the run in upper heartlands. They weren’t infallible, but they were close enough, with excellent leaders. If they were killed . . . Jack’s stomach had landed on a false bottom apparently.

The WO1 continued speaking. “... 27th will be removed from combat, and the logistics arm left in place. The new unit will consolidate into the 56th combat company.” He apparently was finished. His eyes were just as focused as before, with a slightly sour cast to it. Jack wondered briefly if it was pity for the new unit, or bitterness. He wasn’t sure he wanted the answer.

Standing up, he nodded at his CO, and wished him a good night. Charles repeated the words back, a lack of belief in the words. Jack left, stopping at the front desk, to light a candle and began working on the notice sheets. He’d have them up before morning.

Chapter 2