

**Title: Blood On Your Hands**

**Synopsis:** When Lieutenant Williams receives a puzzling communication from HQ, his day is about to turn upside down. Will he respond to his base instincts for revenge?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams was sitting on his favourite chair, just inside the edge of the command tent. Rather than his normal ranking field uniform, he dressed in standard US army fatigues. In his opinion, they were more comfortable. It also helped him form a closer bond with his three-hundred strong battalion. The only distinguishing features from his men's uniforms were the stars on his shoulders. He ran his fingers through his salt and pepper crew cut and across the back of his neck, trying to relieve the tightness. It had been a tough couple of weeks pushing through Paris and then Strasbourg. Despite Hitler's demise and the subsequent surrender of the Germans, pockets of resistance persisted. The construction of their current encampment in Garmisch-Partenkirchen had come as a pleasant respite.

He was reviewing the latest comms. "Well, will you look at that," he said, stubbing out a cigarette. "It seems the Brits have finally taken that damned rocket facility over in Peenemünde." He slid the communique across the table to his second in command, Major Parker.

Parker read the report. "Says here that the place was nigh on deserted by the Krauts. Only a few locals left behind. Guess they're running for the hills now their beloved Führer is gone."

"Not all of them, from what I heard. As you know, it seems some of them didn't get the memo, so to speak. Our boys up near Stuttgart and Frankfurt have also come across a few units who believed the war was still on. The boys taught them otherwise." Williams smiled wryly.

"Well, at least there'll be no more of those V2's causing havoc." Parker paused.

"Sorry sir," he said. "I forgot tha—"

Williams held up a hand. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Looking back at Parker, he said, "You know, he'd have been twenty-four next month. If it was up to me, I'd burn that place, and everyone involved with it to the ground." Silence descended on the tent. Williams reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a folded, worn photograph. He unfolded it and stared at it longingly. "At least Madeleine will be safe back at home now."

A short stocky communication's officer stepped in front of them, interrupting Williams' thoughts. The officer saluted before handing over a piece of paper. Replacing the photograph inside his jacket, Williams read the communique. He creased his brow. "Well, that's damned weird!" he muttered.

"What is it, sir?" asked Parker.

Williams handed him the paper and walked over to the map table. "It appears, Major," he said, "that those new POW's we took in two days ago are of greater importance than we thought." He scanned over the map of Southern Germany, assessing the current situation. Across the Eastern front of Austria and Czechoslovakia, butting up against their own American forces and the allied British positions, lay small red and gold Russian flags.

"HQ wants them secured and transported out of here ASAP." Williams traced a finger from their current location up to Munich. "By my calculations, we're ten clicks away from here." He stabbed a finger on the map. "From there we can meet up with 8th squadron to

airlift them out." He waved a hand across the Eastern front. "Hopefully, we can make it before the Ivan's sweep through." He shouted through the tent entrance, "Captain Todd?"

"Sir!" came the curt reply.

"Gather your unit and the vehicles in compound B." He looked at his watch. "Then load the prisoners in block four into the Jimmy truck. Roll-out in five minutes. Clear?"

"Sir!" Captain Todd saluted.

"And Captain ... I will be accompanying you!"

Captain Todd looked confused but repeated the salute, "Sir!". He turned and hurried away.

"Comms!"

"Sir!" came the reply. "Message HQ and confirm plans for Munich exit. Tell them we need the 8<sup>th</sup> airborne on standby."

"Sir!"

Five minutes later, Williams stepped out of the command tent into the grey morning air. He surveyed the line of six vehicles in front of him. One tarp covered truck, sandwiched between a mixture of jeeps. Each of the jeeps held three of Todd's men and mounted M1919 Browning .30 calibre machine guns for added protection. He watched as they shepherded the eight prisoners into the back of the truck. Dressed in worn woollen slacks and jackets, they looked unusual. Not the normal attire of other prisoners they had taken in.

Williams looked back at the command tent, "Major Parker, you have command until I return." Parker saluted in response.

Approaching the rear of the vehicle, he waited for the prisoners to settle before mounting up himself. He had questions. Lots of questions, and the journey would give him time for that.

"When you're ready, Captain Todd," he called. As he heard each of the engines start up, he eased his back against the sacking, draped over the truck's slatted side. He felt a jolt as they began the journey and turned to survey the prisoners. They looked a motley crew, faces drawn from long sleepless nights. He checked on Lieutenant Hawkins opposite him, making sure he was alert, and looked back at the transcribed paper he'd been given.

**ID:** HQ/COMM/US/129.4

**DATE:** MAY 11, 1945

**VERIFICATION:** 6ALPHA43

**PRIORITY:** #1

**ATTENTION:** LT. COL. R. L. WILLIAMS.

**MESSAGE:** 8 x SCHATTWALD POW'S, NOW AT GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN TO BE SHIPPED TO USA ASAP.

**ADDITIONAL:** 3RD REISCH HAVE ORDERS TO ELIMINATE.

**SIGNED:** GENERAL DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER.

*Orders to eliminate? William thought. What the hell does that mean? Why? Who the hell are these guys?* William turned to the man, who appeared to be the lead. "Smoke?" he

asked, offering a packet of cigarettes to the group. A few muttered between themselves suspiciously, but did not reply.

"No thank you," said the leader in slightly broken English.

"Lieutenant Colonel Williams," Williams said, pointing at his chest. "You?"

The leader looked a little nervous. "Werner von Braun," he finally said. "And these are my colleagues."

"If you don't mind me saying, Mr Braun, you're not exactly dressed for Wehrmacht field work." Williams waved his hand across the group.

"No," came the reply. "As you say. We are not soldiers."

"Then forgive me, but what are you?"

Another nervous look. "We ... We are scientists."

"Really? What kind of scientists? You have me wondering, Mr Braun, why HQ has me providing all this," he said, waving at the armed convoy, "for a bunch of scientists. And why, it seems, that your own leaders appear to want you dead?"

"Dead?" Braun turned to his colleagues and relayed this information to them in German. The gasps and the wide-eyed muttered discussion between them told Williams a lot.

Braun was biting his bottom lip. A moment later, he spoke. "We," he nodded towards his team, "created the Vergeltungswaffe. If what you say is true, the Führer, it seems, does not want our expertise to be, how you say, shared." He looked concerned.

William looked confused. "The what?"

"The Vergeltungswaffe." Braun hesitated again. "You will likely know them as the V1 and V2 rockets."

Silence descended across the truck's occupants while that information sunk in. Williams broke it. "You son of a bitch," he said as he un-holstered his pistol and pointed it at Braun's chest.

Lieutenant Hawkins responded to his commander's agitation. In one fluid motion, he raised his M1 Garand rifle and released the safety catch. He too pointed it at Braun before swinging it back and forth across the group as a warning to all.

Braun looked shocked and raised his hands. "I-I'm sorry," stammered Braun. The rest of the prisoners, shock ricocheting across their faces, raised their hands too.

"Sorry? You're sorry? Do you know how many people you've killed with your god-damned rockets? Countless lives ... Including my brother!" he spat.

"Your brother? But how?" asked a confused Braun. "To our knowledge, the Wehrmacht have not fired upon the United States."

"No," Williams snarled. "But you have blasted everywhere else. The United Kingdom, Belgium, France. And don't forget your own fucking country. You blasted Remagen not two months ago. I saw the report from our intelligence guys. It seems you lot were losing the battle there and didn't want anyone else to have it. My brother's unit was in there trying to save some locals. And you blew the town to fucking kingdom come. You're a bunch of spineless, narcissistic, murdering bastards."

“But … We only designed the rockets. We did not point them or pull the triggers.”

“You might as well have,” seethed Williams through gritted teeth. “Without you, there would be no weapon and no faceless deaths.”

“But I was just following orders,” pleaded Braun.

“Just following orders,” Williams scoffed. “Well, isn’t that handy? So, just because the Führer gives you an order, you disregard anyone else, create weapons of mass destruction, and unleash them on innocent civilians. You have blood on your hands.” He tightened his grip on his revolver.

“Please. We were forced to.”

“And that’s supposed to make everything right, is it?” Williams’ eyes narrowed.

“We are trying to make things right. We surrendered.”

“Bullshit! I think you surrendered to save your own skin—“

An explosion, sending the last jeep in the convoy skyward, rocked the truck. Everyone turned to see. Hawkins and Williams pointed their guns rearward as the other jeep, directly behind them, was hit by a second Panzerfaust RPG. The jeep flew sideways into the roadside ditch. To the rear of the convoy, through the dust cloud which had erupted, appeared a German Kübelwagen. A hail of bullets tore through the truck canopy, causing everyone to dive for cover. Hawkins fell sideways, blood pooling from a fatal wound in his side. Williams opened fire with his pistol as the remains of the convoy accelerated.

Another hail of bullets ripped into the rear of the truck. Williams cried out as two of them tore into his neck and shoulder. He reached up and felt blood gushing from his wound. His only

hope was for the front jeeps to loop round, but that would take time. Time that he didn't have. He watched in horror as the rear passenger of the pursuing vehicle raised a re-armed RPG and aimed it at the truck.

A shot rang out to his left, and he saw a bullet pierce the front screen of the Kübelwagen and hit the driver. It was enough to throw the vehicle into a vicious arc and ruin the RPG operator's aim. The RPG flew wildly over the truck into the adjacent field. Another shot rang out from his left, and he watched as the RPG operators head was kicked backward, blood spraying the air.

Lightheaded, he lowered his revolver and looked left. There, Braun was handing Hawkins' rifle to one of his colleagues and coming towards him. He held up a hand to defend himself but weakened, slumped back against the seat.

"Hold on," said Braun as he applied a rag to the wound. "Help will be coming."

Williams could hear more gunfire from either side of the truck. The familiar tones of the M1919 Brownings. "I—" he muttered before passing out.

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Williams opened his eyes. He struggled to maintain focus. He appeared to be lying on his back on the floor of the truck. On either side, to the rear, were the prisoners, sitting quietly. To his right, was one of Todd's medics, *Hunger? No. Hunter*, thought Williams, his thoughts flowing back and forth like the tide.

"Stay still, sir," said Hunter. "We're nearly there."

"Where?" asked Williams, his parched throat objecting to his demands.

“We’re rounding on Munich airbase now, sir.”

Williams raised his left hand towards his neck and shoulder.

“You suffered a couple of nasty wounds when those Krauts hit us, sir. Your shoulder was a through and through. But one bullet grazed your carotid artery. You’re lucky. Your friend over there saved your life. If it wasn’t for him, getting pressure on that artery, you could have been dead in minutes.”

Williams looked over to where Hunter was pointing. Braun was sitting in the corner, looking troubled at his crimson hands. *Blood on your hands*, thought Williams. Braun looked up at Williams and gave an embarrassed smile. Williams nodded at Braun before looking back at Hunter. They heard the squealing of brakes and a flurry of activity.

“We’re here, sir.”

The truck’s tailgate was un-latched, and Williams felt the stretcher beneath him being manoeuvred out into the open. As he was lowered and carried toward the waiting base medics, he looked back at the truck. He watched as, what remained of Todd’s unit herded Braun and his men out towards the waiting transport.

“Wait,” said Williams. “Todd!” He watched as Todd turned. “Braun,” he pointed.

Todd waved his pistol, showing Braun the desired direction. As Braun reached Williams, he stopped and looked down. “Lieutenant Colonel?”

Williams looked deep into his eyes. “Why?” he asked.

“Why what, Lieutenant Colonel?”

“Why did you save me? I had my gun on you. I was ready to shoot. You could have left me to bleed out.”

Braun tilted his head, considering. “Instinct, I guess. I told you they forced us to do what we did. I too lost some family.” He left that last statement hanging. “But I hope one day to be reunited with those who have survived. Besides, there has been enough bloodshed. On both sides.”

Williams lifted his left hand to his shoulder, numbed with morphine. As his hand came into view, he noticed his own blood-stained hands. *Blood on your hands*, he thought again. In vain, he attempted to wipe his hand clean on his jacket. As he did so, he felt the folded photograph beneath the surface and paused momentarily. *Reunited with those who survive*, he thought. He raised his hand back towards Braun, who took it in his own. “Thank you,” he said.

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