

One



A Potez-63 French warplane, of the type that Robert Bozdech was shot down in – leading to him finding a tiny German Shepherd puppy in no man’s land.

Aeronautics Aircraft Spotters’ Handbook, Ensign L. C. Guthman, 1943

Robert Bozdech had a horrible, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as the twin-engined warplane began its shallow dive towards earth. But for once it wasn’t fear of being pounced on by one of the enemy’s deadly Messerschmitt 109s that so unsettled him. In the thick fog that had blown across the landscape they were all but invisible to any marauding German fighters.

No. It was fear of the guns that lurked below that held him in its vice-like grip.

‘The fog is down so thick, Pierre!’ he yelled across at his fellow airman. ‘It is foolhardy—’

‘And if we return with no photos, we will be a laughing stock,’ Pierre Duval, the aircraft’s French pilot, cut in. ‘Keep your eyes peeled!’

It had been a fine morning when the French Air Force’s twin-engined Potez-63 fighter-bomber had taken to the dawn skies. Stationed at the aerodrome at St Dizier, Pierre and Robert had been tasked with flying a reconnaissance mission over the German front, from where the massed ranks of enemy armour menaced the supposedly impregnable defences of the French Maginot Line.

It was the winter of 1939–40 and Germany and France were locked in the so-called ‘phony war’. But there was nothing very phony about it from Robert’s perspective, when flying a French aircraft which was a hundred kilometres per hour slower than the nimble German fighters that stalked the skies above them. As he hunched over his twin machine guns in the rear-gunner’s seat, he couldn’t help but notice how thick the fog had become. It was condensing in thick rivulets that cascaded down the Perspex turret.

Both a spirited maverick and a man of real principle, Robert had refused to bow to the jackboot of Nazi oppression, as their forces had invaded his native Czechoslovakia several months before. He had escaped and made his way to France, and via a short stint in the French Foreign Legion had returned to what he had learned well in the Czech Air Force, serving as a turret-gunner on a hunter-bomber aircraft. But what he hadn’t quite bargained for was the difference in temperament between himself and some of the more flamboyant French aircrew.

Lacking little in terms of sheer guts and bravery, the Czech airmen tended to be a level-headed and a solid bunch. By contrast, Pierre Duval, the aircraft’s pilot and captain, had a tendency to be impetuous and unpredictable, as today’s mission was about to prove. Sure, it was a brave move to dive headlong into the fog directly above the German lines in the hope that Robert might be

able to grab a few reconnaissance photos, but it was also a distinctly suicidal one.

No sooner had the aircraft begun to emerge from the lower reaches of the fog – its outer edges trailing tendrils of water vapour like wisps of smoke – than the air was rent by the pounding percussions of anti-aircraft fire. The German gunners had heard them coming and were poised to strike. The aircraft was too low to be targeted by flak, but all around them the air was laced with the angry red trails of murderous tracer fire.

Their controlled descent through the mist was over in a matter of seconds. In spite of Pierre's desperate manoeuvres the German gunners quickly found their mark. Rounds ripped through the thin fuselage and shattered the Perspex cockpit. As smoke and fire bloomed from the port engine, Robert sensed that they were going down. They were barely two hundred feet above the snow-bound earth when he saw the port propeller die completely, and felt the enemy fire tearing into their starboard engine.

Robert braced himself for the impact of a crash-landing or worse. The hard, frozen ground was rushing up to meet them, a wide expanse of glistening snow lit here and there a fiery red by the tracer fire. Barely minutes after they'd first been hit, the belly of the aircraft impacted with a terrible tearing of metal. The stricken warplane lifted once, settled again with an ear-piercing screech and ploughed towards a patch of dark woodland.

The doomed aircraft was thrown savagely around as its left flank caught on a thick trunk, and with a tearing of steel the wing was ripped clean away. By the time it came to a juddering halt, half buried in the snow and with its crumpled nosecone embedded in the thick foliage, Robert had lost consciousness.

He came to with little sense of where he was or how much time he might have lost. For an instant he mistook the thick wisps curling all around him for fog, and then the acrid smell of burning hit him. The very idea that their aircraft might burst into

flames at any moment brought him back to reality with a savage jolt.

Choking from the acrid smoke he reached down, groped for the release catch on his safety harness, flipped it free and stretched up to clamber out onto the surviving wing. As he did so he felt a stabbing, burning pain shooting through his chest – no doubt the result of the safety harness biting into him upon the sudden impact of the crash-landing.

Having dragged himself out of the shattered turret, Robert half tumbled the short distance to the ground, and began to stumble away from the wreckage. After making a few paces he collapsed into an exhausted heap on the snow, the shock and the trauma of being shot down overwhelming him. For a few seconds he lay there, struggling to regain his breath and fighting back the waves of nausea, before a thought struck him with the power of a speeding steam train: *Pierre! Where is Pierre?*

Robert searched with his eyes, scanning the wreckage and the tangled, splintered mass of bare winter branches all around him. The fog seemed almost to reach to the ground here, mingling with the steam and smoke rising from the crumpled remains of the aircraft. It was an eerie, ghostly scene, one made all the worse by the fact that there was no sign of the French airman anywhere.

He risked a call: 'Pierre! Pierre! Are you there?'

There wasn't the barest hint of a response. Apart from an angry hissing where the aircraft's hot engines met the snow, all was quiet. The Germans must have seen the fighter-bomber go down. From what Robert knew of how Pierre had thrown the aircraft around during their final few seconds, he figured they must have crash-landed somewhere in the no-man's-land between the French and German lines.

A flare of angry red in the aircraft's fuselage drew his eye. They'd been carrying over a thousand litres of fuel at take-off, and barely a third of that had been used. Robert sensed what was

about to happen and he knew exactly what he had to do. Pierre might well be dead. In fact, being in the front seat of the cockpit he more than likely was. But that wasn't going to stop Robert from making an attempt to find him, and no matter if the aircraft was about to burst into flames.

Scrambling back onto the wing he yelled out the Frenchman's name, but there wasn't a word of reply. As he peered into the shattered cockpit he sensed the glowing licks of flame all around him – the fire beginning to take deadly hold. At the same moment he spotted a figure slumped over the aircraft's controls, his head twisted at an unnatural angle. It looked as if the silly bastard had broken his neck, but from this distance Robert couldn't be absolutely sure.

He reached forward and snatched at the remains of the cockpit hatch, dragging it open. As he did so he felt a stab of agony in his hand, from what had to be a broken or sprained finger. Ignoring the pain, and the frightening smell of aviation fuel that filled the air, Robert leaned in and felt for the pilot's release catch. He found it and pressed hard, but at the very moment that the metallic *thunk* signalled to him that Pierre was free he heard a terrifying sound from below.

There was a hollow, evil crackling as fire rippled along the fuselage. Ignoring the flames at his feet, Robert pulled with all his might, his hands grasping Pierre's armpits as he fought to drag the deadweight up and out. He had Pierre's body halfway free when the pilot's harness caught on some obstruction – yet still Robert was determined not to leave him. They had flown together and fought together, and in spite of their differences they had bonded as brother warriors of the air.

In desperation Robert heaved for all he was worth. Not a moment too soon, the harness came free and Pierre with it, and Robert found himself falling backwards. He landed in a snowdrift, the weight of the Frenchman driving him deeper into the cold

whiteness. Above them the fuselage was awash with flame, and Robert knew it was only a matter of moments before one or other of the fuel tanks caught, rendering the wrecked aircraft a white-hot, seething fireball.

With his arms gripping Pierre's flight jacket, Robert struggled backwards through the snow, dragging the Frenchman further from the wreckage. He'd made about thirty paces when there was a massive explosion, as the aircraft's fuel tanks ignited. Robert felt himself thrown backwards by the blast as a wave of heat and fire washed over him. Burrowing deeper into the snow, and forcing the Frenchman down alongside him, he did his best to shelter from the searing heat, and from what he knew was coming.

An instant later the aircraft's ammunition started to explode, as it roasted in the inferno. The silence was torn apart by the terrifying snarl and roar of bullets hammering past, ripping through the air. It would be just his luck, thought Robert, to have survived a suicidal French pilot and the German guns, only to be killed by their own bullets exploding.

It was then that he remembered the full extent of their predicament: they were far from safely out of this one yet. They were well within sight of the ridge to their south, which marked the mighty trenches and bunkers of the Germans' Siegfried Line. If the enemy hadn't seen exactly where their aircraft had gone down, they were bound to know now – for a giant black fist of smoke had punched upwards from the fiery inferno.

Just as he was wondering how they might make their getaway without being gunned down by the Germans, Robert heard a faint groan from the figure lying in the snow at his side. Moments later the French pilot had struggled into a sitting position, apparently oblivious to the bullets and shrapnel zipping past like a swarm of angry hornets.

'Bloody keep down!' Robert yelled at Pierre, as he wrestled the wounded Frenchman back into the snow. 'Keep down!'

‘I’ve hurt my leg,’ Pierre groaned, confusedly.

‘Bugger your leg,’ Robert shot back at him. ‘If you don’t keep down you’ll lose your bloody head as well!’

Robert managed to keep the Frenchman still until the worst of the explosions had died away. The aircraft was still burning fiercely, but it seemed as if the ammunition had mostly spent itself. Robert felt a crushing, leaden fatigue, but he knew they were finished if they stayed where they were. Sooner or later a German search party would reach them and he knew well what that would mean. As a Czech fighting for the French there was a price on Robert’s head. The Germans would send Pierre to a prisoner of war camp, but for him there would be only a bare post before a bullet-pocked wall and the firing squad.

‘Wait here,’ he told Pierre, who seemed pretty much unable to move. ‘We’ve got to get a look at that leg of yours and I need to find us some cover.’

Rising to a kneeling position Robert spotted what looked like an old farmhouse a hundred yards or so to their north. He hadn’t seen it during the crash-landing, but as the smoke and heat from the burning aircraft drove off the mist more and more of their surroundings were becoming visible. Leaving the fiery remains of their aircraft to his rear, Robert began crawling through the trees towards that patch of cover. As he did so he realised that the woodland in which they had crash-landed was actually an orchard, one that backed onto farm buildings.

He stopped a good few yards from the farmhouse and studied it closely. He didn’t think for one moment that it would be occupied, sandwiched as it was between the German and French lines, but you could never be too careful. He couldn’t detect the barest trace of footsteps in the thick drift outside the door. The snow had lain on the ground for weeks now, and it looked as if the farmhouse must have been abandoned shortly after the Germans had started to shell the French lines.

Robert moved forward at a crouch, sticking to the cover of the trees to keep himself hidden from any watchful eyes. Skirting a rickety outhouse-cum-loo he made the back door, a wooden affair whose glass panes must have been blown out during the shelling. Robert reached through the broken glass, felt a key still in the lock, turned it, and with one hand eased open the door. With his other he drew his revolver, and with that thrust before him he moved into the dark interior.

A smell hit him immediately, one of a damp and airless neglect and of fireplaces long unlit. He didn't doubt for one moment that this place was deserted. He was in what was clearly the living room, with a long wooden dining table pushed against one wall and a stone fireplace opposite. He ran his free hand along the tabletop, and brought it away coated in a thick film of dust. Plaster had fallen in chunks from the ceiling, a result of the repeated shelling.

He glanced at the grate and the ashes lying there were cold and black from where rain and snow had made their way down the unlit chimney. He crossed the room and turned left into what was obviously the kitchen. A wide fireplace was stacked high with stout oaken logs, piled up beside an iron cooking range. A blackened pot lay atop the range, and Robert half expected it to be full of a mouldering stew. It seemed that whoever had lived here had left the place in a terrible hurry.

Above him, the feeble winter light filtered in via a hole blasted clean through the roof, broken slates framing its jagged edges and scattered across the floor. For an instant Robert stood completely still and listened. As a boy growing up in his native Bohemia, he had spent many an hour tracking animals in the forests and mountains. He knew well the value of pausing to listen and to wait, just in case there was anything that chose to break cover and so disturb the silence. Thankfully, he could hear nothing but the beating of his own heart and the faint whistle of the wind through broken tiles.

He turned to leave, content that this was a safe enough place to hole up in while he tried to deal with Pierre's injuries. They were in dire need of shelter, for there would be no real movement possible until nightfall. The wide expanse of snow that lay between their position and the safety of the French lines was completely devoid of cover, and if they tried to cross it in daylight he and Pierre would be done for.

As he re-entered the living room Robert paused for a moment, tuning his ears to the sounds of the house above him, from what had to be the bedrooms. It was then that he froze. Faintly, almost imperceptibly, he'd caught the most unexpected and worrying of noises. For an instant he told himself that his ears had to be playing tricks on him, but as he strained to hear he caught the noise again.

From behind him came the distinct and eerie suggestion of snuffling. It was such an unexpected noise to have detected here, in this ghost house deep in no-man's-land, that it sent shivers up his spine. It sounded almost as if someone – some being – was back there in the kitchen and gently snoring. He turned soundlessly, and with his pistol thrust before him he retraced his steps, tracking the ghostly noise.

As far as he could tell it seemed to be coming from beneath an upturned chair set to one side of the kitchen range, beside a pile of rubble. Robert cocked the pistol and fixed the sound with the cold steel of the barrel. Keeping his finger tight on the trigger he took a step towards the chair. As he neared it the snuffling stopped completely, almost as if someone had woken up and was holding his or her breath, so as not to be discovered.

'Get your hands up!' Robert growled. 'Now! Or else! Show yourself! Come out from hiding!'

There wasn't the faintest suggestion of an answer or any response. As he swept the corner of the room with his weapon Robert detected the barest hint of a yawn, followed by the

recommencement of the snuffling sound. There was no doubt about it: behind that upturned chair was a living presence, one that was failing to respond to his challenge.

Robert felt a rush of fear mixed with adrenalin, similar to that he had experienced as their stricken aircraft plummeted towards the snowbound earth. He didn't know enough German to cry out a challenge in the language of the enemy, but who else could have ignored his warnings issued in a rudimentary but workable French?

'Wake up, you bastard!' Robert snarled. 'Get up and show yourself!'

Still there was no response, other than a momentary pause in the sleepy, snuffly intakes of breath. There was nothing for it: he inched closer to the upturned chair, his finger bone-white on the trigger. He reached the back of it, but still he couldn't see anyone. *Confound the bloody enemy, where is he?*

Robert leaned forward and peered around the chair, sighting down the barrel of his gun. There before him lay the culprit. The instant Robert laid eyes on it, the sleeping figure seemed to wake. One moment there was a tiny ball of grey-brown fluff curled up beneath the chair, the next it had stumbled to its feet unsteadily and was peering up at him anxiously, growling out a throaty little challenge.

At the very sight of it, all of Robert's pumped-up aggression and killer instincts evaporated. He felt such a fool. He'd just spent a good few minutes stalking and yelling out dire threats at a tiny little puppy dog. Ignoring the bravest and most defiant of growls, he reached forward with his one free hand. For a moment the puppy tried to edge away, before its big, ungainly paws tripped over its own tail and it half fell backwards into the dust.

Before it could entangle itself still further, Robert whisked it up by the scruff of its neck – in exactly the same way its mother would have carried it in her jaws. As the puppy looked at him askance he

clutched it to his chest, holstered his gun and started to rub it fiercely around the back of the head. He worked his fingers deep into the thick folds of skin until he reached the special spot just behind the ears. In effect, he was giving the little mite a deep head massage, and within moments the puppy's fierce resistance had dissolved into surrender . . . and then sheer delight.

'So who left you here all alone and hungry?' Robert whispered, as he held the puppy close. 'And you bereft of any friends . . .'

In answer, a pair of big brown eyes gazed up at him and a little bare finger of a tail twitched happily to and fro.

A couple of minutes of such magical treatment and the puppy was totally smitten. It nestled closer to Robert's chest, its nose wrinkling contentedly and its eyes scrunched closed in delight. Robert had no idea where its mother might be, let alone its erstwhile human owners, but he sensed it had given up all thoughts of resistance – which was fortunate, for the last thing he and Pierre needed was a puppy causing a ruckus, with an enemy patrol likely to put in an appearance at any moment.

The house now secured, it was time to go and fetch Pierre. The question was, what to do with his newfound friend? Robert could hardly deposit him behind the chair again, for knowing puppies this one would likely start whining just as soon as he had disappeared. It was crucial that he kept the little ball of fur happy and quiet, at least for now. He unzipped the front of his leather flying jacket, slipped the puppy inside and zipped it closed again.

Little did Robert know that this was the start of a lifelong friendship – one that would see him and the death-defying puppy take to the skies over war-torn Europe, as they waged fierce battle against the enemy.

Two

Robert made his way back into the living room, only to discover that the wounded Pierre, despairing of a helping hand, had made his own way towards the house and was now clinging grimly to the doorway. His pale face betrayed the strain he had endured as he hauled himself across the icy earth, the blood from his injured leg forming a trail of spots and smears in the snow behind him.

He looked reproachfully at Robert. 'You were so long I thought you had run into trouble.'

Robert reached inside his jacket and presented the puppy. 'Here's the trouble. I almost mistook him for the enemy and shot him!'

Pierre eyed the puppy suspiciously. 'Looks like a German Shepherd.' He had stressed the word *German*. 'But the house is deserted, yes? We're safe here?'

Robert nodded. 'As safe as we'll ever be marooned in no-man's-land and with a burning aircraft nearby. We need to get a look at that log of yours and get on the move.'

Robert set the puppy down on the floor. Throwing an arm around Pierre's shoulder he helped him across the living room to where they should be hidden from any passing patrols. He eased

the wounded Frenchman to the floor. Dreading what he might find, he slit Pierre's trousers with the pocketknife that he carried. Luckily, the wound was nowhere near as bad as he had feared. The bullet had passed clean through the calf muscle without so much as breaking a sliver of bone. In short it was a nasty flesh wound, but if he could stop the bleeding Pierre would live. Robert bathed the wound in a handkerchief dipped in some melted snow, before binding it tight with a bandage.

Pierre leaned back against the wall, exhausted. 'Mon Dieu, but it is good to be alive.'

He had uttered not a single word of complaint as Robert had treated him, and there was no doubting the toughness or courage of the Frenchman.

Robert forced a smile. 'Let's hope we stay that way. We're not out of this one yet. In fact, we've got one hell of a long way still to go ...'

While Pierre had been captain in the air, Robert had far more battle experience on the ground, and he sensed it was up to him to take command now and come up with a plan to save both their skins. He spread out a map on the table and frowned: there was no easy way out of here, that was for sure. As he studied the details of their surroundings, he felt a warm wetness nuzzling into his hand. Almost without thinking he reached down and lifted the puppy by his belly and sat him on his lap.

With Robert busying himself over the map, Pierre fished around in his trouser pocket and pulled out a bar of flying-ration chocolate. His hands shaking visibly, he fed a fistful into his mouth, then broke off a sliver to offer to the puppy.

'Poor devil,' Pierre muttered. 'Even though he is a *German* Shepherd he was living in a *French* house, so perhaps we should show some solidarity ... He looks half-starved.'

Pierre held the morsel closer to the puppy's mouth. He was expecting a grateful lick, but all he got for his trouble was a baring

of needle-sharp fangs and as menacing a growl as a four-week-old puppy could muster in the face of a mean-looking predator many times his size.

Pierre tossed down the chocolate in disgust. 'Mon Dieu! That's not a dog. That's a bloody wolf in disguise!'

Robert smiled inwardly. It was as if the tiny ball of fluff had expressed his own feelings towards the Frenchman, whose impulsive, some might argue reckless flying had landed them in their present, desperate predicament.

Robert pored over every minute detail of the map, picturing the terrain in his mind's eye and scrutinising it for whatever hazards it might present. Even as he balked at the prospect of the perilous journey that lay ahead, he felt heartened by the way the little dog flattened his ears but made no attempt to resist his caresses.

'So, my friend, what is the plan?' Pierre ventured.

The Frenchman sounded about as finished as he looked. Robert knew full well that having the injured pilot with him limited his escape options considerably, but come what may he was determined that the two of them would make it out of there.

'It's over one hundred kilometres to the nearest airfield at Nancy,' Robert explained, 'but first we've got to get out of this damned valley. As we crossed the Rhine I noticed a wood over on the west side where our boys are.'

'Yes, but the Bosch have their machine guns on the ridge overlooking the entire valley.'

Robert hardly needed reminding. They were bang in the middle of a two-mile gap between the Maginot and Siegfried Lines. The holes blasted in the farmhouse bore witness to the ferocity of the fighting between the two opposing sides here. There was no safe place in this entire expanse of terrain, not even in the spot where they had sought temporary shelter.

'How's the leg?' Robert asked.

'Aching like hell.'

‘The wood’s about a mile away, practically due west. Do you think you can make it?’

Pierre raised his head defiantly. ‘When do we start?’

Robert considered the question. A light breeze had lifted the mist from the valley, leaving little more than vapour trails across the snow. If they tried to make a move they’d be seen, shot or captured. The only option was to wait until darkness, giving them the cover they needed to move unseen by the German gunners. Robert told Pierre they’d set out at last light, three hours hence. He watched anxiously as the wounded Frenchman limped to a nearby chair, settled himself into it and closed his eyes. In an instant he was sleeping like a baby.

How different the two of them were, Robert reflected, as he drew the puppy closer to him. Both were twenty-six years old and fighting for the same cause, but there the similarity pretty much ended. Pierre was short, stocky and swarthy – a muscular little powerhouse of a man. His French Air Force comrades seemed to love his wild, carefree humour, while his dark eyes and delight in the pleasures of life had thrilled many a woman.

Robert, on the other hand, was a rangy six-footer whose air of driven intensity had settled upon him the day he had been forced into exile by the enemy. His iron will had spurred him to escape from the Nazis, transforming him into a war machine with a single purpose: to hit back hard and hammer those who had overrun his native Czechoslovakia and despoiled his country. He burned to be in action, taking the fight to the enemy, and that meant getting out of here intact and alive.

Something instinctive drew his attention back to the puppy, and his mood softened. The animal was standing in his lap now, unsteady on his tiny legs, but studying Robert warily. The tiny dog glanced briefly at the sleeping Pierre and seemed to shudder visibly, before turning his gaze back to Robert. He sensed that the four-week-old animal had made up his mind about the two

strangers who had broken into his home – about who was his potential protector and who might do him harm.

Robert spoke softly and fondled the sleek black head. It was so tiny he could enclose it in the palm of his hand. A quiver of pleasure ran through the puppy's taut little body and he rewarded Robert with a nuzzle. The little dog would have bitten the hand that fed him if it belonged to Pierre, but Robert seemed to have earned his trust completely.

German Shepherds were hugely popular in Robert's native Czechoslovakia, and he knew the breed well. Running his fingers along the brown back he brushed away a thin layer of plaster dust to reveal a narrow black streak that ran the length of the dog's spine. Robert recognised this thin black line as signifying a thoroughbred, an aristocrat of the breed. No wonder the puppy had shown such pluck when he first laid eyes on these two intruders.

The puppy's body was so emaciated that the ears and legs seemed almost comically large, yet Robert detected a dignity in the animal that was striking. He had barely the strength to stand, yet he had guarded the miserable heap of straw and rags that had been his bed with the courage of a lion. The pitifully neglected puppy of today would surely grow up to be the most spirited and dependable of dogs if ever he survived the war.

As Robert worked his fingers deeper into the animal's coat, his mind drifted to a memory of childhood. He was ten years old and enchanted by everything the wild countryside of his homeland had to offer him and his gang of friends. One day they had penetrated deeper than normal into the remote mountains and woodlands. They'd come across a cave where, huddled together at the back, they had found three small wolf cubs.

Terrified by the thought that the mother might return, Robert and his friends had run from the scene as fast as their legs would carry them, fearing they would be savaged at any moment. Through such experiences Robert had learned to fear, love and

respect nature, and he had developed a close affinity with animals of all kinds. The physical resemblance between those wolf cubs and this German Shepherd puppy was remarkable, doubtless explaining why the little mite had conjured up fond memories of far more innocent times.

Robert pictured his mother, who he had left behind in Czechoslovakia, and wondered if he would ever see her again. His parents had doted on their only son, giving a warm welcome to all his friends in the Czech Air Force. But when the Nazis had rolled into Robert's homeland in 1938, the family had been torn apart. Relatives had been shot and tortured for daring to resist their Nazi 'masters'. Making a break for it alone Robert had sneaked across the border to Poland, knowing that at any moment he might take a bullet from a German patrol.

From Poland he had enlisted in the French Foreign Legion with the aim of transferring swiftly to the French Air Force. There had been rough times with the Legion in North Africa, before the Air Force finally accepted him – at which stage he'd achieved what he hungered for most, which was to fight the Bosch. But now disaster had struck and if he didn't make it out of here he was as good as dead, which would mean his battle against the invaders was over.

Thank God for an abandoned puppy with attitude, Robert told himself. Their companionship lightened his mood and put added steel in his soul. He heard a whimper from the little fellow. He was gazing up at Robert with dewy eyes, pleading for something.

'What is it this time?' Robert murmured. 'What d'you want?'

He guessed the animal had to be hungry. Groping in his pocket he found some chocolate and a few biscuits. He offered a piece of each and the pup sniffed delicately, but would take neither. Suddenly Robert understood why: the poor wretch had very likely never been weaned. He held a piece of chocolate over a lighted

storm lantern – one that he'd scavenged among the wreckage of the farmhouse – and rubbed the melt along his forefinger. This time the pup could not resist. After a few cautious sniffs and a tentative lick, he suckled Robert's finger hungrily until no trace of chocolate remained.

Robert repeated the process over and over again, and he was filled with affection for his new charge. He felt almost ridiculous entertaining the thought – especially in their present predicament – but in his heart he felt the two of them had a lot in common: they were both bereft of family, they were both fighting to exist, and they were both in deep trouble . . . but neither had given up the struggle.

'All right, boy, let's see what you make of something more solid.'

Robert warmed some more chocolate, but this time he offered the hungry puppy a half-melted piece. The tiny tilted head and the confused gaze revealed the puppy's puzzlement. He didn't know what to make of the strange, sweet-smelling solid he was being offered. But finally his pink tongue flicked out and covered it in puppy drool, and seconds later tiny jaws closed over the morsel and it was gone.

The only problem now was that there was nothing with which to wash down the meal. Robert crossed the room moving towards the doorway, watched at every step by a pair of tiny, shining eyes – as if the puppy feared being deserted again. After a few seconds he reappeared carrying a battered frying pan filled with snow. He warmed it over the lamp, after which he dipped his finger in the melt-water for the puppy to lick. Shortly, the tiny dog was lapping happily from the pan, having the first proper drink of his short life.

'God only knows what we're going to do with you,' Robert muttered.

Even as he said it, he could not escape the thought that there was something terrible he might have to do before they left – the

kindest yet the most dreadful thing possible. Already he was wondering if he would have the heart for the job.

At six o'clock he woke Pierre. 'Ready?' he whispered. 'It's time.'

Pierre spent a second or two rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He looked reasonably well rested – which was a bonus, thought Robert. Pierre glanced around him, realised where he was, and a focus and determination came into his gaze.

The Frenchman gestured at his bloodied and bandaged leg. 'As ready as I'll ever be.' He glanced over at the puppy. He was curled up and sleeping soundly after his meal. 'What are we going to do with him? We can't exactly take him with us and if we leave him behind he'll starve.'

Robert shrugged. 'I've taught him to eat and drink. We can't do more than that. We'll leave him asleep and close and lock the door so that he can't follow. We'll give him some of our rations and a pan of water. He'll have to take his chances along with the rest of us. Now, d'you think you can make it to the woods?'

While Pierre readied himself Robert stared out of the doorway, trying to fix in his mind some landmarks to aim for along their route. He prayed for an overcast night, one bereft of moon or stars to light their way. It would make navigation more difficult, but at least it would render them invisible to the enemy on the ridge. The faintest illumination might prove fatal, leaving the two men silhouetted against the white of the snowfields.

Before setting out Robert filled the frying pan with melted snow, heaping up a pile of broken biscuits beside it. He opened the door, helped Pierre outside, then softly closed and bolted it. With a last look at the darkened room and a silent and regretful farewell to the slumbering puppy, they began the trek to what Robert hoped would be freedom and safety.

They had barely left the farmhouse when a series of vivid orange flashes tore through the night sky from the direction of the

German lines. They were followed immediately by a barrage of equal intensity from the French lines to the west. The evening ritual of battery duels had begun. To make matters worse the heavy gunfire was accompanied by flares, which were fired high into the sky to be left hanging beneath mini-parachutes as they drifted lazily earthwards. Each side was using them in an effort to reveal the location of any night patrols that might have been sent out by the enemy, so they could be picked off by snipers.

Pierre and Robert took cover in the outskirts of the orchard. The hot glare of the burning magnesium flares cast a skeletal pattern of black and white across the snow to either side of them. The entire area the airmen had to cross before they reached the sanctuary of the distant woodland was bathed in blinding light – the very thing that Robert had prayed they might avoid.

Pierre uttered a string of muffled curses. ‘Mon Dieu, but we’ll never get through that lot!’

‘We’ll make it,’ Robert replied firmly. ‘The snow’s deep and we can find some cover in the shadows of the steeper slopes.’

There was no question any more of Pierre being able to hobble with the aid of Robert’s supporting arm. The only way to continue their desperate journey would be to crawl. They slithered forward on hands and knees, working their way slowly and painfully over the frozen snow.

Just as they reached the ditch that marked the boundary of the farm a flare burst directly overhead, blinding them. Both men lay flat on their faces in the cover of the snow-filled depression, sweating fear and mouthing silent prayers. The flashes of the German big guns intensified as they hurled their high-explosive shells at the French lines, and their rumbling shook the ground.

The flare went out like a snuffed candle and in the momentary darkness that followed the big guns seemed to fall silent. Robert was just about to signal to Pierre that their time had come to move again, when a new sound filled the air. It was one that Robert had

been dreading. The long, drawn-out howl of a puppy rent the night – a puppy who had just discovered that his newfound source of food, water, warmth and love had deserted him, just as his mother had.

There was a second howl even more anguished than the first. It was as if the puppy understood that his chances of survival were diminishing with each step that his protector took away from him. He seemed determined not to be left to his fate, as if somehow he knew that his cries for help would force Robert to turn back.

Robert glanced at Pierre. ‘Wait there,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

Pierre sensed the grim resolve in Robert’s words. ‘I am sorry, my friend,’ he muttered, ‘but you know we have no choice.’

Robert began to crawl back the way he had come. He was under no illusions as to what he must do, and he cursed himself for having been so soft. He felt for the knife he carried on his belt. To use a revolver would be easier, but far too dangerous now that the hour had come for night patrols to leave their posts and lie out listening in the snow – which was what the Germans did every evening, as they tried to catch the French off-guard.

As he neared the house Robert felt queasy, the nausea rising from the pit of his stomach. Pierre was right, of course – they simply had no choice – but Robert was unsure whether he could summon the courage to do what he had to do, even if their lives depended upon it.

He heard excited yapping as the puppy sensed his approach. He emerged into the open space between the orchard and the house, rising to his feet and blundering forward. He had to silence that dog, or it would bring every German patrol down on their heads. Another flare burst overhead. He threw himself down in the snow barely feet from the doorway, wondering if the howls and yaps had been heard.

The desperate yelping was replaced by a new sound now – that

of a dull thudding as a tiny body hurled itself against the door. Small and starved though he was, the puppy was trying again and again to batter down the door so he could be reunited with his erstwhile protector. For a split second Robert glimpsed a pointed nose pitching upwards as the puppy tried to leap through one of the broken door panels, only to disappear again. The puppy was fighting as if for his very life, and if there was one thing that Robert admired it was a fighter.

Berating himself for his crazy sentimentality Robert began to search about for a log or a rock. Butchering the pup with his knife would feel far too much like savagery and murder. A sharp crack to the skull would spell instant oblivion, and was the most humane way. But as he felt about under the thick snow nothing came to hand.

Robert was growing desperate. Pierre lay injured in a ditch on the far side of the orchard, totally dependent upon him. He had to get this done before the puppy started to howl again. But how could he kill the little mite with his knife, especially when he had taught him to eat and to drink at his own hand?

Robert paused to consider his options. He had been in a few tight corners in the past couple of years, and he had never once given up the fight. The puppy was so close to death but still he was battling all the way. Robert recognised in him the pugnacious spirit he saw in himself. Hearing a desperate, pleading whine from the other side of the door, Robert felt his heart melt. He knew from this kind of distance the puppy would be able to smell him – and Robert's was the smell he now recognised as that of his saviour. Behind him the flare that had been hanging stubbornly in the night sky finally hit earth and fizzled out.

Robert rose to his feet in the darkness, scuttled forward, unbolted the door and reached inside.