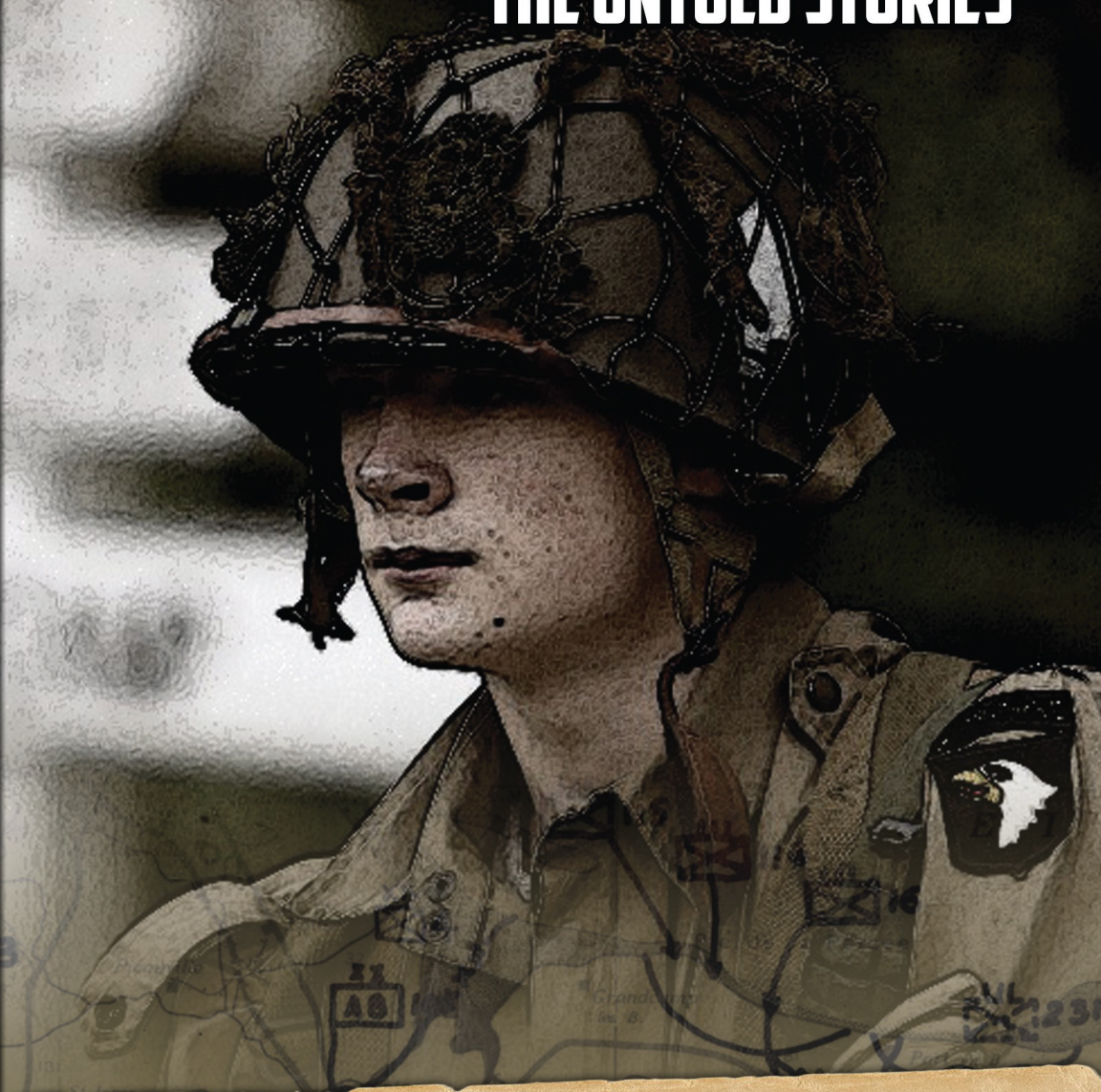


HEROES OF NORMANDY

THE UNTOLD STORIES



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This anthology is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this anthology are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.

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INTRODUCTION

I was going to claim that this project started with a phone call, but it's probably truer to say it started with a bunch of dog-eared DC war comics my big sister's boyfriend gave me in grade school. I pored over those issues again and again: stacks of *Sergeant Rock*, *The Haunted Tank*, *The Fighting Losers*, one especially awesome issue of *Weird War Tales*, and probably my favorite of all, *The Unknown Soldier*. When I spoke for the first time with Lock 'n Load Tactical publisher David Heath, we bonded over our fond memories of those old series.

I don't know for sure where David's interest in World War II began, but my interest owes something to all those movies I watched with my dad, and my interest in tactical WWII games began in junior high when my friend Jon introduced me to *Panzer Blitz* and creamed me when I forgot you had to fire THEN move.

That interest in tactical board games lay dormant for many years while I spent my hobby time role-playing, just as my curiosity in WWII was put aside in favor of years spent researching ancient military history. Then, some time in my mid '40s, I sat down for a manly movie marathon with my son and we watched a slew of great WWII flicks in memory of my father. The next thing I knew I was looking into World War II tactical games, and by and by I came to *Lock 'n Load Tactical*, *Heroes of Normandy*. I loved what I found in this system more than any other I tried: the look and feel of the

maps and counters, the compelling scenarios, and the way the rules worked together to provide tactical choices that created a story. I gushed about it on a review at the *Black Gate* web site.

David Heath saw that review, noting in my “about the author” line that I wrote for a living. He had an idea for a collection of stories centered around the characters featured in the *Lock ‘n Load Tactical* games, and he wondered if I’d be interested in helping him put it together. I’d been writing *Arabian Nights* historical fantasies and *Pathfinder* novels with elves and lizard men, which was a far cry from fiction starring paratroopers. But David’s a persuasive and inspiring guy.

I had a little extra time before my next book was due, so I decided I’d try one story. I’d been reading about the 101st, which meant my research was underway already. The next thing I knew I was devouring books not just about the U.S. Airborne, but on scads of related topics, and watching documentaries, and tracking down first person accounts... and before I knew it that tale was written and David and I were hunting down more writers.

We were both after people who could tell stories about heroes, one of the integral features of the **Lock ‘n Load Tactical** system. We wanted readers who’d never played the game to have just as much fun with the collection as long-time players, although we hoped the latter would get a kick out of seeing named hero and leader counters as the main characters.

Lock ‘n Load Tactical plays like a good war movie in that it provides a driving narrative and a chance for individuals to make a difference. David and I wanted every story to reflect that same sense, but we wanted some qualities that are absent in a lot of modern fiction.

Sure, we were setting out to publish adventure stories, but we wanted them to celebrate honor, duty, and brotherhood. Too often violence is depicted as taking place without lasting consequences, integrity is the by-word of fools, and the bad guys have all the depth of cut-outs. Even though our writers would be crafting tales that featured names from cardboard chits, we wanted those characters to have a little depth: we weren’t after cartoony stories. It may sound strange to the uninitiated, but one of the reasons we loved those

old DC war comics was that there was a somber thread to them all. Even as kids soaking up that action and excitement we had a sense that responsibility lay heavily upon a commander's shoulders, that not all the good guys made it, and that some enemies were worthy of respect – and that maybe, in better circumstances, those enemies would have been our friends.

Mostly, of course, the authors in this collection strove to tell cracking good stories, the kind you might hear if you've ever been lucky enough to sit down with a World War II veteran. Those men and women were the real heroes, and we hope that in some small way the stories in this book honor the harrowing sacrifices they had to make to preserve our freedom.

-Howard Andrew Jones

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to David Heath, whose inspiration brought this project to life; Hans Korting, for the spotting and fixing of vexing problems, and Blackwell Hird, for getting it right onto the page. We're grateful both for the team of designers and developers who created and developed this great series of games, and last and far from least, the fans of the **Lock 'n Load Tactical** series.

HEROES OF NORMANDY

THE UNTOLD STORIES

VOLUME 1

THE STOVEPIPE BLUFF

- by Howard Andrew Jones -

If he hadn't known them for what they were, Ash might have thought the flak clouds and the tracer fire that lit them lovely. He saw the splash of reds and oranges over Hanson's shoulders as they stepped up to that opening to the night and it reminded him of the Fourth of July.

But it was a fleeting impression, countered by the rush of anxiety and fear that swept through him as Hanson dropped into the sky and the jump master shouted at Ash to go. It wasn't like one of the training flights – he didn't wait for the slap on his shoulder, because he wanted out of the plane. He hurried to the door and stepped into the air. The transport plane's roar was instantly drowned by the thunder of triple A and the rattle of machine gun fire.

He'd never felt such a massive prop blast. It whipped him hard to the left. The motion ripped his leg bag free of its rope and sent it plunging into the darkness over Normandy. There went half his ammo and most of his food.

There was no time to worry about that, because even though he'd felt his chute fill, the blackened ground was coming up fast. He was startled. How low had the plane been flying? He tugged on his risers and lifted his feet, but even then his boots brushed the top of a tree. He cleared it and the chute dropped him into what looked like a fallow farm field. He wondered what was usually grown there

even as he heard machine gun fire from somewhere very close. Had the Germans seen him? If so, there was nothing he could do about that yet.

A moment later Ash was on the ground, scarcely conscious of the landing itself. The clean scent of the soil filled his nostrils, an incongruous reminder of home, even if there was a slightly different tang in the air. Not far off German voices yelled that there were more over there – and they might have meant him. He cut the chute free faster than he'd ever managed in practice, tore off his life preserver, and ditched his reserve chute. As the shooting continued he hugged the ground and crawled for the tree line, half expecting a bullet in the back.

If the Germans had heard his scramble through the dirt there was no sign, and soon he was sitting with his back against a tree trunk, putting his M1 together. He felt better with it in his arms and as he sat listening, the machine gun fired another short burst. Maybe it wasn't him that they'd spotted.

Where was he? There certainly weren't any landing lights or trumpet signals, as the officers had promised. From how fast he'd come down he guessed he'd dropped from only three hundred feet or so, a lot lower than planned, and if the force of that prop blast was any sign the C-47 had been moving pretty fast. Most likely, then, he was further inland. And as quickly as the plane was speeding along, most likely the rest of his stick was scattered pretty far.

He checked the faintly luminous arrow on his wrist compass, and discovered north was pretty much straight towards where the machine gun nest seemed to be. Not that the direction helped him much without knowing where he was.

Rifle in hand, Ash took in the surroundings. He'd taken refuge in a little tangle of woods that sloped towards a creek he could hear babbling in lulls between the flak gun bursts. That could be one of several creeks he'd seen on the sand tables. He'd caught a glimpse of a distant church steeple on his way down, but he'd been too worried about the tracer fire and the tree to orient himself well. Returning his attention to the field where he'd landed he saw the dark shape of a farmhouse more than a half mile west. The field stretched south until it stopped at a hedgerow, and to his north it faded into

a darkness in which he was fairly certain the Germans were hiding. Smiling wryly, he supposed that the Germans were hiding just about everywhere.

As if in an effort to reassure him of their location the Germans cut loose with a machine gun burst until a non-com shouted to stop firing at nothing. From the harsh tone, Ash guessed he might have known what the shouting was about even if he hadn't known any German. The tone of a non-com dressing down a soldier was apparently universal. Ash figured the gunner to be only two hundred yards or so distant. Maybe they were guarding a crossroads, or set up in a French farmhouse.

He had just decided that the best way to move out would be to go deeper into the woods, away from the gun, when he heard muted splashing. Someone was trying to pick his way stealthily through the water. Probably more than one.

Ash slid the safety off his M1 and eased through the close packed trees. He stopped when the trees opened up and the ground dropped steeply towards a little rivulet only a little more than two feet across. Two figures were picking their way in the direction of the German machine gun nest. There was no mistaking them for Krauts – he could see the outline of their helmets. He reached up with one hand and clicked the cricket around his neck.

Both men froze and crouched. The first one was carrying an M1. The second had a bazooka strapped to his back and was holding a pistol. Could it be Hanson? He'd been carrying a bazooka. Both soldiers nervously turned their heads to the left and right but neither of them made a move to sound off.

Damn. That was weird. Ash clicked the cricket again. Both soldiers shifted towards him and the soldier with the bazooka reached up to his neck and pressed his clicker, twice.

"There's a machine gun nest up there," Ash whispered down.

"We heard," the one in front said, a little too clearly for Ash's comfort. He had a southern drawl that identified him immediately to Ash as a member of his own stick, Eddings. "We're heading to take it out." Eddings sounded utterly confident, but then he always had been, maybe a little too much.

"Is that you, Ash?"

“It’s me. Is that Hanson with you?”

“Hell yeah,” said the mild voiced man with the bazooka.

“Welcome to Normandy,” Eddings drawled.

Ash checked up and down the creek bed then started towards them, pausing at the edge. Though the two men in the water were wary, they grinned at him through their soot streaked faces, and he found an answering smile rise. It was good to no longer be alone in enemy territory.

“There’s a field on the other side of the trees,” he whispered. “Our best bet is to head through the stand of trees to the east, there.” He pointed to the other side of the creek.

Eddings shook his head. “I figured we’d head up this creek.”

“You’re making too much noise. Come on, this way.”

Neither seemed to object to him taking the lead and soon they were headed up on the other side. Both were moving more cautiously through the woods.

“Maybe,” Ash suggested softly, “we should just creep on by.”

“I’m gonna’ kill those sons of bitches,” Eddings vowed. “They shot up Hastings and Macready as they dropped. I figure they’re gonna’ keep shootin’ when the 82nd flies in.”

Ash heard the distant thrum of C-47s. It might be that they were simply turning around, but he knew there were thousands of more paratroopers coming in, not to mention glider troops. While it was true the airborne were supposed to keep a low profile until they reached their objectives, Eddings made an excellent argument.

“Alright,” Ash said, “I’ll creep up and take a look. How many charges are you carrying for that thing, Hanson?”

“Two.” Hanson sounded a little embarrassed. “I had some more in my leg bag but...” his voice trailed off in shame. As if there was any shame in losing the damned leg bags.

“It’s o.k. Stay put.” Ash didn’t really want to go forward, but he wasn’t about to trust Eddings to scout for him. The man was a little impulsive. And both he and Hanson should have known better than to come down the creek. Did they think bloodhounds were after them? They must have seen too many gangster movies.

Ash started forward. He’d grown up in the forested hills of southeast Indiana, and was no stranger to woodcraft, or hunting,

and his rifle skills had often brought game to his mother's table. His cousin Pete had once grimly joked that Normandy would be a lot like home, except they wouldn't be eating what they shot. At the time Ash had thought they'd be moving in compete platoons or companies after landing, and figured Pete was full of crap.

Yet here he was, creeping through the woods with his M1, choosing each step with care lest he alert the game. And you're not? Pete was in D Company, somewhere ahead, or behind, maybe. Who the hell knew?

As the rumble of the C-47s drew closer and closer he fought down the impulse to hurry. Sure, the planes were making some noise, but it wouldn't drown out any of his own footfalls, especially if he snapped a twig.

By and by Ash advanced north through the woods, some twenty yards ahead of his companions, and looked out onto the clearing.

He saw the moon shining brightly through scudding clouds. There was a lot of tracer fire racing up from multiple spots in the west. And to the northeast, maybe fifty feet on, was a machine gun nest, complete with sandbags, a machine gun, and four visible Germans. They'd stationed themselves at a crossroads, just as Ash had guessed, so they would have a clear view of anything coming their way for at least a half mile. Well, except for this little copse of woods. It looked as though the trees had once stretched all the way to the corner where the Krauts had set themselves up, because stumps stood up from the ground ahead. Probably some of that wood shoring up their nest was leftover from lopping down the trees.

Ash knelt and considered his options, absently closing his right hand over one of the hand grenades on his bandolier. Four Germans. One of them was standing up and studying the night sky, talking in a low voice to his companions. Ash couldn't make out his words, but there was no missing the sense of awe. Two were manning the machine gun, which was pointed off to the right, at the crossroads. All three would have been sitting ducks if it wasn't for the German with the rifle pointed loosely in his direction. They weren't stupid. They knew that the woods were a blind spot.

He frowned as he considered the best approach. The creek left

the woods and came up within twenty paces of the left flank of the nest. It could conceivably provide more cover, but the nest was built on a rise, so it would be a hard climb. If that sentry facing him was alert, that approach was suicide. So was any other, unless he was able to take out the sentry.

Unfortunately, all he could see of that sentry was the top of his helmet. Maybe, Ash thought, the Germans are just having fun with me, the rifle's just lying there, and the helmet's jammed on top of a post. Then he saw the rifle's snout shift slightly. Nope, there was a man there, and he seemed edgy.

Damn. He was going to have to go back and tell the boys that not only did it not look like a safe bet, but that they'd have to circle wide to avoid it.

From overhead there was the sound of an explosion, the cough of an engine, and a whine dropping in pitch. The German flak had hit a plane, and it was coming down.

The standing German let out a pleased cry and pointed upward, drawing his comrades' attention to the American plane that had been shot.

And the sentry who'd been watching Ash's woods looked up, turning to follow his comrade's pointing finger. Even in this lapse he was still careful, for only his head and shoulder showed above the sandbags. He must still have been crouching.

It was too good an opportunity to miss. Even as a C-47 waggled down towards the fields, its fuselage trailing flame and smoke, Ash lifted his M1 and snapped off two shots. The German sentry dropped out of sight.

As the standing soldier turned in bewilderment, all hell was breaking loose behind Ash. He heard the familiar beat of the M1 on auto fire, the less familiar snap of a bolt action rifle. And a cry, in English, Hanson shouting a sad cliché. "I'm hit!"

Ash cursed, and startled himself by rushing forward, yanking his grenade's pin with the hand still holding his M1. The standing German was shouting in surprise, pointing at him as he lobbed his grenade.

He was two-thirds of the way there, scared to death the Germans in the nest would open fire, or that the Germans assaulting

his men would open up from behind.

He threw himself flat just as there was a shout of alarm, followed closely by an explosion and a rain of debris. He shot to his feet and ran for it, vaulting the sandbags only a moment later. Better to have some cover there from what was coming from behind. Even if someone was alive inside, they'd be stunned.

His feet hit the ground beside the rifleman's body and he advanced at a crouch past a leg that wasn't attached to anyone. Three men were down. A fourth lay beside the tripod machine gun, which was pointing wildly skyward. The last soldier moaned and struggled to rise and Ash shot him purely by reflex.

From the trees where he'd come he heard shouting: someone was calling in German to ask what had happened. Ash cursed.

The demands grew louder and he heard footsteps crashing through the brush from which he'd come.

"Hurry," he called back in German. "Hurry back!" He figured he could imitate his grandmother's accent well enough to pull off two words. Any more would probably give him away. Ash knew enough German to get by, but he was by no means an expert. He grabbed the machine gun, tripod and all, and with an ease that surprised him -- for he wasn't especially strong -- he set it down facing into the copse. He was sinking down behind it when a trio of Germans emerged from the woods, advancing with cradled rifles.

His machine gun burst cut the first one practically in half. The second dropped as he fumbled for his gun and the one to the rear spun to dash for the woods before the spray caught him.

Ash released the trigger, senses still taut, trying to listen past the roar of planes and the rumble of the flak. Suppose there were more Germans nearby? Wouldn't they have had a larger patrol? Was there a standard sized patrol? What if there'd been mines between the woods and the nest? He might have blown himself to pieces as he charged...

"Shut up," he whispered to himself, and clenched a shaking hand. He'd promised his cousin Pete that he'd trust his instincts. "You only mess things up when you over think things," Pete had said.

He jumped at the sound of a ground swelling explosion from