

## Rescued by Moonlight by John Petelle

Guard-duty hours stretch beyond comprehension, lasting far beyond their span, and suddenly snapping back to reveal that only minutes have gone by.

I tried to find ways to silently fill the time, denying the warriors of sleep their heavy-lidded victories. Some nights, I would create clever word games with the challenge/response passwords. Imaginary conversations imprinting crucial words to be spoken and heard.

*'Too smart for your own good'* - I've had that said to me, more than a few times, and that night in the desert was one of them.

Perimeter guard duty in a war zone was not an idle task, and although unlikely, the consequences of failure could be dire. The moonlight and the gently sloping sand dunes gave wide visibility, and far too much space in which a tense mind could imagine danger.

That night, like countless others, a group of three figures appeared in the distance, slowly growing closer. All the hours in the world to consider when and how to confront them, using the night's challenge word of "advance". A poorly chosen password, and with years to reflect, a poorly-chosen phrase of mine to use.

"Advance, and be recognized!"

The figures stopped, and said nothing.

I repeated, "Advance, and be recognized!"

Silently the outlines of men remained motionless. Dead air roared in my ears.

When you are miles away from anything that makes noise, sounds carry, and take on a character of their own. The sound of the bolt being pulled back as I ran the charging handle on my machine gun, was like a vault door slamming shut on a crypt.

Behind me, from the communications tent, one of my comrades sprinted towards me, his frantic shout desperately seeking to paralyze my hands. "Don't shoot! It's Gunny Tierney!"

Relief, shame and anger flooded through me. *'Responding to the challenge was a simple thing, why hadn't they done it?'*

Throughout the years, I've remembered that night and told that story. I've never allowed myself to live through the experience that would have happened if the comm tent guys had been asleep.

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