

SHADOWS ON THE LAND – Chapter 60

As the days wore on, forward-ranging Japanese began to penetrate American lines, and Big Sam Claw finally saw the enemy's face.

It happened early one evening, while Sam's pants were down around his ankles as he sat on the latrine, intently studying the pictures in a *Captain America* comic book.

Hearing the loud snap of a twig, Sam looked up and reached for his Springfield – realizing that it was already too late and he'd been foolishly caught off guard.

Time suddenly slowed and everything around him took on a clear, sharp edge. At the instant the Japanese soldier raised his rifle, Sam could only wonder at how small the man was, and how dark – as dark as any Indian he'd ever known. In fact, Sam thought, this Japanese soldier who was about to kill him looked more like his own people than any of the Americans he was serving with.

As Sam waited to die, an even darker figure stepped out of the shadows – a naked *Igorot* warrior, black as pitch, who plunged a small spear through the Japanese soldier's chest.

The man who'd just given Sam his life back was a pygmy native – one of countless others who roamed the jungle at will – as fluid and silent as any desert Apache. Slipping about, they fought the Japanese because the Americans gave them bits of food for every one they killed – as long as they brought in proof.

The Igorot knelt over the man he'd slain, drew his knife and neatly sliced off one of the Japanese soldier's ears. He handed the ear to Sam, then went back to work sawing off the dead man's head. If he were lucky, the Americans might give him a bag of rice for it.

By the time Sam had his pants back on, the pygmy was finished with his bloody work. Recognizing the man had saved his life, Sam gave the native half a pack of Chesterfields and slipped the dead enemy's ear into his pocket. Sam decided he would carry it with him, for although he'd not killed the Japanese soldier himself, it still might give him power.

Joe and Holt met their first Japanese while guarding the edge of a banana grove. It was a dark, humid night – quiet and moonless. In a ravine, each was armed with a Browning automatic rifle. They held their cigarettes low, cupped in their hands, and passed the time listening to the night chatter of monkeys – when suddenly the chatter stopped.

“Somethin’ spooked ‘em,” Joe whispered, and as he reached for his helmet, a bullet smacked into a tree limb just above his head.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Holt cursed, as they both ducked down. Over the ravine’s edge, he could make out a small group of figures in the grove, moving slowly toward them in the darkness.

“Japs,” Holt whispered. “Five of them – maybe six.”

Barely aiming, they touched off the BARs, laying down a vicious field of fire. Holt pulled the pin of a grenade and, planting his right foot, lobbed it in the direction of the Japanese.

They ducked back down again as the grenade went off, then continued firing the automatic rifles. When the smoke and blast-blown debris cleared, there was no one left advancing through the grove. Joe counted six men down, with only one still moving. Holt quickly aimed and fired a short burst – and then all of them lay still.

“Jesus, we stopped ‘em,” Joe said. He noticed that his hands were shaking.

The jungle was eerily silent again. Nothing else came at them, and soon they were relieved by Sergeant Toomey who came scrambling up with two other enlisted men.

“Heard all the racket,” Toomey whispered. “What happened?”

“Japs,” Joe told him, nodding towards the bodies.

“They all dead?”

“Yeah, I think so. We been watching for movement, but we ain’t seen any. Pretty sure they’re dead.”

By then, dawn was beginning to break and Holt was curious about the six Japanese bodies in the banana grove. “You want us to check, sarge?”

“Best you do,” Toomey grunted. “But be careful.”

They slowly approached the dead Japanese and were shocked at the damage a BAR could do. Of the six who’d come at them, five were dead, but the sixth was still breathing. He wore a white shirt, now soaked with blood, and looked to be an officer. On the ground next to him were a samurai sword and an 8mm Nambu automatic pistol.

“Jesus,” Holt mumbled, staring down at the man and feeling his stomach turn. The Japanese officer had been hit in the spine and in the face. His lower jaw was completely shot away and only his eyes showed any life – slowly blinking and following their movements.

“Sarge, one of ‘em’s still alive,” Joe called out, unsure of what to do.

“Shoot him,” Sergeant Toomey shouted back.

“He’s already shot,” Holt protested.

“I mean kill the bastard.”

“Shit, I don’t think I can do it,” Holt whispered, as he and Joe looked at each other. “Not with the poor fucker just laying there and lookin’ at us like that.”

“Well, you better go back then,” Joe said, reaching over the wounded man’s body for the Nambu pistol. “Sarge gave us an order.”

As they lay strewn about, the five other dead Japanese seemed impersonal to Joe – something apart, as if they had no connection to either Holt or himself. But the wounded officer was different. It was like putting a crippled horse out of its torment – and yet, this was a human being.

As Holt made his way back to Toomey’s position, Joe placed the Nambu pistol in the officer’s limp hand, curling the man’s own finger around the trigger and bringing it up to the side of his head.

“Can you do this for yourself?” Joe whispered, hoping the wounded man might somehow understand. But with his spine so shattered that he was too helpless to even move a finger, the Japanese could only close his eyes and weep.

Seconds later, as he reached Sergeant Toomey, Holt heard the sharp crack of a pistol and turned to see Joe Apodaca on his hands and knees – being sick on the ground.