



THE WINNER

Joseph Dement



I

Right after we slogged out of the jungles of that beautiful South Pacific Isle, Taga, I started nosing around headquarters company looking for some kind of a desk job. Never let it be said that I was trying to goof off; I was just looking for a little rest. I found what I was looking for in the form of an empty desk at battalion headquarters. The public relations non-com had been sent back to the States on rotation, and the Adjutant was looking for someone to take his place. I was able to read and type—also the battalion commander was from my home

town—so I got the job. As usual, the rifle platoon of which I had formerly been platoon sergeant was put to work digging latrines and cutting grass. I was sorry for the boys, but was glad for my own tired body.

The first words spoken to me after I had moved my bedding and duffle bag to the headquarters company area were tendered as an invitation to the local poker game.

“Got any money?”

“Yeah.”

“Poker game tonight in the mess tent.”

I got into the company on the third of the month. By that time all of the money in the outfit was in the possession of four or five men. The big crap games were over, and the big poker game had started. If things went as usual, one of the men would have all the money in the company in a couple of days. And everyone knew who that man would be.

Bill Jansen was a lone wolf. He had no friends in the outfit. No one had ever seen him get a letter. His position in the battalion was a strange one, completely unofficial. Whenever the battalion commander had a particularly rough mission to assign, Jansen got it. If it was a dangerous patrol, Jansen led it. If it was individual scouting, he was the man. Once the outfit lost all contact with the enemy for several days. We hadn't taken a prisoner in weeks. Jansen loaded up with C-rations and went into the jungle alone. He was gone eight days, and even the battalion commander had given him up for dead. He came back on the ninth day with a Jap full colonel. Both were slightly tattered but unscratched. Now, it's hard enough to capture a Jap private; just imagine how much harder it would be to get a full colonel, and by yourself at that! The Jap colonel talked and the campaign was over in a week. No one ever found out how Jansen did it. When he was asked about the mission, he would just shrug his shoulders. He got the D.S.C.¹ The division commander tried to commission him on the spot—the highest honor he could think of—but Jansen refused.

¹ The Army awards the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in battle as the second highest award after the Medal of Honor.

Almost everybody hated him: the officers and non-coms because he threatened their prestige; the privates because they were afraid they would be assigned to one of his patrols; both because he inevitably won their money every month.

His fame spread all over the South Pacific. Every division commander west of Honolulu tried to get him, but he was happy—if he could be happy—where he was. It was even rumored that the Japs called him “the tiger,” high honor indeed for an individual soldier.

I knew that Jansen would be in the poker game. I also knew that I didn’t belong in any poker game over a quarter limit. I’m not a very good player. But my curiosity got the better of me, for I had never seen Jansen.

The mess tent was full of penniless kibitzers. I pushed through the crowd and saw the man who had invited me to the game sitting at the table with four others. He motioned me to a box. I sat down and looked around the table.

Jansen was unmistakable. He was short, swarthy and stocky. In contrast to most of the men in the tent, his fatigue clothing was spotlessly clean. His hair was very black and curly—almost kinky—receding slightly above a broad brown forehead. Beneath his small nose was a pencil mustache. He was cleanly shaven. His firm red mouth looked almost voluptuous above the square, slightly jutting chin.

But the eyes were his most impressive feature. As he played they snapped smoothly from player to player. They were always impersonal—impersonal as a lion’s eyes when he is looking over a flock of gazelle for the fattest, tastiest morsel.

When I sat down to play, I had four hundred dollars—I had been lucky in a crap game back at the rifle company. When I got up thirty minutes later I had nothing but the change in my pocket; yet I somehow felt as if it had been worth four hundred dollars to receive such a masterful lesson in the art of poker-playing at the hands of the most feared man in the South Pacific. During my stay in the game, he had said nothing to anyone, except in mentioning the conventional poker responses, usually, “I raise.”

I couldn't complain. My cards had been good, but not quite good enough. In the last three hands, I had a straight beaten by a flush, three jacks beaten by a straight, and a flush beaten by a full-house. Two times out the three Jansen had won the hand; each pot had been over three hundred dollars.

I said that I had had enough, pushed back my box, and joined the kibitzers. Jansen continued to win steadily.

"Does he always draw cards like that?" I asked one of the onlookers.

"Only seen it fail once," the man said, "maddest guy you ever saw."

"So he doesn't like to lose."

"Like it? They tell around here that he threatened to kill a man that beat him at blackjack!"

I repressed a shiver, remembered how close I had come to winning those three big pots.

I left the mess tent and walked out into the beautiful tropical night. Even the lush loveliness of the jungle under a full moon could not lift me out of the strange aura which a small man with impersonal eyes had spun around him.

II

When the division got ready to move out for an unknown destination two months later, I was transferred back to my old rifle platoon. I was sorry to leave the men of Headquarters Company. I had become very attached to some of them. I had become more attached to their way of life.

Although I had seen Bill Jansen only a few times since the night of the poker game, the fascination which his memory held for me remained. Evidently, I was not the only one who was fascinated by Jansen. All the guys in my company were anxious to hear about this man who was rapidly becoming a legend.

Then came the big news. Jansen was in the division stockade. He was charged with murder. Headquarters company was

bivouacked near us, so one night I went over to get the real story from my old friends.

The trouble had started in about the only place possible, a poker game. Gambling was the only real contact that Jansen had with other men. He ate alone, slept in a single tent, and very seldom talked to anyone in the company.

A new man had been transferred into the outfit after I left. His name was Johnny Sutton, and he had been a professional gambler in civilian life. He was Bill Jansen's antithesis. While Jansen was morose and taciturn, Sutton was jolly and garrulous. While Jansen played his cards close to his vest, Sutton played hunches, but his hunches usually worked out. Everyone hated Jansen, but Sutton was the friend of every man in the outfit two days after he arrived. Jansen was short, stocky, and swarthy; Sutton was tall, angular, and blond.

Somehow Sutton's warm friendly attitude touched something deep in Jansen's character. Miraculously, he quickly accepted Sutton. During the regular poker game, he smiled a few times at Sutton's jokes. Sutton won around four hundred dollars, and Jansen six hundred. After the game Jansen asked Sutton to share his tent with him. This was completely unprecedented, and the men of the company did not believe it would last. But to everyone's surprise, the arrangement seemed to work out well. Jansen's attitude toward the other men of the company continued to be the same. But he and Sutton could be seen playing cards together or chatting almost every evening.

No one in the company noticed any change in the relationship until the poker game at the first of the next month. As usual, Jansen and Sutton won most of the company money. Sutton, however, was the bigger winner. Jansen suggested that they cut the cards at ten dollars a cut. Sutton, always ready for anything, laughingly acquiesced. In fifteen minutes, he had won over three hundred dollars. He wanted to stop, but Jansen, who always carried a lot of money with him, insisted that they not only continue, but also raise the stakes to a hundred dollars a cut. Shrugging his shoulders, Sutton said "okay." In less than half an hour, he had won all the money Jansen had with him,

around twenty-five hundred dollars. The word had spread that a really big game was going, and most of the company crowded into the mess tent. Jansen went back to his tent to get more money. While he was gone, several of the men warned Sutton that he had better get out of the game. He laughed and told them that he was in no danger of winning much more. Didn't everyone know that Jansen never lost?

When he came back, Jansen was loaded for bear. Everyone had known that he kept money in his tent. It was as safe there as in the Chase Manhattan Bank. A man would have stolen Jansen's money about as soon as he would have picked up a cobra by the tail. In his hand he carried a large stack of bills. They were twenties or better. He motioned for Sutton to cut.

As the evening progressed, Jansen's losses became heavier and heavier, but he wouldn't quit. Sutton lost his garrulousness. He was praying that he would start to lose.

By three o'clock the next morning, Bill Jansen didn't have a cent. The tent was still packed. Jansen stood up without looking at anyone and walked out. Several of the men advised Sutton to sleep in the guard tent or stay up all night. He refused, saying that everything would be all right. After talking for a few minutes, he walked down to his tent. There was a shot. When the men got to the tent, Sutton was lying on the ground. There was a small round red spot in the center of his forehead. The back of his head was gone. Jansen was staring at the body of his friend. He was holding a carbine.

As soon as he heard the men coming, Jansen extinguished the candle in the tent. He yelled, "Keep away!" No one came closer than thirty feet to the tent for several minutes. Then Jansen walked out of the tent without the carbine. No one approached him. He went to the motor pool, got in a jeep, and drove himself to the division stockade.

A military court sentenced him to death for "Deliberated and Premeditated Murder." He did not appeal.

Just after the court-martial, the division landed on the beach of Madora and moved up into the hills. The Japs had left the beach unguarded. They had decided to defend the north-

ern end of the island. A range of mountains ringed the island and another cut it in half. There was only one entrance to the valley thus formed with was practicable for military operations. That was the infamous Guro Pass. Some of the toughest fighting of the Pacific War took place there. I often thought of Jansen in the stockade, and of how much help he would have been to the division in this situation.

I heard no more about him until we were out of combat.

III

The reveille whistle blew just as I was putting on my fatigue jacket. I walked over to the area with my buddy, Chick. He said he thought that something was up. I replied that if there was I didn't know anything about it.

The company formed slowly, and the first sergeant took up five minutes of our time by chewing out stragglers. That made it certain. The first sergeant never chewed unless something was up. Chick looked at me and winked. I shrugged my shoulders.

After reveille the first sergeant said, "Third platoon, stay in formation after the rest of the company is dismissed. DISMISSED." The rest of the company took off toward the mess hall.

The third platoon was mine. It was a rifle platoon, and every man in it had seen plenty of rugged fighting. The first sergeant shuffled his feet, put his hands to the back pockets of his fatigue pants and said, "All right men, let's have it at ease. You guys will fall out here immediately after breakfast. Uniform will be fatigues and helmet liners. Any questions?"

"Yeah sarge," said one of the men, "how deep will it be?"

"Cut the funny stuff," the first sergeant said, "you'll be told what the detail is as soon as you get loaded on the two-and-a-halves this morning.² I don't want any goofing off. Any more questions, men?" No one said anything. "Ok, that's all."

²From the M35 family of trucks, a two and a half is a 2 and 1/2 ton cargo truck. Also called "deuce and half."

The men left the area in little groups, each of which was speculating upon the nature of the detail which the third platoon had been given. The first sergeant said, "Hey Jim, wait a minute." I stopped and waited for him to come abreast of me.

When he caught up with me, I noticed he was puffing a little. He always seemed to be puffing. He was getting fat.

"You ever hear of Bill Jansen?"

"Did I ever hear of him, my God, do think I'm deaf?"

"Cut it out," he said. "Cut it out. You guys are always getting smart with me."

"Spill it," I said, "spill it."

"He's gonna be shot this morning."

It really jolted me. If he'd said the war over I wouldn't have been more surprised. He continued quickly,

"Jim, you're taking the platoon to San Juan airstrip this morning to see him shot."

"Oh I am." I said.

"Yeah, you are. The order came through to battalion last night that every company would send one platoon to see it."

"Well that's nice," I said. "That's just ducky. And suppose some of the men don't want to see the guy get shot?"

"They'll see it anyway. It's an order, you know that. The Captain and I drew straws last night to see which platoon would go, and you happened to be the lucky outfit."

"Okay," I said, "Okay, so we go." I started walking toward the mess hall fast. He caught up with me and said, "Not a word about this to anyone until you hit the trucks. I'm sorry, Jim. You get the dirty end again, but can I help it?"

Without looking at him I said, "That's okay, that's okay. I know you couldn't help it." I said it, but I didn't believe it.

We entered the mess hall, got our mess kits and went through the chow line. Powdered eggs, a little dab of fried dehydrated potatoes and coffee. I sat down next to Chick. He was all through except for coffee and a cigarette.

"What's up?" he said.

"Can't tell you, yet. Tell you when we hit the trucks."

"Must be big," he said.

“All depends on how you look at it,” I said.

“Well, I got to brush my teeth before we go, see yah,” and he was gone.

“Yeah, I’ll see yah,” I said. So Chick has to brush his teeth. I wondered whether Jansen would brush his teeth this morning. Probably not, what would be the use? If some guy aimed a little high, he’d get his teeth brushed with a thirty caliber slug.

I got up, went out, washed my mess kit, and walked down to our tent. Chick was just putting on his helmet liner. I took mine off my mosquito bar and followed him out of the tent.

When we arrived at the area I saw that the first sergeant was already there. So was Second Lieutenant Klepis, the new platoon leader who was going to accompany us on our “mission.” The first sergeant didn’t say anything to me.

We hung around shooting the breeze until the first sergeant said, “Take the roll, Sergeant.” I got out my roster and called off the names. Everyone was present except Jordan, who was in the hospital.

The first sergeant told me to take over and walked away. I turned to Second Lieutenant Klepis. He gave me the details of the trip and told me I was in charge. That dumped the whole load in my lap.

“All right, let’s have it at ease,” I yelled. “Batallion has given us a nasty little duty this morning. Some of you will like it. Most of you won’t. But like it or not, all of us have to go. No excuses. As soon as I finish here, we load on the two-and-a halves. Our destination is San Juan airstrip, and our purpose for going there is to witness the execution of Bill Jansen. Okay, get on those trucks.” Instantly there was a hubbub of excited voices. I left the loading in charge of a corporal, and walked over to the jeep where Lieutenant Klepis was waiting for me.

“A little rough on them, weren’t you, sergeant?” he said.

“This is a rough detail, Lieutenant,” I said.

I got in behind the wheel of the jeep and waited for the corporal to signal to me that the trucks were loaded. A couple of miles from here, Jansen was probably sitting in a jeep, waiting for someone to signal his driver to move out. A crazy

thought occurred to me. What if the jeep he was in had an accident and he was killed? No, they wouldn't let that happen. They'd drive very carefully. Jansen should have killed himself when he had the chance. But life is sweet to most people, too sweet to bring it to an end of their own volition. I laughed out loud. The lieutenant nervously said, "What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just a crazy idea."

The corporal came up and told me the trucks were ready. I thanked him and started the motor. The trucks moved out behind me. Highway 8 was full of trucks and jeeps. An MP stationed at the turn stopped the line and signaled my little convoy into it. We bounced down the road to the turnoff for San Juan. Another MP was directing traffic there. Just like going to a football game.

We parked on the airstrip and went back to the trucks to see that all the men were there. An officer came up to the lieutenant and gave him the position from which our platoon was supposed to watch the proceedings. I had the men fall in, gave them right face, forward march, and route step. The lieutenant led the way to our position. We were stationed directly to the left of the area marked off for the firing squad. It was the best position on the field.

There must have been two thousand men there, and more coming, all in small groups such as ours. The men were arranged in a mammoth semi-circle. Just inside the semi-circle, maybe thirty feet from its center, was an area about ten feet by twenty feet. It was marked off with white stakes. This space was reserved for the firing squad.

I looked around the semi-circle at the men. Most of them were talking but with a definite restraint. Then I turned toward the center of the semi-circle.

It was six by six and about ten feet high. It looked strangely as if it had at one time been a railroad tie. It had the same oil smudges and the same chewed look. Arranged as it was in the center of the flat airstrip, it looked vastly taller than it really was. It completely dominated the scene. Somehow it looked to me as if it would have made a good subject for a totem pole carver, or the object of worship for some ancient, primitive re-

ligious cult. I looked at Lieutenant Klepis. He was watching it as if it were alive. Little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and upper lip. He noticed that I was watching him. He turned to the corporal and asked for the time.

There was less talking now. Most of the men were shuffling nervously or puffing cigarettes. Suddenly the shuffling stopped. I looked to my left and saw a detail of men—fatigues pressed, helmet liners freshly painted, rifles smartly at right shoulder—marching toward the area marked off with the white stakes. As they marched nearer, I looked at them more closely and realized that I knew them all. They were the men of Jansen's own platoon. I found out later that they had volunteered for the job.

The officer in charge of the detail gave them a column left and halted them in the assigned area. He gave them order arms and at ease. The rifles instantly relaxed. None of the men talked. Most of them looked at the ground or fiddled with their rifles.

By this time, the whole airstrip was silent. For five minutes we stood there without speaking. Ten—and then suddenly the sound of vehicles driving up the strip broke the silence. A quick period of false relaxation came with the noise. Everyone turned to his neighbor with some comment. When the vehicles came to a halt the noise died.

There were three vehicles. The first was a three quarter ton truck. The tarpaulin was off its bed, and on each seat were three MP's, each sitting rigidly at attention, his carbine between his knees. As soon as the truck stopped the MP's piled out and gathered around the second vehicle, a jeep, screening it from our eyes. Their carbines were at port arms. The third was an ambulance, one of the old field type. Its rear doors opened, and two medics jumped out with a litter. They set it down outside the ambulance.

The MP's moved away from the jeep and formed two lines, three men in each. Then we saw that there was a man between the lines. The chaplain, his surplice around his neck and a book in his hand, got out of the jeep. He took his place behind the man between the lines. The officer in charge of the detail

went to the front of this little procession and gave a command. They moved off toward the stake.

The man between the lines was Jansen. He was wearing army fatigue clothing and combat boots. The boots were polished and the clothing very clean. There was no insignia of rank or unit on his jacket. His head was bare. He walked along steadily between the two lines of MP's. The scene reminded me of another I had seen. That of an Olympic track star being escorted to the victory pedestal by his team mates, head bare, ready to receive the crown of laurel. The man looked like an athlete with his well-knit body and light step. He never faltered or deviated from the path.

The little entourage stopped before the stake. The MP's broke ranks and reformed in a line to the rear of the three principals. Jansen turned toward the firing squad and put his hands behind him. He looked like a man ready to give a speech. The chaplain started talking to him. We could not hear what he was saying, but we could see that Jansen was paying no attention to him.

I looked at the firing squad. All of the men in it were now staring at Jansen, fascinated. I looked back at Jansen. He was going down both lines of the squad with his eyes, looking at each individual member of it. Most of the men in the firing squad lowered their gaze. A faint grin appeared on Jansen's face. As the chaplain said his last words, Jansen turned to him and made the sign of the cross. The chaplain stepped back, and for a moment, Jansen was alone in front of the stake. I looked around. Men were leaning forward, sweating heavily. They thought that he was going to say something. He let his eyes run over the entire group once more. Then he smiled, and the smile became a laugh. The laugh stopped, and though I didn't see his mouth move, I thought I heard him say, "I'll win, you bastards."

The MP officer came up behind him. In his hand was a piece of black cloth. He motioned to Jansen, and Jansen backed up against the stake and put his hands behind it. Two of the MP's behind him slung their carbines over their shoulders and broke ranks. The MP officer handed each of them a

piece of rope. One secured Jansen's hands behind the stake and the other tied his feet to it.

The officer, meanwhile, had unfolded the black cloth, and was putting it over Jansen's head. It fitted nicely. The cloth was longer than I had expected. It covered the head, shoulders, and chest of the prisoner. In the exact center of the chest there was a white spot about the size of a man's hand. After the hood was adjusted, the officer produced another length of rope and bound Jansen to the stake about the chest. When he had finished he said something. The hood nodded. Both officers stepped back. The line of MP's reformed, executed a right face, and marched off.

The officer in charge of the firing squad said, "Squaaad. . . . Ten-HUT." The squad came to attention, but it was not a very happy maneuver. It didn't make any difference, because no one was watching it anyway.

"Right shoulder. . . . ARMS." All eyes were on the figure against the stake. It wiggled as if it were uncomfortable. I looked at the firing squad. The rifles which had been so perfectly in line were now at every crazy angle to their bearers' shoulders.

"READY." The rifles were wavered down to firing position. Some of them were so unsteady that I could see them vibrate.

"AIM." The safeties clicked, but not in unison. The figure at the stake had stopped moving. It seemed to expand, both upward and outward. The hood was bowed firmly back against the stake.

"FIRE." I looked at Lieutenant Klepis. His mouth was open, and his eyes held an expression of horror. His fatigue jacket was drenched around the armpits.

The noise sounded like the drum blast of eternity. The figure at the stake jerked upward in one last, mighty effort to break its bonds, and then sagged like an empty balloon. After an age the doctor strode towards the body with a stethoscope, opened the jacket and put his instrument over the place where the heart had been. He straightened, in a moment, and said in a clear voice, "I pronounce this man dead."

Two MP's came up to the stake. One had a knife. He cut the bonds across the chest and around the wrists. The body sagged forward, and the other MP gingerly attempted to catch it, but failed. It hit the ground face first with a thud. I wonder if the ankles were bruised by the fall.

The Medics had come over with their litter. They hastily wrapped the body in a piece of black tarpaulin, put it on the litter, and carried it to the ambulance. The driver started the motor and the ambulance rolled away, preceded by an MP escort.

IV

A year later I was out of the Army and back in college. It didn't surprise me very much one afternoon, to meet one of my old friends from headquarters company on the campus. He too was a student.

We talked about old days, and eventually the conversation moved to Jansen. I told him about imagining that I heard Jansen say, "I'll win, you bastards." When I looked at him, he was very white.

"So you heard it too," he said. I was startled.

"You mean you heard it?" I asked. He waved his hand.

"No, no, I didn't hear it, but some others did. All the men in the firing squad."

I laughed nervously. "That's incredible," I said, "but it was probably auto-hypnosis, or some such thing."

He waited a long time before he answered, "I wouldn't be too sure," he said. "Those men were all killed."

I thought that one over. "So what," I said, "so were plenty of other guys."

"It's not the same," he said. "You see, the division got VJ passes for the celebration. The men on the firing squad didn't go into town. They stayed in the mess tent. Someone threw a live grenade in there and it killed every one of them."

"My God," I said, "what were they doing?"

"Playing poker," he said.