“This One Is Captain Waskow”

At the Front Lines in Italy, Jan. 10 — (by wireless) — In this war I have known a lot of officers who were loved and respected by the soldiers under them. But never have I crossed the trail of any man as beloved as Capt. Henry T. Waskow, of Belton, Tex.

Captain Waskow was a company commander in the 36th Division. He had been in this company since long before he left the States. He was very young, only in his middle 20s, but he carried in him a sincerity and gentleness that made people want to be guided by him.

“After my own father, he comes next,” a sergeant told me.

“He always looked after us,” a soldier said. “He’d go to bat for us every time.”

“I’ve never known him to do anything unkind,” another one said.

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I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Captain Waskow down. The moon was nearly full, and you could see far up the trail, and even part way across the valley. Soldiers made shadows as they walked.

Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly down across the wooden packsaddle, their heads hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs
sticking awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and
down as the mule walked.

The Italian mule skinners were afraid to walk beside dead
men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night.
Even the Americans were reluctant to unlash and lift off the
bodies, when they got to the bottom, so an officer had to do
it himself and ask others to help.

The first one came early in the morning. They slid him down
from the mule, and stood him on his feet for a moment. In the
half light he might have been merely a sick man standing there
leaning on the other. Then they laid him on the ground in the
shadow of the stone wall alongside the road.

I don’t know who that first one was. You feel small in the
presence of dead men, and you don’t ask silly questions.

We left him there beside the road, that first one, and we all
went back into the cowshed and sat on watercans or lay on
the straw, waiting for the next batch of mules.

Somebody said the dead soldier had been dead for four
days, and then nobody said anything more about him. We
talked for an hour or more; the dead man lay all alone, out-
side in the shadow of the wall.

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Then a soldier came into the cowshed and said there were
some more bodies outside. We went out into the road. Four
mules stood there in the moonlight, in the road where the
trail came down off the mountain. The soldiers who led them
stood there waiting.

“This one is Captain Waskow,” one of them said quickly.

Two men unlashied his body from the mule and lifted it off
and laid it in the shadow beside the stone wall. Other men
took the other bodies off. Finally, there were five lying end to
end in a long row. You don’t cover up dead men in the com-
batt zones. They just lie there in the shadows until somebody
else comes after them.

The uncertain mules moved off to their olive groves. The
men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood
around, and gradually I could sense them moving, one by
one, close to Captain Waskow’s body. Not so much to look, I
think, as to say something in finality to him and to them-
selves. I stood close by and I could hear.
One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud: "God damn it!"
That's all he said, and then he walked away.
Another one came, and he said, "God damn it to hell anyway!" He looked down for a few last moments and then turned and left.
Another man came. I think he was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the dim light, for everybody was grimy and dirty. The man looked down into the dead captain's face and then spoke directly to him, as though he were alive:
"I'm sorry, old man."
Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said:
"I sure am sorry, sir."
Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down and took the captain's hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face. And he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.
Finally he put the hand down. He reached up and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound, and then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.
The rest of us went back into the cowshed, leaving the five dead men lying in a line end to end in the shadow of the low stone wall. We lay down on the straw in the cowshed, and pretty soon we were all asleep.

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