

Maneuvering a Minefield

“So, you said the forest was riddled with anti-personnel devices?”

I stood up from my comfortable chair and crossed the large room, shaking off the jet lag that made me groggy at noon.

“Landmines, young man, is quite good enough for this story.”

I'd come into the middle of the tale as often happens when eavesdropping. The elderly man was open to catch me up, but a little impatient. Though polite, perhaps he thought an American didn't quite fit in at his staid, English military club.

He was right. I didn't. But as a history fanatic, I was fascinated by his story.

I was in London researching a book on the resistance movement. My friend, Niles, had recently joined the Cavalry and Guards Club and invited me for lunch. But he was off making a call.

“So, you said the Alsatian just plunged into the minefield to save the child? Without any thought for his own safety?”

He frowned and shrugged. “Of course. Although I wouldn't say ‘plunged,’” He drew out the word.

“This happened right after World War Two? In Alsace?” The Resistance was strong there.

“No, no.” He waved his hand around in the air as if what I was asking was of no importance. “I mean, yes, it was in the days following the war. Somewhere in the Rhineland along the Siegfried Line.”

I joined the men in their semi-circle of leather wingback chairs around the fireplace and pulled out my notebook.

“So, you and your company—”

“My good man,” he interrupted. “Exactly how old do you think I am?” He rapidly thumped his fingers on the arm of his chair and glared at me as he waited for my reply.

I stuttered out, “I, um, well, no— you'd have to be around—” I hesitated, fidgeting. “It was eighty years ago.”

He sat up as straight as his stooped shoulders would allow. “Do I look 100?” He put the question not to me but to his cronies gathered around him.

Chuckles and murmurs of dissent were his answer.

“My *father* and his men witnessed this. They arrived to sweep for mines. Poised to go in with their detectors, through the trees they saw a little French girl who had wandered off from her family's picnic!

“My father said his heart stopped, and he froze. Nothing that happened during the war had prepared him for this.

At once, they all quickly called out a warning not to move, to wait until they could reach her. Trembling and crying, she tried to run back the way she came. When they screamed at her to stop, the frightened child began sobbing.

“Someone had painted ‘beware’ on the trees. There were paper signs with skull and crossbones warnings nailed here and there, but she spoke only French and was too young to understand what the pictures meant.

“The soldiers looked at each other in dismay. What could they do? They’d never reach her in time. She could dart out at any moment and be blown to smithereens. It was a wonder she hadn’t been already.

“All of a sudden, out of nowhere, this Alsatian ran up. He must’ve heard the girl and hurried there from a nearby cabbage farm.

“He hesitated before setting foot in the minefield. Then he carefully picked his way to her in a jagged path, almost as though he *knew* where the mines were. When he reached the girl, she put her hand on his back, and he led her out step by step, exactly the way he came in.”

“Amazing story! She was not so *very* small if she could reach his back, though.” I thought of my own small daughter and wondered why her rescuer didn’t instantly scoop her up but trusted her to follow him.

“She was *small*,” the elderly man glowered at me, his bushy eyebrows joined into one.

I wondered what the man’s name was. It was likely that he was involved in the Resistance. If so, maybe there was a way to work the story into my book.

“Do you know his name? Did your father think he wasn’t afraid to enter the minefield because he was incredibly brave, or because he didn’t read English?”

“Read English?” The men seated before the crackling fire exchanged amused glances.

“Neither,” said the storyteller. “It was because he was an Alsatian.”

He chuckled at the puzzled look on my face. “What do you Yanks call it? A German Shepherd.”