

GHOST SQUAD

Rise of the Black Legion

**by Ron Fortier
& Andrew Salmon**

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by Ron Fortier and Andrew Salmon
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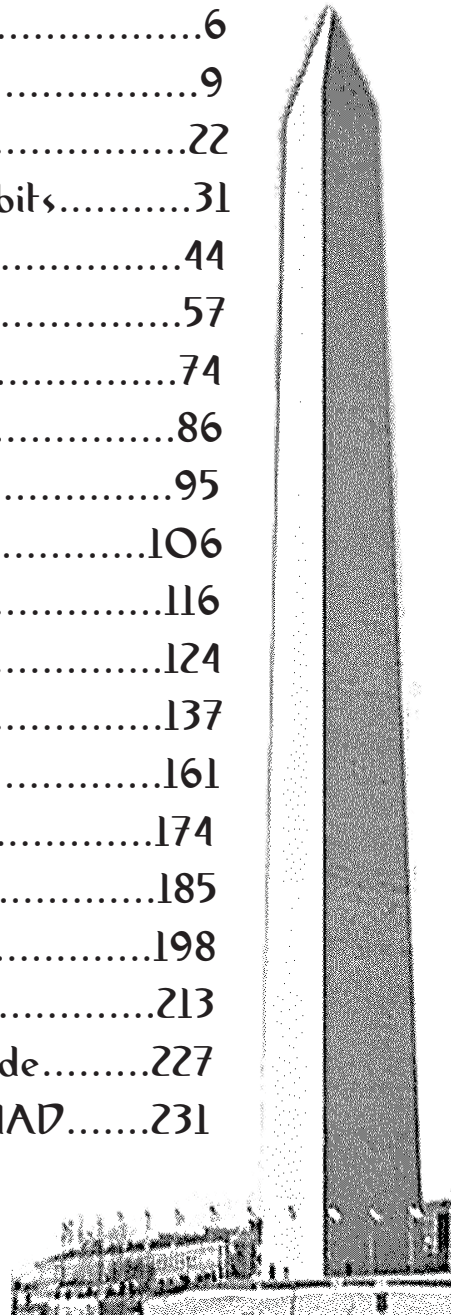
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Prologue

HE AWAKENS

Someone was calling his name. At first it was a vague sound, as if a weak echo shouted in some distant canyon. He was disorientated. The world around him was dark and dank, as if there was lots of moisture surrounding him. As awareness became stronger, his thoughts were jumbled and questions came at him in an endless procession.

Where am I? What am I doing here? Where is here? What happened to me?

Then he heard the voice again, this time much louder. And the name resonated inside him. Someone was calling him personally. The voice was familiar. He tried to move and nearly toppled over. Everything around him was dark, but it wasn't night.

Night. The dark. A fear so overpowering gripped him and he began to shake. Tears sprang forth and wet his cheeks under the white muslin wrapping that covered his face.

He remembered where he had been before the voice called him. Called him back to the world, to his sisters, to Jerusalem.

Moving awkwardly, he tugged at the cloying linen and managed



“And the voice called out a third time.
‘Lazarus, come forth!’”

to expose his face to the cave's cool air. His lungs sucked in air greedily. It was good to be alive. But how?

It was impossible!

He moved to the aperture where a stream of sunlight filtered into what had been his tomb. And the voice called out a third time.

“Lazarus, come forth!”

He complied.

Chapter One

FRANCE 1918

Major David Atwater thought he understood evil.

Flaming onions plopped down in the thick, churned mud around Atwater's Engineering Headquarters. He barely had time to turn away before the incendiaries so colorfully named erupted in gouts of flame. The ground trembled slightly beneath Atwater's feet and a shower of mud poured through the shattered windows.

He flicked the mud off his hands with a disdain that contrasted with his already filthy uniform.

Yes, he thought he'd learned all he'd needed to know about man's inhumanity to man from the books and teachings he'd immersed himself in while engaged in study at Princeton. Wars, battle, great victories and defeats filled his brain along with the vast history of Machiavellian maneuvering, plots, assassinations and murders in the name of forward progress.

Amidst the desperate cries from the wounded outside came the excited, throaty yells and hurled oaths of those still standing.

The enemy was approaching.

Atwater expected this. The strings of incendiaries which had

just gone off were hand weapons. Unlike the huge trench mortars launched from afar, flying onions had to be armed and thrown. This meant the throwers were, at this moment, barreling towards the building, rifles in their fists, blood lust, loathing and fear in their eyes.

He barked commands at his men, attempting to shut out his own terror in the process. He was no soldier. He preferred words to warfare. But he had recognized the evil being perpetrated on the battlefields of France since '14, felt compelled to do something about it, and enlisted.

The thing was that no amount of training could have prepared him for what followed. Three days of combat – the first for himself and the entire US Expeditionary Force – had shown him Hell on earth. Atrocity on a grand scale: men churned under tank treads, blown to pieces in trenches, bisected by machine gun fire, maimed, crippled, stabbed, destroyed every way it is possible to take life. All without so much as a thought or care. Funny how his instructors had left these details out of their lessons. Of course how could they have possibly put into words what Atwater had seen since the battle of Saint Mihiel began.

Atwater checked the load in his revolver and, as his men were watching as they scrabbled about, he casually re-holstered the weapon. This was sheer theater on his part. The enemy was only seconds away and he'd need the weapon soon enough. But he wanted the men to be fooled into thinking that the approaching tide was nothing to be concerned about.

He couldn't tell them that he'd sent the majority of his men out to meet the German commandoes who had broken through the line in a desperate attempt to destroy the Engineering Headquarters. Couldn't tell them that their comrades had all fallen to the attackers, leaving them, a mere handful, to hold the line.

"Stand ready, men!" he said in a voice laden with confidence he did not feel. "We are abandoning this position to the enemy. If they mean to have it, let's make them earn it. Outside!"

In the hallowed halls of Princeton, the idea of murder for a cause would never have occurred to him. He would have argued that surely

the law and justice were the only weapons one needed to see that right prevailed. However the black and white of the printed page meant nothing here on the battlefield. He stared briefly at the mud-splattered files strewn over his desk and the irony did not escape him.

Despite all he'd been brought up to believe, murder was sometimes necessary. A necessary evil that could not be avoided. The Germans roaring towards him would cut him down without a second thought. It was kill or be killed -- the law of the jungle, which had been mankind's only law for so many millennia.

Atwater bent at the waist and hoisted a half-full gasoline can. He sprinkled the gas about over the papers, placed the can down next to his desk and struck a match. Just as the first bullets smacked against the outer walls of his office, he tossed the match on the pile of gas-soaked sheets and they turned to flame.

Drawing his revolver, he stared at the flames, grateful that there was no one present to see the naked fear stalk across his features.

A necessary evil, he reminded himself.

Outnumbered, he knew that he and his remaining men would soon be cut to ribbons, left dead or dying in the unforgiving mud while the enemy continued forward over their cooling corpses in search of fresh game.

He would die for something at least. That mattered to him -- mattered a great deal in fact. He would lay down his life in the opposition of the enemy, to buy precious seconds in which some of his comrades might reach safety. He would die fighting evil he never dreamed could have existed until he heard the first canon roar and had seen what the heartless weapons of war could do to human flesh as well as the human spirit.

But, before he died, he would become evil. That necessary evil, which made a man take up arms in noble cause and give that last full measure of devotion in the name of freedom and, yes, in the name of peace.

Revolver in hand, Atwater strode to the door. The flames licked at the back of his tunic. His eyes, at first dazzled by the fire glow, adjusted to the dark gloom and steel rods of rain thundering down.

The horses were away, their riders bearing secrets the enemy could not be permitted to obtain. They had been dispatched at the first sign of trouble. The riders needed precious time to reach safety. Atwater and his men would buy that time with their lives.

Bullets lanced out of the gloom. Like invisible daggers they cut flesh, shattered bone. Two men fell, clutching stomachs and throats. They writhed and kicked in their own gore. There was no choice but to leave them there. The dying men understood this, which only added to their misery.

A small reminder of the shades of gray lesson he'd learned these last days since the battle began, Atwater saw the good that had come from the attack. Through the night black as death, the lethal hail of bullets could be backtracked to their source. He did so. The enemy was attacking from the southwest. And they were as blind as Atwater and his troops in the stygian darkness or else they would have cut everyone down.

This would change when their abandoned Headquarters was ablaze.

Atwater didn't intend to be anywhere near the building when the flames found the gas can next to his desk.

However the enemy could be drawn into the fireball. If he could time it just right and luck was on his side.

"Return fire!" he bellowed and a terrible din of gunfire sounded.

The Germans knew the building was occupied. If they received no response to their volley, they would suspect a trap and approach cautiously, slowly. By returning fire as close to them as possible, Atwater hoped to give them the impression that their position was known and therefore unsafe. The Germans would have no choice but to meet their attackers in close combat or risk being picked off at a distance. A battle he wanted them to believe would take place at the burning Headquarters.

Atwater seized the elbow of his master sergeant and hissed into the burly man's ear.

"Fall back! Spread the word! Quietly, man! I want riflemen covering the retreat."

The master sergeant lumbered through the half-dozen men and

passed the order.

Atwater fired two shots at the unseen enemy.

His men faded into the darkness.

Shots answered Atwater's, pattering against the wall of the building. One whizzed off the sheered trunk of a tree the major stood near, gouging out long splinters.

Atwater back-pedaled. His worn boots fought for purchase in the sucking mud.

He heard the low rattle of army gear over the sound of the rain. The enemy was closer than he thought. This worked to his advantage because he was sure the gas can in his office was going to go up like a Roman candle any second.

By God, his slapdash plan had a hope and chance of working.

Then he heard a whirling hiss coming towards him.

Flaming onions!

"Retreat!" he roared. "Double-time!"

Major David Atwater turned and ran.

The first string of incendiaries splashed into the mud between the two fallen men and exploded. Mud, blood and body parts flew up in a jet of flame. The concussion knocked Atwater off his feet.

He rolled onto his back and aimed his revolver between his splayed legs at the advancing enemy momentarily lit by the explosion. He fired and a German fell.

Then things slowed down. As his fingers tightened on the trigger to let lose a second volley, his mind registered the graceful arc of a second string of bombs spinning their way straight through the shot out window of his office as though guided by unseen hands. The second shot burst from his gun. He did not wait to see where it went.

Flopping on his belly, he tried to stand but the mud yanked his feet out from under him with every step. Shots whizzed by all around as both sides fired at each other with him in the middle.

Like a fish out of water he slid and flailed, the seconds counting down in his head with inexorable certainty.

The bombs went off. The gas and half the building was consumed in a roiling fireball of bricks, wood, motor and flame. The noise was

deafening. The debris like so much shrapnel tore into both sides indiscriminately. Hot daggers stabbed the mud around Atwater. Agonized cries sounded in front and behind him.

Yet the gunfire continued.

Crawling was safer than running but would take too long. He could hear shouted commands in German.

They were almost upon him.

An overturned, blackened wreck of a five-ton loomed up ahead. If he could put that wall of metal between himself and the enemy –

The German voices were louder now. He heard the rattle of their gear, the sucking sounds their boots made in the mud.

He had to run for it.

Atwater staggered to his feet and ran drunkenly towards the wrecked truck. Shouts of surprise from the Germans told him he'd been spotted. He heard the deadly sound of rifle bolts being drawn back. He tried to run faster. The truck was close, so close.

The guns behind him fired. Bullets spanged off the blackened underbelly of the truck in little firework bursts of sparks.

Atwater lost his balance and slammed head first into the front axle. Dazed, he whirled around, seeking the protection of the front fender. More shots clanged off metal. Too close for comfort. With his left hand, Atwater clutched the bumper and swung himself around to safety.

As he did so, his feet slid out from under him again and he went face first into the mud next to the vertical hood. The smooth rain-slick metal provided no hand hold for him to pull in his exposed legs.

Frantically, he dug and pushed into the mud with his boots, trying to swim to safety. Bullets ricocheted off the metal. The noise like a bucket of rivets dropped down a fire escape.

Then something swatted at his right leg, all but spinning him around. It took a moment of shocked immobility before he realized he'd been hit. This realization came with searing pain. Pain which propelled him to safety behind the truck.

However the damage had been done.

Atwater felt his own hot blood soaking his frozen leg. The wound

was high on the back of the thigh. The bullet appeared to have gone clean through without shattering bone. This was some relief. However, he was bleeding heavily and could not tell if an artery had been hit. If so, then it was curtains for him. Simple as that. He stared at the bleeding hole in his leg as if waiting for it to give up its secrets, but watching the blood soak through the cloth was more terrifying than anything he'd seen to date and he yanked his eyes away. Whether he had minutes or hours didn't matter. He had to make do with whatever time he had left.

He tried to adjust his position to better see the closing enemy. Every twitch of his body brought fresh waves of agony. His cold, numb fingers could barely clutch the revolver. He tried to aim at the advancing enemy but shock made his hand tremble. He could not sight the pistol.

He managed one shot but it struck only air.

The silence behind him told him that his men had made good their escape. This meant the riders with their important cargo were also clear.

Mission accomplished.

There were more poetic epitaphs, Major David Atwater had no doubt. But none more satisfying.

He pulled his pistol to his chest, planted the butt squarely against his breastbone and, clutching the gun in both hands, waited for the first enemy to round the truck.

The Germans were upon him now, easing their way with as much stealth as the mud would allow. He steeled himself to go down fighting and tightened his white-knuckle grip on the revolver. He heard the enemy's ragged breathing, saw their muddy boots through a gaping hole in the hood. So close he could have reached out and touched them if he desired.

Then movement behind told him he'd been outflanked. Part of the enemy force had gone around the rear end of the truck.

This was the end.

He heard a heavy bolt being drawn back.

The enemy boots twitched in surprise and there was an intake of breath all around.

Then the bull-fiddle roar of a Lewis machine gun shattered the night.

Atwater watched with morbid fascination as the Germans danced and spasmed while lethal lead ripped their bodies open. Blood geysered and spouted, weapons fell from suddenly lifeless hands. Some of the enemy dropped their weapons and tried to flee, but they were cut down mercilessly.

Others returned fire. Atwater could only duck and wrap his arms around his head.

He heard the light tread of boots as the man with the Lewis seemed to glide over the mud with ease. Moving like a shadow, the man went right past Atwater where he lay.

The major looked up, saw a broad back in an olive green trench coat. The man's right shoulder was pressed against the hood of the truck.

"I'll have you out of this in a moment, sir," the man said without looking over his shoulder.

Atwater was stunned at this saving angel's tone. Outnumbered, outgunned, the man spoke as calmly as a theater usher telling him when the next show was to start.

The man stepped forward and turned, presenting himself to the enemy in order to bring the long, barrel of the Lewis to bear. The barrel spat flame and death. The man holding the weapon seemed unfazed by the massive recoil. There were a few answering shots but these were drowned out by the death cries of men cut to pieces.

The ammo drum spent, the man dropped the weapon unceremoniously into the mud. Then he reached under the soaked trench coat, which clung to him like a shroud, and withdrew a machete.

Without so much as a glance at Atwater, the man disappeared from view and, through the hole in the hood, was seen by the disbelieving major to be charging the enemy. Atwater heard the whistle of that terrible blade as it sliced through air, then through skin, bone and gristle.

Like a wraith the man seemed to dance through the slogging mud. He appeared to be everywhere at once, hacking and butchering the

stumbling enemy like some noble barbarian from the primordial mists. The machete dripped with blood, drops flew off the keen blade with the rise and fall of each deadly stroke.

The enemy withered under the attack. They could not draw a bead on their executioner. The handful still standing turned and fled. In seconds the man stood alone over the steaming body parts and fresh corpses.

Satisfied the threat has passed, the man wiped the machete on the back of one of the dead and returned the blade to its place beneath his trench coat.

Atwater was gripped with blind terror as the man made his way back to where he lay. For some inexplicable reason he was certain that he would be next. That the death-dealing figure before him would not be swayed by the color of a uniform.

“I am Captain John Lazarus,” the man said in a sepulcher voice. “Your wound is not terminal. Colonel Patton has sent reserves to re-enforce the action at Woel. They will take us to General Rockenbach’s forces at St. Benoit.”

Before Atwater could accept the fact that he was to be spared, Lazarus ripped the lining from his overcoat to bind the Major’s injury. The motion pulled the bottom of the coat from around his legs, revealing them to the waist. Atwater saw the revolver at the man’s hip and wondered why any man armed this way would prefer to use a blade against bullets. Then the bottom of the coat swung down and around the man’s legs, hiding them from view. The man bound Atwater’s injury efficiently then, hoisted the Major on his back in a fireman’s carry and began a smooth jog away from the truck.

The cowering Germans saw the back of Lazarus and thought it made a fine target. They opened fire. Atwater, all but spent, could barely summon enough energy to be frightened by this fresh assault. As he bobbed with his savior’s steps, his eyes grew heavy and his mind clouded with fatigue, pain and blood loss. Just before he passed out, he was sure he felt the impact as Lazarus took a bullet in the back, then two more in the left shoulder near which Atwater’s head lolled.

But seeing as the Captain's gate did not waver, Atwater was sure he must be mistaken and had only imagined the impacts.

Then everything went black.

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Major David Atwater opened his eyes and gazed upon an angelic vision in white. The warmest eyes he'd ever beheld looked down caringly on him where he lay. Smooth, rounded jaw, high cheek bones, a pert nose – he was certain he'd gone to his reward until he noticed the tiny crevice of worry between the woman's almond-shaped sky-blue eyes.

Surely nothing could worry an angel?

Therefore, Atwater reasoned, he must still be on terra firma and very much alive.

His senses corroborated this. He became aware of the medicinal smell of a hospital laced with suffering and death. Crisp sheets swaddled him like a benign shroud. Gas lamps flickered around the large room, softening the faces of the men and women in the business of healing and dying. The odd low groan reached him from the beds of those worse off than he was and these were mixed with occasional chuckles from a card game nearby.

"How did I come to be here?" he asked the vision in white. And as the words passed his lips he knew the answer. A strange dream sprang to mind of being carried by a fellow comrade in arms, a stranger. Someone who took bullets meant for him –

"The man who brought me here," he began, his voice raspy as a death rattle. "Did he pull through?"

A faint blush colored the nurse's porcelain beauty and she bowed her head demurely.

"I-I am not sure, sir," she stammered in a sweet voice with a pleasant French accent. "There has b-been some trouble."

"Blast that! I owe this man my life. Now tell me what I want to know!"

"An-an army Captain brought you in, s-sir. You were bleeding freely. Our surgeon, he is one of the best, did all he could and saved

y-your leg.”

“A thousand blessings on the man!” Atwater sighed. He’d been aware of the dull, aching throb in his leg under the blankets since he awoke and had been loath to look lest he find it to be a phantom itch below a fresh, bandaged stump. But what did his leg matter now? “Did this surgeon of yours work on the heroic Captain?”

“I-I do not think so, sir.”

“What!” Sharp stabs of guilt pierced his soul at the thought of the surgeon toiling over him while his savior bled out on a filthy cot. “Surely he was hurt worse than I. What were you fools thinking?”

“I do not know. As I said, there was some trouble here earlier. We were all coming and going most hurriedly. I cannot say for certain, but I think the man who brought you in was uninjured.”

“Uninjured!” Was such a thing possible? He said a silent prayer that it was. “Show me the man. I must thank him.”

“He is no longer here. At least, no one has seen him. He remained until the surgeon began working on you, then simply disappeared.”

“A man can’t vanish.”

“If-If you only knew, sir, what’s been going on here. It’s terrible.”

He could not bear to see the lovely nurse so upset so he put aside his desire to speak to the man who saved him for the moment and asked the nurse, whose name was Giselle, what was the matter.

“I am ashamed to speak of it, sir.” Giselle paused and her blush deepened to an angry scarlet. “One of our orderlies was seen stealing supplies: morphine, bandages even sheets and cots have gone missing. These are sold on the black market for exorbitant profit. When we are short we sometimes have to buy these things back from these people lest the injured go without.”

Anger flared in Atwater’s breast at this abomination.

“Why does this shame you?” he asked through gritted teeth. “You were not involved, I’m sure.”

“Am I not a human being, sir?” Giselle’s eyes flashed angrily. “To think that one of our species could deprive injured men the means to get well or dying men surcease from their agony, why, I am ashamed to be cut from the same cloth. Can there really be such evil in the world?”

“That and more, child,” Atwater said, his gaze turned inward on fresh horrors he would never forget.

“The other orderlies chased the blackmarketeer but he escaped. We have no morphine now. And so many will gasp out their last in unrelenting pain because of it.”

Suddenly a shriek from across the room pierced the heavy air. A nurse, wide-eyed and staring, hands pressed to her cheeks, stood in the doorway to the courtyard. Her eyes rolled back and she fainted.

“What -- ” Atwater began but the nurse was gone from his bedside. He tried to rise but pain shot through his thigh and hip and he collapsed back onto the cot. He lay there a few anxious moments, then the nurse returned, tears streaming down her cheeks, her face pale.

“Oh, it is horrible! I cannot bear it!”

“What has happened?” Atwater asked, struggling to rise up on his elbows.

“We have recovered that which was stolen.”

Atwater smiled, weakly. “Why, that’s a good thing.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Did you catch the rotter who stole them?”

Fresh tears sprang from her eyes and she turned away.

“What is it? Speak plain, dear.”

“There is such evil in the world,” she whispered as though to herself. “When will it end?”

Atwater put his hand over hers. She flinched at the touch but did not pull her hand away. He understood her feelings more than she would ever know, more than he could ever impart to her.

“They found Choquette, that was the orderly’s name, Michel Choquette. He was bound to the great tree in the courtyard. Upside down. He-He had been hacked to death. So much blood! And the dirty money he received from the blackmarketeers was stuffed into the wounds as if to staunch the bleeding. Horrible. Horrible!”

Atwater winced at the mental image her words conjured. Then again, he reasoned, anyone who would steal from the injured and dying for personal gain was the lowest form of scum imaginable. Such a man deserved far worse than he had received and he hoped

there was a special place in Hell for such people.

“Do they know who did it?”

Giselle could only shake her head in mute shock.

Atwater eased over on one elbow so he could keep his hand over hers as he contemplated who could have been the agent of vengeance. He was bone-weary and his eyes drooped as his mind fought for an answer. Then he had it.

“Wait a minute!” His gripped unconsciously tightened on Giselle’s hand. “Did you say this vermin had been hacked to death?”

“Yes!” she wailed. “Such awful, long gashes.”

Atwater’s eyes widened in realization. He released the girl’s hand and lay back on the cot.

“Oh, who could have committed such an atrocity?” Giselle went on. “Choquette did a terrible thing, an evil thing, but did he deserve such a fate as this?”

The head nurse, a staunch woman with gray hair, overheard Giselle’s question. She bent over the young nurse and spoke softly yet firmly to her.

“It was necessary that Choquette be made example of, Giselle. Hopefully others greedy for such dirty profit will think twice before they sell their souls. Choquette’s executioner knew this.”

Hacked to death, Atwater mused. He recalled the mysterious savior wading into the enemy with his lethal blade and knew precisely who had been the villainous Choquette’s executioner.

“It was necessary, Giselle. Like the accursed war itself,” the head nurse repeated. “Dreadful but necessary for the greater good.”

“A necessary evil,” Atwater said, then closed his eyes and slept soundly.