

## the firing squad

Colin McDougall

'Why, what was he doing that was so awful? He was simply commanding a firing squad to execute a soldier who had committed a murder. That's all—he was commanding a firing squad; he was, he was—an executioner!'

Captain John Adam has just come to a terrible realization. To refuse to carry out this order will be regarded as an act of cowardice and Adam cannot afford to be branded a coward *again* . . . .

He was the first Canadian soldier sentenced to death, and rear headquarters in Italy seethed with the prospect of carrying it out. At his marble-topped desk in Rome Major-General Paul Vincent read the instructions from London with distaste. The findings of the court martial had been confirmed by Ottawa—that meant by a special session of the cabinet, the General supposed—and it was now the direct responsibility of the Area Commander that the execution of Private Sydney Jones should be proceeded with "as expeditiously as possible."

The hum of voices and the quick beat of teletypes in the outer office marked the measure of Rome's agitation. No one had expected this confirmation of sentence. Not even the officers who had sentenced Private Jones to death. For them, indeed, there had been little choice; Jones had even wanted to plead guilty, but the court had automatically changed his plea, and gone on to record its inevitable finding and sentence.

The salient facts of the case filed quickly through the neat corridors of General Vincent's mind. This Jones, a young soldier of twenty-two, had deserted his unit, had joined with a group of deserter-gangsters who operated in Rome and Naples, and had been present when his companions shot and killed a U.S. military policeman.

All this Jones admitted, and the court could pass no other sentence. The execution of a Canadian soldier, however, was more than a military matter: it touched on public policy; and higher authorities had never before confirmed a sentence of death. But now the confirming order was in his hands and the train of events must be set in motion.

General Vincent sighed. He preferred to think of himself as the business executive he happened to be rather than a general officer whose duty it was to order a man's death. An execution was something alien and infinitely distasteful. Well, if this thing had to be done under his command at least it need not take place under his personal orders. From the beginning he had known just the man for the job. Already the teletype had clicked off its command to Volpone, the reinforcement base where Private Jones was imprisoned, and a staff car would now be rushing the commander of that base, Brigadier Benny Hatfield, to Rome. The General sighed again and turned to some more congenial correspondence on his desk.

A dirt track spiraled out of Volpone and mounted in white gashes upon the forested mountain side. Fifty infantry reinforcements, fresh from Canada, were spaced along the first two miles of zigzag road. They carried all the paraphernalia of their fledgling trade: rifles, machine guns, and light mortars. Some were trying to run, lurching ahead with painful steps; others stopped to stand panting in their own small lakes of sweat. One or two lay at the roadside, faces turned from the sun, awaiting the stabbing scorn of their sergeant with spent indifference. But they all spat out the clogging dust, and cursed the officer who led them.

Farther up the hillside this man ran with the gait of an athlete pushing himself to the limit of endurance. Head down he ran doggedly through the dust and the heat; he ran as though trying to outdistance some merciless pursuer. His eyes were shut tight and he was inhaling from an almost empty reservoir of breath. Captain John Adam was going to run up that mountainside until he could run no more. He was running from last night, and all the nights which still lay ahead. He was running from his own sick self.

Then, almost at the halfway mark, he aimed himself at a patch of bush underneath the cliff and smashed into it headlong. He lay quite still; he had achieved exhaustion: the closest condition to forgetfulness he could ever find.

For Captain John Adam found it unbearable to live with himself and with his future. He had lost his manhood. As an infantry company commander he had drawn daily strength and sustenance from the respect of his fellow fighting men. They knew him as a brave leader, a compassionate man. He had been granted the trust and friendship of men when it is all they have left to give, and this he knew to be the ultimate gift, the highest good. And then, one sun-filled morning, he had forfeited these things for ever. He had cracked wide open; he had cried his fear and panic to the world; he had run screaming from the battle, through the ranks of his white-faced men. He had been sent back here to Volpone in unexpressed disgrace while the authorities decided what to do with him.

Now Captain John Adam rolled over. There was always some supremely unimportant next matter which had to be decided. He lighted a cigarette and gave his whole attention to the small column of climbing smoke. Well, he would sit here until Sergeant Konzuk whipped this miserable, straggling pack up to him, and then he would reveal their next phase of training.

He stood up, a tall young man, looking brisk and competent. His sun-browned face, his blue eyes, the power of his easy movements, even the cigarette dangling negligently from his lips, all seemed to proclaim that here was the ideal young infantry officer.

"Sergeant Konzuk," Captain Adam called now. "Get these men the hell back to barracks, and leave me alone here!"

The sergeant did not look surprised. He was used to such things by now, and this was no officer to argue with. Sure, he'd take them back to barracks, and let Adam do his own explaining. "All right, you guys — on your feet!" said Konzuk. It was no skin to him.

It was late afternoon by the time he had smoked the last of his cigarettes and Adam came down from the mountain. Striding through the camp he frowned with displeasure when he saw the hulking form of Padre Dixon planted squarely in his path. Normally, he knew, he would have liked this big chaplain. There was a sense of inner calm, of repose and reliability about Padre Dixon. Although in his early fifties he had served with devoted competence as chaplain to an infantry battalion. But Adam considered himself to be an outcast, no longer holding any claims upon the men who did the fighting; the men who still owned their self-respect. He made a point of refusing the friendli-

ness which this big man was trying to offer.

"Mind if I walk along with you, son?" Adam was forced to stop while the Padre knocked his pipe against his boot.

The two men walked on together through the dusk, picking their way between the huts and the barrack blocks. As they neared the officers' mess the Padre stopped and his fingers gripped Adam's arm. He pointed to a small grey hut just within the barbed wire of the camp entrance.

"That's where poor Jones is waiting out his time," the Padre said. "Well?"

The Padre shrugged and seemed busy with his pipe. "No matter what he's done he's a brave boy, and he's in a dreadful position now."

"He won't be shot." Adam repeated the general feeling of the camp without real interest. "They'll never confirm the sentence."

The Padre looked him directly in the face. "Adam," he said. "It *has* been confirmed. He is going to be executed!"

"No!" Adam breathed his disbelief aloud. He was truly shocked, and for this instant his own sick plight was forgotten. This other thing seemed so—improper. That a group of Canadians could come together in this alien land for the purpose of destroying one of their own kind . . . And every day, up at the battle, every effort was being made to *save* life; there were so few of them in Italy, and so pitifully many were being killed every day. This thing was simply—not right.

His eyes sought for the Padre's. "But why?" he asked, with a kind of hurt in his voice. "Tell me—why?"

"The boy's guilty, after all."

"Technically—he was only a witness. And even if he is guilty, do you think this thing is right?"

The Padre could not ignore the urgency in Adam's voice. He spoke at last with unaccustomed sharpness. "No," he said. "It may be something that has to be done—but it will never be right."

The two men looked at one another in the gathering Italian night. For a moment their thoughts seemed to merge and flow together down the same pulsing stream. But then a new idea came to Adam. "Padre," he said. "Why are you telling *me* about this?"

Then they both saw the figure running toward them from the officers' mess. It was Ramsay, the ever-flurried, ever-flustered Camp Adjutant. He panted to a stop in front of them. "Adam," he gasped out. "The Brigadier wants you at once!"

Brigadier Benny Hatfield waited patiently in his office. He liked to feed any new or disturbing thoughts through the mill of his mind until the gloss of familiarity made them less troublesome. Early in his career he had discovered that the calibre of his mind was not sufficiently large for the rank he aspired to and so deliberately he had cultivated other qualities which would achieve the same end. He emphasized an air of outspoken bluntness, his physical toughness, a presumed knowledge of the way the "troops" thought, and his ability to work like a horse. Indeed the impression he sometimes conveyed was that of a grizzled war horse, fanatic about good soldiering, but with it all intensely loyal, and a very good fellow. His appearance served to support this role: there was something horselike in the wide grin that lifted his straggling mustache, a grin that proved how affable and immensely approachable he really was.

Now he sat and considered his interview with General Vincent. He understood his superior's unexpressed motives perfectly well: it was a straight question of passing the buck and he intended staying up all night looking after his own interests. This execution was a simple matter of military discipline, after all, and he would ensure that it was carried out in such a way that no possible discredit could reflect on himself. The General, he believed, had made an intelligent choice, and he had an equally good selection of his own in mind. The file of Captain John Adam lay open on his desk.

The Brigadier sat up straight. Ramsay was ushering Captain Adam into his presence.

This was the interview Adam had dreaded since his arrival at the reinforcement base. But he showed no sign now of the sickness and fear that gnawed inside him. He stood at attention while the Brigadier leafed through the file before him.

The Brigadier looked up at last. "Well," he stated. "Captain John Adam." His eyes bored steadily at Adam's face and he waited in silence. He knew that in a moment his unwavering stare would force some betrayal of guilt or inferiority. He waited and at last he was rewarded: the sweat swelled on Adam's forehead, and the man before him felt it essential to break the intolerable silence. "Yes, sir," Adam had to say.

The Brigadier stood up then. "Well," he said again. "It can't be as bad as all that, can it, boy?" His mouth lifted the straggling mustache

in a grimace of affability, and despite himself Adam felt a small rush of gratitude.

But then the smile died. "It does not please me," the Brigadier said coldly, "to receive the worst possible reports about you." He consulted the notes on his desk. "You have been AWL twice; there is some question of a jeep you took without permission; and my officers say that you act with no sense of responsibility."

The Brigadier was frowning, his lips pursed. His glance bored steadily at Adam. But then there was a sudden transformation. His smile was reborn in new and fuller glory. "Sit down, boy," he urged. He clapped Adam on the shoulder and guided him into the chair beside his desk.

The Brigadier hitched forward in his seat. Now there was a warmth of friendly concern in his voice. "Adam, boy," he said. "We know none of that piddling stuff matters. However—you have read this report from Colonel Dodd?"

It was a needless question. Adam knew the report by memory. It was an "adverse" report: it was the reason why he was back here at Volpone. That piece of paper was his doom. "Not fit to command men in action," it read; "not suitable material for the field." And Colonel Dodd had phrased it as gently as possible; in his own presence he had written it down with pity on his face.

With ungoverned ease his mind slipped back to that sun-filled morning on the Hitler Line. They were walking through a meadow—slowly, for there were Schu mines in the grass—and they moved toward a hidden place of horror: a line of dug-in tank turrets, and mine-strewn belts of wire. And then the earth suddenly erupted with shell and mortar bursts; they floundered in a beaten zone of observed machine-gun fire. A few men got as far as the wire, but none of them lived. There was a regrouping close to the start line, and Adam was ordered to attack again.

The first symptom he noticed was that his body responded to his mind's orders several seconds too late. He became worried at this time lag, the fact that his mind and body seemed about to divide, to assume their own separate identities. Then the air bursts shook the world; no hole in the ground was shelter from the rain of deafening black explosions in the sky above them. Then he remembered the terrible instant that the separation became complete, that he got up and shouted his shame to the world. He got up from his ditch, and he ran blubbing

like a baby through his white-faced men. And some of his men followed him, back into the arms of Colonel Dodd.

"Yes," Adam said now, his face white. "I've read the report."

Brigadier Hatfield spoke softly. "If that report goes forward from here you'll be in a bad way—at least returned to Canada for Adjutant General's disposal, some second-rate kind of discharge, the reputation always clinging to you . . ." The Brigadier shook his head. "That would be a pity."

If the report goes forward . . . A pulse of excitement beat in Adam's throat. What did he mean—was there any possibility that the report could be stopped here, that in the eyes of the world he could retain some shreds of self-respect? Adam's breath came faster; he sat up straight.

"Adam!" The Brigadier pounded a fist upon his desk. "I have confidence in you. Of all the officers under my command I have selected *you* for a mission of the highest importance."

Adam blinked his disbelief, but the hope swelled strong inside him. "Yes," the Brigadier said steadily. "You are to command the firing squad for the execution of Private Jones!"

Adam blinked again and he turned his head away. For a moment he was weak with nausea the flood of shame was so sour inside him. "No," he heard his voice saying. "I can't do it."

The Brigadier's smile grew broader, and he spoke with soft assurance. "But you can, my boy. But you can." And the Brigadier told him how.

It was all very neatly contrived. Adam had his choice, of course. On the one hand he could choose routine disposal of his case by higher authorities. Colonel Dodd's report, together with Brigadier Hatfield's own statement, would ensure an outcome which, as the Brigadier described it, would cause "deep shame to his family and friends," and Adam was sure of that. On the other hand if he performed this necessary act of duty, this simple military function, then Colonel Dodd's report would be destroyed. He could return to Canada as soon as he desired, bearing Brigadier Hatfield's highest recommendations.

The Brigadier went on to say that the man Jones was a convicted murderer—that Adam should have no scruples on that score; that he relied on his known ability to handle men under difficult circumstances . . .

Adam listened and each soft word seemed to add to his degradation. This was where the Hitler Line had brought him; this was the inevitable consequence of his lost manhood.

The Brigadier's voice was kindly; his words flowed endlessly like a soft stream of liquid. Then the voice paused. "Of course," the Brigadier said, "it is a task for a determined and courageous man." His glance darted over Adam's bent head and flickered around the room.

Adam broke the silence at last. He spoke without looking up. "All right," he said, "I'll do it."

The Brigadier's response was quick and warm. "Good," he said. "Good fellow!" His smile was almost caressing. But to Adam that smile seemed to spread across the horselike face like a stain. The small office and the space between the two men was suddenly close and unbearably warm.

"One more thing, Adam." The Brigadier spoke with soft emphasis. "The members of the firing squad can be detailed later, but your sergeant must be a first-rate man, and—it is most desirable that he be a volunteer. Do you understand?"

Adam forced himself to nod.

The Brigadier stared directly in Adam's face. His voice now rang with the steel of command. "All right," he said. "Bring me the sergeant's name and a draft of your parade orders by 1100 hours tomorrow. Any questions?"

"No, sir." Adam stood up.

"Good boy. Get to it, and remember—I'm relying on you."

"Yes, sir."

The Brigadier leaned back and allowed the smile to possess his face. He had selected exactly the right man for this delicate job: a man of competence who was *bound* to carry the thing through to its final conclusion.

By next morning the news had raced to every Canadian in Italy. At the battle up north men heard about this execution with a dull kind of wonder. Advancing into the attack it was brought to them like bad news in a letter from home; they looked at each other uneasily, or they laughed and turned away. It was not the death of one man back in a place called Volpone that mattered. It was simply that up here they measured and counted their own existence so dear that an unnecessary death, a *planned* death of one of their own fellows seemed somehow

shameful. It made them sour and restless as they checked their weapon and ammunition loads.

In the camp at Volpone it was the sole topic of conversation. All officers had been instructed by Brigadier Hatfield to explain to the men that the prisoner, Jones, had been convicted of murder, and therefore had to pay the penalty that the law demanded. But the law was not clear to these men: from their own close knowledge of sudden death they did not understand how a man could commit a murder without lifting a weapon. And those who had seen Private Sydney Jones could not picture that harmless boy as a murderer. Still, the officers went to great pains to explain the legal point involved.

It was soon known that the news had reached the prisoner also, although, to be sure, it did not seem to have changed his routine in the least. All his waking hours were busied with an intense display of military activity. The guard sergeant reported that he made and remade his bed several times a day, working earnestly to achieve the neatest possible tuck of his blanket. The floor was swept five times a day and scrubbed at least once. His battle-dress was ironed to knife-edge exactitude, and his regimental flashes resewn to his tunic as though the smartest possible fit at the shoulder was always just eluding him. At times he would glance at the stack of magazines the Padre brought him, but these were thrown aside as soon as a visitor entered his room. Private Jones would spring to a quivering erect position of attention; he would respond to questions with a quick, cheerful smile. He was the embodiment of the keen, alert, and well turned-out private soldier.

The truth was, of course, that Private Jones was a somewhat pliable young man who was desperately anxious to please. He was intent on proving himself such a good soldier that the generals would take note and approve, and never do anything very bad to him. The idea that some of his fellow soldiers might take him out and shoot him was a terrible abstraction, quite beyond his imagination. Consequently Private Jones did not believe in the possibility of his own execution. Even when the Padre came and tried to prepare him Private Jones simply jumped eagerly to attention, polished boots glittering, and rattled off, head high: "Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

A surprising amount of administrative detail is required to arrange an execution. The Brigadier was drawing up an elaborate operation order, with each phase to be checked and double-checked. There were

the official witness, the medical officers, the chaplain, the guards, the firing squad, of course; and the conveyance and placing of all these to the proper spot at the right time.

But Captain Adam's first problem was more serious than any of this: his first attempts to recruit the sergeant for his firing squad met with utter failure. After conferring with the Brigadier he decided upon a new approach, and he went in search of Sergeant Konzuk.

The sergeant was lying at ease on his bed reading a magazine. When Adam came in Konzuk scowled. He swung his boots over the side of the bed and he crossed his thick arms over his chest.

Adam wasted no time. "Konzuk," he said. "I want you as sergeant of the firing squad."

The sergeant laughed rudely.

"Never mind that," Adam said. "Wait till you hear about this deal."

"Look," Sergeant Konzuk said. He stood up and his eyes were angry on Adam's face. "I done my share of killing. Those that like it can do this job."

Adam's tone did not change. "You're married, Konzuk. You've a wife and two kids. Well, you can be back in Winnipeg within the month."

Konzuk's mouth opened; his eyes were wide. His face showed all the wild thoughts thronging through his mind. The sergeant had left Canada in 1940; his wife wrote him one laborious letter a month. But his frown returned and his fists were clenched.

"Look," Konzuk said, fumbling with his words. "This kid's one of us—see. It ain't right!"

"Winnipeg—within the month."

Konzuk's eyes shifted and at last his glance settled on the floor.

"All right," he said, after a moment. "All right, I'll do it."

"Good." Adam sought for and held the sergeant's eyes. "And remember this, Konzuk—that 'kid' is a murderer!"

"Yes, sir."

Then they sat down together. Adam found no satisfaction in his victory, in the full obedience he now commanded. Sitting on the iron bed in Konzuk's room they spoke in lowered voices, and Adam felt as though they were conspiring together to commit some obscene act.

The ten members of the firing squad were detailed the same day. Adam and Konzuk prepared the list of names and brought the group to

be interviewed by Brigadier Hatfield in his office. And after that Sergeant Konzuk had a quiet talk with each man. Adam did not ask what the sergeant said; he was satisfied that none of the men came to him to protest.

Adam found his time fully occupied. He had installed his ten men in a separate hut of their own; there were some drill movements to be practised; and Sergeant Konzuk was drawing new uniforms from the quartermaster's stores. Ten new rifles had also been issued.

Crossing the parade square that night he encountered Padre Dixon, and he realized that this man had been avoiding him during the past two days. "Padre," he called out. "I want to talk to you."

The Padre waited. His big face showed no expression.

"Padre—will you give me your advice?"

The Padre's glance was cold. "Why?" he asked. "It won't change anything."

And looking into that set face Adam saw that the Padre was regarding him with a dislike he made no attempt to conceal. He flushed. He had not expected this. Only days ago this man had been trying to help him.

His anger slipped forward. "What's the matter, Padre—you feeling sorry for the boy-murderer?"

Adam regretted his words at once; indeed he was shocked that he could have said them. The Padre turned his back and started away.

Adam caught at his arm. "Ah, no," he said. "I didn't mean that. Padre—is what I'm doing so awful, after all?"

"You've made your choice. Let it go at that."

"But—my duty . . ." Adam felt shame as he used the word.

The Padre stood with folded arms. "Listen," he said. "I told you before: no matter how necessary this thing is it will never be right!"

Adam was silent. Then he reached out his hand again. "Padre," he said in a low voice. "Is there no way it can be stopped?"

The Padre sighed. "The train has been set in motion," he said. "Once it could have been stopped—in Ottawa—but now . . ." He shrugged. He looked at Adam searchingly and he seemed to reflect. "There *might* be one way—." After a moment he blinked and looked away. "But no—that will never come to pass. I suppose I should wish you good luck," he said. "Good night, Adam."

That meeting made Adam wonder how his fellow officers regarded

him. In the officers' mess that night he looked about him and found out. Silence descended when he approached a group and slowly its members would drift away; there was a cleared circle around whichever chair he sat in. Even the barman seemed to avoid his glance.

All right, Adam decided then, and from the bar he looked murderously around the room. All right, *he* would stick by Benny Hatfield—the two of them, at least, knew what duty and soldiering was! Why, what was he doing that was so awful? He was simply commanding a firing squad to execute a soldier who had committed a murder. That's all—he was commanding a firing squad; he was, he was—an executioner!

His glass crashed to the floor. Through all the soft words exchanged with Brigadier Hatfield, all the concealing echelons of military speech, the pitiless truth now leaped out at him. He was an executioner. Captain John Adam made a noise in his throat, and the faces of the other men in the room went white.

When he left the mess some instinct led him toward the small grey hut standing at the camp entrance. Through the board walls of that hut he could see his victim, Jones, living out his allotted time, while he, Adam the executioner, walked implacably close by. The new concept of victim and executioner seized and threatened to suffocate him.

His eyes strained at the Italian stars in their dark-blue heaven. How had it happened? Only days ago he had regarded the possibility of this execution with horror, as something vile. But now he stood in the front rank of those who were pushing it forward with all vigour. For an instant his mind flamed with the thought of asking Brigadier Hatfield to release him, but at once the fire flickered out, hopelessly. That night John Adam stayed in his room with the light burning. He tried to pray.

Brigadier Hatfield had the most brilliant inspiration of his career: The place of execution would be changed to Rome! There was ample justification, of course, since the effect on the troops' morale at Volpone would be bad to say the least. No one could dispute this, and all the while the Brigadier relished in imagination the face of General Vincent when he found the affair brought back to his own doorstep. It only showed that a regular soldier could still teach these civilian generals a thing or two!

The Brigadier was in high good humor as he presided at the conference to discuss this change. All the participants were present, including

one newcomer, an officer from the Provost Corps, introduced as Colonel McGuire. This colonel said nothing, but nodded his head in agreement with the Brigadier's points. His eyes roamed restlessly from face to face and his cold glance seemed to strip bare the abilities of every person in the room.

Colonel McGuire, the Brigadier announced, had been instrumental in finding the ideal place for the affair. It was a former Fascist barracks on the outskirts of Rome, and all the—ah, facilities—were readily available. Everyone taking part, and he trusted that each officer was now thoroughly familiar with his duties, would move by convoy to Rome that very afternoon. The execution—here he paused for a solemn moment—the execution would take place at 0800 hours tomorrow morning. Any questions? No? Thank you, gentlemen.

Adam was moving away when the Brigadier stopped him. "John," he called. He had slipped into the habit of using his first name now. "I want you to meet Colonel McGuire."

They shook hands and Adam flushed under the chill exposure of those probing eyes. After a moment the Colonel's glance dropped; he had seen sufficient. As Adam moved off to warn his men for the move he felt those cold eyes following him to the door, and beyond.

Adam kept his eyes closed while Sergeant Konzuk drove. In the back of the jeep Padre Dixon had not spoken since the convoy was marshaled; it was clear that these were not the traveling companions of his choice.

Although Adam would not look all his awareness was centred on a closed three-ton truck which lumbered along in the middle of the convoy. The condemned man and his guards rode inside that vehicle.

The concept of victim and executioner filled Adam's mind to the exclusion of all else. He had tried throwing the blame back to the comfortable politicians sitting at their polished table in Ottawa, but it was no use. He knew that it was *his* voice that would issue the last command. *He* was the executioner. . . . Then another thought came to torment him without mercy: How did his victim, Jones, *feel* now?

They stopped for ten minutes outside a hilltop town, where pink villas glinted among the green of olive trees. Adam followed Padre Dixon to the place where he sat in an orchard. The Padre looked up at him wearily.

"How is he taking it?" Adam demanded at once.



The Padre scrambled to his feet. His eyes flashed with anger. "Who? The boy-murderer?"

"Please, Padre—I've got to know!"

The Padre stared at Adam's drawn face. Then he passed a hand across his eyes. "Adam—forgive me. I know it's a terrible thing for you. If it makes it any easier . . . well, Jones is brave; he's smiling and polite, and that's all. But Adam—the boy still doesn't understand. He doesn't believe that it's really going to happen!" The Padre's voice shook with his agitation.

Adam nodded his head. "That other time, Padre—you said there might be a way of stopping it—"

"No, forget that—it's too late." The spluttering cough of motorcycles roared between them. "Come. It is time to go." And the Padre laid his hand on Adam's arm.

Adam and Konzuk stood on the hard tarmac and surveyed the site gloomily. The place they had come to inspect was a U-shaped space cut out of the forest. The base of the U was a red-brick wall, and down each side marched a precise green line of cypresses. The wall was bullet-pocked because this place had been used as a firing range, although imagination balked at what some of the targets must have been. On the right wing of the U a small wooden grandstand was set in front of the cypresses. Adam looked around at all this, and then his gaze moved over the trees and up to the pitilessly blue sky above. "All right, Konzuk," he said. "You check things over." And he went away to be alone.

Adam was lying on his bed in the darkness. His eyes were wide open but he made no move when he saw the Padre's big form stumble into his room. Then the Padre stood over his bed, eyes groping for him. He was breathing loudly.

"Adam—he wants to see you!"

"No!"

"You must!"

"I couldn't!" Now Adam sat up in bed. His battle-dress tunic was crumpled. His face was protected by the dark, but his voice was naked.

"No, Padre," he pleaded, "I couldn't."

"Look son—it's your job. You've no choice. Do you understand?"

There was silence. Adam made a noise in the darkness which seemed to take all the breath from his body.

"Yes, I understand." He was fumbling for his belt and cap in the dark.

"Padre—what time is it?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"Eight hours."

"Yes."

"Well. Good-by, Padre."

"Good-by, son."

The Provost Sergeant came to attention and saluted. His face was stiff but he could not keep the flicker of curiosity from his eyes. Adam saw that this was a real prison: concrete flooring, steel doors, and iron bars. They stood in what seemed to be a large brightly lit guardroom. A card game had been taking place, and there were coffee mugs, but the guards stood now at respectful attention.

"Where is he?" Adam turned to the Sergeant.

A dark-haired young man stepped from among the group of guards. A smartly dressed soldier, clean and good-looking in his freshly pressed battle-dress. "Here I am, sir," the young man said.

Adam took a step back; he flashed a glance at the door.

The Sergeant spoke then, apologetically. "He wanted company, sir. I thought it would be all right."

"It was good of you to come, sir." This was Private Jones speaking for his attention.

Adam forced himself to return the glance. "Yes," he said. "I mean—it's no trouble. I—I was glad to."

The two men looked one another in the face, perhaps surprised to find how close they were in years. Jones' smile was friendly. He was like a host easing the embarrassment of his guest. "Would you like to sit down, sir?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

They sat in Jones' cell, on opposite sides of a small table. Because he had to Adam held his eyes on the prisoner's face and now he could see the thin lines of tension spreading from the eyes and at the mouth. It was certain that Jones *now* believed in the truth of his own death, and he carried this fact with quiet dignity. Adam was gripped by a passion of adoration for this boy; he would have done anything for him—he who was his executioner.

"It was good of you to come," Private Jones said again. "I have a request."



Surely, Adam thought, it took more courage to act as Jones did now than to advance through that meadow to the Hitler Line . . .

"Well, sir," Jones went on, his face set. "I'm ready to take—tomorrow morning. But one thing worries me: I don't want you and the other boys to feel bad about this. I thought it might help if I shook hands with all the boys before—before it happens."

Adam looked down at the concrete floor. This was worse than a thousand Hitler Lines; *he knew now he would be able to go back there anytime*. A dim electric-light bulb hung from the ceiling and swayed hypnotically between them. Well, he had to say something. The thing was impossible, of course: he'd never get his men to fire if they shook hands first.

But Jones read the working of his face. "Never mind, sir—maybe you'd just give them that message for me—"

"I will, Jones. I *will!*"

He stood up; he could not stay here another moment.

Jones said, "Maybe—*you* would shake hands with me?"

Adam stood utterly still. His voice came out as a whisper in that small space. "Jones," he said, "I was going to ask you if I could."

When he came back to the guard-room Adam looked ill. The Provost Sergeant took his arm and walked him back to his quarters.

It was a softly fragrant Italian morning. The dew was still fresh on the grass and a light ground mist rolled away before the heat of the climbing sun. In the forest clearing the neat groups of soldiers looked clean and compact in their khaki battle-dress with the bright regimental flashes gleaming at their shoulders.

The firing squad stood "at ease," but with not the least stir or motion. Sergeant Konzuk was on their right; Captain Adam stood several paces apart at the left, aligned at right angles to his ten-man rank. The grandstand was filled with a small group of official witnesses. A cordon of military policemen stayed at rigid attention along the top and down each side of the U.

In front of the grandstand stood Brigadier Benny Hatfield, an erect military figure, his stern eye ranging with satisfaction around the precise groupings and arrangements he had ordered. A step behind the Brigadier was Ramsay, his adjutant; then Padre Dixon, and the chief medical officer. The assembly was complete—except for one man.

Somewhere in the background a steel door clanged, a noise which no

one affected to hear. Then there came the sound of rapid marching. Three military figures came into view and halted smartly in front of Brigadier Hatfield. Private Jones, hatless, stood in the centre, a provost sergeant on each side. The boy's lips were white, his cheeks lacked color, but he held his head high, his hands were pressed tight against the seams of his battle-dress trousers. It was impossible not to notice the brilliant shine of his polished boots as they glittered in the morning sun.

Brigadier Hatfield took a paper from Ramsay's extended hand. He read some words from it but his voice came as an indistinct mumble in the morning air. The Brigadier was in a hurry. Everyone was in a hurry; every person there suffered an agony of haste. Each body strained and each mind willed: Go! Go! Have this thing over and done with!

The Brigadier handed the paper back to Ramsay with a little gesture of finality. But the three men remained standing in front of him as though locked in their attitudes of attention. Seconds of silence ticked by. The Brigadier's hand sped up to his collar and he cleared his throat with violence. "*Well*, sergeant?" his voice rasped. "Carry on, man!"

"Yessir. Left turn—quick march!"

The three men held the same brisk pace, marching in perfect step. The only sound was the thud of their heavy boots upon the tarmac. They passed the firing squad and halted at the red-brick wall. Then the escorting NCOs seemed to disappear and Private Jones stood alone against the wall. A nervous little smile was fixed at the corners of his mouth.

Again there was silence. Adam had not looked at the marching men, nor did he now look at the wall. Head lowered, he frowned as he seemed to study the alignment of his ten men in a row. More seconds ticked by.

"Captain Adam!"

It was a bellow from Brigadier Hatfield and it brought Adam's head up. Then his lips moved soundlessly, as though rehearsing what he had to say. "Squad," Captain Adam ordered, "Load!" Ten left feet banged forward on the tarmac, ten rifles hit in the left hand, ten bolts smashed open and shut in unison. Ten rounds were positioned in their chambers.

There were just two remaining orders: "Aim!" and "Fire!" and these

should be issued immediately, almost as one. But at that moment a late rooster crowed somewhere and the call came clear and sweet through the morning air, full of rich promise for the summer's day which lay ahead.

Adam took his first glance at the condemned man. Jones' mouth still held hard to its smile, but his knees looked loose. His position of attention was faltering.

"Squad!" Adam ordered in a ringing voice, "Unload! Rest!" Ten rifles obeyed in perfect unison.

Adam turned half right so that he faced Brigadier Hatfield. "Sir," he called clearly. "I refuse to carry out this order!"

Every voice in that place joined in the sound which muttered across the tarmac.

The Brigadier's face was deathly white. He peered at Private Jones, still in position against the wall, knees getting looser. He had a split second to carry the thing through. "Colonel McGuire!" he shouted.

"Yes, sir!" McGuire came running toward the firing squad. He knew what had to be done, and quickly. The Brigadier's face had turned purple now; he appeared to be choking with the force of his rage.

"Colonel McGuire," he shouted. "Place that officer under close arrest!"

"Sir?" McGuire stopped where he was and his mouth dropped open. Private Jones began to fall slowly against the wall. Then a rifle clattered loudly on the tarmac. Sergeant Konzuk was racing toward the wall and in an instant he had his big arms tight around Jones' body.

"McGuire!" The Brigadier's voice was a hoarse shriek now. "March the prisoner away!"

Padre Dixon stood rooted to the ground. His lips were moving and he stared blindly at Adam's stiffly erect figure. "He found the way!" he cried then in a ringing voice, and he moved about in triumph, although no one paid him attention. At his side Ramsay was spluttering out his own ecstasy of excitement: "Jones will get a reprieve after this! It will have to be referred to London and then to Ottawa. And they'll never dare to put him through this again—"

Ramsay looked up as he felt the Padre's fingers bite into his shoulder.

He laughed nervously. "Yes," he chattered on. "Jones may get a reprieve, but Adam's the one for sentencing now." He peered across the tarmac where Adam still stood alone, his face slightly lifted to the warmth of the morning sun. He looked at Adam's lone figure with fear

and admiration. "Yes," he said, suddenly sobered. "God help Adam now."

"Don't worry about that, son," said the Padre, starting to stride across the tarmac. "He already has."

*Colin McDougall's 'The Firing Squad' first appeared in MACLEAN'S; it became the most widely known Canadian story to emerge from the Second World War and it has been anthologized many times. McDougall later expanded this material into the novel, EXECUTION. McDougall is an Ontario native.*