

Coronet

July, 1944
p. 24

KILL OR BE KILLED



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A young guerrilla fighter from Poland gives a graphic word picture on the grim business of killing or being killed in sniper warfare

DURING RECENT MONTHS several articles have appeared in the press dealing with the experiences of snipers and guerrilla fighters. One was titled *I Like Killing Germans* by Lieutenant Ludmilla Pavlichenko, a Russian woman sniper who claims to have shot over 300 Germans and enjoyed it. Now I am certain that if you take 10 guerrillas and asked them whether they liked killing their enemies, nine would reply negatively. Because, in spite of what is said about the lust for killing, a normal person cannot enjoy taking life. One does it when in danger or under emotional stress, but it is far from being a pleasure.

This opinion is based not only on conversations with those who spent many months in guerrilla fighting and skirmishes in Poland, but also on my own experiences.

My first "kill" happened on September 4, 1939. I was then in command of a small signal unit attached to one of our armies near Rzeszow in southern Poland. Soon after an air raid warning, word came that enemy parachutists had been dropped not far from our position. The information was verified when shots began to ring and men fell here and there. They were all rounded up within two hours, all except one whose whereabouts nobody could ascertain. In half an hour he killed all four men operating the radio station and kept firing from time to time at anybody who showed as much as a finger.

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By a lucky chance, one of my men saw the German fire from a barn but was killed by his next shot. Lying in a ditch, I was able to crawl the distance unseen, creep around and enter the barn from the other end. Lying comfortably in a pile of hay, he was firing between the spaces of logs without showing even an inch of his muzzle outside. He didn't see or hear me, so I fired two shots at him. He turned around in a half-sitting position, taking aim at me, so I fired once more. He fell on his back, yelled something and then rolled down to the ground. I went away without looking at him. He was the first man I killed.

During the next 10 days we were driven very hard by German armored columns and infantry and we had to retreat eastward. Several times we were cut off and had to shoot our way out. Man for man, every one of us had to fight and kill—for his own life.

After nearly two weeks of incessant bombing and shelling of Lwow, having no more ammunition and no hope, we decided to have our last go at the Germans. Eight of us, with grenades, knives and revolvers, went out in an attempt to get the crew of a German mortar battery. But before we managed to do anything, we ran into ambush and were captured. I was court-martialed and sentenced to be shot.

There were 18 of us locked in a barn, around which sentries were posted, but we planned to escape.

In the straw on which we lay we found a bayonet, probably left there by some soldier in the earlier days of the war. With this, a stick and our hands, we dug beneath the wall as quietly as possible, until we had a hole big enough for a man to slip through. Trying to steady my legs which were trembling, I crawled in and put my head out.

About three yards away, sitting with a rifle across his legs and a big revolver in his hand, was the sentry — apparently sleeping. I pulled myself out, but broke the edges of the hole and the sound of falling grit woke him. Before he realized what was happening, I was on top of him and at his throat.

It was an awful job. I could feel the muscles in his throat moving under my fingers and saw deadly fear in the whites of his eyes. I knew that I must kill him, choke him to death, if I were to be free

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and alive. So I put all my strength into the grip, but he still struggled. Then all at once he gave a shiver and relaxed. It was the bayonet which the man after me had put into him. I released my grip and he fell to the ground dead. The whole struggle, which may have lasted a minute or less, created some noise and we took to the woods.

For three weeks, in small groups, we played hide and seek with the Germans, ambushed their patrols, built obstructions for their cars, shot the occupants, made raids on ammunition stores and slept in forests, barns or ditches.

And again, it was a question of patience, steady nerves and hands. There was time to think about it too. Many a time, lying with a gun near a spot down which a German patrol was bound to come, I thought, within half an hour or more I shall probably kill a man who, with thousands of others like him, invaded our country, killed so many of our people, and that's why I'm going to kill him, though I should much prefer another solution. And when the time came, I fired and killed—but I didn't like it.

BUT IN ONE instance I was very glad and rather happy to have shot a German. Not because if I hadn't I would have been shot myself—that realization came later—but because it was a hard job. Though it may sound trivial to use that expression in the serious business of killing, it turned into a sort of sporting match between us—and I won.

In Lublin Voyevodship we got the news that a German supply column would pass south. This being a much wooded part of the country, we had no difficulty in preparing an ambush on the road. I was made lookout at the end from which the Germans were coming, to give the alarm if help should be coming for them and to stop those who would try to run back.

A small convoy appeared. The motorcyclists were the first to be killed, and the rest in confusion fired in every direction, ran into the woods straight into our guns. Two ran back, one fell but the other kept on towards me. And though it was only 50 to 60 yards—I missed. He saw me and before I could fire again, jumped into a ditch. From there he threw two grenades. I replied with shots when-

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ever he showed an inch above the ground, but missed each time, being unable to take good aim. Four of his bullets came uncomfortably near, throwing earth and sand into my face. The fifth ricocheted from a stone with an unpleasant whine.

I realized that the fight with the convoy was over, heard my group moving away, but couldn't withdraw myself; neither could he. We had to shoot it out. I called to him in German, but all I got back was a dirty name and another grenade which fell short. I knew I couldn't wait there long, for some of them would be bound to come down the road soon.

There was some dry grass in my hole, a few dry sticks and plenty of leaves. The breeze was in the right direction. I made a small bunch of sticks, leaves and grass, set fire to it and threw it into the leaves ahead of me. This brought more shots from the German, but before he realized what was happening, hidden by smoke, I was out of my hole and behind a big pile of cut wood which gave me a good aiming position. I got him with my next shot and then went over to see him. He was about 23, ginger-haired, good-looking. The bullet had entered his right shoulder, passed through his chest and torn a big piece out of his left side. He had a surprised expression on his face.

THERE IS another one, however, whom I am sorry to have killed.

It was early spring, 1940. I was trying to get out of Poland to join the Polish army in France. With a friend, I decided to cross the frontier to Hungary. To save our legs from crossing the Carpathian Mountains, we smuggled ourselves on a freight car. Next morning the sun came up, and tired of sitting in a cramped position, we pulled aside the canvas cover to stretch and get some warmth. The German guard saw us. He didn't fire, just walked along the planks to our truck and started threatening us with handcuffs. We pushed him over the side and he fell on the buffers. There he hung, yelling, so I had to kick his hands off. He fell under the wheels and was crushed. I can still remember the look on his face. I hate it.