

THE RESCUE TREE

A giant oak tree stood alone with a dense forest wrapping its way three-quarters around and with a thriving village on the remaining side. If its branches, leaves, trunk, and roots could tell a story, it would go something like this:

Once upon a time, there lived a tree called the “rescue tree”. How it received its name is not totally clear, but with a life spanning ten decades, it most probably gained the name from one of the many stories told about it.

The first written evidence of the tree’s powers came in 1942. A lonely soldier separated from his unit in an ambush came upon the tree on a hot, muggy day. He took refuge in its shade and wished he could stay there all day. An enemy patrol changed his plans. When the patrol saw the soldier, they fired their weapons at him. The soldier stayed behind the solid trunk of the tree, which took the brunt of the enemy’s fire. Overhead he heard a plane flying low. The enemy patrol scattered and decided not to pursue the soldier when the plane began strafing their position. When the soldier stepped out from behind the tree, he looked at the

trunk and saw at least twelve bullets lodged into the hard wood. He felt rescued at that moment. What he didn't know was that there were dozens of other bullets inside the tree whose presence had been covered by the bark growing around them. A short time later, the soldier heard another patrol approaching. He braced for another assault, but it was his unit, instead of the enemy, looking for him. He showed the tree to his sergeant and the sergeant just shook his head.

A few weeks later, the magnificent tree opened its arms to catch a parachuting soldier, who, if he had made it to the ground, would have been immediately captured by the enemy below. As it was, all the anti-aircraft fire drowned out any sound of the parachutist hitting the tree. In the morning, patriots from the village cut the parachutist down and tended to his wounds.

Several months later, a bomber crashed into the tree and destroyed it. The fire that engulfed the tree burned it to the ground except for a three-foot tall stump. The villagers slowly and painstakingly removed the remnants of the plane and looked for any life in their beloved tree. But, alas, the tree held no life.

Then one day a member of the Underground and a stranded pilot came into the village looking for a place to hide. The villagers wanted to help them, but they knew the enemy patrols would soon find them as they searched the village regularly and thoroughly. They had to do something, so they created false papers for them and made them a part of their village. It would be temporary, at best, but it might bide them some time to figure out a way to get them back into Allied hands.

One day, a handsome young woodcutter had an idea about the tree stump. He dug all around the base of the tree stump and used his mighty ax to cut off the stump just below ground level. With the help of his friends, he loaded the stump onto his wagon and took it back to his woodworking shop only a short distance away. The young man removed a 3-inch slab at the top and then worked feverishly, cutting out the interior of the stump. When the interior of the stump was hollow, he attached the slab back on the top with interior hinges. While he was working on the stump, his friends were busy digging a tunnel from under his workshop to the exact spot where the stump had been in the ground. When only a few shovelfuls of dirt remained, the woodcutter and his friends hauled the

stump back to its original spot at the edge of the forest. They filled in the area around the stump and spread old leaves around the stump to hide any fresh dirt. Then they removed the last of the dirt from inside the tunnel beneath the stump. They now had a way to get the member of the Underground and the pilot away from the houses in the village. Timing remained a very critical factor.

A few weeks later, another member of the Underground snuck into the village and said a rescue ship stood anchored just offshore. It could not stay for long at that spot with the enemy still so active in the area. As he was giving this information to those in the village, one of the young patriots saw an enemy patrol come into town. The messenger now became one of those needing rescue. It became time to move. The young patriot went to the enemy patrol and told them he saw two strangers heading into the woodcutter's shop. As soon as the woodcutter saw the patrol coming and knowing what their focus would be at the moment, he gave the signal, and the fugitives went into the tunnel and out the stump. With his woodworking skills, the woodcutter cleverly concealed the entrance to the tunnel in his shop. Every time someone escaped through the tunnel, the people of the village planted

a new tree around the stump. It was their way of knowing the number of lives rescued.

Finally, the war came to an end and a somewhat normal life returned to the village. The little Catholic church in the village that had no priest during the war welcomed a new shepherd to lead the flock. The new priest felt it important to get to know everything he could about the church's members and about the little village. He became fascinated with the story of the rescue tree and had one of his parishioners show him where it was. They weaved their way through the young trees surrounding the stump and it finally came into view. The priest pulled up on the top of the stump and it opened. When he looked inside, he could see that at some point there was a cave-in just below the opening.

The priest remained intrigued with the rescue tree and came up with a plan. He got the woodcutter to bring a partial wagon load of dirt out to the stump, and they filled in the stump the rest of the way to the top. The following month, the priest decided to have a sunrise service at the stump on Easter Sunday. As part of the service, they removed the slab that served as the lid to the stump, and they planted a new oak tree into the dirt inside

the stump. The rescue tree that had taken the brunt of so much evil during the wars of its lifetime and who had seemingly given up life with the plane crash, now breathed anew in a sort of resurrection, if you will.

And, in another twist of fate, so to speak, the young woman member of the Underground that first used the rescue tree stump as a means of escape came back for a visit to the little village. She just wanted to thank the people for helping her. During her visit, she fell in love with the handsome young woodcutter. They got married and welcomed six children into their home.

And, of course, as it should be, they lived happily ever after.