

JACK WOODVILLE LONDON



FRENCH LETTERS

VIRGINIA'S WAR:
TIERRA TEXAS 1944

**FRENCH
LETTERS ©**



BOOK ONE

VIRGINIA'S WAR

Tierra, Texas 1944

A Novel, By
Jack Woodville London

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Thieves

“Give me a fag.”

Butch liked to call them fags. Sluggo called them ‘cigs.’ Tommy and Sandy referred to them as smokes. No one actually called them cigarettes. Finding one was a treat; finding a Lucky Strike was a miracle. In 1944 the only way to get a Lucky Strike was out of a box of Army rations or take one from the next guy over in the foxhole. The guys were suitably impressed.

“Where’d you get this?”

“Ah, just found it.”

“Yeah, bull. You stole it.”

“Did not. Found it.”

“Liar. Give me one.”

“Me too.”

Tommy turned to hide whatever it was he had them in, drew four out, passed them around. They all took one. A match was struck. The boys lit up.

“Nothing like a Lucky for flavor,” Butch said with an air of experience.

“Better taste, cooler smoke.”

“That’s Chesterfields. Don’t you know anything?”

“Steady nerves!”

“Camels. *‘You want steady nerves to launch a tin fish. Or make one.’*

They all admired the Camel advertisement, a cluster of sailors smoking inside a

submarine.

They inhaled and exhaled and let the pungent smoke swirl around their nostrils as they gazed across the cotton fields from the platform of the windmill high above Tommy's family farm. The smoke drifted, evaporated.

"No kidding. Where'd you find these? Come on."

Butch made a deal.

"We're the American army now – me and Tommy. You're the Nazis."

"No way."

"Okay, not our problem. You want to bum off us, ..."

Sluggo wasn't so sure. They hadn't played army for months, anyway. The rain had wrecked the first part of the summer and now that it was gone everyone, except Butch, was working. "Like the wetbacks," Butch reminded them. Tommy worked for his dad. Sluggo cleaned the offal from his uncles' slaughterhouse. Sandy had given up all of his jobs in town to work in the fields when they were dry although on Sundays, after church, he went over to the Sullivans to see if Virginia needed anything. Now that the fields were wet again he was looking for lawns to mow and haunting Old Bradley's barber shop.

"Okay. You're Americans. We're the Japs. Where'd you find 'em?"

The rain had poured so much water into the ground that the scrawny creek bed that wound past the cemetery and on toward the quarry was full of water.

“Follow me,” Butch had said, and shimmied down the steel legs of the windmill. Sluggo and Sandy followed and they took off walking across the muddy cotton fields to the bluff overlooking the quarry a half mile away.

“We goin’ swimmin? The quarry’s full of water.”

“Like there’s a box of Lucky Strikes in the water? Are you stupid or what?”

“Could be. Remember Captain Blood? He found a box of treasure under the ocean.”

“Sea Hawk. Not Captain Blood.”

“Not Captain Blood. Count of Monte Christo. And it was in a cave.”

“No. But you’re gettin’ warm.”

They came up to the barbed wire fence at the top of the bluff. Poppy’s phony ‘**No Trespassing - U.S. Government**’ signs were still nailed to the fence posts, albeit faded. They crawled through the fence and into the tree line at the top of the bluff. Through the trees they looked down on the quarry. It was about thirty yards long and half as wide, formed by the bluff on one side and a rock outcrop on the other side. The creek, no more than an erosion scar most of the year, trickled water in at the northerly end. The opposite end had been closed by a dirt dam built by the Corps of Engineers.

The quarry was brimming with water. The few clouds in the sky reflected from its flat surface, the tops of the trees where the boys lay hidden were mirrored on the water. At the deep end a large boulder emerged, a rock so

large and flat that it was known by every kid in Tierra as ‘the diving rock,’ a stone from which all of them had jumped, dived, fallen, and taken naps when they sneaked away from home to swim.

The shed, on the opposite side of the quarry, was big enough to hold several pickups. Its flat walls were made from cheap plywood, windowless, and capped by a tin gabled roof that reflected the hot August sun. The doors were on the other side, away from the quarry and away from the boys.

“Okay, Hot Shot. Now what?”

Butch led them single file down the short bluff face to the edge of the quarry. Water lapped at their feet as they walked along the soft dirt near the bluff, the pool opening up to their left as they bounced and hopped along the path toward the earthen dam. It was a place they all knew. They crossed the narrow dam on foot, jumped down near the shed, and followed Butch as he trotted the last few yards. They walked along the west wall to the corner and stopped.

“There.” Butch pointed to the tar paper that had fallen away from the wall. Years of wind and battering revealed the two inch by twelve inch planks that made up the wall.

“So I come out here the other day to take a swim and walked over here to pee and – look!” He pointed to a loose board on one corner. “I thought, well that board might make a decent diving board, and I was gonna just pull it off and take it out to the divin’ rock and so I started pryin’ on it. I got it to where it

was loose enough to open enough for me to squeeze through and I thought I'd get inside and push it off from in there."

As he spoke he folded the tar paper away and, sure enough, there was a two-by-twelve plank, the lower end warped by wind and rain and jutting away from the corner of the shed. Butch got down on his knees and began to tug on the board which began to open away from the rest of the wall. Tommy got down on his knees and pulled on the other edge of the plank; it slowly began to open up, the nails creaking as the board pressed against them. When the space was big enough for a tight squeeze Butch put his head in the gap, then his shoulders, then slipped out of view. He was in.

One by one the treasure hunters squeezed in through the boards, stood up on the dirt floor, and bumped into the boxes and machines that were stacked about near the corner. They squinted, blinked, and adjusted their vision and, not two feet from the opening, saw a big, open cardboard box, a box with a Lucky Strike sign on the side. More full than empty, the box was big enough to hold fifty or a hundred cartons of cigarettes. Five more boxes, Chesterfields, Camels, Kools, were stacked on the same pallet.

"This is my stash," Butch declared. "When I need a fag, this is where I come."

They gaped at the find. Lucky Strikes, and every other cigarette advertised in the *Saturday Evening Post*, were as rare as hen's teeth. It was common knowledge that the only way to get a pack was to be in the army. Yet

here in front of them was neither a pack nor a carton but a whole pallet of the things.

“And I call dibs. It’s mine,” Butch continued. “But I share.”

He reached inside, took a carton, and began to open it to divide right there in the shed.

“Two for you, two for you,…”

“Easier to keep ‘em all together. We can split ‘em up back in town,” Sandy proposed. “Let’s see what else is here.”

Seeing what else was there was not easy or certain. The big swinging front doors were closed and, they knew from experience, locked with chains and pad locks. There were no windows. But through the cracks in the planks, through beams of light filtered with dust motes, a picture of the contents began to emerge.

“Look at this,” Tommy pointed. Against the back wall there were stacks of tires, new tires, still wrapped in paper. There were big tires for pickups, smaller tires for cars, and even some very thin tires that could only be for bicycles. “We can get these tires over to Homer and make a fortune.”

“Hell, sell ‘em ourselves.”

“What are you gonna do, put a sign on the highway? New tires?”

“Maybe. Why not?”

“What are you gonna tell ‘em? Found ‘em?”

There were cases of motor oil on a pallet. Cases of leather shoes. A crate

of nails. A tarp covered a dozen drums of gasoline. Boxes of sugar. Boxes of canned fruit.

“What’s that?” Sluggo pointed to a rusty machine in the opposite corner.

“Dunno. A motor of some kind. Big one. See all the flywheels and compression chambers.” He pointed out the various tubes and hoses which connected the parts of the large industrial engine.

It was the only thing that wasn’t new.

The boys’ gaze lifted and, for no apparent reason, they began to whisper.

“Hey – whose stuff is this?”

“I dunno. Why?”

“I’ll tell you whose – it’s the government’s. That’s why they’ve got those signs on the fences.”

“Why do they want it? And why’d they put it out here? Seems like they’d keep it at an army base, or in Lubbock.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s reserves.”

It then occurred to them that they were not finding. They were stealing.

“Put the fags back and let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah. Let’s get.”

Butch looked at the open Lucky Strike box, then at the carton he had begun to share, then back at the box, and made a very bad decision.

“It was already open. Someone’s comin’ out here for cigarettes and they won’t miss what I took. I’m keepin’ these.”

“Let’s scam.”

It was when the last of them got out through the plank that they heard a pickup truck driving right up to the front of the shed. Their hearts froze in place.

“Stop!” Butch hissed. He held up his hand in warning, then turned his palm down and motioned toward the ground rapidly, three times. The boys all jumped to the ground and stretched out flat. The engine sputtered to a stop in front of the shed and, soon, the squeak of a door handle was followed by the thud of a tin pickup door slammed shut. They couldn’t see the shed doors but they could hear someone open the padlocks, rattle the chains, and swing the doors wide open and around to the sides of the building.

“Let’s get out of here,” Butch whispered.

“What if they catch us?”

“If we stay here we’ll sure find out.” And with that, Sandy tiptoed away, directly to the earth dam, then crouched low to sneak across it. Each of the boys followed, breath held, fear permeating every step. When Tommy finally reached the west end of the dam they scrambled into the trees and from there up the bluff. At last Sandy stopped, laid down on his stomach, and hid behind an elm tree. The others dropped to the ground.

“Look.”

Not thirty yards away, right where they had been at the corner of the shed, a stocky man in a cowboy hat and boots, a man with a mustache and a

star on his chest, stood and glared at the quarry. He put his hands on his hips, spread his legs, and stared directly at them, unable to see because of the glare of the five o'clock sun and the growth of WPA elms.

No one said a word, or even breathed.

The sheriff stared at the bluff, then slowly swivelled to his left to focus across the pasture in the direction of the Carter farm a mile away. He turned back and peered to the north in the general direction of town and along the dirt ruts he had just driven to get to the shed. It seemed to them that he looked right at them. Suddenly he put his hands up to his face and shouted:

“Who the hell’s out there?”

Sluggo nearly answered but Sandy, quicker, clapped his hand over Sluggo’s mouth.

Hoskins waited.

“If there’s anybody up there you’re in some serious god damned trouble. Get your ass down here.”

They were all tempted to get up but before any of them stood Hoskins turned and gazed again across the scrub and dirt between the shed and the barbed wire fence at the edge of the Carter land, barely visible in the distance. He was facing directly away from them.

“I said if there’s anybody out there, you’re under arrest. Come here, God Damn you.”

He waited but no one came. The boys stayed on their stomachs.

“Shhh. He don’t know we’re here,” Butch hissed.

“Shut up. He’ll hear you,” Sandy hissed back.

“How’s he gonna catch us? We’re up here, he’s down there.”

They waited several minutes, as did Hoskins. Nothing happened. At length the sheriff walked back out of view to the front of the shed. They held their breath. Several moments later they saw the outline of the north door swing closed and, shortly, there was the sound of a groaning starter and a sputtering engine. A cloud of oil choked out of the tail pipe, followed by the clash of badly shifted gears. The county law enforcement vehicle backed up, turned around, and drove away from the shed, going east on the ruts across the pasture and as far away from the hiding boys as it was possible to do.

“ To the fence.” It was time to leave.

The boys held their collective breath until the last of the dust raised by the disappearing truck had settled and no sign of the vehicle was left. When no speck of any kind was visible on the horizon, they stood and, to their surprise found that they were shaking.

“Butch?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re a dumbass. A real dumbass,” Sandy said.

“How’d I know someone would be out there?”

“No, Dumbass. It ain’t that you’d know if anybody’d be out there. It’s who was out there that makes you stupid.”

“Piss on you.”

“Piss on you, Dumbass. You come this close to gettin’ all of us in the same trouble you’re in.”

“What’s that if you’re so damned smart?”

“You wasn’t just stealin’ fags. You was stealin’ fags from the sheriff.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Vamoos.”

They vamoosed under the barbed wire fence and back across the cotton fields, running, stopping, looking to see if they were being chased. They circled around the cemetery, slowly, to see whether Hoskins was waiting with handcuffs, chains, a shotgun, dogs, whatever a sheriff might use to nab a bunch of shed thieves.

He wasn’t.

When they got close to town Tommy said they should skirt around behind the courthouse for fear that Hoskins might be standing in front of the jail on the corner, waiting for them.

“Maybe he just let us do his job for him. Why nab us out there when we had to come home? He could just wait and arrest us here. I’ll bet that’s what he’s doing, just waitin’ for us.

“Bull! He didn’t see nothin’. He never looked up. And even if he did, from down there he wouldn’t know who we was anyway,” Butch protested.

They biked to the street that separated Nona’s from the Magnolia station,

then got off the bikes and pushed them to the edge of the vacant lot.

“You got to get rid of those fags, Butch. Even if they don’t arrest us now, if somebody finds you with a bunch of Luckies there ain’t but one place you could have got ‘em. Soon as somebody tells Hoskins that you’ve got Luckies he’ll come get you.” Sandy had a fair point.

Butch never got in any trouble or, more correctly, as the banker’s son when he did get in trouble the consequences were negligible, being told to stay in his room for an hour, getting only half his dessert, having to take the trash out. Even so, the idea that he might be fingered by the sheriff was enough to make him pause. It dawned on Sandy and even on Butch, to a lesser degree, that the shed was full of things that people couldn’t get at the store. Franklin’s was out of nails, but they came up with some. Mrs. Tarlton was out of sugar, but she always seemed to find a bag. Sandy’s mother never had a roast or a ham but on July Fourth the tables on the courthouse lawn had been covered with barbeque.

The four conspirators grew quiet. Since it was late on a Sunday they would have to disperse anyway, some for supper, some for church, all for baths. They edged toward the lengthening shadows of the elms that bordered the west end of the lot when a *scusshhh* of air brakes made them turn to look behind.

About the Author

Texas native, author, attorney and lecturer Jack Woodville London graduated from West Texas State University and the University of Texas Law School. A historian as well as a trial attorney, London was an officer in the Quartermaster Corps of the United States Army and has traveled extensively. Having written articles for numerous professional journals, he now has turned his pen to historical fiction. *Virginia's War: Tierra, Texas 1944* is the first book in his World War II trilogy *French Letters*. It is a finalist for the Anderson Foundation Award for the Best Novel of the South in honor of Willie Morris and the Military Writers Association America Award for Best Historical Fiction of the Year.

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