

HIS NAME WAS RODNEY HARRIS

I.

Through the winter cold our column
Rumbled onward, onward still.
Soldier's faces soiled and solemn
Stripped of color, rough with chill.
Our weary eyes were cold and keen
Refined by battle's deadly scourge.
Grim faced veterans, far from green
We'd lost all dash of careless courage.

Our sergeant was the tank commander
Perched above our clanking tank
He searched the trees for German panzer
As we climbed the river bank.
His voice was high and not resounding
Army glasses down his nose
His stature set no heart to pounding
Looking much too thin in clothes.

II.

Later on, the battle found us
In what was a farmer's field.
Circumstance and duty bound us
To fight on and never yield.
Then began the deadly nightmare
Trapped against a pine tree row
Fragments flying everywhere
Violating placid snow.

The Germans fired round by round
From their ever shifting rank
Then a shell skipped off the ground
And blew a wheel off of our tank.
Trapped in sharded trees and rubble
Stymied there, a sitting duck
Panic set in on the double.
Out of movement. Out of luck

In this moment's desperation
With no vain heroic tone
Our sergeant with no hesitation
Said, "Get out, I'll stay alone".
He stepped into the gunner's seat
And fired at the charging line.
We jumped and ran in wild retreat
Leaving man and death behind.

Our sergeant never looked the part
Of soldier hero found in lore.
A gentle man, his caring heart
Belied the uniform he wore.
Yet in a moment quickly passing
Mind and body worn by war
He risked his life without the asking,
A wearing knock upon death's door.

Hours later in a push
The Allies hit the German flank.
I searched the meadow in a rush.
Then in the smoke I found our tank.
I scaled the tank my soul not needing
The image that I still recall
My sergeant dirty, dead and bleeding
Crumpled up against the wall.

III.

Now I think about it often
How he lay slumped over there
Lying in his steel wheeled coffin
In the dusty, oily air.
Men as these deserve great honor
For their unknown sacrifice.
And I fret and curse and ponder
How these words do not suffice.
Now those fields have all grown over,
Freedom flows in peaceful waves
Blowing trees and grass and clover
Up above these soldier's graves.