

The Kurtzman story reproduced here, "Big If," is from the heyday of EC war, and Kurtzman's last solo story for Frontline Combat [#5, Mar 1952].

Title Page

As in nearly all Kurtzman pages, the panel arrangement of "Big If's **splash** page is simple, straightforward: one large, square panel centrally placed over three, evenly proportioned smaller panels. Introductory lettering runs across the top of the panel in a linear, unobtrusive manner. The very simplicity of the arrangement directs attention inward, to each panel's content, rather than outward, to the existence of the panel itself.

Kurtzman's compositional style consists of solid blacks played off light, sketchy line-work. The title logo, for instance, sits upon a background of quick, uneven lines representing clouds. The thickly outlined devil posts carry interior wood grain rendered in vertical lines. Even the figure of Paul Maynard sports quick interior diagonals — and yet, these are not "sketchy" in the proper sense. Compared with most Kurtzman line-work, they appear deep and heavy, reminiscent of the woodcut-like lines employed by Jack Kirby in giving his figures solidity. Kurtzman's lines not only give his figure solidity, but also a sense of muddy, dirty weariness. The deep, black shadow obscuring the soldier's face and front, played off the naked expanse of the mountain range, provide him with three-dimensionality in a relief sculptural way. He is the most touchable entity in the entire scene, and thereby the center of attraction. Even nature seems to pay him homage. The mountain range dips to meet his lip line. Devil posts bend toward him, their bright-eyed gaze contrasting sharply with his blackened face. A *repousse* shadow in the panel's lower right corner forms a curve complementary of that formed by the serviceman's hunched back. Kurtzman has carefully cradled this fetally positioned babe and we concentrate upon him as we would the bullseye of a target. "Big If" is to be a human drama. The spotlight, therefore, rightly falls on Paul.

Page 2

In panel two, Paul Maynard stares out at us with dark, exhausted eyes. His head is like an acorn, adorned with a half-shell of hair. His right arm and leg bend inward in identical, energy-less curves. His shoulders are rounded, slumped and complemented by the roundness of his crotch. His whole frame seems a mass of rubberized geometrical shapes. Around him, the sparse, sketchy quality of the clouds, mountain range and terrain set him off in stark relief from nature, alienating him from any sense of worldly harmony. His image haunts us, fills us with dread; yet invites our curiosity. We wonder how any human could come to this sad state.

Kurtzman begins to play motion-Picture cameraman in panel two. First, we frame our main character evenly, introducing him to our audience. In Panel three, we pull back, allowing the devil posts to obstruct the audience's view even as the words "If those devil posts..." are spoken. In panel three, we pull back even further, and begin to swing our camera in a clockwise

circle. The audience thus gets a feel for the setting. On page two, panel one, we continue our clockwise swing. A shot of the devil posts and crater brings to mind Satan and Hell. Suddenly, we zoom in, staring into the crater's depths as distinctly outlined pebbles and surrounding stress lines combine with the crater's interior texture to give the illusion of falling. We arise from the crater in panel three, completing our circular reconnoiter. The actor is again framed in our lens. As we pulled back from him for three panels on page one, so we now pull in for an extreme close up in panels three through six. The narrator's last words to us are a slow, mysterious, "oh-nine-hundred!" The scene shifts with startling immediacy as a sergeant shouts, "OH-NINE HUNDRED, MEN!" It is a shock 'em technique inspired by Hitchcock. In panel eight, the main character appears as in page one, panel one: back hunched, face obscured by shadow, arm hugging his torso tightly. Again, human beings stand relieved from their background through the artist-writer's play of solid blacks and line-work. The tank in the background seems almost astral.

The facial construction of Paul Maynard in panel five is strikingly reminiscent of the work of German Expressionist Edvard Munch. Munch's specialty is the portrayal of corpse-like people whose soulless frames personify alienation. His "Virginia Creeper" is an excellent example. The painting's entire atmosphere is infirm, its clashing colors juxtaposed and in violent combat. There is an all-pervading sense of anxiety and unrest. The human figure in the lower left (man or woman?) fails to relate to Munch's brightly burning world. He walks zombie-like down its middle. His solid black garb sets him off in distinct contrast from the work's kaleidoscopic composition. His face is constructed in precisely the same oval manner as Paul Maynard's, with the sole exception of the eyes. The egg-shaped orbs of Munch's character convey a loss of intelligence and feeling not meant to exist in the flesh-and-blood personage of Kurtzman's wounded soldier. Despite this difference, the basic effect is the same: the portrayal of a living corpse existing in complete alienation from his surroundings.

Page three introduces a Kurtzman forte: the use of onomatopoeic word symbols. (Kurtzman would later do an entire story in Mad using nothing but these word symbols.) The groan of the tank in panel one is placed squarely across the breadth of its treads, and the very choice of sounds (sQuoNK!) identifies the fat, dull, pig-like essence of the war machine. Panel two places us atop the juggernaut and we look down upon a scene swarming with life in the form of tiny soldiers. In panel three, that life is suddenly obliterated as a shell, represented by the sound "KRUMP!" and a myriad of sketch lines, explodes nearby. Confusion sets in. It is almost as if the tank and its riders have been dropped suddenly into the center of a pond. In panel four, the soldiers' faces are depicted in smooth, boyish terms. They cannot understand the complexities of war. They are only its innocent pawns. "Incoming or outgoing?" "What's going on?" "Who knows?" A sergeant, all mouth and jaw, barks orders. "We've gotta deploy to the right and left." In all directions. He never explains why. No one is ever able to explain why in a Kurtzman war. His wars are hell. Hell is insane.

On **page four**, Paul is left alone to guard the machine gun. Set apart from his platoon, he displays typically human idiosyncrasies. He wonders about time, about baseball, about back home through baseball, and about his own motivations ("What am I doing up here?"). Kurtzman

points out that the young soldier does indeed have a soul and to lose him would be to lose more than just a khaki uniform — it would be to lose a collective of memories and feelings — it would be to lose a life. Our viewpoint in panels one and two is essentially the same. When shells explode in the next three panels, Kurtzman quickly shifts perspectives again and again, adding to the turmoil. The remaining panels are seen from behind the soldier with the camera rising slightly in panel seven. Again, this is pure cinematography. It reminds us of film wind-ups wherein the star walks toward the horizon, the music swells and the camera rises to meet a starry sky. Here, the rising camera and single viewpoint emphasize the retrogressive progress of Paul's lone retreat. Sketch lines on the tank, road, and squared-off field of grass parallel the soldier's movement, accentuating it.

Page five is composed in light, airy terms. Backgrounds are minimal, skies flat and textureless. There is a feeling of freedom and unrestrained movement —and yet, there is the foreboding message scrawled in caption form over the first panel. Here, too, the entire landscape recedes behind Paul, giving him forward motion. His left heel and right toe dig visibly into the rounded turf as if it were an enormous treadmill. His face is again boyish, his mouth slightly open and gaze rendered in round, black dots. His outspread arms and bow-legged walk are like those of a little child who, coming in after the streetlamps are out, tiptoes past his father in fear of punishment. The apprehensive nature of Paul's figure thus presents a fitting visual statement to the caption.

In panel two, Paul smiles, and his boyish innocence completely takes him over. As bombers pass overhead, their linear, vibrating undersides indicating motion, Paul prepares to "have chow and watch the show." In panel three, his Page three introduces a Kurtzman forte: the use of onomatopoeic word symbols. (Kurtzman would later do an entire story in Mad using nothing but these word symbols.) The groan of the tank in panel one is placed squarely across the breadth of its treads, and the very choice of sounds (sQuoNK!) identifies the fat, dull, pig-like essence of the war machine. Panel two places us atop the juggernaut and we look down upon a scene swarming with life in the form of tiny soldiers. In panel three, his springy, attentive sitting position contrasts sharply with the one he assumes on page one, panel one. His gaze is directed up, not down. His whole body thinner, quicker, livelier. His arms are of pressed against his torso and his knees are further from the ground, giving his mass a less monolithic quality. He no longer reminds us of a tombstone. In the last three panels, the camera circles once more in a clockwise direction and we are again on the road with Paul Maynard. Refreshed by his meal and ie entertainment, the soldier's stride now forceful, confident.

Turning to **page six**, we immediately feel discomfort. This is, in part, due to the darker, more ominous quality of the page --and, in part, to its panel arrangement. Pages three through five sport identical panel arrangements: two rows of two square panels atop a third row of three smaller panels and a foreboding "if" caption introducing the page. Thus, Kurtzman has developed a rhythm, a sense of chronological regularity. On page six, he disrupts the flow of time. Its second panel row consists of the three smaller panels moved up a notch. Time is compressed. In panel five, Paul's familiar habit of checking his watch takes on a new meaning.

The devil posts behind him lose the black shadows previously surrounding their eyes and chins, as if they have sprung suddenly to life. In contrast with the freedom of movement he experienced on the previous page, Paul is now hemmed in by the devil posts. Even when they themselves are not visible, their shadows form a prison-bar effect around him: It is Kurtzman's way of saying, "Something awful is going to happen." All the ifs have been used up. All the paths Paul Maynard could have taken are now closed. In panel six, the young soldier is tossed skyward like a disjointed rag doll.

Page seven returns to the "present." The panel arrangement is reminiscent of page two; two top rows of three panels each. We again view the Munchesque visage of Paul Maynard and, for the first time, his death-mask features explode in a grimace of pain. The outburst shocks us. In panel four, Paul's eyes widen, his face now completely in the Munch mode. Death is near. Stress lines on each side of his head indicate some sort of internal spasm. We gather from his dialogue that he's been wounded, and as he draws his bloody hand from beneath his shirt in panel five, we learn just how badly. His words "...or if Paul Maynard hadn't even been born!" indicate his inability to control the events which mold his life. So alienated is he from his own destiny, that he refers to himself in the third person.

He slumps over in panel six, helplessly sobbing, "If... if...if" The biggest "if" of all is the question of life's meaning when man invents such horrors as war. The final panel is a lengthwise coffin, designed to accentuate the prostrate, almost unnoticeable body of Paul Maynard. The dialogue completes the sense of cyclical time running throughout the story by paraphrasing the introductory passage. The terrain bulges upward like a bridge, visually complementing Kurtzman's last words: "And man's destiny goes marching on." But if man's destiny marches on beyond man's control, as Paul Maynard's was beyond his, whither does it go? That, Kurtzman seems to say, is a frighteningly open question in the midst of a war.



Red Virginia Creeper

Edvard Munch

1998-1900

Oil on Canvas

119.5 x 121 cm

Source of image: www/paintingmania.com/red-virginia-creeper-16_2527.html

BEFORE THE TOWN OF X — IN KOREA, A G. I. SITS THINKING IN FRONT OF A ROW OF ANCIENT KOREAN DEVIL POSTS! AND, AS IF TO MOCK HIS THOUGHTS, THE DEVIL POSTS GRIN DOWN AT HIM... JAGGED WOODEN GRINS FROM EAR TO EAR... AS IF THEY KNOW HE'S THINKING OF THE BIG...

BIG 'IF'!



YEAH... *IF*... *IF*! NOT MUCH OF A WORD! A LITTLE WORD! BUT LOTS OF MEANING!



LIKE... *IF* THOSE DEVIL POSTS HAD ONLY BEEN A LITTLE FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD!



OR... *IF* THAT SHELL CRATER WAS ONLY A HUNDRED FEET FURTHER AWAY! YEAH...





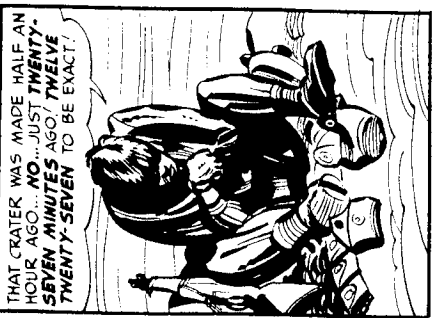
...FUNNY ABOUT THAT SHELL CRATER BY THE DEVIL POSTS! WHY THERE, BY THE DEVIL POSTS?



CRATER NOT MORE'N THREE FEET DEEP! COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BIGGER THAN AN EIGHTY-MILLIMETER SHELL!



AN ODD SHOT, TOO, MISSED TARGET BY A MILE! HAD TO LAND HERE, A MILLION CRATERS IN KOREA! AND I KNOW ALL ABOUT THIS ONE.



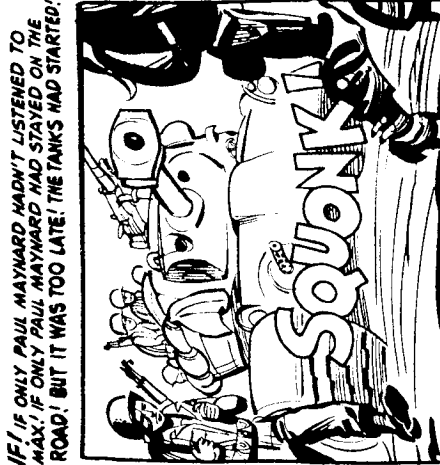
THAT CRATER WAS MADE HALF AN HOUR AGO... NO...JUST TWENTY-SEVEN MINUTES AGO! TWENTY-TWO... TWENTY-SEVEN TO BE EXACT!



TWELVE TWENTY-SEVEN! IF ONLY IT HAD WAITED TILL TWELVE TWENTY-EIGHT! IF ONLY...! IF...! IF...!

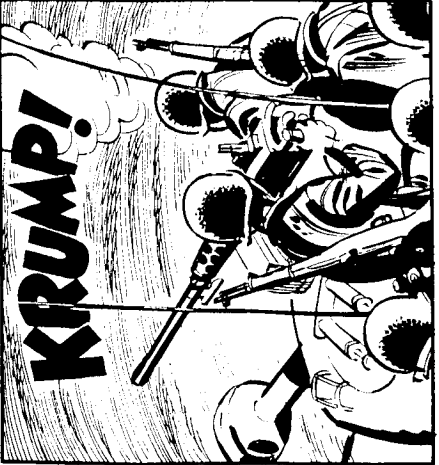


YAAAH... WHAT'S THE USE OF SAYIN' 'IF'! THERE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN 'IF'S' IF THE OLD MAN HADN'T DECIDED WE SHOULD GO ON RECONNAISSANCE THIS MORNING... AT OH-NINE-HUNDRED!



IF! IF ONLY PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T LISTENED TO MAX! IF ONLY PAUL MAYNARD HAD STAYED ON THE ROAD! BUT IT WAS TOO LATE! THE TANKS HAD STARTED!

SQUONK!



KRUMP!



HMM! OH-NINE-TWENTY! THAT'S THE KING COMPANY WE'RE PASSING THROUGH! THEY'RE THE LAST PERIMETER!



LOOKS LIKE IT WAS MEANT FOR US! WHO KNOWS! COMIN' ON!



OH-NINE-HUNDRED, MEN! LET'S GET MOVIN'! THEM THAT WANTS TO RIDE ON THE TANKS, HOP ABOARD! THEM THAT WANTS TO WALK, STAY CLOSE TO THE TANKS!



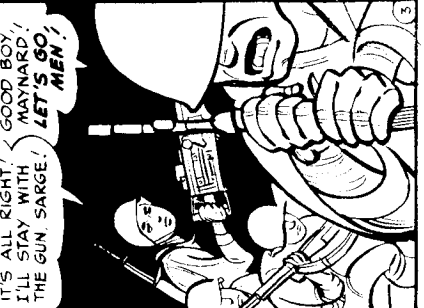
PAUL! PAUL MAYNARD! IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE DITCH, MAX, BUT... AHM, WHAT THE HECK! MIGHT AS WELL SAVE MY FEET!



O.K., YOU EIGHT BALLS, OFFA THE TANK AND INTO THE RICE PADDIES! WE'VE GOTTA DEPLOY TO THE RIGHT AND LEFT!

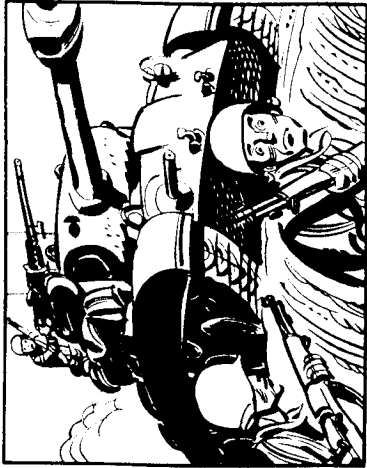


I WANT A VOLUNTEER TO STAY WITH THE FIFTY CALIBER M.G. UP HERE! O.K. / DO I HAVE TO PICK A VOLUNTEER?



IT'S ALL RIGHT! GOOD BOY, I'LL STAY WITH THE GUN, SARGE! LET'S GO, MEN!

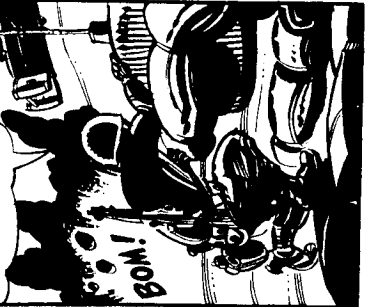
IF ONLY PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T VOLUNTEERED!
BUT PAUL MAYNARD WOULDN'T HAVE VOLUNTEERED
IF HE HADN'T BEEN STANDING BY THAT MACHINE GUN!



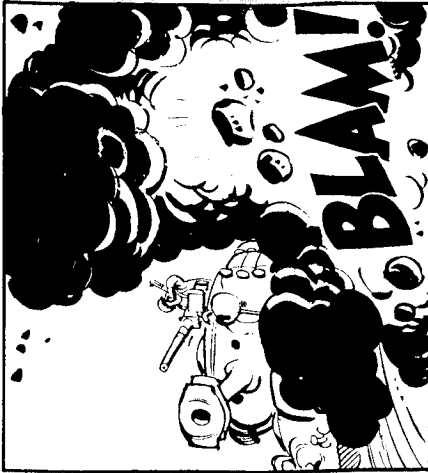
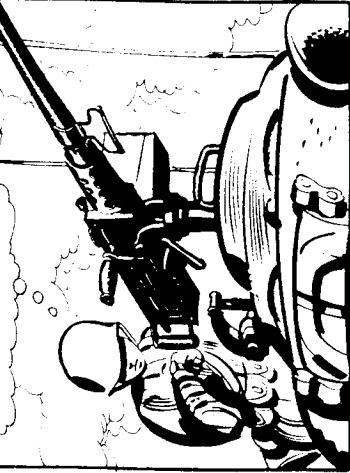
WONDER HOW THE
DODGERS MADE OUT
YESTERDAY? HEY...



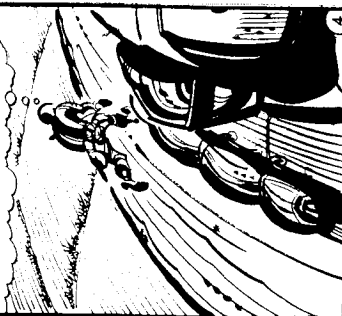
THOSE SHELLS ARE
GETTING TOO CLOSE
FOR COMFORT!



WHAT AM I DOING UP HERE? I'VE LEFT MY
SQUAD FAR BEHIND! I SHOULD HAVE HOPPED
OFF EARLIER! WHAT TIME IS IT? HMM...
ELEVEN FORTY-TWO!



I'M HEADIN' BACK DOWN THE
ROAD WHERE BOYS FROM MY
SQUAD ARE! HATE TO GET
SEPARATED FROM THE BOYS!



THAT MACHINE GUN'S
GONNA HAVE TO SHOOT
BY ITSELF FOR A WHILE!



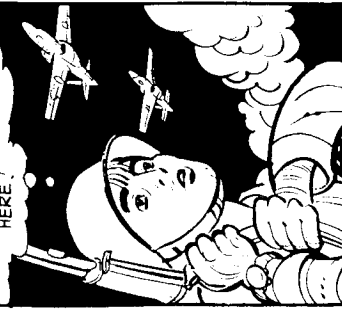
IF ONLY PAUL MAYNARD HAD STUCK WITH THE TANK!
IF ONLY HE HADN'T GONE DOWN THE ROAD...
DOWN A ROAD WHERE FIVE DEVIL POSTS SAT WAITING!



THEY'RE CIRCLING OVER THE
TOWN OUT THERE! PROBABLY
GOING TO BLAST THAT
ARTILLERY THAT'S BEEN
GIVING US TROUBLE!



THE PLANES ARE HEADING
BACK, AND I'D BETTER DO
THE SAME BEFORE THINGS
START POPPING AROUND
HERE!



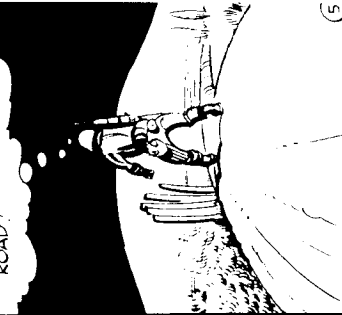
THERE GOES THE
AIR FORCE! P-S-T-S!
SOMEONE'S GONNA
GET IT! WONDER
WHAT TIME IT IS?



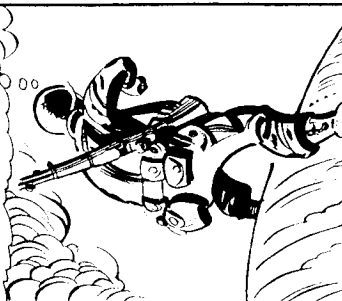
THERE
THEY
GO!



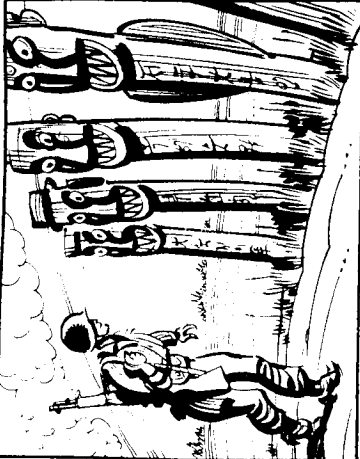
NO... I CAN STILL SEE 'EM A-WAY
DOWN THE ROAD! HEY... WHAT'S
THAT UP AHEAD? KOREAN
DEVIL POSTS ON THE
ROAD!



LEMMIE SEE TIME! IT'S
AFTER TWELVE! TWELVE-
TWENTY! WONDER IF THE
OUTFIT'S PULLED BACK!



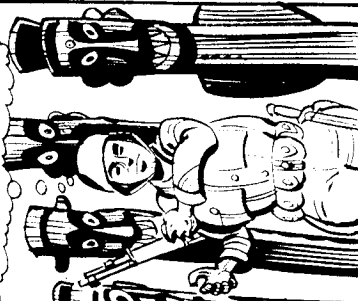
IF ONLY PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T STOPPED TO WATCH THE PLANES! IF ONLY PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T STOPPED FOR CHOW! OH, GOD... IF...



FUNNY LOOKING DEVIL POSTS! THEY SAY IF YOU OFFER A PRAYER TO THE DEVIL POSTS, YOU'LL WARD OFF EVIL SPIRITS! SUPERSTITION IS A FUNNY THING!



THE BUCKLE ON MY COMBAT BOOT'S COMING LOOSE! I'LL STOP A MINUTE TO FIX IT!



THERE! THAT DOES IT! SURE WISH WE WERE BACK AT THE BINOAC AREA!... LEMME SEE TIME!



I'D BETTER GET GOING! IT'S TWELVE TWENTY-SEVEN AND I'VE... WHUUZZAT...



IF PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T STOPPED TO BUCKLE THE COMBAT BOOT!... COULD'VE WALKED FIFTY MORE FEET IN THE TIME IT TOOK TO BUCKLE THAT BOOT!



IF PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T STOPPED TO LOOK AT HIS WATCH... COULD'VE WALKED TWENTY-FIVE FEET IN TIME IT TOOK TO LOOK AT WATCH!



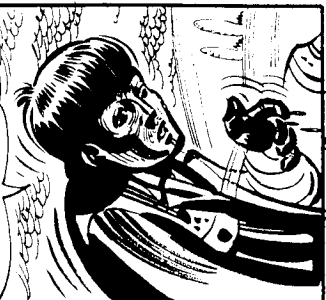
IF PAUL MAYNARD WALKED FASTER... OR SLOWER... OR DIDN'T WALK AT ALL! OH, LORD...



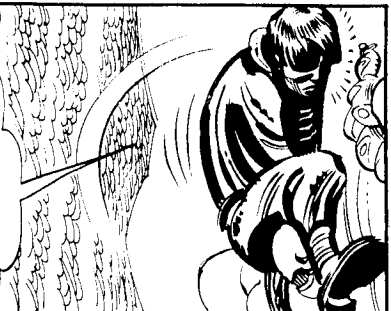
IT WAS ONLY A STRAY MORTAR SHELL! COULD HAVE LANDED ANYWHERE! IF ONLY THAT SHELL SPLINTER HAD GONE FIVE MORE INCHES TO THE RIGHT...



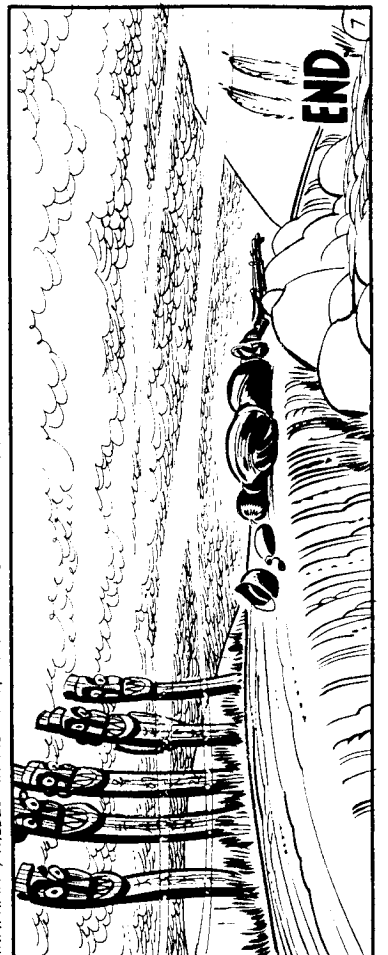
OR IF PAUL MAYNARD'S HEART HAD ONLY BEEN FIVE MORE INCHES TO THE LEFT... OR IF PAUL MAYNARD HADN'T EVEN BEEN BORN!



IF... IF... (SOB) ... IF... IF...



BEFORE THE TOWN OF X — IN KOREA, A ROW OF ANCIENT WOODEN DEVIL POSTS GRIN DOWN!... WOODEN GRINS FROM ONE WOODEN EAR TO THE OTHER... GRIN DOWN UPON THE BODY OF PRIVATE PAUL MAYNARD, KILLED IN ACTION! AND MAN'S DESTINY GOES MARCHING ON!



END

