

THE GREAT SIGN

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FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

A rosary dangles from a bedside table. A small silver cameo of Mother Mary among the beads spins in the breeze, sparkling in the pale afternoon light.

In the background, the blurred image of a man and woman making love, tenderly.

LATER

Afterward. ALAIN and MICHELLE LAFRANCOUER, a beautiful young couple, lie together in bed. Alain sleeps, but Michelle lies awake with tears on her cheeks.

LATER STILL

Michelle, wearing a pretty blue dress, stands before a chiffonier combing her hair. She puts on the rosary, has trouble with the clasp. Alain, in a French captain's uniform, circa 1917, comes and helps.

ALAIN

The clasp is broken. Here, let me.

He takes the rosary. Reshapes the broken clasp so it closes. Puts the beads around his wife's neck and kisses her cheek.

Looks in the mirror at Michelle who returns a faltering smile.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Alain and Michelle eat dinner. She checks the clock.

Which reads 4:20.

IN THE FOYER

Michelle and Alain put on their coats. Michelle touches a crucifix on the door, blesses herself then steps outside. Alain heaves a haversack across his shoulder and picks up his rifle. Takes a long last look at his home then follows her out.

EXT. STABLE - DAY

Alain harnesses a black and white mare to a buckboard. Helps Michelle onto the seat.

EXT. CHEVOIS, FRANCE - DAY

Alain and Michelle ride through their village. An old woman feeding chickens watches them pass.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

They travel a dirt road lined with poplars. Michelle tucks her hand into Alain's coat pocket and nestles against him.

ALAIN

Cold?

Michelle glances up at Alain, obscurely, as if the question were out of place. She looks away.

MICHELLE

No.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - CHEVOIS, FRANCE - DAY

Michelle and Alain climb steps onto an open-air platform where a sign with chipped white paint reads: "Chevois". They sit on a bench below a train schedule that shows the date: "October 5, 1917".

Beyond the track, a field of lion-colored wheat sways in the wind and a bank of angry clouds gather in the east.

ALAIN

There's a storm coming.

Michelle looks down-track for any sign of the train, her hair blowing across her face. Alain puts the strands in place and Michelle pulls sharply away.

ALAIN (CONT'D)

Cherie, do you really want to see me off like this?

(leans in, softly)

I'll get another leave in six months.

Michelle stares into the distance.

ALAIN (CONT'D)

What is it?

MICHELLE

(without turning)

You know what.

Apparently he does. Alain draws back and thinks. Decides.

ALAIN

It's out of the question.

MICHELLE

(turns)

Really? Why?

(MORE)

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

Men are leaving the front every day,
by the hundreds. What makes you so
important? The war goes on if you're
killed. So what if you don't go
back?

ALAIN

And if everyone felt that way?

MICHELLE

Then there'd be no war. What's wrong
with that?

Alain takes a moment.

ALAIN

But there is a war and I'm part of it.

MICHELLE

Yes, I know, your men, your duty to
France, they mean more to you than I
ever will.

ALAIN

You don't believe that.

MICHELLE

I don't know what to believe. All I
know is I can't watch you leave again.
I can't.

She sobs. Lays her head against Alain.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

Oh, Alain, don't go.

ALAIN

Cherie.

MICHELLE

Something will happen this time. I
just know it.

(looks up at him)

Let's leave. Tonight. We'll just
go. It doesn't matter where, just so
long as we're together.

Alain pulls her into an embrace and holds her.

A smoke-billowing train coming into view in the distance.

MOMENTS LATER

The troop train is stopped beside the platform.

Alain walks with Michelle over to a car. Sets down his rifle and kisses her. Michelle clings to him, pulls him back as he tries to go and kisses him once more.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

Oh, my love, promise me you'll come back. Please... promise. You always keep your promises.

Michelle breaks down and Alain wipes her tears and looks into her eyes.

ALAIN

Michelle, Cherie... I can't make you any promises, except to love you, always.

He gives her a last kiss. Picks up his gear and boards.

Michelle follows him down the length of cars, past windows filled with soldiers returning to the front.

She cranes to keep an eye on him. Momentarily loses him until Alain appears at an open window and reaches for her.

The train WHISTLE BLOWS. The wheels turn.

Michelle takes Alain's hand and kisses it. Holds on to him and trots after the train until she loses the pace and he slips away from her.

Michelle stands by the track watching him go. A receding image that gets smaller and smaller until she's finally lost from view.

EXT. FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE - TRAIN TRACK - NIGHT

Sheets of rain. Alain's train rushes by, the train lights illuminating a refugee family waiting for the train to pass.

EXT. TRAIN DEPOT - NEAR THE FRONT - NIGHT

Favoring a train station sign peppered with shrapnel holes. Alain's train rolls by.

Brakes before a war-battered depot where a dozen soldiers disembark, Alain among them. He turns his collar against the rain and walks off through the charred remains of a town, an artillery barrage flashing on the horizon.

EXT. ROAD TO THE FRONT - NIGHT

Under cover of night military vehicles move to and from the front. Pick up Alain marching by the side of the road.

EXT. ROAD TO THE FRONT - DAY

In the gray morning light a horse-drawn ambulance passes through frame, the exhausted team straining to move the tires caked with mud.

Following the ambulance we find Alain in a line of men slogging through mud past a row of BOOMING French 75s.

EXT. FRENCH LINE - WESTERN FRONT - DAY

Alain darts between a column of trucks in the road. Climbs a small hill lined with OFFICER DUGOUTS, wood and stone structures built into the earth. Reaches the top and stops.

WHAT ALAIN SEES:

A quarter-mile wide strip of trenchworks that extend north and south as far as the eye can see.

Beyond the barbed wire and parapets that marked the French front line lies a swath of pockmarked earth: "No-man's-land", all that stands between the French army and the crenellated contours of the German fortifications.

ON ALAIN

Staring. Stone-still.

EXT. TRENCHES - DAY

Alain strides through the twists and turns of the trenches past a gong and mallet suspended from the trench wall with a sign: "Gas Alarm". Other signs read: "Mudville", "Keep your head down!", "Ach! Gott in himmel!", etc.

FARTHER ON

He passes mud-encrusted men lining the trench walls. Playing cards. Cleaning rifles. Resting. One man de-louses his tunic, running a lighter over a seam.

Another soldier scurries by with a dead rat and joins comrades who have hung a half-dozen rats from a stick by their tails like trophies.

He turns at a trench crossroad where an arrow points the way to "LOUSELAND".

MATCH CUT TO:

TO A HAND-PAINTED SIGN THAT READS "LOUSELAND".

Beneath it SERGEANT MICHEL TREZEGUET (37) sits on an ammo crate stitching a boot.

Sgt. Trezeguet is lanky, wears glasses and if he sported a goatee could pass as a professor.

A dozen soldiers lounge near him. Among them are BLANC and FONTAINE, two young soldiers who watch the sergeant work.

BLANC

Hey, Trezeguet. How much to stitch
my underwear? I got a hole right in
the seat.

Blanc and Fontaine laugh.

SGT. TREZEGUET

I've got two words for you, Blanc,
and they're not "let's dance".

Alain rounds a corner into the trench.

FONTAINE

Captain!

Everyone's up, not at attention, but in genuine surprise.
Alain moves through them acknowledging their greetings.

Ad libs: "Hey, Captain." "Good to see you, sir." Et cetera.
Alain greets Sgt. Trezeguet.

ALAIN

Trez.

SGT. TREZEGUET

Welcome back.

They smile, share a look that suggests each man feels a little
more sure of his place by having the other by his side.

Alain takes a seat on an ammo crate. His men gathered around
him like pigeons in a park.

BLANC

Any word from HQ, Captain? Rumor is
we're in for an offensive.

FONTAINE

Ah, you and your rumors. They flow
in your ears and out your ass. C'mon,
Captain, where's the good stuff? We
know your wife, she wouldn't send
you back with one arm as long as the
other.

Alain smiles and digs into his haversack. He hands out a
bottle of wine, cheese and a few tins to the men.

ALAIN
With her compliments.

The men reach in greedily, "Thanking" him.

SGT. TREZEGUET
All right, that's it, give him some
air. Go on... And save me a cup of
wine.

The men disperse leaving Alain alone with Sgt. Trezeguet.

SGT. TREZEGUET (CONT'D)
You just cost me a week's pay.
(off Alain's look)
I bet half the squad you wouldn't
come back.

Alain offers Sgt. Trezeguet a cigarette and lights him.

ALAIN
Only half?

SGT. TREZEGUET
The half with money. How's Michelle?

ALAIN
Good. Getting by.

SGT. TREZEGUET
You know, at times I think it's
rougher on them than it is on us,
until the shelling starts.

Alain looks down-trench at a small crater and scorched
sandbags, a recent hit.

SGT. TREZEGUET (CONT'D)
We took a mortar round last night,
lost a new man.

Alain takes a quick inventory of the men in the trench.

ALAIN
Who bought it?

SGT. TREZEGUET
Some kid with shit for luck. Just
his second day on the line.

Alain wears a look-- the waste, the tragic shame of it all.

SGT. TREZEGUET (CONT'D)
His name's Guillod, if I remember right. He's at the forward aid station. By the look of him, they won't be moving him back.

The words sit heavy in the air. Alain takes a long drag on his cigarette. Looks at a rat licking dried blood off a scorched duckboard.

EXT. FORWARD AID STATION - DAY

The tailgate of a truck drops open and reveals a load of dead soldiers. Two orderlies walk up and heave a corpse atop the stack.

The corpse's head turns at an angle and reveals a plum purple face and bright red lips, a chlorine gas victim.

Pick up Alain walking pass the truck, entering the

FORWARD AID STATION

A camouflaged tarp erected against the side of a hill.

He weaves between wounded men on blankets on the ground. Comes upon an OLD DOCTOR kneeling over a burn victim.

ALAIN
Doctor.

The doctor turns. The look on his face is one of complete exhaustion.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
I'm looking for Private Guillod, B company. He was brought in last night.

DOCTOR
(waves a languid hand)
If he came in last night he's over there somewhere. If he's still here.

Alain looks down at the burned man whose entire upper body is crispier than overcooked bacon.

ACROSS THE TENT

Alain looks around at row upon row of wounded men, one in worst condition than the other.

He grabs a chart hung from the end of a cot and reads a scribbled name: "J. Guillod, Private".

Both of the boy's leg are blown off below the knee, his right hand is missing and there's a bandaged cavity where his left shoulder should be. He is bathed in sweat. Trembling.

Alain's jaw tightens and he winces a little as if he can almost feel the boy's pain. A HOSPITAL AIDE happens by carrying a pail of bloody bandages.

HOSPITAL AIDE
One of yours, Captain?

ALAIN
Yeah.

HOSPITAL AIDE
We given him morphine. Not much
else we can do.

They both look down on the boy.

HOSPITAL AIDE (CONT'D)
Tough kid. Too tough for his own good.

The Aide moves on. Alain remains, watching the boy.

With what appears to be a great effort the boy's left hand turns over and opens. Alain sits and takes his hand, the dying boy's lips quivering an inaudible thanks.

EXT. FORWARD AID STATION - DAY

Alain emerges from the tent and takes a long drink from his canteen. He stares into space, numb, then walks away.

EXT. RESERVE TRENCH - DAY

A grizzled OLD SOLDIER is strapped to a wagon wheel, caked in mud, like some poor sot out of the Inquisition. A sign above him reads: "Failed to salute an officer."

NOTE: This is an American movie so the main characters speak English throughout the film. However, all written words are in their authentic language with or without subtitles. This includes French, German, and Portuguese as the case may be.

ALAIN

Comes down-trench to a room-size opening of intersecting trenches where the old soldier is strapped to the wheel.

Alain reads the sign, fumes, and draws his bayonet.

ALAIN
God damn them all.

He cuts the old soldier loose. Soldiers peel off the trench walls and gather around. One slips away down-trench. A BIG CORPORAL steps forward.

BIG CORPORAL
Captain, I wouldn't do that if I
were you.

The old soldier falls into Alain's arms.

ALAIN
(to big corporal)
Give me a hand.

Big Corporal hesitates, then comes and helps Alain lay the man under a lean-to.

The old soldier raises a hand in weak salute and grins mischievously at Alain who can't help but smile. Alain gives him a drink from his canteen.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
Easy.
(to no one in
particular)
How long was he up there?

The soldiers play dumb. Alain looks at Big Corporal.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
How long?

BIG CORPORAL
A day and a half. No water, no
rations. Those were the orders.

ALAIN
Whose orders?

LT. PAPIN (O.S.)
Mine, sir.

A "sir" punctuated with contempt. Alain turns to LIEUTENANT PAPIN, early twenties, short, and spruce-- as much as one can be at the front. He glares at Alain.

LT. PAPIN (CONT'D)
Lieutenant Phillippe Papin the Second,
Captain.

The same supercilious emphasis on Alain's rank.

LT. PAPIN (CONT'D)
That name mean anything to you?

Something flickers in Alain's eyes, apparently it does. He turns back to the old soldier and washes mud off his face with water from the canteen.

ALAIN

This man is severely dehydrated.
I'd think a general's son would
recognize that.

Lieutenant Papin's men exchange looks, awaiting the lieutenant's reaction.

LT. PAPIN

Of course he's dehydrated. He's
being punished. Now I suggest you
leave him be and go back to your own
unit, sir.

Alain gives the old soldier another drink.

LT. PAPIN (CONT'D)

You're interfering with the legitimate
order of a fellow officer. You
haven't the right. By Army
regulations I can punish him as I
see fit. Captain!

He grabs Alain's shoulder and Alain wheels and shoves him.

ALAIN

Get your hands off me.

Lieutenant Papin stumbles backward and falls in the mud.

ALAIN (CONT'D)

(to big corporal)

You there, get a stretcher, take
this man to an aid station.

Big Corporal looks from Alain to the lieutenant and back.

ALAIN (CONT'D)

Now!

Big Corporal taps a buddy and together they lay the old
soldier on a litter and carry him off. Lieutenant Papin
comes to his feet, shakes mud from his hands.

LT. PAPIN

This will go on report, Captain. I
have witnesses! You could be court-
martialed. You realize--

ALAIN

Shut up, Lieutenant.

The lieutenant freezes, and his men snicker. Alain comes right up into the man's face.

ALAIN (CONT'D)

Listen, you... pup. These are good men here, who live in mud, share their beds with rats, and fight and die over the same damn ground they fought over the day before, all at your command. And not one of them can tell you why. But they do it just the same. If you took your nose out of the air long enough to see that maybe, just maybe, you'd earn a little respect, Junior.

He looks the younger man in the eye. Doubtful he understands. He brushes past him. Lieutenant Papin's eyes flash to his men, who can barely contain their amusement.

EXT. WESTERN FRONT - FRENCH SIDE - NIGHT

Framed by barbed wire, no-man's-land, the pockmarked landscape between the French line and the distant spiny silhouette of the German fortifications.

INSIDE A TRENCH

French soldiers huddle together like gargoyles along the trench wall, dozing. Bored sentries man the firing steps.

Overhead, a flare rockets into the night sky.

INT. OFFICER'S SHELTER - NIGHT

Alain sits on a cot writing a letter by candlelight. Nearby, Sgt. Trezeguet hunches over a tin burner brewing coffee. He brings Alain a cup who sips it and reacts bitterly.

SGT. TREZEGUET

It's the ninth time I've used the grounds. Kinda' sticks to the tongue doesn't it.

ALAIN

Burns a hole in it.

Sgt. Trezeguet sits on a cot across from Alain who braves another sip then resumes writing.

SGT. TREZEGUET

(re: Alain's letter)

To Michelle?

Alain nods. Signs the letter. Looks at Sgt. Trezeguet.

SGT. TREZEGUET (CONT'D)
What, no envelopes?

Sgt. Trezeguet rummages through a bag, comes up with some.

SGT. TREZEGUET (CONT'D)
Here, take them all. I've got no use
for them.

ALAIN
What about that girl in Lyon?

SGT. TREZEGUET
The schoolteacher? Oh, I cut her
loose. All she ever wrote me was
awful poetry and complaints about
her bunions. The girl had terrible
bunions. I wrote her a letter in
your name, told her I died, bravely
of course.

The distant RAT-A-TAT-TAT of a machine-gun filters into the
room... along with a FAR OFF SCREAM. Alain and Sgt. Trezeguet
look toward the entrance and listen. Ominous silence.

Sgt. Trezeguet kisses a crucifix around his neck.

SGT. TREZEGUET (CONT'D)
(off Alain's skeptical look)
Heathen.

ALAIN
Better a heathen than a blind fool.

Alain signs off on the letter, seals it.

SGT. TREZEGUET
So what do you think happens after
we check out?

ALAIN
Nothing. We go down into the dirt
like the dogs, and there we stay.

SGT. TREZEGUET
Captain, you've been too long at the
front.

ALAIN
Too long in this world.

A quiet beat, then...

SGT. TREZEGUET

I don't buy it. There's got to be something behind all this. A God. A Christian God who loves us all.

ALAIN

Loves us so much he just stands by while we slaughter each other by the thousands.

SGT. TREZEGUET

Maybe it's not his affair. Or maybe... maybe he's just extremely patient. You know before the war I drove a cab in Paris. All day long I'd go to and fro, like a little bee among the hive. But at night when I got home, the first thing I'd do was go up to my apartment building roof and just sit, sit and stare out at the sunset and at a small tree that someone had put into a pot. I used to look at that tree and envy it. How it could spend its whole life in that one spot and be content.

ALAIN

Now who's been too long at the front?

Sgt. Trezeguet chuckles.

SGT. TREZEGUET

I know, it sounds crazy. It just seems to me that everywhere I look in nature I see peace and patience. In the meadows and streams, among the birds and animals, even the seasons, everything. There's a pace to it, an acceptance. We look past it, but it's there. This all-encompassing patience. 'To everything there is a season'. No?... I believe that it's in that patience that we get a glimpse of the mind of God.

ALAIN

And it's in his mind to just stand by, patiently, while we kill each other?

SGT. TREZEGUET

Why not? It's what he did when they killed his son.

A MESSENGER pops his head through the curtained doorway.

MESSENGER
Captain LaFrancouer? You're wanted
at battalion headquarters.

Alain looks at Trezeguet, in his eyes the question-- "Now what?".

INT. COMMAND TRENCH - BATTALION HQ - NIGHT

A fully operational field headquarters built into the earth. Staff, telephones, tables, cots, etc.

In the dim light GENERAL GEORGE PAPIN, 50, looms over an operation map atop a camp table, a crowd of officers around him, including Lieutenant Papin hovering in the back row.

Alain appears in the entryway. Speaks with a junior officer who goes to the general. While he waits Alain looks around, his eyes linking up with the cool gaze of Lieutenant Papin.

The general nods to the junior officer who waves Alain forward. Alain walks up and snaps to attention.

ALAIN
Captain LaFrancouer reporting as
ordered, sir.

GENERAL PAPIN
At ease, Captain.
(to an officer)
Give him room.

Alain steps up to the map. General Papin's gaze goes from his son to Alain where he holds for a moment, measuring him.

GENERAL PAPIN (CONT'D)
I understand you're just back from
leave, Captain. Is that right?

ALAIN
Yes, sir.

GENERAL PAPIN
Good, then you should be well-rested.

General Papin examines the map.

GENERAL PAPIN (CONT'D)
Captain, I need some prisoners. I
know the Boche are planning an offensive
and I want fresh intelligence. Your
unit will handle it.

ALAIN

Sir, with respect, men in my company undertook the same mission just three nights ago. They're going to wonder why they're coming out of rotation.

GENERAL PAPIN

Tell your men I don't give a damn about rotations. I want fresh prisoners and I'm assigning it to you. Understood?

Looks between the general, his son, and Alain clarify the purpose of this-- retribution.

ALAIN

Yes, sir. Is that all, sir?

GENERAL PAPIN

No. No, that's not all.

He comes around the table.

GENERAL PAPIN (CONT'D)

I've had a look at your record, Captain. It's quite impressive, decorations for valor, leadership, three years of service on the front. Long enough to know that strict discipline is the only thing that keeps this army together up here.

Comes to within inches of Alain's face.

GENERAL PAPIN (CONT'D)

If I ever hear again that you've interfered with a fellow officer's disciplining of a soldier, junior officer or not, I'll have you shot on the spot.

General Papin turns back to the map. Alain looks to Lieutenant Papin who oozes satisfaction.

EXT. WESTERN FRONT - NIGHT

A moonless sky over no-man's-land.

Across the cratered landscape, lines of barbed wire are strung fifty yards from the German side.

Alain appears from out of the black void of a crater, crawling on his belly with a small keg under his arm.

He reaches the wire. Jams the wooden keg between the strands and slips through the opening. Six men follow close behind, all on their bellies, face first in the mud.

Down the line a flare skyrockets into the air. Phosphorous sparks scattering, lighting up the earth, the outer glow reaching Alain's team.

Alain and his men burrow into the mud, still as stones. A tense moment before the light ebbs and the shadow of night washes over them like a protecting tide.

FARTHER ON

Alain slides headfirst into a crater, through water on the bottom and up the far side. His men follow him in.

Sgt. Trezeguet joins him at the crater edge. They peek over the side at the German line--

An ominous silhouette of wire and parapets.

Alain and Sgt. Trezeguet duck down. Alain turns.

ALAIN

Cat-eyes.

CAT-EYES crawls to his side, a diminutive Frenchman with large dark eyes. Alain nods with his chin and the soldier peeks over the crater's edge.

Fifty yards away there is a salient fortification and... movement!... a helmet, bobbing, and in brief silhouette a pivoting machine-gun barrel.

Cat Eyes slides back to Alain. Speaks just above a whisper.

CAT EYES

A firing point. Fifty meters dead ahead. A widow-maker with a three man crew.

Alain turns.

ALAIN

(whispers)

Fontaine. Bastien.

The two soldiers crawl up.

ALAIN (CONT'D)

Machine gun...

(points)

Fifty meters. Take the left. Give it five, then over you go.

Fontaine and Bastien crawl away left.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
Trezeguet. Take Blanc and Cat-eyes
around right.

Sgt. Trezeguet and Cat Eyes slither back to Blanc. Crawl away right. A big soldier, CAPELLE, clammers up to Alain. Alain offers him a grenade.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
How's the arm?

Capelle takes the grenade, pats his right shoulder.

CAPELLE
Good as new.

EXT. GERMAN LINE - OBSERVATION TREE - NIGHT

A mangled leafless tree on the German side that when viewed from behind reveals a hollowed out trunk where an observer on a ladder peers out through a slit.

Before him is dead-still no-man's-land. Suddenly there is movement to his left, the shadowy outline of a man crawling toward him.

Observer waves down to two runners at the base of the tree. He holds up a finger, looks again through the opening, and signals in silent, frantic motion-- Two! No, five!

The runners race off down each side of the trench. Passing the word to fellow soldiers as they go. Word spreads as alerted soldiers wake the man next to them.

NO-MAN'S-LAND

Alain peers over the crater rim, a grenade in each hand. Suddenly a flare shoots into the sky exposing them...

And the Germans open up with everything they've got.

Fontaine and Bastien take hits, writhing on the ground.

Sgt. Trezeguet, Blanc and Cat-Eyes return fire.

Alain and Capelle throw grenades.

WHAM! WHAM! They blow away the Mauser.

The Germans answer. A dozen stick-grenades hurtle through the night... and land. Exploding in rapid succession BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Sgt. Trezeguet comes up from under the debris. Turns to Blanc and Cat Eyes, dead at his side.

He makes a mad crawl for the French line, bullets whizzing past his head as he does his best to crawl into his helmet.

Somewhere a WHISTLE BLOWS. And answering fire erupts from the French side. Star shells and French rockets on parachutes light up the sky.

ALAIN

Returns fire. Grabs Capelle.

ALAIN

Go!

Capelle bolts. Gets ten meters and is cut down. Alain scrambles after him, bullets whizzing past his head.

He checks Capelle, the back of his head is gone.

Bullets pummel the mud beside him and Alain spins and rolls into a crater where he finds Sgt. Trezeguet lying half in and out of a pool of water.

Sgt. Trezeguet is bleeding. Badly. A line of black bullet holes across his chest.

Alain starts first aid with no idea where to begin. He plugs a gushing wound with his hand.

Sgt. Trezeguet pleads with his eyes for Alain to save him.

BOOM! A grenade goes off at the crater rim, ejecting a hundred pounds of mud that covers them both.

Alain comes up from under it. Digs frantically for his friend. Uncovering a dead Sgt. Trezeguet. Alain groans, drops his head and beats the ground with his fist.

NO-MAN'S-LAND - FROM A HIGH WIDE ANGLE

Encompassing the crossfire, the flashes of gunfire coming in bursts. Sputtering. Falling still.

Lingering over the front, time compresses as DARK NIGHT yields to MISTY DAWN.

In the gray morning light stretcher bearers, tiny from this height, move among the broken ground collecting the dead and wounded.

INT. TRENCHES - DAY

Soldiers stir. Rows of noncoms rise from beneath blankets and ponchos. Crawl out of hovels dug into the trench sides.

Officers emerge from wood-framed dugouts.

PICK-UP ALAIN

Striding through a trench. Past a queue at a field kitchen.

He comes to an area of intersecting trenches. Gets his bearings and moves on.

INT. LT. PAPIN'S QUARTERS - DAY

Lieutenant Papin shaves before a small mirror hung from a post. Behind him two other officers crouch through the entryway on their way out. OFFICER 1 stops and turns.

OFFICER 1

Lieutenant, do you want us to bring you some breakfast?

LT. PAPIN

No. I'm joining my father this morning.

He pauses while shaving and looks over his shoulder.

LT. PAPIN (CONT'D)

Chocolate croissants and quail eggs.
Eat your hearts out.

Officer 1 masks his contempt with a smile, turns and goes.

OUTSIDE THE QUARTERS

He joins the other officer.

OFFICER 1

(twirling his moustache)

His royal high ass will break-fast with Father. "Croissants and quail eggs". I hope he chokes on it.

They chuckle and walk off, passing Alain whose mud-encrusted uniform draws a double-take.

INT. LT. PAPIN'S QUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

Lieutenant Papin applies toilette water. Turns and finds himself face to face with Alain, caked head to toe in mud.

Lieutenant Papin goes ash white. His eyes dart past Alain to the exit, a way out.

Alain just stands before him glaring.

Words form on Lieutenant Papin's lips, die there. He dashes for the exit. Alain grabs him, wraps him up.

ALAIN
You sonofabitch!

Alain throws him to the floor. Straddles him and pummels him with his fists. Lieutenant Papin flails back. Gets tagged on the chin and goes limp. Alain grabs him by the collar.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
Six good men dead. For what? For what!

Alain slaps him a couple times and Lieutenant Papin revives and immediately starts clawing at Alain who bangs his head hard against the dirt knocking the fight out of him.

Alain stands and looks down at Lieutenant Papin in disgust.

ALAIN (CONT'D)
I'm taking this whole goddamn mess up to division. You and your father can answer to them!

At the mention of his father, something feral springs up in Lieutenant Papin and as Alain turns to go he grabs a bayonet draped from a cot and charges.

Alain turns, catches the bayonet hand and twists it behind Lieutenant Papin's back. They struggle. Lieutenant Papin stumbles and falls backward onto the blade.

He groans. Rolls over. Reaches for Alain's feet and dies.

At that moment Big Corporal and another soldier burst in, stunned by what they see.

Go to Alain's reaction and... to the bayonet in Lieutenant Papin's back where blood blossoms on the uniform.

TRIBUNAL GENERAL (V.O.)
Will the defendant rise.

MATCH CUT - TO THE BAYONET

Now tagged as evidence on a table.

TRIBUNAL GENERAL (CONT'D)
Captain Alain LaFrancoeur...

Alain stands before a military Tribunal in the converted DRAWING ROOM of a French chateau.

THREE GENERALS seated at a refectory table preside over the proceedings. A pair of French captains serve as prosecutor and defense attorney and two gendarmes man the door. Off to the side a row of chairs are filled with observers. Among them is General Papin.

TRIBUNAL GENERAL (CONT'D)
(middle of the three)
after a thorough review of the evidence, it is the finding of this Tribunal that you are guilty of the murder of a fellow officer and are hereby sentenced to death by firing squad. Sentence to be carried out tomorrow morning at six a.m.

He pounds a gavel.

Alain turns to General Papin who shoots him a withering look. Alain returns Papin's gaze with expressionless eyes.

INT. PRISON CORRIDOR - NIGHT

A GUARD leads a gaunt middle-aged priest, FATHER DESAILLY, down a dark corridor to a cell door and lets him in.

INSIDE THE CELL

Alain sits by a wall, lit by a moonbeam arrowing in through window bars, the finger of God pointing out the accused.

FATHER DESAILLY
(to the guard)
Thank you.

The guard steps out and shuts the door.

FATHER DESAILLY (CONT'D)
Captain, I'm Father Desailly.

Alain casts a weary, side-eyed glance. Looks back to the window. Father Desailly waits near the door, motions toward the floor with his hand.

FATHER DESAILLY (CONT'D)
Mind if I sit?

Alain consents with a tilt of his head, then looks off again into space. The priest sits on the floor across from him.

FATHER DESAILLY (CONT'D)
Your service record says you're
Catholic.

ALAIN
Does it? Well, I had to put something
down. Word was on Sundays they made
the atheists clean latrines.

FATHER DESAILLY
A rather apropos use of manpower, I
would say. It's reassuring to know
the French army gets something right,
now and then.

Father Desailly smiles. Alain answers with a blank stare.

FATHER DESAILLY (CONT'D)
I hear you're from around Soissons.
Chevois isn't it? I've spent some
time near there when I was--

ALAIN
Father, save it. I'm not buyin'.

FATHER DESAILLY
I've nothing to sell, my son. It's
just that when a man is in your
situation I... I thought you might
want someone to talk to.

Alain shuffles his feet and stares at the floor.

FATHER DESAILLY (CONT'D)
You know you're not the only unfortunate
man in this war.

ALAIN
(looks up)
You don't say.

There is a moment.

FATHER DESAILLY
Are you afraid to die?

ALAIN
I've been afraid of dying since I
got here.

FATHER DESAILLY
And what of your soul? Have you no
fear for it? After all, you killed
a man.

ALAIN

I've killed a lot of men. Few of them deserved it as much as him.

FATHER DESAILLY

My son, whether you realize it or not you need absolution. A short time from now you're going to meet your maker.

ALAIN

I'm not going to meet anyone. If three years on the front has taught me anything, I'm sure of that.

Father DeSailly weighs a response. Alters his tack.

FATHER DESAILLY

I'd like to accompany you tomorrow, if that's all right? I want to pray for the conversion of your soul.

ALAIN

Sure. Why not? What's an execution without a mumbling priest? But keep your distance, will you. Last thing I want is to be looking down the barrel of a gun listening to that.

FATHER DESAILLY

I'll do my best to keep it in mind. God bless you, son.

He stands and knocks on the door. The guard opens it. Something suddenly dawns on Alain.

ALAIN

Hey, Father. You really want to do something for me?

Father Desailly motions to the guard to give him a moment.

FATHER DESAILLY

Yes, of course.

Alain stands and takes a letter from his coat.

ALAIN

Give this to my wife.

FATHER DESAILLY

Won't she be there tomorrow?

ALAIN
I'll be dead before she's even
notified.
(off Father DeSailly's look)
Justice is swift for a general's son.

Father Desailly takes the letter.

FATHER DESAILLY
I'll see she gets it.

ALAIN
Thank you.

Alain looks at Father Desailly with quiet respect. The priest leaves and the guard shuts the door.

OUTSIDE THE CELL

Father Desailly pockets Alain's letter and turns to leave when the guard detains him and holds out his hand.

GUARD
General Papin's orders.

Father Desailly hesitates, then he hands him the letter and walks out, slamming the door.

OFF THE SLAM

A hammer blow reverberates around the PRISON COURTYARD as two guards nail shackles to a wooden post.

INSIDE ALAIN'S CELL

Alain peers out the window watching the preparations.

Their task complete, the guards walk off chatting unintelligibly.

Alain stares at the firing squad post.

Slides down from the window to the floor with his back to the wall.

LATER

Alain sits watching the door, ash-white, really sweating it out. He fidgets. Gets up and goes to the door.

ALAIN
Hey. Guard.

Alain hears the man stir from a chair and scuff to the door. A slat slides open and the guard's ugly mug appears in the barred porthole.

GUARD

What?

ALAIN

What time is it?

GUARD

Why torture yourself, Captain? Go to sleep.

(off Alain's look)

It's after three. You've got a couple hours. They'll bring you out at five-thirty. It won't be long after that.

Alain searches for something else to say, just to talk to someone. Something sadistic flickers in the guard's eyes, like he's seen it many times before. The slat closes.

ALAIN

Hey!

GUARD

(opening slat,
irritated)

What?

ALAIN

How 'bout a cigarette?

GUARD

You'll get one in the morning. Sweetest you'll ever have. So they say.

He grins coldly and shuts the slat.

Alain walks to the window and looks up at the moon, another cold grin set among the stars.

At the sight of it some of the tension leaves Alain's face. He stares at it for a long quiet moment, then notices--

A strange light arcing in from beyond the moon. The light descends, WHISTLING loudly. Suddenly it cuts off...

And Alain throws himself to the floor.

A second later a huge shell slams into the CELL next to his and blows the room apart. Obliterating the wall behind the guard in the blink of an eye.

Alain comes up from under debris and staggers through smoke and a door-size hole in the cell wall.

EXT. DEMOLISHED CELL/COURTYARD - NIGHT

He clammers through rubble into the courtyard. Pancakes himself to the ground as more artillery rounds explode nearby.

MASSIVE EXPLOSIONS from German howitzers.

That pummel the compound. Shake the earth beneath Alain and spew fifty-foot geysers of dirt into the air.

Another building takes a hit. Flames, concrete and concussive force mushroom across the compound, cutting a fleeing soldier in two, tossing another through the air like a rag doll.

Alain gets to his feet. Weaves in a crouch. And leaps through a hole in the prison wall as another EXPLOSION rocks the compound and the screen fills with flames.

Here ends the website excerpt of The Great Sign. If you'd like to read the full script contact R.C. Davidson of Tahoe Film Group: rcdavidson@tahoefilmgroup.com.