

The Centurion Chronicles

Book Two: The Belgae
Fiercest of the Gauls



J.M. Garlock

The Centurion Chronicles – Book Two
The Belgae -- Fiercest of the Gauls 57 BC
By J. M. Garlock

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ISBN: 978-0-9858688-4-0

Preface

Caesar wintered in the land of the Sequani. The natural barriers of the River Doubs and the southern terminus of the Vosges Mountains offered excellent protection for his army of roughly 30,000 legionnaires.

The campaign of 57 BC was the obvious successor to the triumphs of the preceding year in which the numerically inferior legions fought three major engagements. In April the Tenth Legion, Caesar's favorite, had defeated an army estimated at 100,000 led by Casticus and Dumnorix at Geneva, thwarting the Helvetian invasion of the Northern Province in April. Two months later, Caesar's army, reinforced by three additional legions, again routed the Helvetians at the battle of the River Saone. Two more engagements at Bibracte and Armency in July finally put an end to the Helvetian threat. In September, the Germans led by their king Ariovistus were decisively defeated at Besancon.

Caesar was well-organized in terms of intelligence and reconnaissance. Well-placed spies and informants kept him apprised of both the geography and inhabitants of Gaul. Cognizant of the inherent restrictions of Gaul, specifically the Rhine River that lay to the northeast and the sea to the northwest, Caesar also had knowledge of the bellicose and xenophobic Belgic tribes who populated the lands that lie north of the Seine River. Caesar concluded that a lasting and meaningful pacification could only be wholly achieved by military conquest. A lightning-fast thrust northward through the heart of Belgae lands was clearly unavoidable and although Caesar first half-heartedly tried diplomacy, a unilateral military action was ultimately preferable. The Belgae had not yet experienced the might and power of the Roman army. On the other hand they would have known that an equitable accord with Rome could be very advantageous. The status conferred by Roman support could bring them instant potency over their weaker neighbors in addition to protection against usurpation of their local supremacy. Caesar and his army were to learn through bitter experience that the Belgae was the fiercest tribe in all of Gaul.

NAME: Baculus, Publius Sextius

ARMY NUMBER: XXIVVVIIIV

RANK: Centurion First Class

LEGION: Tenth

COHORT: Fifth

MANIPLE: First

CENTURY: First

IN CASE OF DEATH

NOTIFY: Claudia Venetto – 22 Via Flaminia - Rome

RELATIONSHIP: Sister

Prologue

This is my story. The time has finally come for me to tell it, for my sixtieth year has long passed. Soon I shall be crossing the River Styx and entering the vast unchartable land that lies on the other side. I always carry two pennies to ensure that the boatman will be recompensed.

Of my youth I shall say little save that I was born into the patricius. I am fluent in Greek and Latin and know a smattering of Persian. I am also conversant in Helvetian, Allogobrigian, Aeduian, Lingonian, and Sequanian, dialects spoken in Gaul. I was taught by private tutors. I am educated.

My parents are dead and I revere their memory. My hair is now white although it was once thick and dark. My muscles have atrophied although they were once firm and full. My flesh sags upon my bones although it was once as taut as the cow hide that covered my shield. My eyesight has grown dull but my memory remains sharp. Although my physical surroundings are of little consequence to me now, you may wish to know that I live in Lavertina, a small town that lies an easy day's ride north of Rome. I am comfortable and well-taken care of. You will get no more than that from me.

During the many years I soldiered my needs were simple and they remain so. My slaves attend me well for they know who and what I was and they fear me for that and also for what I still am.

The light grows dim although the sun shines brightly.

I must make haste for I have much to do and little time.

Chapter One

The translator and Tribune Lavinicus and I had the extreme misfortune of being taken prisoner by the Germans whose barbaric treatment of their captives was well known by all. It was a fate to be avoided at all costs because it invariably resulted in a prolonged and painful death by torture. The sudden, quick thrust of the sword, the impact of the javelin that bursts your chest apart or even the unseen arrow that finds its mark are all blessings by comparison.

Caesar had given Lavinicus the command of an undermanned camp in an attempt to lure the German king Ariovistus into battle. The camp was a satellite of our main quarters. I was the second-in-command.

The ruse had worked although subsequent to our ignominious capture Lavinicus and myself were tortured mercilessly. Finally, we were crucified on a small hill. Lashed to our crudely fashioned crosses we had an unimpeded view of the battlefield which place on a huge, flat plain. Our captors kept us alive so we could witness what they foolishly assumed was to be a final and lasting victory.

After hours of fierce fighting the tide of battle swung in our favor and it became apparent that Caesar and his generals were going to defeat Ariovistus and his combined army of Nemetes, Vangiones, Harudes, Marcomani, Seubi, Triboci, and Sedusii. After our legions broke the German phalanx, Lavinicus and I were taken under armed escort toward the Rhine.

If the retreating Germans and their allies could spirit us to the other side where they knew Caesar would not follow we were lost, valuable at best only as hostages. As soon as the Germans found out how little we were worth, they would have killed us and fed our corpses to the always hungry camp dogs.

Caesar himself had rescued me at the last possible minute. In doing so he repaid an old debt for I had saved Caesar's life before the summer campaign had even begun.

On his way to Geneva where the 10th Legion was the only combat ready force available to stem an eminent Helvetian invasion of the Province, he was attacked at a changing station in the far northern reaches of the Province by deserters desperate for horses, food, and weapons.

He and his aide-de-camp, Quintus Servus Quadratus would surely have been killed had I, accompanied by my new orderly Marcus Titurius Sertorius not fortuitously arrived on the scene. I had been on leave attending the wedding of my sister in Rome when Marcus arrived with

mobilization orders. We had sped north on fast horses, overtaking Caesar's slow-moving carriage in the nick of time.

But Caesar does not owe lowly centurions anything at least not in the commonly accepted sense that ordinary men owe one another favors or debts. To publicly acknowledge such an obligation would place Caesar on the same moral level as the centurion and that is both impossible and unthinkable. It would be beneath Caesar to even contemplate such a thing.

When he arrived on the scene an instant before my captors were going to kill me if they could not force me into a waiting boat, I thought Caesar himself was going to do the deed. Weeks earlier after wine had dulled my senses and loosened my tongue I had foolishly blurted out that I had deduced the reasons behind Caesar's continuation of his war against the tribes that inhabited Gaul. Encouraged by Caesar and the generous amount of wine I had consumed, I wittlessly told him what I thought.

His military and political ambition were clearly great, perhaps limitless, matched possibly only by his ego. It was plain for anyone with half a brain to see and his generals who also sought more fame and fortune readily agreed to the shallow rationalizations he posited before them. He even had the audacity to let them vote in the course of actions he suggested they take, namely a war of conquest designed to solidify Caesar's position and status. Caesar wallowed in hypocritical modesty.

My words that flirted with denunciation were clearly treasonous and when Caesar used me as bait to trick the Germans into thinking we could be easily defeated I assumed it was Caesar's way of assuring I died a respectable death in battle. It would also save him the trouble of having to execute me. Because of my rank and the citations I have received for bravery I would have been given the benefit of a general courts-martial but Caesar's will was law.

Somehow I survived the battle, capture and subsequent torture and crucifixion. Why Caesar chose to spare me, I do not know for sure nor shall I dwell upon it for it would serve me no purpose. Caesar is a brilliant general and an even cleverer politician.

Of the martial skills I have great knowledge for it is my life and hopefully it will be my death but of politics I care little. It is a duplicitous art and in order to be successful one must speak with many tongues from the same mouth. By in large I have nothing but contempt for those who have verbal mastery over others. They are beneath me.

The last thing Caesar said to me before he and his escort rode away was, "As soon as you have recovered I order you to rejoin your unit."

The Germans had been routed and our forces killed great numbers of them as they attempted to reach the relative safety of the Rhine where they had cached boats of every size and description. Some were wooden, others made of inflated cow skins but all were capable of ferrying men across the broad expanse of the river. Few Germans got the opportunity to use them for our cavalry swooped down from the flanks, converging with our infantry that had demolished the enemy center.

As far as I could see in either direction panic stricken Germans were wading and recklessly splashing into the deep, frigid, fast moving water. Others foolishly ran up and down looking for a safer, shallower way across although there was none.

In a few places the wide banks had been worn down by the passage of immeasurable feet, hooves and wagon wheels that many months before had gone the other way while in others wide paths had been hacked through thick underbrush, making access to the banks easier. The brush yielded to a sloping rock and pebble strewn beach fifty yards wide.

Judging from the swiftness that bodies were carried downstream the current was fast and dangerous. Immense, jagged-edged boulders stuck out from the silvery surface. Glittering, late afternoon sunlight made the water look uninviting and unforgiving. Eddies and whirlpools twirled corpses in circles before releasing them.

Lavinicus and I were surrounded by terrorized, panic-stricken Germans who were recklessly plunging into the river, oblivious to its dangers. Some drove their battered carts into the water only to be swept away as soon as they became buoyant. Luckier ones found small boats and rafts that had been previously hidden and cached in the dense underbrush. Overcrowded, many either sank or capsized, throwing their occupants into the Rhine. A few looked like they were going to make it safely across.

Then we heard the indisputable clamor of charging cavalry that begot instantaneous bedlam among the Germans. Thousands of frightened, noncombatant refugees clogged the overcrowded river banks forcing those in front of them into the water. The soldiers guarding us pointed excitedly before they began to drag us toward a boat they discovered. Two of the larger men laboriously lugged it toward the Rhine while the others defended it from those who tried to wrest it away.

Squadrons of loosely organized Roman cavalry crashed down on the Germans who were now cornered between them and the river. The horsemen pincerred from the far flanks and stormed at a full gallop down the bank.

Some of the more intrepid Germans skirmished and died in small bunches; others dove into the Rhine. I heard the unearthly war whoops of the mounted speculatores rise above howls of terror and alarm.

Lavinicus and I dug our heels into the ground and resisted with all our remaining strength as we were pushed and pulled toward the wooden boat. It bobbed in the water, oars manned, ready to be launched as soon as we got there and could be thrown on board.

The cavalry quickly overcame the token resistance put up by several hundred Germans. The officer in the boat stood up and screamed an order to the men who were manhandling us. It was at that precise moment that Caesar rescued myself and Lavinicus.

From where I stood I could see the steel-gray river run in an almost straight line. The opposite banks, at least several hundred yards distant rose steeply and beyond them lay the thick, almost impenetrable deciduous forests that formed the first barrier to those who would dare to venture into the land of the Germans.

It was late afternoon. My grey, Army-issue tunic was in tatters and I was weak from hunger and thirst and the torture inflicted upon me and being half-dragged, my wrists tied tightly and connected by a rope tethered to a trotting horse for fifteen miles from the place of crucifixion to the river.

In the chaos and intoxication of battle no one paid any attention to me. The Germans and their allies were fleeing for their lives, discarding weapons and clothing as they splashed into the algid water.

Men who tried to swim across the river were cut down in great numbers by Roman soldiers. If the Germans somehow avoided them our cavalry wading in up to the horse's chests easily finished them off. The swift current carried thousands of bodies downstream. Many were dead; the wounded would soon join them in eternal sleep.

Lavinicus had been taken away by Caesar's escort because they wanted to debrief him before he either forgot what he saw and heard or died from his wounds. I was on my own.

Our heavily fortified camp, constructed weeks before was at least twenty miles distant. Weak from hunger and loss of blood I doubted if I could survive another night in the open for Lavinicus and I had already spent two nights on our crudely fashioned crosses. Summer was over and it was early fall. Although the days were still sunny the nights were already cold. Somehow I had to reach the camp.

I scraped off some lichen and moss from small rocks and bound the wounds on my arms, legs and feet with strips of cotton cloth I tore from dead Germans. My torturers had placed live coals on my legs and chest in an effort to force me to reveal Caesar's battle plans. As if I knew.

Tribunes on horseback shouted orders as squads of legionnaires engaged the enemy. Inebriated by the frenzy of battle and victory they ignored me as I limped toward the rear. As far as I could ascertain the front had degenerated into what could generously be called organized chaos and was now fluid. Other wounded Roman soldiers staggered away hoping to either be rescued by comrades or somehow reach the safety of our camp. Many had grievous wounds which I knew would soon claim their lives. There was nothing I could do to help them.

There were no clearly marked lines save for the Rhine. Our soldiers surrounded pockets of resistance and annihilated them. Cavalry, anxious to get in on the slaughter uncharacteristically mingled in close quarters with infantry. The killing zone was a confused, dangerous place and a few errant arrows thudded into the ground perilously close to me. My tattered uniform gave no indication of my rank and status. Consumed by the temporary madness that invariably accompanies slaughter and revenge I was ignored by my compatriots.

I knew I couldn't walk all the way back to the camp. My first objective was to get far enough to the rear so I would be free from immediate danger. I trudged back the same way my captors had taken me. Strewn with corpses low, rolling hills I ordinarily would have marched up without even breathing hard became mountains of agony. Most of the German dead were on their stomachs facing the Rhine indicating they had died while trying to flee. Many had arrows sticking out of their backs like giant porcupine quills.

I gave burning wagons a wide berth because I heard moans and cries for help. Not all the Germans were dead. Many had been rendered semi-incapacitated by their wounds but that did not make them any less dangerous. A man near death has nothing to lose and it does not take much to hurl a spear or a battle ax.

Dead oxen and horses were everywhere, mingling for eternity with the lifeless bodies of slain women and children. Discarded household goods, pots, pans, clothing, weapons and other detritus littered the broad swath the retreating Germans had taken across the plain upon which they had camped. Everything that impeded progress had been jettisoned. A light, wafting breeze suddenly felt chillier and made me shiver involuntarily.

Small, treeless rises emerged on the grassy plain at frequent intervals giving it a lumpy look. The rises were topped with bare poles crowned with animal and human heads whose vacant eye sockets appeared to judge all those who passed. Dense, impenetrable clusters of ash and birch trees intermittently sprouted seemingly at random.

Undergrowth and scrub slowed my progress while bracken tugged at my bloodstained tunic and scratched my legs.

After an hour of slow but steady walking I knew I was out of immediate danger. It became eerily quiet. I no longer heard moans or whimpers or cries of vengeance and triumph coming from the Romans. As I slowly made my way among the dead Germans and Romans I knew that if I stopped to rest even for a minute I would join them in their everlasting sleep.

Exhaustion made my thighs quiver and blurred my vision. In spite of the chill, sweat poured down my face and chest, stinging my many wounds with salt. I was battling the strongest enemy I had - myself - for I longed to sleep. Morpheus called incessantly as I staggered along like a drunk.

I methodically put one foot in front of the other, staring at the ground. This I did until I was compelled to finally stop and rest against a rough-barked tree. So quietly had I been moving that the grazing, riderless, chestnut-brown horse a scant ten yards from me did not run away. Reins trailed behind the animal as it munched contentedly and calmly on fetlock-high grass.

The Germans and their allies favored stocky, shaggy-haired, short-legged ponies. This horse was taller and sleeker with shorter hair. It obviously belonged to our cavalry. I knew it was my only chance to reach the safety of our camp.

I approached it slowly, murmuring, "Easy, easy. There's a good fellow. No one's going to hurt you." The horse's withers were stained with dark, wine red blood and after I picked up the rein's I reassuringly ran my free hand over his shoulders. Then I checked the rump and chest.

As I suspected, the horse was not wounded. The blood clearly belonged to its rider. At the sound of the jangling caused by the metal rings at the end of the snaffle bit to which the leather reins were attached the horse raised its head and picked up its ears. "Easy, easy," I reassured.

The saddle, a padded wood frame covered with protective leather, was missing. Pommels, sometimes topped with bronze at each corner gave the rider stability, especially in combat where an unhorsed cavalryman was extremely vulnerable to attack by infantrymen.

A heavy cloth, usually made of several layers of wool, was placed under the saddle to protect the horse's back from chafing and rubbing. It too was missing. Sometimes the strap that went under the horse's belly and held the saddle and cloth in place became loose for a variety of reasons or even broke and caused the saddle and cloth to slide or fall off.

The blood was still slippery but I managed to grab a tuft of hair at the base of the mane and pull myself onto its bare back. Our cavalry was comprised primarily of Roman horsemen whose numbers were augmented by auxiliary units recruited from local tribes loyal to Rome. It was impossible to know by looking at it where this horse had come from or how long it had been in service.

Some of them remembered where they were billeted for it was there that food and the comfort of their own kind awaited them. If left to their own devices many of them instinctively returned to the camp where they had a special section reserved exclusively for them. But if this animal was newly recruited it would wander anywhere, the direction dictated solely by its nose or the needs of its stomach.

I tied the reins loosely around one of my wrists. Pain shot up my arm but if I fell off at least I would not lose the animal. After I turned its head in the right direction and gently prodded it with my heels, the horse obediently started to walk. My head started to nod down toward my chest as the cumulative effects of fatigue and hunger suddenly swept over me.