

# Eagles in the Storm

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by

BEN KANE



preface

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Preface Publishing  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road  
London SW1V 2SA

Preface is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com).



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First published by Preface Publishing in 2017

[www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781848094024 (hardback)  
ISBN 9781848094031 (trade paperback)

Map illustration on endpapers by Darren Bennett, DKB Creative

Typeset in 11.5/15 pt Fournier MT by  
Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes  
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for  
our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made  
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



For all Irish rugby players, past and present. You gave – and give – your all for the four proud provinces, and we love you for it. 2016 will go down as a momentous year in Irish rugby, thanks to the victories over New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

The glory is tinged with sadness too, because of the untimely death at Forty-two of Anthony Foley, former Shannon, Munster and Ireland player. This book is also dedicated to Anthony, a giant of the game, taken far too soon.



# List of characters

(Those marked \* are recorded in history)



## Romans/Allies

Lucius Cominius Tullus, a veteran centurion, formerly of the Eighteenth Legion, now of the Fifth.

Marcus Crassus Fenestela, Tullus' *optio*, or second-in-command.\*

Germanicus Julius Caesar, step-grandson of Augustus, nephew of Tiberius, and imperial governor of Germania and Tres Galliae.\*

Lucius Seius Tubero, a Roman noble, now a legionary legate and enemy of Tullus.\*

Marcus Piso, one of Tullus' soldiers.

Metilius, another of Tullus' soldiers, and Piso's friend.

Calvus, another of Tullus' soldiers.

Dulcius and Rufus, more of Tullus' soldiers.

Bassius, *primus pilus* of the Fifth Legion.

Tiberius Claudius Nero, emperor and successor to Augustus.\*

Lucius Stertinius, one of Germanicus' generals.\*

Aulus Caecina Severus, military governor of Germania Inferior.\*

Caius Silius, military governor of Germania Superior.\*

Lucius Apronius, one of Germanicus' legates.\*

Potitius, one of Tullus' centurions.

Flavus, Arminius' brother.\*

Aemilius, *primus pilus* of the First Legion.\*

Chariovalda, a chieftain of the Batavi, and ally of Rome.\*

Caedicius, camp prefect, and Tullus' friend.\*

Publius Quinctilius Varus, the dead governor of Germany who was tricked into leading his army into a terrible ambush in AD 9.\*

Nero Claudius Drusus, Germanicus' father, and a general who led extensive campaigns into Germany.\*

Gaius, a soldier who owes money to Piso.

Gnaeus Aelius Gallo, a soldier taken prisoner by the Marsi.

Arimnestos, a Greek army surgeon.

### Germans/Others

Arminius, chieftain of the German Cherusci tribe, mastermind of the ambush on Varus' legions, and sworn enemy of Rome.\*

Maelo, Arminius' trusted second-in-command.

Degmar, Marsi tribesman and former servant to Tullus.

Thusnelda, Arminius' wife.\*

Mallovendus, a chieftain of the Marsi tribe.\*

Horsa, a chieftain of the Angrivarii tribe.

Inguiomerus, Arminius' uncle and ally, and chieftain of a large faction of the Cherusci tribe.\*

Gerulf, a chieftain of the Usipetes tribe.

Osbert, one of Arminius' warriors.

Gervas, a Usipetes warrior who allies himself with Arminius.

Tudrus, a Dolgubnii warrior.

Segestes, Thusnelda's father, ally of Rome, and chieftain of a faction of the Cherusci tribe.\*

Adgandestrius, a chieftain of the Chatti tribe.\*

Artio, orphan girl rescued by Tullus in *Eagles at War*.

Sirona, Gaulish woman and carer for Artio.

Macula, stray dog adopted by Piso.

Scylax, Artio's dog.

# Prologue

Autumn, AD 15



Near the Roman fort of Vetera, on the German frontier

Autumn sunshine lanced from a break in the banked cloud above, flashing off the Fifth Legion's eagle. A sign from the gods, many would have said. Divine-sent or not, the beams drew everyone's gaze to the glittering golden eagle. Senior Centurion Lucius Cominius Tullus was mesmerised. He forgot the nip of the gusting west wind, and stared. Perched on crossed thunderbolts with garlanded wings raised behind, held aloft by the bareheaded *aquilifer*, the eagle radiated power. The physical embodiment of the legion's spirit and the sacrifices made by its soldiers, it demanded reverence, expected devotion.

I am your servant, thought Tullus. I follow you, always.

As ever, the eagle made no answer.

Patient, Tullus waited and watched. His answer came perhaps a dozen heartbeats later when the *aquilifer* shifted position. The sun's rays again bounced off the eagle, this time searing Tullus' eyes. Blinking, awestruck, he repeated his oft-made vow to serve the eagle unto death. Before he'd finished the silent oath, his heart wrenched. Loyal as he was, the Fifth's eagle wasn't the standard about which he dreamed, nor the one which dragged him night after night, sweat-soaked and with racing pulse, from sleep.

Tullus' soul would always belong to the eagle of the Eighteenth, his legion for a decade and a half. The legion had been annihilated with two others six years before by Arminius, a Cherusci chieftain and one-time ally

of Rome. Although Tullus had survived the bloodbath, dragging with him a handful of his soldiers, the mental scars it had left pained him yet. He lived for revenge on Arminius, but stronger still was his desire to recover the Eighteenth's eagle. One of the three lost standards had just been recovered, fanning hot his heartfelt wish.

A man coughed behind him, dragging Tullus to the present, and the parade. At his back, arrayed cohort by cohort to his left and right, were the soldiers of the Fifth. At right angles to the Fifth and forming the second side of a square, were the men of the Twenty-First, Vetera's other legion. The square's third side was made up of the fort's auxiliaries, a mixture of skirmishers, infantry and cavalymen. Only the sentries, those away on official duty and the patients in the hospital had been excused from the parade.

Everyone was ready and waiting. They were no longer eager, thought Tullus, studying his men's expressionless faces, but it was hard to blame them for that. The cold out here was ball-tightening. Cloaks had been banned, for Germanicus wanted his troops looking their best, gleaming armour and weapons on view. The parade's purpose was to celebrate the army's brutal campaign in Germania, which had ended a month before. As well as honouring senior officers whose actions had stood out, the governor Germanicus would recognise individual soldiers' bravery. Tullus wasn't fond of ceremony, but after the summer's heavy casualties, occasions such as this were a morale boost for the men.

Another vicious blast of wind whistled by, raising goose bumps on his arms and legs. The last thing I need is men coming down with a chill, he thought, giving a loud order allowing his soldiers to stamp their feet and move about on the spot. He did the same for thirty heartbeats, and after checking for signs of Germanicus – there were still none – Tullus took the opportunity to pace along the ranks and engage in a little banter with his men, and to see that the cohort's five other centurions were happy.

Life had not been kind afterwards to the soldiers who had survived the ambush laid by Arminius; the majority had been split up from their comrades when they'd been transferred to other units. Matters had been made worse

for Tullus by Tubero, a malevolent tribune of whom he'd fallen foul. Stripped from the rank of senior centurion of the Eighteenth's Second Cohort, Tullus had been reduced to an ordinary centurion in the lowlier Seventh Cohort of the Fifth, his new legion. It had taken five years and recognition by Germanicus before Tullus had been promoted again to his current position, commanding the Seventh Cohort.

After the disaster, Tullus had also been shorn of most of the troops he'd saved. Caedicius, one of Tullus' few senior-ranking friends, had ensured that not all were moved into other units, and he gave thanks for that mercy every day. Foremost among his old soldiers was his wiry, ginger-haired *optio* Marcus Crassus Fenestela. Piso and Metilius were two others, brave and resourceful legionaries – Tullus acknowledged them both with a word before moving on.

The soldiers of his new century were much the same as any men he'd led, Tullus thought, studying their faces. There were a few outstanding individuals, and a central core of good men, with a larger number of average ones. As was inevitable, he had a handful of bad soldiers too: layabouts and malcontents. Ruled with an iron fist, they still played their part. As an entire unit, his men were formidable. They had served with distinction and not a little bravery in the just-ended punishing campaign. Tullus was proud of them, but admitted that on rare occasions. Scant praise worked best.

Trumpets called from the fort's ramparts, some quarter of a mile distant. 'Chins up, chests out. Shields straight and javelins planted,' he barked. 'Germanicus is coming!'

'Will he be giving us anything, sir?' called a voice from the rear ranks.

'A cash donative?' a second man was quick to add. 'Or some wine, maybe?'

Centurions often punished soldiers who spoke out of turn, but Tullus was cut from different cloth. It was cold, they'd been here for more than an hour – in his mind, these were reasonable questions. 'Don't be expecting money, brothers,' he answered, smiling at the responding groans. 'This century, this cohort, didn't do enough to warrant that. Wine isn't beyond the realms of possibility, though.' They rumbled low-throated approval,

and grinned like fools when he told them there'd be wine in any case – from him. 'It will be a small gesture, brothers,' said Tullus, striding back to his position at the very right of the front rank. 'You did well this summer gone.'

Everyone's eyes were now on the track that led to the fort, and the approaching party of riders. Close behind the horsemen came a cohort of Praetorians, a unit of Germanicus' imperial bodyguards. When the first horsemen were two hundred paces out, the camp prefect made a pre-arranged gesture. Tullus and every senior centurion issued an order to their cohort's trumpeters. A welcoming fanfare shredded the autumnal air. Repeated several times, it died away with perfect precision as Germanicus reached the low platform set on the fourth side of the great square parade ground. The Praetorians took up positions on either side of the platform.

A collective sigh rose at the sight of their commander, whose regal appearance demanded respect, even a degree of fear. He was an impressive figure, Tullus had to admit. Tall, well built and with a commanding presence lessened not at all by distance, Germanicus' armour shone as if burnished by the gods themselves. A red sash around his middle marked him out as a general. He was also the governor of Tres Galliae and Germania. Cynics could have called him – in secret – a pretty-boy nobleman playing at soldiering, but Germanicus was far from this. Blessed with good leadership skills, courage, charisma, and a ruthless streak as wide as the River Rhene, he made an excellent leader.

On a less formal occasion, the legionaries might have cheered Germanicus, but today a reverent silence reigned as he climbed the steps on to the platform and was greeted by his senior officers.

Tullus smiled as the camp prefect offered Germanicus a seat, and the general declined. He's about to address his troops, thought Tullus with stirring pride. What kind of leader does that sitting on his arse?

'Brave legionaries of the Fifth and Twenty-First Legions. Courageous auxiliaries of Rome,' cried Germanicus, his voice carried by the wind. 'Fine soldiers of the empire all, I greet you!'

‘GER-MAN-I-CUS!’ upwards of twelve thousand voices answered, Tullus’ among them. ‘GER-MAN-I-CUS!’

‘We crossed the Rhenus in the spring, we and thousands of others,’ declared Germanicus. ‘Forty thousand imperial troops, of one mind. We marched into enemy territory to avenge our dead, the general Varus and his legions, cruelly murdered by Arminius and his treacherous henchmen. We marched to crush the tribes who still resist Rome’s rule, and to kill Arminius. We marched to recover the three eagles lost to the enemy.’ Germanicus stilled the soldiers’ acclaim with a raised hand. ‘To an extent, we succeeded. Several tribes were vanquished – the Marsi, the Chatti and the Bructeri. The retrieval of the Nineteenth Legion’s eagle is a cause for great celebration.’

Riotous cheering broke out. Masterful at working a crowd, Germanicus again let the troops express their happiness.

Old bitterness gnawed at Tullus, for the job hadn’t been finished. He could never rest until the Eighteenth’s eagle had been brought home. Nor would he be satisfied until Arminius, the man responsible for its loss and the annihilation of Tullus’ men, was dead. Blood for blood, he thought, imagining Arminius under his blade. The traitor – once an ally of Rome – had to pay for what he’d done.

‘Despite our successes, and the good fortune that saw the safe return of our soldiers, much was left undone,’ Germanicus said when the noise had abated. ‘Another campaign beckons us next spring. I will again lead you over the river, to victory. Arminius and his ragtag band of followers will be overcome and slain, and the two remaining eagles found. Rome *will* emerge triumphant!’ He raised his right fist high.

‘RO-MA! VIC-TRIX!’ bellowed a hundred voices among the Fifth’s ranks.

The call was taken up with gusto. It echoed around the training ground and rose into the windy sky, a clamouring bank of sound that seemed to challenge the gods themselves. ‘RO-MA! VIC-TRIX! RO-MA! VIC-TRIX!’

Germanicus watched with a satisfied expression, and Tullus thought, He's a smart one. His words are perfectly pitched. The soldiers' devotion to him will be increased by the presentation of awards for bravery followed by a large issue of wine. He'll be able to do no wrong for months.

The senior officers were first to be honoured. Caecina, the veteran commander of the troops on the lower Rhene, who had led four legions out of a terrible ambush on the way home that summer, was presented with the full raiment of a triumphant general. Caecina's pleasure was clear as Germanicus bestowed on him the gold laurel wreath, ivory baton, embroidered tunic and purple toga. Apronius, one of the legion legates, was recognised in similar fashion. To Tullus' annoyance, Tubero – newly appointed legate of the Fifth – was rewarded with a gold coronet.

Although the soldiers had cheered for the more senior officers, their response was much louder for the next group who had distinguished themselves, the centurions and lower-ranked officers. Tullus watched with approval as upwards of a dozen men were called forward by Germanicus and rewarded with *phalerae* – gold or silver disc ornaments worn on a chest harness – or torques of the same precious metals. After the final man had been honoured, Germanicus paused.

An expectant hush fell. It was time for the most valiant legionaries and auxiliaries to be recognised, thought Tullus, glancing at his men's eager faces.

'Before I mention you brave soldiers of Rome,' announced Germanicus to excited shouting, 'I have one other officer to call on.' Again he stopped. This time, a complete silence descended, leaving the squalling wind as the only voice.

This award – separate from the awards granted to the centurions – was breaking from the usual protocol. Intrigued, Tullus listened with the rest.

'Senior Centurion Lucius Cominius Tullus, of the Seventh Cohort, Fifth Legion, present yourself!' Germanicus' shout boomed across the training ground.

Stunned, Tullus wondered if he had misheard. He could feel his soldiers' gaze boring into him, however, and could hear their delighted muttering.

Shit, he thought. I'm not imagining it. Half a dozen heartbeats pounded by. On the dais some two hundred paces away, Germanicus waited.

'Best get up there, sir,' hissed Piso to Tullus.

He snapped back to the present. Self-conscious and already worried that his delay would have offended Germanicus, he stepped forward. Stiff-backed, guts churning, Tullus marched towards the platform, the weight of thousands of men's eyes upon him.

At the regulation ten paces' distance, Tullus snapped to attention, fixing his stare on Germanicus' midriff. 'Senior Centurion Tullus, Seventh Cohort, Fifth Legion, sir!' he cried.

Standing on the platform emphasised the general's great height – he towered over Tullus. 'You took your time, senior centurion,' Germanicus said with a frown.

'I did, sir,' Tullus faltered. 'I was surprised to be summoned. My apologies.'

Germanicus' lips twitched. 'Apology accepted.'

He thinks it's funny, Tullus realised, unsure whether to be relieved or annoyed.

Germanicus' expression became formal again. 'Soldiers of Rome,' he shouted. 'Senior Centurion Tullus is a man known to many of you. A veteran officer, he has served the empire for more than three decades. Until six years ago, he was in the Eighteenth Legion. When disaster befell that unit and two others at the Saltus Teutoburgiensis, almost every soldier of Varus' command fell or was taken prisoner by the enemy. Not Tullus. Like a hero of old, he battled on for days, although it seemed as if the gods wished every Roman in that cursed place to die. Fewer than ten score men escaped the massacre, most of them in ones and twos. Tullus brought to safety fifteen. *Fifteen!* Legionaries whose honour was intact, who lived to fight another day!'

Fresh cheers rose.

More embarrassed than he had ever been, Tullus' hope that Germanicus was done came to nothing as the general drew a fresh breath.

‘Senior Centurion Tullus and his men remained loyal through the difficult times after our divine father Augustus’ death. He risked his life then to save my person from danger.’ A still uncomfortable subject, Germanicus didn’t mention the previous year’s bloody rebellion further, but continued, ‘In the campaign that has just ended, Tullus distinguished himself on more than one occasion, in particular during the difficult battle on the Long Bridges road. These acts were not the first occasions in which Tullus has marked himself out as a leader, as a true son of Rome – the number of phalerae on his harness are proof of this. His soldiers love him, and would march with him into hell if he ordered it. He has the respect of his fellow centurions, and the regard of the tribunes and legates of more than one legion. I can think of no finer officer, no greater embodiment of *virtus*, than the man before me now.’ Germanicus extended his hands towards Tullus, palms up in recognition.

A moment’s pause, and then from across the training ground came a loud cry of ‘TUL-LUS! TUL-LUS!’

Tullus’ heart wrenched. Those were *his* soldiers’ voices – he would have staked his life on it. To his astonishment, the refrain was taken up, first by the Fifth’s other legionaries, and then by those of the Twenty-First. Even the auxiliaries joined in.

‘TUL-LUS! TUL-LUS!’

‘Tullus.’ Germanicus’ tone was commanding. Irresistible.

He lifted his head and met Germanicus’ gaze. ‘Sir?’

‘If Rome had ten thousand men like you, it would conquer the entire world.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ replied Tullus, fighting to keep his voice from choking.

The cheering had died down, and Germanicus raised a hand for greater quiet. ‘In recognition of Tullus’ valiant service to the empire, he is to be promoted. Henceforth he will be known as Centurion Tullus of the Second Century, First Cohort, Fifth Legion!’

‘TUL-LUS! TUL-LUS!’

If it hadn't been for the troops' roars of approval, and the wind chilling his face, Tullus would have believed himself in a fantastic dream. This was a huge promotion. He gave Germanicus his best parade salute. 'You do me great honour, sir!'

'The honour is mine, Tullus.' Germanicus' tone was solemn. 'I will have need of you again in the spring. Arminius and his allies must be defeated – and your legion's eagle salvaged from the enemy.'

'I'll be ready, sir,' said Tullus, bursting with pride.