

Leo & Swan

# Curse of the Somme

a fictional story about the Battle of the Somme (1 July – 18 November 1916). Made for the historical story competition.

## Chapter one: The week before

The rain cascaded down: swelling the wounded ground as the cloud filled sky hauntingly loomed above. Michael leaned back against the cold, damp mud as he contemplated the plan. It would be simple. They would rain artillery fire on the German forces and then capture or destroy them in their retreat. Hopefully, they would secure a victory for the Allied Powers and claim back areas of occupied France. Commander in Chief, Douglas Haig had confidently proclaimed that, if the resistance continued to persist, they would have a tactical advantage for they were to use the Tank: a heavily armoured, wheeled weapons platform that could cause heavy losses against enemy soldiers and equipment. This, however, was still in testing. They would also be supported by a sizable amount of planes and also French and Italian forces.

He was a private in a Pals' battalion and had only recently been enlisted. War was new to him: the cruel conditions of the battlefields, the onslaught of his comrades who he had known so well as those who fought alongside him, those who shared their victories and defeat, and even friends before the war. It was a contrast of normal life. Death had gone from a being rare, deleterious occurrence to an almost usual fact of life. This battle seemed to be a glimmer of hope in the dark abyss of the reality of war. Maybe they wouldn't suffer the regular losses that plagued them in previous conflicts. Maybe they would even make a large impact on the progression of the war!

The artillery bombardment had been going on for days, almost a week. Blast upon blast of solid metal shuddered out from the cannons that were supposed to be the German forces' demise. Not one soldier had a moment of peace as thunderous explosions rattled the trenches, as the guns continuously swept the enemy lines with shells meant to force the enemy into rapid retreat.

Michael, amongst others, believed that the continuous shelling was probably unnecessary. Even one shell seemed enough to frighten a whole squadron of infantry, let alone a continuous bombardment of them. They were all completely oblivious to the unfortunate truth that the opposition was sitting unharmed in dugouts, ready to return fire whenever they had finished their barrage. To the British and French, the Germans' survival was the only chance that they would fail, and yet was seemingly impossible. Consequently, this time the odds were against them. Their enemies were hidden in the dugouts completely unharmed. Not only would this plunge the allies into confusion and shock, it would be the inevitable death of hundreds of thousands of lives if they did not make a hasty retreat and evacuation. It could also cripple the western front although the battle was only meant to be an offensive.

But nobody knew it. Michael and his battalion were too confident to even doubt the plan. It seemed so perfect and simple that not one moment of thought was placed in its possible outcomes apart from its victory.

Nevertheless it wouldn't be their last battle. This attack was an attempt at repelling a large German force that was attempting to invade France on the western front. According to intel, they had expended most of their armed forces onto the western front. Any gap in the defences would result in a enemy takeover and possibly a defeat of the Allies.

“What if we never make it back?” said Michael to his comrade, Robert, who was a lifelong friend of him who had lived near to him back in Britain

"Then we'll die fighting." sighed Robert. Everyone in the armed forces knew the truth. They could come back, but they had sworn their lives to the war, and the odds of surviving were low. Not only were they fighting against others who were trying to protect their own lives, they had to endure the travelling, the disease that often broke out amongst the trenches which the rats spread, and especially the frequent shortage of water which forced many to drink from whatever source they could find, even from ditches and puddles.

"Even if we do succeed, we may lose the war to the Germans..." said Michael "Then it may be our families and homeland which may be taken from us"

"I would just like to see my family one last time. I never thought the war would be like this. For all we know, the Germans could have invaded England..." Robert replied, staring in sorrow at a worn, blemished picture of him at a younger age with his family.

"Well on a positive note, if we win the war we will know we fought for home and country, and for those who couldn't. We have experienced what most people would dread: the grief, the violence, the journeys across rough terrain, marsh and hills for days and weeks and months and eating that disgusting stew everyday! We only get real food once every two weeks or so!"

A pair of soldiers strode past, pointing over the horizon and making notes on a scrap of paper. Again, one more cannon penetrated the short lived silence with another blast; the terrifying explosion that engulfed the surrounding vegetation left those in arms length recoil in discomfort. Subsequently, the loud scraping of the howitzer being reloaded followed and the ordeal repeated.

## Chapter two: Before the battle

It was the nearly the first day of July, the day they were due to begin the attack.

Michael watched on in silence as the commanders issued the plan one last time. The French forces, making up the majority of the attack force, were to advance across the north bank and by the Albert-Bapaume road. The British forces were to approach on the northern flank, eliminating the remaining German forces and forcing them into retreat towards the east and Central Europe.

They had been reassured countless times by the commanders themselves that their prolonged artillery bombardment would certainly send the enemy forces into retreat away from the river Somme and a victory was inevitable. Even though the higher ranking members of the army were always optimistic, it was clear to the soldiers that they had reason to be so hopeful this time.

After the soldiers had all trooped back to their stations with an air of confidence and excitement, Michael, with pen and paper in hand, began hastily scribbling down a letter to send back to his friends and family back in southwestern England.

He wrote:

*"Dear mother and father.*

*From the time I am writing, we are due to begin the assault tomorrow. The weather has been poor, however we are all in good spirits. We have not seen any trace of German soldiers around the trenches and the plan seems to be going just fine. Do not be afraid about me in the battle, there is about as much chance of us failing in defeating the enemy as there is of the sky falling down! I know I have said this before, but we may hopefully withdraw from France if we succeed in defeating the Germans. It has been interesting visiting here - the countryside is beautiful and the weather is*

*usually calm and warm (but not this time). I will be writing back soon when we are victorious - we surely will be!  
Do write back whenever possible.*

*Your loving son Michael."*

He folded the letter, addressed it, and hurriedly placed it inside an envelope. As he trekked through the forbidding trench he heard the peaceful distant rolling song of a skylark gliding freely high in the sky, followed by a deafening explosion as the other trenches were pelted with a barrage of artillery fire once again.

The mud was laced with rubbish and remains of food and misplaced wire and tools. A wisp of smoke wafted past his face, leaving behind an acrid stench of gunpowder.

He met Robert cooking on a pile of sandbags

"Anything new?" asked Michael, expecting to have something worthwhile to eat as it was the day before's battle.

"No. It's the same as usual." said Robert. "It's just the rations. We didn't even get beef this time. I can't wait to eat anything but these hard biscuits and mounds of animal fat. It's making my stomach feel heavier each time I eat them."

As they slowly and unwillingly ate the revolting stew that they had so many times before, they peered over the trench. The German trench zone was a scar in the tranquil French countryside. The placid trees wavered amid the erratic tide of shots at the trenches. The war zone looked so out of place, so unnatural.

Afterwards they began preparing their weapons and kit. They placed their rifles and ammunition together,

and kept their gas masks in close reach. A single breath of the gas released from some of the German chemical weapons could be fatal.

They left their shovels in their part of the trench. They would likely not be needing them again, and so they lay scattered across the floor of the trench. They kept their boots propped up along the wall of the trench

ready to be worn - no man's land was a grim hell of mud which was a great risk to walk through as it put the soldiers at risk for their ability to walk was impaired by the thick mud.

After preparing their kits for battle, Michael rested while Robert stayed on guard, although they would swap positions once in a while.

Late in the evening, Michael looked blankly at the opposite wall of the trench. He was reflecting on what had happened numerous times before when they had entered into warfare. The endless repetition of his career as a soldier made him feel lost. He felt as if the person he was before was someone else, who lived in another world. He felt soulless and wishing for freedom, but he knew that life would still never be the same.

There was always an urge within him to leave the disgusting trench, and to venture out onto this place which he had only known by thought not by sight

An oversized and foul looking rat leapt across the floor nearby him. They would often grow as large as a small cat, following the men into the trenches where they often killed them indirectly through the disease they spread. They were coated in dirty water and grime and were not afraid to bite someone's hand, leaving a deep wound and likely an infection

As the last rays of sunlight faded into the pitch black of night, the orders and clattering throughout the trenches ceased. The gentle flow of the river was the only noise to be heard.

Except for the voices, that was. As he lay his head against the ground, he thought he heard faint voices in an rough foreign tone, from somewhere not in their trench. However they became blurred and confused as he drifted into sleep.

### Chapter three:

### The day of the battle

It was the dawn of the 1st of July.

All was quiet. Time seemed to stop as the two marks in the land laid plain and lifeless, until suddenly, hundreds of thousands of soldiers poured out from the steep banks, beginning the long laborious trek across the barren land. They approached at a steady pace, but with no rush as any real combat was not expected. It seemed a waste to send such a large number of soldiers into the situation, and without an equally sized opposing force it appeared to be nothing of a battle. They held their guns ready, expecting a few, but not many defenders to leave the trenches and retreat.

As they forced their way over no man's land, orders were silently issued in the 'stollen' (dugouts), and the German soldiers prepared to fight back. All of a sudden, thousands of machine guns and rifles sprung up from over the German lines. The sky was ablaze with gunfire and from various points in the trenches some German soldiers lit flamethrowers, burning all the soldiers that approached too close. As everyone went frantic with shock, they were caught off guard by the storm of machine gun fire, that ploughed through the armies. As clouds of smoke lifted up to the sky and the ground was scorched, the British and French infantry suffered unimaginable casualties.

Michael stood staring in shock and defeat as he saw his fellow comrades fall to the ground. All he could see was blood, smoke and explosions. He knew then that all he could do was run. But there was still a chance, so he and his battalion continued advancing across the war torn landscape.

But then it happened. Something whizzed past his head and struck someone near him. They fell instantly, just as the same happened like lightning. He looked back, and saw Robert, his face streaming thick with blood, staring up into the heavens. And just as he saw him one last time, a searing pain shot up his leg, and Michael fell to the ground, his leg decapitated.

He looked around through his dazed eyes. All he saw was carnage. It was the worst thing he had ever seen, and would ever see again.

He tore a picture out his pocket, and as it fell in half, his eyes closed.

Six hundred thousand allied soldiers died in the battle. Entire battalions were flattened by machine gun fire. Many more died injured or were imprisoned.

There were many victories and defeats for either sides, but they both lost too much. At no one point did Haig choose to withdraw his soldiers, as he was too far away from the battle to see what was happening. It was one of the most violent and disastrous events in a war ever.

Back in Western England, Michaels family and village received news a few weeks later that the battle had been a failure and an estimated 60% of the soldiers had been killed or had not returned to the trench. They also heard that the whole of Michael's pals' battalion was gone.