

Scarlet Fields

by Shahyaan Khan

An ominous veil of smog loomed over the trench George, amongst hundreds of other Tommies, occupied. Every inch of his decaying body grasped at any morsels of nutrients as he wolfed his can of Bully Beef. George's head rested on the cold muddy Trench wall whilst he evaluated the plan. Field Marshall Haig had informed the soldiers on the strategy earlier on in the day: the British soldiers would bombard the Germans with a constant rain of artillery shells and bullets at Verdun, thus tiring and weakening the 'Boche', allowing us to cross No-man's land and save the French. The plan was flawless. So flawless in fact maybe it could instigate the end of the Great War...or so he thought.

George was merely a boy who had lied about his age in the recruitment process to be part of his Pals' Battalion. Unconscious to the genocide and bloodbath that infested the life of a soldier, he went through months of gruelling training where he was put into a course with thousands of other oblivious young men. He was taught to fire a rifle, had discipline and obedience instilled in him, made a solemn promise to do his duty and swore an oath of allegiance to the king and country. Despite how arduous the drills he endured were, they would be paradise in comparison to the massacre he would later witness. An occasion that would inflict a plethora of inimical burdens on George.

Luckily for George the only real peril he had faced was the constant onslaught of German shells bombarded onto the British trenches. A torrent of artillery shells plummeted from the heavens, deluging the soldiers' new homes and producing a cacophonous shriek that pierced their ears. George stared in dismay as the remnant of an artillery shell hurled into the chest of a fellow soldier. The soldier collapsed onto the floor, his body rooted to the bitter mud as it perished. He inhaled a trembling breath, sweat accumulating on his skin: icy cold. Death was not as beautiful or peaceful as George had previously imagined ; with the soldiers chest turning in on itself and eating away at his insides, tearing away at the tissue there, leaving him but a rendered corpse of dying cells. The initially blue oceans captured within the jewels that decorated George's traumatised face, became frigid and clouded as the image of a fallen soldier's exposed heart - tainted with drool and blood - strangled his thoughts.

Death was nowhere near as merciful as George had dreamed. Traumatized by the scene, he continued his work.

Chapter 2

George had left his Mother back home in Northwest England. She was the only family he had since the age of 5, after his father's death, so he often wrote to her about his experiences as a soldier. Nonetheless, writing letters home was the most difficult thing about being a soldier. When he put pen to paper it opened up emotions inside of him that he locked up hard, in order to be able to do his job ; it made him softer, more vulnerable - he was still a child after all, he was not as tough or impassive as the older soldiers. But at the same time it was all that kept him going, to re-read his crumpled, mud-stained correspondence, to remind him what he was fighting for. It was hard to know what to say though, George did not want to scare her, he did not want to say so much he cried whilst writing it. As a result of his unprivileged background, spelling had always been a problem for him too, so he was reluctant to use large words. In the end it was brief, he sometimes ended with a description of the battlefield at sunset that he hoped was poetic. He told her of his perennial love for her and how he hoped she would write soon. This event occurred every Sunday, after each soldier had returned back to their station, George, wielding his pen and seeping in excitement, began composing his latest letter.

His mother received the following:

"Dearest mother.

The Great War has been fantastic! Despite the poor weather it's just been a fun adventure - I have made several companions and I've learnt so much. I now know how to shoot a gun, fire artillery shells and us soldiers have used a tank. I had never even heard of these tanks let alone used them before the War ; they're colossal, metal behemoths that are capable of causing severe damage. Us British soldiers have used them against the Boche and caused dozens of soldiers to 'bite the dust'. This war is not all fun and games however : a few days ago Charles from back home had gone doolally [REDACTED] It was the first [REDACTED] I have witnessed in the war. I am excited for tomorrow - Field Marshall Haig has formed an ingenious plan that is bound to win us the war, as well as being my first proper battle - I cannot wait! [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The war has been a lot less violent than I perceived - I have seen little to none deaths or injuries. I am quite

confused about why everyone back home warned me on the horrors of war, there's no need to worry about me. But I would appreciate it if you were able to send me a pair of socks - the trenches are filled with [REDACTED] and littered with [REDACTED]. Many of my comrades are suffering from [REDACTED] [REDACTED] - and I am terrified I will be next. If possible could you also send me some food? I've been living off beef from a can and biscuits for what seems like forever! The government can barely feed us Tommies so they've had to cut down on rations (unsure whether this is good or bad). Hope you write back soon!

With love, your son George”

Whilst writing these letters George ensured he did not involve anything that would unsettle his mother, the last thing he wanted was his mother to be constantly wondering whether or not her son is alive or not. Although they were complete fiction, George savoured each moment as he scribbled ‘his experience’ of the war onto the paper. He cherished the ability to be able to write about a war ; a war devoid of the ordeal and trauma he has withstood.

Chapter 3

It was sunset. George watched with an unwavering gaze, as a fiery red orb of light slowly sank beneath the horizon. Threads of light lingered in the sky, mingling with the rolling clouds of summer, dyeing the heavens first orange, then red, then dark blue, until all that was left of the sunset was a chalky mauve, that melted away in turn as obsidian darkness invaded the sky. Sequin-silver stars like the glowing embers of a dying fire winked down at George, illuminating the onyx curtain of sky. Then suddenly the clouds parted and George found himself looking at a lustrous, argent disc casting brilliant rays of moonlight onto the sombre grounds, he wondered how something could be so beautiful in the hell he lived in. He gawked in awe at the enchanting spectacle, unable to fathom its elegance. With the image of the night sky enrapturing his mind, George lugged himself and his rifle to the sandbags that lined the trench ; he dropped his rifle creating a shallow thud and rested his head on a dishevelled sandbag. His heartbeat decreased and his eyes drooped until he was wrapped in profound sleep.

Following the blackness of night, sunrise had finally sailed across an ocean of twilight, spreading its gold in every direction. The stars that once swam throughout these sombre seas were now latent under islands of clouds.

Rays of sunshine beamed onto George's face, awaking him. His eyes were greeted to the almost mechanical scene of rifles, ammunition and wire cutters being passed from soldier to soldier.

"What is going on?" George asked Edward - who was working beside him - unaware of his surroundings.

"Do you know what day it is? Its the first of July, George - we're going into battle, so get up and gather your equipment" Answered Edward as he passed George his backpack.

George's heart began racing in exhilaration. Finally his first battle! He raced across the trenches, acquiring ammunition, his bayonet, wire cutters, water and rations. Due to his gaunt physique, the backpack, which weighed close to 70 pounds, was a burden on George's body - it crushed his back and caused his whole body to ache. Despite the excruciating pain, he was determined to fight at the Somme. He fantasised about becoming a hero back home - no longer he would be the indigent boy everyone overlooked but rather the boy whose war efforts incited victory for the British.

With this idealistic mindset and clutching onto his rifle he joined hundreds of thousands other soldiers, ready to march over the top.

Chapter 4

Dusk was approaching but the heat did not retreat. The stagnant air still hung loosely under the lambent summer sun. Weak rays of sunlight ignited the clouds, and burnt across the sky transforming it into a sea of flames. A vast expanse of emptiness stretched underneath the sanguine clouds. The land was arid and dry, no seeds were germinating ; no plants were growing ; no animals were living. The battlefield was devoid of any morality, instead it was decorated with trenches riddled with puppets forced to immolate their integrity and become machines of carnage. George watched in abhorrence as a profusion of hopeless fathers, husbands, sons, climbed over the top only to have their life stripped away from them in a matter of seconds. It was clockwork. Over and over George witnessed inert soldiers trek over the callous mud, only to hear the blood-curdling shrieks of German machine guns that suffocated the ambience and be mowed down.

George's whole body began quaking in exasperation as he watched William - a fellow soldier in his Pals' Battalion - climb over the top. Though the rain of searing bullets had moved too fast to be seen, the blood poured out of William as if in slow motion. It came as a crimson fountain to spread over the already sodden mud, every projection the struggling of William's heart. He raised his

already blanched hand to his neck before falling to his knees, eyes wide. Before anyone would reach him he was slumped to the ground, pulse fading and weakening. He joined the other soldiers now resting in the bloodstained cemetery that towered over the numb soldiers.

Herds of tanks stampeded across the merciless fields. Their roars thundered for miles as they hurled tonnes of venomous artillery shells. The shells gracefully soared through the sky until they began cascading down the scarlet sky. The eerie silence that developed during the artillery shells' descent was broken by the vociferous rumble of blistering metal shattering into smithereens as it met the ground. It looked as if the stars were plummeting down from the sky as thousands of shrapnel pieces showered down from the heavens. Unsuspecting soldiers wailed in agony and anguish as sizzling shrapnel pierced their icy skin. Rose fountains surged from their marred skin, engulfing the battlefield in seas of suffering.

After being an audience to the constant slaughter, it was now George's turn to perform in this play of destruction.

His battered heart sank ; apprehension invaded every inch of him, exterminating every fragment of hope buried deep in his body. He knew it was over. His hands trembling and his brow profusely sweating, he climbed over the cold-blooded trench wall and lugged his rifle towards his demise. Followed by his entrance into the desolate abyss, George was greeted to the macabre hills of massacred soldiers. Tears welled in his eyes as the menacing grin of the German machine guns stared back at him ; his whole life flashed before his eyes. George saw every memory with his mother, every memory made in the past few months with his Pals' Battalion, even the memories of his Father.

George opened his eyes one last time to see the blinding light from the machine guns' muzzle as it fired. Time seemed to slow down. He watched in trepidation as the bullet flew closer and closer to him. He knew his mother would be proud of him, he knew Verdun would be proud of him. So for the last time he closed his eyes and waited patiently to be submerged by the perpetual slumber.