

Christmas in Flanders Fields

By Chris Waddington

Dedicated to my beautiful daughter, Chantelle. You have bestowed upon me enough love and joy to sustain a thousand lifetimes, leaving me owing you a debt of gratitude I can never hope to fully repay.

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Trench Life

'Lice rats, barbed wire, fleas, shells, bombs, underground caves, corpses, blood, liquor, mice, cats, artillery, filth, bullets, mortars, fire, steel: that's what war is. It is the work of the devil.'

German Expressionist artist, Otto Dix.

So bereft of hope and devoid of dreams, empty human vessels strewn across a boggy mire dominate the grisly landscape I perilously survey. Stricken with sadness and fear, I duck swiftly beneath the parapet. The dangerous terrain ahead cruelly denies them the dignified burial they richly deserve; easy fodder for the portly rats that scurry through the deep, gaping chasms of no-mans-land. So called distinguished gentlemen destined to never taste the brutality of battle are callously using the blood of decent men as ink to write history. All the while, my slowly hardening heart aches for home, having already endured far too much tragedy. Merry bloody Christmas, Private Crosby!

It's in stark contrast to the balmy late summers day when I arrived at the makeshift recruitment office with my best mate, Davy Frost, to a rousing ovation. Raucous cheers intermingled with exuberantly played trumpets created a carnival style atmosphere that did little to dampen the hedonistic haze descending over the pair of us. With our dazed heads held high we were swiftly answering Lord Kitchener's rally cry, an impassioned plea to stand tall and gallantly serve ones King and country. Ironworkers by trade, we'd spent our youth in scorching factories, now the promise of travel, celebratory beers in Berlin and home in time for Christmas decorated with medals and cloaked in glory is proving irresistible...

With all the enthusiasm of a group of fellows on a charabanc trip to the lights, we marched briskly, our bulging chests swollen with pride. Oblivious to the elements of a fresh autumnal day and armed with a naïve eagerness to reach our destination, we made good time singing heartily all the way. The buoyant mood rapidly dissipated on arrival at the Western front when we were confronted with the dawning realization that there was no glory to be had on the blood soaked fields of the Flanders region. The sight of a ghostly German soldier impaled on barbed wire in front of your trench will do that. It's hard to fathom, that in the not too distant past, unbridled ambition flowed freely through the veins of his now frozen corpse. No amount of basic training prepares you for this reality. Inaugural feelings for my own mortality rush violently to the surface, I might never get to cradle my sweetheart Rose again, become a doting father or lay eyes on my beloved Blighty once more. *Snap out of it man, there isn't a jot of time to dwell on ones circumstances, the bullets are already ringing around your ears!*

I've known Frosty for most of my days; schoolmates dragged up on the same drab council estate. We've smoked many a fag behind the bike shed, downed our first pints at The Dirty Duck, heck we even lost our virginity together (same night but different girls, thankfully). Yet I've never witnessed such emptiness in his eyes before, without a semblance of colour and laced with fear. It's all too evident that the barbarity before us bared no resemblance to the heroic fairytale we'd cooked up in our minds. I muster an awkward smile

in his direction, but my futile efforts of reassurance are no match for the horrific realism engulfing us. Bathed in the shadow of death, our fate now rests in the lap of the God's for the foreseeable future.

Over the next two months, I settled into trench life as best as one could, a daily diet of bullets, billets and bully beef that bordered on the bizarre became routine. The practice of breathing, sleeping and eating within yards of men intent on killing me inexplicably morphed into normality. As a patriotic Tommy I've been subtly conditioned to despise the average Jerry, but the human heart isn't designed to carry hatred so comfortably and with every passing hour it's proving impossible to not feel empathy for young men suffering indignity in equally squalid conditions. The propaganda machine keeps mercilessly spreading its poison, consequently we're all pawns trapped in a sadistic game, sharing the same pain and misery, our lives wholly dispensable.

Each day a battle rages within as I desperately strive for sanity and survival amidst an array of formidable foes, if only it was just Jerry's bluster I had to contend with! December has brought with it a harsh Belgian winter, every bit as unrelenting as the ferocious German shelling I've sadly become accustomed to. Falling asleep now requires the accompanying and somewhat soothing crackle of enemy fire. The flat landscape does not lend itself to the torrential downpours that rain viciously upon my weary head, each drop fuels a growing sense of embitterment that threatens to consume me, but I daren't succumb.

The torment, now simmering between my ears, will forever be my daily penance, that's if I'm lucky enough to make it out of this godforsaken Belgian hellhole. Life's most caustic memories will obliterate the euphoric ones, leaving behind an indelible imprint scorched on my mind that affords no prospect of escape. Ultimately, these will manifest themselves as dreams, the dark and disturbing kind that come for you in the dead of night. Chilling images of war that can never be unseen will rebound around my head like a tennis ball caught up in a gladiatorial rally as beads of cold sweat pour from my brow. Trapped in a torture that I'll never conquer or even tame, my forlorn hopes rest with a dulling of my demons over time. That's the bleak future I'm fighting for, me and all these other poor bastards sharing this desolate patch of soil. There will be no winners, that much is painfully apparent.

God's fury has been battering down for what feels like an eternity, causing a dramatic deterioration in what's now beginning to feel like the palatial surroundings once enjoyed in pleasant autumnal sunshine. Frostbite, gangrene and the dreaded trench foot have infested and depleted our ranks, claiming more young lives than conflict in the last few months, as both sides incur Mother Nature's wrath. Fellow comrades on sentry duty through the night have tragically perished, despite what I can only imagine were frantic efforts to claw their way out, sinking into muddy graves. The land is rich in sand and clay which is a deadly combination when it comes to absorbing water. Our hastily built drainage channels are no match for the unrepentant torrents of rain and desperate attempts to bail out the trench have become a long, exhausting daily ritual that provides precious little respite from the elements.

As water pours in, it swirls around the ankles meandering effortlessly through the trench, bringing with it the pungent stench of death. Body parts intermingle with rats and slushy mud facilitating the inevitable spread of disease. Extra pairs of socks and puttees put

up a staunch defence, but ultimately have to give up the ghost in conditions I can only describe as atrocious. If it is a choice between a prolonged opening of the heavens or a biting winter chill then I'll happily take the cold, all night long. Each four day rotation in the trenches is its own individual war, made all the more arduous when spent in soggy boots and a sodden uniform. I hold no strong religious beliefs, but I've recently turned to prayer-the last refuge of a scoundrel! *I'll take my chances with the shells and bullets Lord, but please I beg of you to let the rain relent for a short while.* My appetite for medals has long diminished, but it would be grand to wake to a clear blue sky and patrol at night beneath a bevy of stars. As the December deluge rumbled on I could be forgiven for thinking my impassioned pleas had fallen on deaf ears, but finally on the 24th day God showed up.

Christmas Eve delivers all the weak and weary battalions, situated in close proximity, an early present in the form of a beautiful winter's day. The dark lingering clouds that blighted us remorselessly have given way to a piercing blue sky accompanied by a hint of frost which cools the hands, but warms my heart. The sharp crunchy sound made underfoot as I stomp through the frontline is quite frankly exhilarating, it's making me feel positively giddy and that's before the thick heavenly aroma of sizzling bacon wafting through the trench assaults my senses! One comes to appreciate and enjoy the simple luxuries in these extraordinary times and it doesn't get much better than indulging in a steaming mug of coffee and a warm greasy bacon sandwich. The queue forming around the sizzling pan bears testament to the fact it is a sentiment shared by my fellow comrades. My rumbling stomach's timid gurgling has evolved into angry growling as I patiently inch towards a taste of paradise. *Great, there is mustard available!* I long to spread it lavishly across the bread, but adopt a more conservative approach mindful of the hungry chaps in line behind me. The moments following first light tend to be a more sedate affair and I exploit the opportunity to savour every moreish mouthful of my breakfast whilst mustering up the necessary enthusiasm for another bruising day of battle. However, this morning feels different, lively chatter reverberates around the trench and the mood seems distinctly chipper. That's not to say we're normally a miserable bunch of sods, just mere mortals subdued by the weight of waging war.

It's Christmas, well at least that's what I keep telling myself, but it's a notion that's tough to digest given the dire circumstances I find thrust upon me. Its significance has been underestimated, especially by the Generals tucked up in their cosy winter hideouts, even if I try my damndest to ignore it, one suspects Christmas will find me. Thoughts of home and loved ones left behind are never far from my mind, but must be expunged during prolonged periods of intense battle; any loss of concentration can serve as a death sentence so one must be on his mettle! If there is a fate worse than dying then it's living on with the knowledge that your ineptness cost one of your muckers their life, a prisoner to the heavy conscience simmering inside. My responsibilities run deeper than just my precarious existence. I'm fighting for Frosty and all the other magnificent men in this battalion. I'm willing to die for them, no other mentality is acceptable. Reuniting as many men as possible with their sweethearts, that's the perennial sense of purpose that keeps me stumbling through the darkness. Sentimental thoughts gnaw away at the crumbling walls of my conscious mind incessantly, like a mental cancer, but my resolve must remain steadfast. Nostalgic musings are an indulgent pastime and are strictly reserved for sacred moments of recuperation, but today they appear more prevalent than ever given the time of year and therefore harder to shake.

Prior to my tasty breakfast, our daily stand to arms ceremony had taken place at dawn's first light. Comrades standing shoulder to shoulder, packed in like sardines and listening intently to Sergeant Bevan's forthright address. An impressive man that commands respect, Mike Bevan is a bank clerk by trade with designs on becoming a branch manager. I imagine in his pre-war incarnation he lived a rather studious existence, but war moulds a second character with its predecessor often lost forever. Inevitably, the heat of combat brings vices that are paramount if one wants to absorb the pressures of war whilst retaining the faintest slither of sanity. Like most, poor old Sergeant Bevan has succumbed, sobriety and the soldier rarely make for good bed fellows. Liquor is readily available in the trenches, particularly whisky and rum to fight the cold. It settles the nerves and silences the old grey matter, helping keep the demons at bay, so partaking of it is pretty much universal. The war has made a hard drinker out of Sergeant Bevan and he's developed a penchant for American whisky. On occasion, I'm summoned to his quarters to discuss anything from covert missions after dark to the Tottenham Hotspur back four, but whatever the time of day, we drink bourbon from some rather grand crystal cut tumblers and enjoy a smoke. Certain civilians during this war have been known to go power crazy when given a taste of authority, revelling in their new found status to the point of becoming intolerable, but not Sergeant Bevan and the men admire him for it. In the main he speaks softly, but with a comforting assurance and we take him at his word without question. Some men are born to lead whilst others are willing to bleed, but possession of both attributes is as rare as smooth custard.

"Good morning, chaps, and a Merry Christmas to each and every one of you, I only wish we could be spending it under different circumstances, but mercifully at the very least we have better conditions today." The men smile and nod in unison, Sergeant Bevan warmly reciprocates before continuing.

"Naturally, at this time of year our thoughts will drift towards home and the festivities we'd be partaking in as a matter of course." He pauses momentarily, a sombre expression spreads across his face. "There will be a host of empty chairs at dinner tables as our loved ones sit down to enjoy their Christmas lunch. They are sharing the immense burden war affords us and we owe it to them to remain vigilant, keep alert and above all else men, stay alive. Not more than eighty yards away, Jerry may well be concocting all manner of fiendish plans designed to catch us off our guard, but we shan't gift them the opportunity. Make no mistake gentlemen, the threat of imminent attack remains our constant companion, Christmas or no Christmas we mustn't allow ourselves to lose focus."

His voice now exudes a much more serious tone, which is not lost on me or any other man given the intent way we're listening, while the eloquence of his address in no way disguises the severity of its message. Sergeant Bevan concludes his impassioned plea in familiar fashion.

"Let us all remain unscathed today by the scourge of battle and may Godspeed our hearts and minds to glorious sanctuary."

This is met with defiant cries of "hear, hear" from the majority of quarters as his sobering words began to sink in, it's to be business as usual, another day of deathly duelling beckons!

The day's events dance to a familiar worn out tune as a steady flow of enemy fire crackles all around me, any careless raising of the head will be met with the uncompromising cold steel of a sniper's bullet. I stand with my back to the trench wall, trusty rifle in hand and mentally prepare to retaliate. This callous war makes murderers out of the mildest mannered men and I'm yet to derive any satisfaction from the barbaric act of taking a human life. Despite having several months to become accustomed to this kill or be killed environment, I still experience an abrupt shudder each time my index finger hovers over the trigger. Some men develop a taste for bloodlust, thriving on the adrenaline fuelled state that only the threat of imminent death can deliver, but not me. The repercussions of my daily indiscretions will be devastating for all those who hold affection for the poor victims whose fresh blood stains my weathered hands, but my crimes are committed out of necessity and that is the justification I cling to whilst slowly coming to terms with my deplorable actions. Every single kill leaves a permanent scar across my deeply troubled mind, emitting disturbing thoughts I must bury within some dark and forgiving crevice. I'm a dead man walking, habitually haunted by the ghosts of every young service man I've ever slayed, may God bestow solace upon me and spare my dishevelled soul!

The trench I begrudgingly inhabit can be a curse or a comfort. It is undeniably susceptible to the elements, bringing untold misery to its occupants, but the barbed wire lined borders and towering walls of mud provide substantial protection. This sorry state of affairs has created a stalemate which serves to prolong the agony as both sides bed in for the long haul, neither relishing the prospect of engaging in open warfare. It's giving political leaders ample time to get round the table and end this madness, but there seems precious little appetite for that either. It's traditionally the time to offer goodwill to all men, but try telling that to the German sniper who's making full use of his aerial vantage point to enthusiastically discharge his weapon. It's severely limiting any opportunity I have to wrestle the initiative away by lunging above the trench wall and returning the compliment. Daring forays of this nature are more palatable when conducted under a blanket of darkness, but needs must whence embroiled in the art of conflict. A sudden silence jolts me into action, with a racing heart I unleash a flurry of ill-directed bullets in his vicinity, before throwing myself back in readiness for his violent reciprocation. Slumped against the clay, I breathe heavily as the adrenaline slowly dissipates from my body. Acutely aware my actions haven't proved fatal on this occasion, fleeting feelings of disappointment are tinged with relief.

So far, today qualifies as a success, despite heavy shelling and a generous spray of bullets being fired in my direction, I'm still in one piece and blessed with a beating heart. At this rate I'll get to enjoy a warm mince pie once the sun goes down. Festive treats started arriving long before December graced us with its ugly presence, apart from the aforementioned mince pies; biscuits, chocolates, cake, Christmas pudding, sherry, socks and knitted blankets amongst other goodies have been gleefully received into the trenches. This isn't the handy work of our loved ones alone, the British public have been very generous and their kindness has touched our homesick hearts. We have not been forgotten this Christmas time and there appears to be a real determination from all the folks back home to make things as joyous as possible for us. To know we haven't strayed too far from their thoughts makes this wretched struggle all the more bearable. Its mid-afternoon and the crazed conflict rages on unabated, delightful daydreams of turkey dinners and Christmas pudding have no business infiltrating my mental armoury and must wait...

A single silver bullet offers a chilling destiny, but my ongoing desire to dodge death keeps my head below the precipice as much as possible. If it wasn't for this blasted shelling, another sunset would dangle precariously within my grasp. It's a different beast, wholly indefensible and absolutely terrifying, those pesky exploding steel balls possess the capability to create carnage on landing, blowing anything in close proximity to smithereens. I've seen arms and legs end up in trees as body parts are strewn far and wide. In the immediate aftermath of executing a successful strike or tragic hit, it's hard to feel any sense of jubilation at causing such catastrophic devastation. I'm out here rain or shine gambling with my own mortality, it's a game that's cloaked with a tragic inevitability. Thankfully, today the dice of death has fallen in my favour, but one day as the law of averages allude to, my luck is going to run out. With the exception of charging headlong across no-mans-land into a storm of steel, this feeling is never more prevalent than when enduring a sustained period of shelling. I'm helpless, a sitting duck waiting patiently for death to come knocking, with only a light sprinkling of hope as my cowering companion. Each bombardment sends streams of soil spurting violently into the air, leaving huge craters which will, in time, double as watery graves across the decimated terrain that separates its perpetrators.

"There goes a whiz-bang," cries Frosty, as the all too familiar screeching sound peppers the sky, "thank God it's not another woolly bear!"

I crouch down, clasp my helmet with both hands and close my eyes for what may be the last time. Travelling quicker than the speed of sound, this missile offers scant warning and barely enough time to die. If it lands in close proximity my goose is cooked, only if it's then revealed as a dud will I be spared eternal damnation. Suddenly, the whistling sound I yearn to hear blazes out above my motionless bowed head as the shell finds land well beyond our fretful ditch. An almighty bang delivers a deafening crescendo which sends tremors ripping through the earth. Clumps of mud blended with tiny metal molecules shower my head like confetti, feverish with relief, I allow myself a breath.

Undisturbed by painful screams, a golden silence ensues, suggesting my compatriots have come to no harm. It garnishes my scrambled mind with hope, but at this point it's nothing more than wishful thinking. My heart still races, pounding out of my chest as I nervously swivel my head left and right in search of confirmation. I see traumatized bodies shaking profusely, young heads buried in hands, silently praying for it all to stop, their youth viscerally pillaged from them by this wretched war. By the grace of God everybody seems ok and even if it doesn't feel like it, this is a small win. The once majestic blue sky is now besmirched with thick dark lumps of smoke which gradually clears to reveal a huge crater, the last remnant of an ill directed strike. I've witnessed the devastation that exploding shrapnel wreaks first hand, such as a piece lethally embedded in a crumbling skull and another gouging out a poor fellows eye, one man's fatality is another man's fortune!

The desperate moans of the dying reverberate around a trench like no other sound, ever so sadly endured when the agonising spectacle of a slow death plays out. I've cradled men in my arms, their ravaged bodies punctured with horrific flesh wounds gushing blood, yet still granted one last glorious moment of terminal lucidity. The ghastly pain they're so bravely baring freezes momentarily, allowing them to converse with a fluent clarity that belies their condition, often to declare their love for a sweetheart and beg for assurances that their last words will be passed on. The faintest sign of recognition, be it a word or gentle nod is enough to send them to their final rest with a smile. Amidst such heinous moments

emerges the power to make a man's final seconds tolerable, who knew tragedy can be tinged with such beauty?