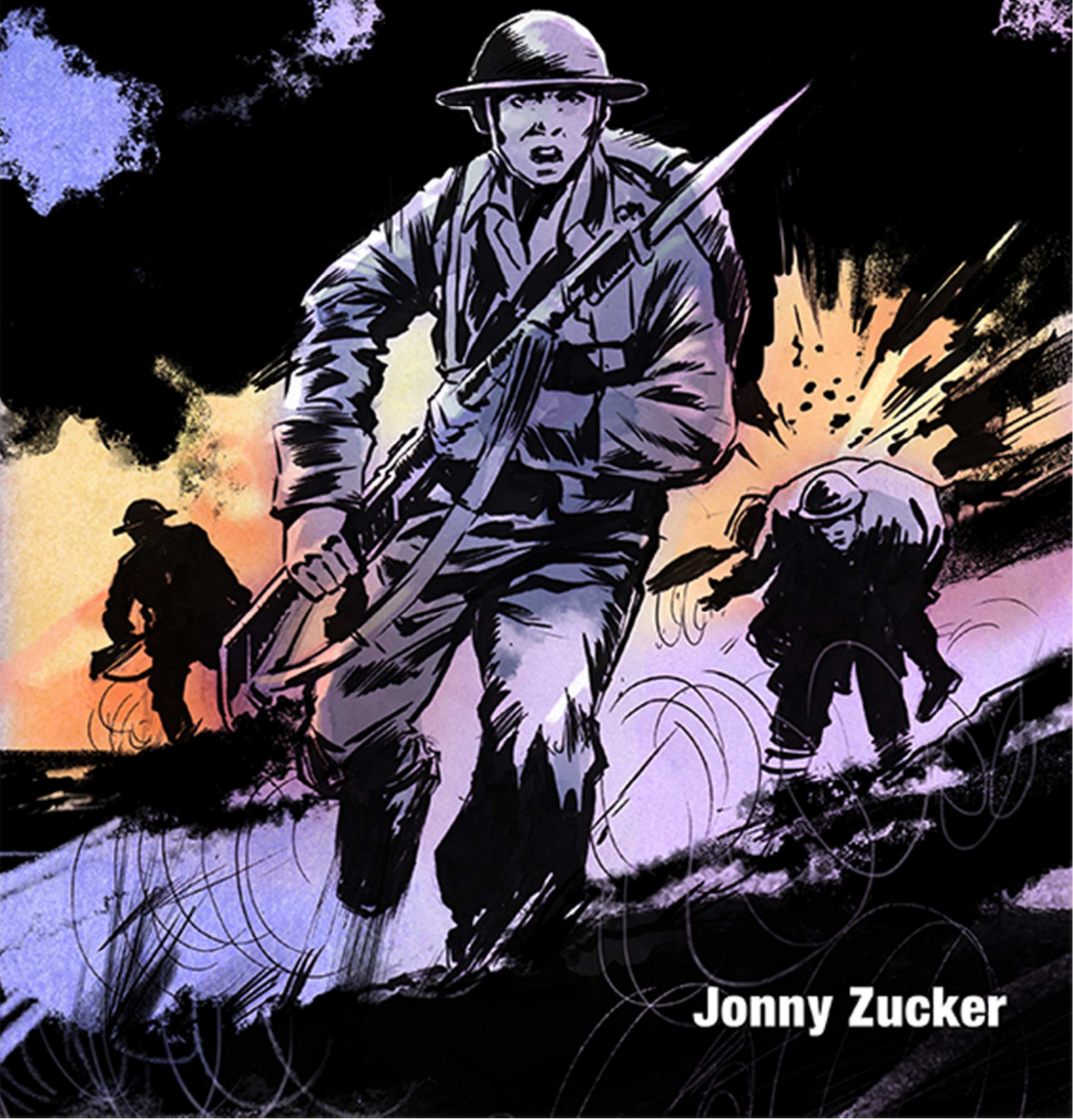


NIGHTFALL ON THE SOMME



Jonny Zucker

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Chapter 1

“AND... CHARGE!”

There I was in a muddy field, my bayonet held out in front of me, running at full pelt towards my enemy. All around me, men in my unit were doing exactly the same. It was a full-on attack.

As I reached my opponent I lunged forward and thrust the bayonet with all of my strength right through... a bale of hay.

That’s right: a bale of hay. It had been placed on a tall, upright spike and was supposed to represent a German soldier. I withdrew my bayonet and shivered. Could I do this to a real person?

“Not bad for a first try, lads!” shouted our officer, Thomas ‘Tommo’ Nelson. “Let’s do it again, but this time I want you running faster and with more aggression.”

I couldn’t believe it. It was June 1st, 1916, and here I was on my first day of basic training with the British Army.

And I was only sixteen years of age.

You had to be nineteen to join up, but I’d walked over ten miles to a recruiting office where nobody knew me, and because I looked old for my age they’d served me with my enrolment papers after I’d given my oath:

“I, Neville Mason, swear to faithfully defend His Majesty and His Heirs and Successors against all enemies. I promise to obey the authority of all Generals and Officers set over me as long as this war lasts.”

That’s right: Britain was at war. The British and French Armies were on one side, and the German Army was on the other. Various other countries and empires had chipped in, but the main part of the war was being fought in France and that’s where our unit would eventually be sent.

The war had started in August 1914 and it was now down to trench warfare on what they called the Western Front, in France. Their side were dug into long lines of deep trenches facing our side dug into long lines of deep trenches, each trying to outgun and outmanoeuvre the other. Our side, the ‘Allies’, had made some gains and some losses, moved forwards and been pushed backwards.

I didn’t want to stay in England reading snippets about the fighting in the newspapers; I wanted to be out there on the battlefield, making a difference. Maybe I could do my own little part to help us win the war?

The man who’d enrolled me was an old fellow called Mr Charlton who’d tested my stamina, strength and eyesight. “You’ll be joining up with a unit of the Bell Town Pals Battalion,” he’d informed me. “They’re mostly men who worked in the local textile factory together.”

I’d heard of these Pals Battalions: The Preston Pals, The Leeds Pals, The Grimsby Chums. Battalions made up of men from the same areas or the same workplaces.

“Does it bother you that you’ll be a newcomer in their midst?” Mr Charlton had asked.

“Not at all, Sir,” I’d replied, although to be truthful I was a bit anxious about this. If they all knew each other, was there a chance that they would just ignore me?

I needn’t have worried. Most of the thirty men in our unit welcomed me like an old friend.

By sheer luck I joined up the night before we were to start basic training. We were billeted in an old, slightly shabby hotel called the Caversham. It was three men to a room and my room-mates were Mickey Flanagan, a fresh-faced, twenty-one-year-old Irish lad with a wicked sense of humour, and Jack Hartland, a man in his late thirties with seven-year-old twins; his drooping expression lent him an air of impending doom.

That first night the three of us lay on our beds talking as a shaft of moonlight piercing through the flimsy curtain picked out a spot on our bedroom wall. Mickey and Jack were filling me in on all of the other men in the unit. “Mark Williams is a brilliant footballer,” Mickey told me. “I reckon if the war hadn’t come along he could have been a professional.”

“The only bad apple in the barrel is Duncan Royle,” said Jack. “He’s got a foul temper and it’s best to avoid him.”

I listened to all of their stories and tried to remember all of the details, but it grew very late and we grew very tired so eventually we just conked out.

“I reckon I’m going to be a dab hand with this bayonet,” Mickey grinned at me as we prepared to have another go on that first morning of training.

We hadn’t been given the standard issue green khaki British Army uniforms because they were in short supply. Instead, we were all wearing ‘Kitchener Blues’: blue uniforms named after that famous army general Lord Kitchener—the one on those posters with his finger pointing out at you saying, “YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU!”

Ever since I’d seen those posters I’d wanted to join up.

I’d gone to live with my aunt and uncle when I had been eleven years old. My parents had died in an accident. My aunt and uncle tried to look after me but they had four kids of their own and I was always last in the supper queue and last in their hearts. So as soon as I had turned sixteen, I had decided to finally make my move and enlist.

“Right,” said Tommo when we’d finished with the bayonets, “that’s a decent beginning, but your main weapon is going to be the short-magazine Lee-Enfield Mark Three rifle.” He held one up for all of us to see. I’d seen guns before on local farms but not a standard issue British Army rifle, with its double barrel glinting in the sunlight.

“This piece of manufacturing genius can fire twenty to thirty rounds a minute when fired by a trained rifleman,” declared Tommo. “This is your ally and your friend. This gun could mean the difference between living and dying.”

I felt a shiver snaking down my spine.

The difference between living and dying. This was all suddenly becoming very serious. I wasn’t playing some game here. I was preparing for war.