

NIGHTFALL ON THE SOMME

Chapter 4

Amongst the cold and wet and monotony of trench life, there were quite a few laughs. There was even the odd chance to play a game of cards with some of the lads during the afternoons when you weren't sleeping and were just about awake enough to let yourself have a bit of fun.

The food was not what you'd call delicious. There was the odd bit of fresh fruit and vegetables but the majority of our diet was stale bread, pea soup and a watery kind of stew. The things in most abundant supply were biscuits, but these weren't creamy, buttery delights that melted in your mouth. No: they were hard and tasteless things that ground against your teeth. Still, however unpalatable they were, I suppose they were better than nothing. Duncan Royle complained a bit about the rations but Tommo told him to put up or shut up and that stopped his moaning.

During that first four-day stint in the trenches, two events really stood out. The first happened mid-morning on our second day. I was on guard duty, standing on one of the trench steps, using a periscope to peer over the top and gaze out over the vast, muddy expanse of no man's land. I'd been trained in what to look out for so it was with horror that I spied a silver shell hurtling its way towards us. I just knew that it was going to land on us, or somewhere very near.

And I knew what kind of shell it was.

"GAS ATTACK!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "GAS ATTACK!"

All around me men sprung into action, including myself. We dived for our gas masks, with their long necks and their eyeholes, in a frenzy of panic. You really, really didn't want to inhale any of the gas. It was a killer, a pure killer.

The shell exploded about ten yards in front of our trench and all of us were ready for it, gas masks pulled over our faces and held tightly shut at our necks to keep out the poison; all of us except one.

A lad called Ian Smart got to his gas mask a few seconds too late and his terrible luck was to inhale some of the noxious fumes. I can't tell you how shocking his reaction to these deadly chemicals was: the coughing, the retching, the doubling up in agony. We knew that he was desperate for a drink of water but we also knew that taking one could kill him.

Tommo was on him in a moment. He slung Ian over his shoulder and moved off as quickly as he could, reaching a bend in the trench and disappearing round the corner and out of sight.

"Do you think he'll die?" I asked Mickey fifteen minutes later when the worst of the gas had been dispersed by the wind and we were given the all-clear to take off our masks.

"I hope not," whispered Mickey. "He's a good lad with two brothers and a sister back home."

For the rest of that day, no one spoke much. We did our jobs, refilling sandbags, chasing away rats with Mickey, trying to dispose of as much water from the trench floor as possible. But our thoughts were with Ian, and the fact that Tommo didn't return made us fear the worst.

It was late afternoon when Tommo finally joined us, and to our utter joy the news was nowhere near as bad as we thought.

“Ian did inhale quite a bit of gas,” Tommo informed us, “but they reckon he might get away with no long-term lung damage. He’ll need to rest up for some time. It could have been a lot worse.”

We were so happy we felt like cheering, but that would have been like holding up a big sign to the Germans saying, “WE ARE HERE. PLEASE ATTACK US.” So instead we did silent jigs and exchanged hearty handshakes. The unit was still complete. The Germans hadn’t taken any of us out yet.

The second incident happened on our last night of that tour, June 23rd.

It must have been around one o’clock in the morning and I’d just finished talking to Mickey and Jack when I saw Duncan Royle about fifteen yards away, standing on one of the ledges and looking out over the embankment at the top of our trench. He wasn’t crouching down; he wasn’t ducking; he didn’t even have his rifle with him. If you were in the German trenches and you had decent eyesight and a good periscope, I was pretty sure you’d be able to see him. What was Duncan thinking? He knew the rules. Maybe he thought he was above everyone else, that he had some special right to stand up there and not face any danger.

I was tempted to leave him to his own devices, but my conscience got the better of me. After all, what was Tommo always saying? “Cover each other’s backs: it’s the best way to stay alive on the front line.”

So I sighed, silently sidled up to him and stood on a ledge a few yards away from him. He was just standing there looking out into the night. At that second I was suddenly convinced I could see something glinting beyond no man’s land. I squinted and realised that I was staring at the tip of a sniper’s rifle. I could actually see the butt of the gun in the moonlight. A German marksman had risen above the top of his trench and was aiming his gun directly at Duncan Royle’s head.

And Duncan was standing there as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

A split second later I saw a flash of light as the German sniper pulled his trigger.