

NIGHTFALL ON THE SOMME

Chapter 3

Half an hour later, we were marching to the very furthest end of the field, descending a flight of wooden steps and entering another world: the world of the trenches.

I cannot express fully how staggered I was upon entering this world because to me the design and layout of these remarkable creations was on a par with any of the architectural wonders of the world.

The trenches were about twelve feet deep, some carved straight into the mud with solid mud walls, others with wooden beams or sandbags plunged into the mud to reinforce the walls.

On the ground were large pieces of wood known as duckboards. These were supposed to keep the soldiers' feet above the water that gathered at the bottom of the trenches but within minutes of being down there I could feel the muddy water sloshing around my boots.

"Notice how the trenches aren't built in straight lines," marvelled Mickey, who seemed as awestruck as me. "They go in zigzags so it's harder for the Germans to know exactly where we are."

I shivered.

The Germans.

It was incredible to think that thousands of Germans were hunkered down in trenches just like this one.

"Guess how far away their front line is?" whispered Mickey.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Could be 250 yards, but might be as little as fifty," he said.

"Thanks for that," I replied with a shudder.

We continued on our way and I was surprised to find that our trenches weren't all built on the same level. Some were higher, some were lower; a series of intricate paths linked them all.

"This is it," said Pete, when we finally stopped. "Your little piece of England for the next few days."

We'd been told that a unit tended to spend four days on the front line before being relieved by another unit.

"Seems cosy enough," smiled Mickey, as the cold bit into my face and I surveyed my new surroundings.

In some places on the trench wall, about halfway up, was a step cut into the mud that allowed a soldier to use a periscope to look over the top and study enemy positions. At the top of the trench was an embankment, a sort of curved slope, above which was a coil of barbed wire.

“Right,” said Tommo, striking a match, lighting a lamp and pointing to several cases he and some of the other men had been carrying. “In those cases are our food rations for the next few days and some other odds and ends. Let’s set up camp and make this as painless as possible.”

Suddenly, the fun and games were over.

We were real soldiers now.

“It goes without saying that from this second on all of our lives are in danger every second of every day,” went on Tommo, all of us staring with ferocious intensity at him as we stood there bunched up together. “I’ve drawn up a timetable of who’s doing what and when; things like cooking, reinforcing the trench walls, liaising with other units, etc. Night-time is for being awake and alert and doing any recon work we’re asked to carry out. The most likely time of attack is early in the morning, so everyone will need to look sharp.”

“Er... when and where do we sleep?” asked Mark Williams, the talented footballer.

Tommo held up his lamp and we saw what looked like narrow shelves carved into the mud walls of our trench.

“They don’t look as comfortable as what we had back at the Caversham but they’ll have to do,” said Tommo. “We’ll take turns to sleep in the day. We’re going to need every ounce of stamina and strength we possess down here, boys. I have to warn you that front-line duty is a bit of a slog. But that’s not to say we can’t have a laugh too. The only problem is noise levels. Talk and shout and laugh and the Germans will know exactly where we are. Silence is golden. Everyone got that?”

We nodded as one.

I suppose, like many young men, I’d idealised what an army existence would be like: a series of glittering, heroic scenes with me as the soldier who always saved the day. But the grinding reality of life in the trenches put an end to all of that. It was cold, it was wet, you were constantly hungry and there were frogs and rats to contend with. Mickey found an old plank of wood and took on the job of unit rat-basher, a role we were all grateful for. There were lots of other jobs to do: cleaning rifles, restacking sandbags to firm up the walls, fixing barbed wire and, worst of all, cleaning out the latrines or toilets, which, believe me, no one, not even Tommo, was really prepared to do, although we all did it when it was our turn. There were also messages to receive and relay to other members of the unit. These were sometimes brought by other soldiers but also came via carrier pigeons. Those birds were extremely clever; how they knew where they were going baffled me completely.

When I got my chances to sleep during the day I was out like a light, in spite of the wet and the cold surrounding me. Sleep was like a blissful break, but when you woke up you quickly remembered where you were and what you were doing there.

Tommo’s encouragement and Mickey’s sense of humour always kept me going, and although I heard shells explode pretty nearby and the screams of British soldiers who had been struck, we were lucky and our slice of trench remained unharmed. I was greatly relieved by this but, as with so many other times in life, just when you think things are going well, you soon find yourself facing a pit of darkness.