

The reflection of the muzzle flashes lit up the heavy clouds like lightning. Tank treads covered the muddy ground like brush strokes. Fire scorched the trees to a crisp, if they ever were alive with their roots planted in the lead-ridden soil. The booms of the howitzers drowned out the machine guns and occasional grenade. Colonel Johnson thought it was wonderful.

I'd had just about enough of it all.

I shifted around in my bed, if that's what you'd call a hole clawed in the side of the trench with canvas stretched over it. We had been bombarding the German position for days, and the sound of explosions still rung in my ears. A bullet whizzed by overhead. In our breaks in shooting, they took potshots at our trenches. I was surprised that anybody was still alive over there.

Another streak of silver whizzed past, and our gunners opened fire on the German sniper boxes. I saw Colonel Johnson coming my way, got up, and tried to look like I was shooting. In my entire year of being at war, I had emptied a grand total of ten magazines of ammo and used six grenades.

Standing on the fire platform, I peered over the row of sandbags and barbed wire. The scarred stumps of trees stood like sentries. I could see the skeleton of a tank, one that I had been next to when it had gotten hit. It had earned me my first scar.

The enemy trench was about a quarter mile away, abutting a forest that was alive, but just barely. Their broken howitzers, out of commission because of ours, burned low and slow. I didn't want to think about what must've happened to their crew.

When the military drafted me, I had no idea what I was getting into. At first I thought, *Oh wow, I'm gonna be a soldier!* And then during basic training, *I hope I don't die here before I even get to fighting.* And on the Western Front, *Someone shoot me now!* But I learned pretty quick that most of the time when someone gets shot, they don't die right away. Basic never could have prepared me for that.

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Even at night, Colonel Johnson ordered that we blast away at the German trenches. I hadn't seen much activity there since yesterday. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd packed up and left.

The duckboards creaked ominously as I walked back to my bunk after pretending to shoot. Despite not seeing any action, I was bone weary from constantly being on alert for incoming projectiles. I threw down my pack and flopped down with a sigh. Ever since I found out I was the youngest of my group, I knew I didn't belong in the trenches, hauling sand bags and eating more dirt than rations. I was scrawny, barely able to do the mandatory fifty push-ups a day. My rifle felt too big, my uniform slightly baggy, my helmet too loose. The older guys always shoved me, making fun of my freckles. At least I didn't suck up to the colonel like a teacher's pet.

I felt my eyelids dropping, a sensation savored by most soldiers. Even the highest ranking men could be seen zonked out on the firing platform. During times of war, there was a good chance that you wouldn't get a wink of sleep at night, whether it was because of your weapons firing or the enemy's.

A slight tinkling sound accompanied the shower of dirt that peppered my hair. I stood up and vigorously shook my head. My foot connected with something light but hard. I opened my eyes, and a live grenade sat on the boards, a real representation of the calm before the storm.

I lunged forward, my hand latching onto the metal plated orb of doom. I hurled it out of the trench not a moment too soon. The blast illuminated a large group of soldiers in dark gray uniforms slinking across no-man's-land. They were about ten or so feet from our barbed wire.

"Germans! The Germans are coming!" I hollered, grabbing my gun and running toward where I hoped Colonel Johnson was holed up.

Rifle fire tore up the wood just to my right. I dove into a dugout just as the enemy soldiers dropped down onto the firing platform. I stayed as still as I could, and slowly cocked my M1903, bringing the butt up to my shoulder. I had always laughed at the name of the wooden stock, until it was described to me what it could do to an enemy skull. It shut me up for a long while.

I could hear the Germans shouting at the American soldiers, telling them to put their hands up, from what I could tell. I could hear Colonel Johnson's voice in the distance, and I hoped he could put together a rescue party in time.

Suddenly a soldier's head poked into my dugout, and I smothered a scream. I always imagined the Germans to be lifeless shells, brainless automatons. But this young man had a boyish face, and a timid, yet suspicious expression. His freckled nose was lined up in my sight, my finger on the trigger. I could

feel my arm trembling. His eyes scanned the darkness, passing right over my shadowed corner. He withdrew without a sound. I threw down my rifle as his footsteps faded away.

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Colonel Johnson never found me. He was too busy barking orders as a rifle squad ran off to where the Germans had moved. Gunshots shattered the calm night air. Soon, there was only silence.

I poked my head out of the dugout like a mole. Slowly, I climbed out, watching for the colonel or more Germans, both of whom would deal out equal punishment for finding me away from the battle.

A fellow soldier ran past, and I fell into step with him, trying to look like I was doing something important.

Colonel Johnson suddenly appeared around a corner, and I snapped a salute. "Report?" he asked, addressing the soldier beside me.

"Small raiding party, all dead. Low casualties for us. No injuries."

He nodded. "As you were."

I walked away briskly, eager to get out of the presence of the colonel. Something about the attack struck me as odd, but I couldn't quite place it. There was some element that I was missing. That *everyone* was missing.

*Missing... I thought. Where were all the other Germans? That couldn't have been their whole force. We wouldn't have been shelling them for the last week if it was just twenty men!*

The realization hit me like the German bullets that came a second later, spraying our troops, hitting the men ten times or more. My fellow soldiers had no advance warning of the incoming barrage. I was out of there as if my boots sprouted wings. The trench walls blurred past as I ran blindly, not thinking about where I was going, so long as it was away from the destruction and carnage. I wanted no part of it.

The end of the trench sprang forth, slowing me down to a stop. There was no noise aside from the gunshots, still loud even though I had traveled at least a half mile. A forest, only slightly withered and burnt, beckoned me closer. I glanced behind me. There was only mud and wood. I took a deep breath and climbed out of the trench, stepping into the trees. A sweet smell wafted through the air. It took me a

moment to recognize the scent. It was flowers, something I hadn't experienced for a year. I flashed back to my family's beautiful backyard, where daisies grew in the little flowerbed I lovingly tended to.

I glanced back at the huge slash in the ground, the hovel that I'd called home for the past eleven months. Countless souls had been poisoned, traumatized by war and blood. Baptized by fire, maimed, patched up, and sent back out. A repeating cycle until your luck ran out, which happened pretty quick for most guys. I'd seen too much of it.

The penalty for desertion was death, but that was only if you got caught. I turned and walked away through the mossy trees, ready to shape my own life how I wanted it. Out in nature, away from the insanity of the world.