

Candidate 4 evidence

Lost but not forgotten -

The old man strode purposefully through the rows of neatly lined graves stones. This was his first time back on French soil, and it was one that he had long dreaded. He slowly advanced towards the large stone monument towering in the midst of the graveyard which wore the honours of the brave soldiers whose bodies had never been found. It's surface was worn down by the harsh coastal weather where the prevailing winds had penetrated, creating sharp cracks, dressing it in poorly healed battle scars from previous winters, reflective of the lost souls it sought to represent. The base of the monument, had been better maintained where the assembled names had united, row upon row, continuing their fight together against the slow but inevitable erosion, protecting the engraved bolded lettering. The old man hung his head in front of the monument in solemn reflection, then slowly with anticipation, raised his gaze, to scan the list of names. His interest was in finding a name, one very special name that had haunted him for almost 70 years. While excited at the prospect of finding it, he remained terrified of the thought of it not being there, and his wandering eyes frequently became entangled and lost amongst the maze of lettering. His gaze was suddenly frozen, transfixed on a name, a soldier, a lost comrade. His concentration momentary halted and the names started to blur, as the increasing sound of violent explosions began to fill his mind as past memories stirred unbridled inside of him.

It was September 1916, on the Western Front, and military progress had all since dissolved into a cruel and bloody standoff: each side making an advance from their trenches only to be mercilessly cut down by the destructive machinery of war. His own advance had started only minutes before and already was in disarray with the air laden with the smell of cordite and the screams of his comrades torn apart by the gunfire and explosions. After diving into a newly formed crater for safety he had heard the muffled retreat bugle being signaled but the relentless and rampaging machine gun rattling had him trapped. Alone, face down in the mud, the smoke and charred air suffocated him, while his stiff leather boots sunk further into the dark slouching ground. His heart thumped in his chest, his blood raced through his veins and he wheezed like an asthmatic child. The burning explosions blasted overhead, with the dirt erupting around him, attacking his eyes and blinding his vision. His throat clogged up as he choked on the smoke and dust circling in a spiral around him. With his eyesight limited to less than twenty yards in front, he could no longer see the safety of his own lines somewhere behind him. He was lost in no-man's land. He felt like a coward - too scared to move onward, too scared to fight, too scared to die.

The realization of his isolation pierced his frightened stupor and he forced himself out of the hole in an attempt to get back to safety and started to wade through the dark grey blur. Panicked, with sweat dripping off his back, he gagged at the smell of rotting carcasses surrounding him from earlier battles - a mess of bodies previously buried in the soft ground had been re-awoken by shellfire. This carnage was once soldiers, once proud men, and he feared it would not be long till he joined them. Sharp grenades continued to flash not more than 100

yards away as the enemy took advantage of the retreat. If he took a step forward he could be gone forever. Dead. Forgotten.

Stumbling past the debris of bodies devastating the landscape, he was disturbed by the whispered cry of a ghostly figure lying motionless.

"Hello Jock...am I glad to see you!"

Jock stared almost in disbelief at the familiar face which masked the crumpled and broken body. It was Albert Monteith, one of the original platoon members from his training days in England. His thick eyebrows, now obscured in dirt, rose producing large, defined, wrinkles across his filthy forehead, thick with sweat, his eyes reddened as he tried in vain to mask the pain.

"I'm feeling bad"

Flinging his rifle to the ground he knelt beside the man, removing his poorly-fitted steel helmet. The man's face was marked with smears of dried blood and the matting of wet blood down the length of his uniform led to a gaping wound. He grabbed Albert's arms, which felt frail and weak and tilted him to get a better look at his clearly fatal wound but this only served to produce desperate wails and whimpering. In the gloom Jock saw black fragments dispersed deep into the flesh. His skin had been ripped open, with his organs held in only by the tightness of his belt. His reward for bravely holding onto life, was agonizing pain and loneliness.

He couldn't let Albert die here, couldn't leave him behind. The mud would soon consume him. Even now the sides of the crater were slipping. He'd never be found; his body would end up as flesh picked over by the circling crows, eradicated from memory, rather than being returned to his loving family to mourn.

Crouching down to grab his limp hand, Jock draped it round his neck, causing intense burning in his shoulders. Albert's unresponsive body slouched against his side, making progress near impossible. Every step taken, amplified the dying man's pain. Time after time the weight of this burden slid off his shoulder, flopping motionless into a puddle filled with mud and disease. If only he had help, an extra hand, to carry this weight. However no help would come as sniper fire continued to whistle overhead. The muffled rumble of the wind smothered the calls of the enemy troops who were being readied to advance on their position. Dragging him behind like a slaughtered animal's carcass, he made little progress. Eventually Albert could take no more and thumped on his shoulder and pleaded hopelessly

, "Put me down, put me down...I'd rather die...I'd rather die".

"Listen...if I leave you here Albert, you'll never be found. Come on let's have another go."

Together they rose to continue their treacherous path through craters but once again Albert could not hold his own weight and finally collapsed, resigned to his fate.

Jock's fatigue was suddenly interrupted by the barking orders of the enemy officers leading their men into certain death. With the chattering of the advancing troops and the on-coming drilling of the machine-gun fire, it was hopeless, there being little option but to leave Albert behind. Alone; lost and forgotten, Albert would be devoured by no-man's land. No body to remember, no body to grieve, no body to bury. Despite the frustration and despair, he turned his back on Albert and started his own desperate retreat to the safety of his trenches, as the realisation of his betrayal infected his thoughts.

The faded regimental flag rippled in the light winds as it stood guard over the war cemetery's treasured graves. The blur of the names on the central monument had once again focused into one, the only one that mattered to him. This name was responsible for the guilt that had grown within him like a cancer. His lungs expanded with cool air, lifting his heavy chest weighted down with medals worn proudly above his left breast. As he exhaled however, his expelled air carried also the weight of guilt and regret which had imprisoned him for all these years. A great relief washed over him and with a lifting of his unburdened heart, his worn eyes brightened. Albert had been found. He had been remembered.

Word Count - 1289