

## REGRETS

My tour of duty or should it be 'tour of hell' was coming to a very welcomed close for myself and my fellow comrades. Getting a slight shrapnel wound was not unwelcome, as it confined me to the field hospital, whittling away a few more days.

My stay at the make-shift hospital seemed a lifetime away from the battle as I could only hear the occasional blitz of shell fire echoing in the distance. The frontline must have been a good ten miles away. However, I was experiencing mixed emotions about my absence from the frontline. Obviously the fact that I was only going to be around that day and the next before being shipped home was pleasing and spending my penultimate two days in a field hospital doing absolutely nothing and most importantly in very little pain added to this almost euphoric feeling. But mixed with my joy of not fighting in the trenches was a slightly guilty thought emanating from my conscience, like a snake slithering through grass. If the truth were told I would probably have been classed as fighting fit. I remained in the hospital thanks to the fact that I had been making out that I was in more pain than I actually was and that I was almost completely immobile. In truth I could probably walk relatively freely. This ruse had only probably worked due to a very trustworthy nurse. She has fallen for everything I'd said and moaned about, treating my supposed agony with the utmost care, respect and respect.

I must have dozed off in a rare moment of tranquillity in the hospital to be abruptly awoken by the sound of a medical vehicle as it sped up to and halted right outside the tent. The inevitable two stretcher-bearers brought in someone barely definable as human. The only thing identifying him as a living human being were his screams of agony and cries for help piercing the silence and the lingering echo. It reminded me of the screams of agony that I had made just a few days ago but unlike me this man was in real pain.

The nurse who treated me got straight to work on him. From my thankfully very poor vantage point I could make out that she was removing what looked like shrapnel from his legs and chest. His agonising screams sent a chill down my spine and reminded me how lucky I was to be there with only a superficial wound. The nurse frantically worked on, calming him down with comforting words and relieving some of his pain with the very primitive medicines available to her. Wielding a syringe like a soldier wielding a gun, she administered what was presumably morphine, about the only painkiller available. With the needle easily detectable from where I was, glistening like a mirror catching the sun, I held my breath in apprehension. I felt the pain reverberate around the room as his body twitched when the needle like a pointed probe pierced his arm. I just hoped the drug would be sufficient to be worth it. I felt anger at the needlessness of it all and my heart ached to be away from it. In what seemed to be impossible attempts to calm him down she was gently asking him questions, presumably to take his mind off the unimaginable. She ask him his name and to my surprise his response muffled with pain was 'Stuart, Stuart Wright'. I paused. Seconds passed as I sat in absolute shock, motionless. He was the boy I had enrolled with. I travelled with him and fought with him. It was only a day

ago that he had said to me, with a touch of tongue in cheek, 'get out here like the rest of us'. We had both laughed in our shared camaraderie. I felt that we had shared so much that he must have somehow shared in my deceit. I felt as sick as a parrot, with absolute guilt personified. I couldn't sum up the courage to say anything, anything at all. It was as if my jaw was frozen shut, for what seemed like an absolute age. But also a pervasive thought crept into my mind like a slow swirling mist, we were always together, it could have been me lying there.

Rescue from this horror came in the form of Field Marshal Collins marching into the tent. He sternly and abruptly broke my away from my anguished thoughts by announcing that he had recently come from forward field command. In a loud booming voice he said,

'You look like a soldier who's beginning to miss the action back on the frontline'.

Left with no option, stuttering and mumbling, I uttered out the words

'yes, .....yes sir'.

'Feeling better then lad. No use you wasting away here then is there?'

Grunting and puffing with his own importance, he growled,

'Right then sonny, you can come back with me tonight.'

In a slightly lowered excited tone, which left me cold, he said,

'We've got plans for a major offensive tonight'.

As I left I managed to ask the nurse how she rated Stuart's chances and she replied 'fifty/fifty'. I knew I had to get back to see him. I owed him this much. He had to live. I asked the nurse her name, I hadn't even thanked her. In her hurry I caught what seemed to be the reply 'Jane Daily'.. Little did I know the circumstances under which I would hear this name again. Just as I was leaving I heard a stuttery voice mumble,

'Steve.....Steve is that you.....?,'

Pausing and thinking I said,

'Yeh...yeh it is, I've gotta go, but I'll see yu tommorra,'

I said this in a very hurried manner, knowing what I just said was hardly what he wanted to hear. I could have been more reassuring. I was his friend for Gods sake.

Bouncing along in the Land Rover the noise of the intermittent shells grew louder reverberating in my skull like a hammer on stone. My teeth began to chatter in unison. On the horizon you could see the fusillades and brighter still in the ever-darkening French and Belgium twilight the blazing melodic meteors of the

German cannons before they exploded. My stomach churned as I contemplated that this is where I should have been for at least the previous day or two. With this thought occupying me the last few miles sped by all too quickly for my liking.

Disembarking from the Land Rover I was struck by the all too eerie silence clinging to the air, every slight sound was reverberating around. I found this ominous and disconcerting having been away from the action for four days. Just a minute ago and indeed the last time I had been there all hell was breaking loose, guns blazing from both sides. But now dead silence as if everyone was waiting.....waiting.

Walking through the feeder channels back to the main trench I was getting unwelcoming and disapproving stares from my fellow men, presumably because they thought I had outstayed my sabbatical in the field hospital. The one thing that was going for me was the fact that according to the Field Marshal, this latest attack was planned to start in under half an hour. This was good, there would be no hanging about in negative anticipation.

The seconds ticked. The whistle was blown. The salvo of fire began. Everyone leaped 'over the top', feeling just as anxious as me, sick at heart and legs like lead, wondering if this would be the last time. Running on nervous adrenaline I headed for my target. I'd previously studied the relief looking for banks from shell craters where I could get to and be safe in a suitably offensive position. I went hell for leather, bullets fizzing past like gnats, much too close for comfort. I leapt at the bank and felt a momentary flood of relief. With my fellow comrades catching up and sharing in the shelter, we fired our rifles as fast as they would allow. Just as I was reloading from the corner of my eye I caught sight of a German running nearby oblivious in the knowledge that we were sheltering behind the banks. I quickly finished reloading, from and just as he was turning round I shot him. He fell to the ground in what seemed like an everlasting satirical elegance. My expected elation turned to distaste at the horror of it all.

Unsurprisingly to many, the Germans launched a full-scale counter attack forcing us to retreat back to our trench. Little did I know it at the time, but that was going to be my last contact with the enemy before our brigade was whistled back deeper into France before being deployed back to various parts of Britain. My relief at escaping alive from this hellhole was tempered by the knowledge that I never got the chance to fulfil my pledge and visit Stuart. This played on my conscience, was he still alive? I had let him down again.

Back in England for a week, I was having a much easier time of it, but it seemed like an age as we waited for news. Everyone cheered when we heard that the frontline had been pushed deeper into central Europe. This gave me some consolation that what I was fighting for a few days ago just might have been worth some of the effort. I was still thinking about Stuart and I was eager to find out how he was. Someone suggested I listen to the radio where they held regular 'role calls' of people falling in combat. I was very sceptical because accurate reports of the huge numbers of deaths must send morale tumbling, surely? Anyway, all ears devoted, we tuned into the radio listening intently.

Names were read out and Stuart's name didn't come. I was beginning to feel the warm glow of relief. But when what was to be the penultimate name was read my vision blurred and I felt dizzy. A surge of nausea threatened to overcome me and I fell on the radio in disbelief. The name 'Jane Daily' echoed in my head. It was she who had probably saved my life. She had been my saviour and I had never even thanked her. She had probably saved my fellow soldier's life although I would probably never know. 'Lost in the course of duty during a German bombing raid on field hospital.....' I lost consciousness but had the haunting experience of feeling her gentle, comforting reassuring voice envelope me.