

A foreboding forest casts ominous shadows over Langemark Cemetery. A sinister fog lingers in the murky October air, draining the already-stagnant life out of the atmosphere.

At the foot of a tree's emaciated roots, a solemn, sombre headstone lies. The only completely legible inscription within a list of eight other comrades reads, 'ein Bekannter Deutscher Soldat', slowly wearing away from the slab of grey rock. Moss visibly begins to eat away at the edges.

Deep under the surface, buried in a thick layer of filth, thousands of miscellaneous bones lie scattered. These bones show no signs of their ownership, their possessor's shape or size, colour or gender, nationality or ethnicity - only that they belong to humans. Once a few of these bones clung to warm flesh, of a Private soldier fighting to feed his four starving children - struggling through the Turnip Winter in Germany.

Their suffering is never depicted. Sleepless nights which rolled into nightmare-filled days, harrowing images that scarred their innocent brains, visions of comrades being blown to the ground - playing as if stuck on a scratch in a disk. And they rest, miles away from home, miles away from their childhood, and miles away from their grandchildren. Forced to carry the weight of hundreds of thousands of lives on their innocent shoulders, guilty written in bold on their dark gravestones. Can these helpless men really be blamed for their Kaiser's sinful ideologies? Hunger for power? Thirst for war?

Just a couple of miles away, British soldiers sleep snugly, resting in the warmth of their countries' patriotism. Matching cemeteries are scattered across the vast Belgian countryside, adding to the tranquil, exquisite scenery. Smooth, white headstones stand proudly, shielded by grand brickwork and magnificent crosses. Eye-catching, the passersby are reminded of the gratitude they should feel towards these ill-fated men who became invaluable pawns in their countries' huge game of chess. Here, no names are concealed by darkness, no limits are put on how much land can be used and men are placed alongside their comrades in an orderly fashion, not a clustered heap like the mass grave in Langemark.

A feeling of great injustice streams through my veins. They were all soldiers, British, German, French, Canadian, Russian, American, Austrian, Italian, Bulgarian, South African, Australian, Indian... Young lives expunged to fulfil the madness and megalomania of some and the desire to protect of others.

By Ruby Breakwell

I closed my eyes on the rows of hastily made and already worn wooden crosses, marking the graves of men who I had shared a hovel with, who I had fought with, who I had been prepared – even willing – to die with, and now I was the only one left. To stop the tears falling I closed my eyes, prickling with tears and warm. My boots, worn and almost useless, almost pointless, sunk into the soft mud where the blood red poppies chose to make their home, where they were trampled and then where they regrow. We could learn a lot from the poppies. The sounds I've grown so used to echo around me, shells screaming and bullets shouting as they search for their targets. I wonder when it will go quiet again, as it often does with no warning before resuming its soul destroying chorus with no more exhortation than its sudden silence. After three years I still do not know what is worse, silence or battle. I know that, for me silence is far more damaging and battle is what some men live for; at the same time battle is what took all the men in the graves lying before me and in hundreds of other battlefield cemeteries across Europe. The wind howling past, unsure what to do, who to attack and so chilling everyone, expresses its own pain and confusion in this war.

My eyes closed I thought about the events of the day that had led me here, standing watching the wooden crosses and the poppies, staring a piles of freshly turned earth and my tears inadvertently mixing with the already sodden ground.

It had started normally (or as normal as you can get on the western front): a beautiful sunrise like paints spilled across the sky, conflicting with the struggle below. A brave bird, perhaps a lark trilled its notes in the midst of the chaos, a touch of light and hope in darkness and destruction. Yin and yang I had thought bitterly, is there really good in evil? I must believe there is, that the Bosch are just like us, mostly forced into a war they don't want to fight and just doing what they can to get back home, safely to their wives and children, mothers and fathers, siblings and friends. A thin fog covers the stiff peaks of mud, like a frozen brown sea that is no man's land, the few miles we are expected to lay down our lives to protect. The fog is thin, exhausted, lack lustre. Just like us, no longer able to give our best but just about able to stay alive, the question plaguing all of us was simple: But for how long? Then the Germans had come and we had been taken by surprise, an attack we should have seen but didn't and now we were paying the price – to be slaughtered like sheep. I heard the screams of men around me, the thud and punch of bullets; I smelt the mud and blood and metal and fear. The air was hazy, a red mist thrown up from the blood that was spilt that day. The red mist meeting with the sunrise, joining, combining until the sky (so alluring and graceful before) was red, a reminder of the war taking over our lives; everything elegant; everything wonderful. All I could hear was the bullets and the thumping of my heart in my head, all I could see was death and blood, all I could feel was numbing fear and cold clinging mud. It was then irrational courage seized me and I opened fire, the red haze of the sky indistinguishable from the one over my mind. I knew no more.

I felt the guilt of a survivor as I looked over the fresh graves of my former comrades and had a fresh wave of a strange cocktail of regret and success wash over me once more. They told me I was a hero, that I would be worthy of the Victoria Cross. Before it would have been the highest honour, but now ... now it just seems empty, worthless compared to these men's lives. If there is one thing this war has taught me, one thing of value, it is that human life has no value, nothing is more important than it and I think we must all remember this now and for years to come. Remember these men who paid the ultimate sacrifice – their life for others' freedom.

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