

The Day The Birds Stopped Signing

By Matthew Graham Brown '24

I woke up to the same cold, damp, wet place I fell asleep. An artillery shell landed with a large bang 50 feet away, which is what I suspect woke me up. The sad reality came over me as I realized I was still in this god-awful trench. I got out of my little makeshift dugout and stretched, looking at my watch to see that it was 5:45, Monday, September 6, 1916. It was a bitterly cold, but beautiful morning. I looked around to see James peeking over the parapet.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?!" I exclaimed.

He hopped down off the ladder with his dusty glasses and ragged boots. "Nip it, Lyle," he said sharply. "I was trying to spot birds out there," he said.

"Yeah well maybe don't do it while they've got guns aimed at your head. Besides, there's nothing alive out there anyway," I said, coarsely.

James had always been fascinated by birds since preschool. He would spend hours at a time in the woods looking for them. I slapped on my gloves and peeked through the periscope. I could see a large crate being moved by the German trench.

"Those krauts are up to something," I said.

"When are they ever not?" asked James.

I saw James freeze for a moment and say, "shush up." I hadn't got the slightest idea what he was talking about but then I heard it, a songbird singing peacefully in a tree. Its song reminded me of my darling back at home. Everything was calm for a moment, and I forgot about where I was until I heard a whistle and a bang. James and I were both knocked off our feet from the force of the shell. I could feel the bits of dirt and rock pouring down on me.

"Bleedin' Christ!" James shouted. I looked up to see a crater no more than 20 feet away.

"That was really damn close, James," I said. James was already up and looking for his glasses which had fallen off his face. I sat up and realized that the singing of the songbird had stopped. It was heartbreaking how things of such beauty and nature could be wiped out in an instant by man's creations.

I was soon rocketed back into reality by a sharp yelling. "Officer Approaching!" I darted up as fast as I could and stood as straight as a board. The officer walked with two stretcher-bearers behind him, and he looked at all of us one by one. He nodded but said nothing. He walked away and I saw the body on the stretcher. He had a photo of his wife and kids hanging loosely in his left hand with a British flag draped over him.

"I guess he's a high ranking," said a man.

"We'd never get treatment like that if we died," said James.

"Ow old is you two anyway," said the man. "Seventeen, sir," said James.

“Eighteen, sir,” I said. The man looked like he thought it humorous. “

You still have spots, yet they dragged you into this,” the man said.

He opened up his pocket and pulled out a lighter and a packet of fags. He gestured for us to take one but we refused.

“I never really did like the taste of tobacco,” said James.

The man laughed. “Well you will soon enough,” he assured us.

The cold day dragged on with nothing to do but drain the water that had pooled from last night’s storm. The boredom was overwhelming as we waited and waited. James was writing a letter to his wife, Melissa, when he looked up.

“Aren’t you gonna write one?” he said.

“No, I don’t wanna get Sophie’s hopes up and then drop dead,” I quipped. Then, more seriously, “Why did you marry so young?”

“Well as soon as the war started, I knew I had to go so I popped the question,” said James. “Anyway, how is Sophie?”

I missed her so much that I didn’t even want to think of her name,

“Fine,” I responded sharply.

James knew how I was feeling and said no more. As I succumbed to the boredom I began to drift off when I heard the crack of a bullet firing, followed by a clang as it hit its target. I opened my eyes to find the man from earlier lying face up in the mud, staring without seeing. “Oh my God,” said James, as he stared at the body.

A group of soldiers passed by us but didn’t acknowledge the man whose life was just taken mere seconds before.

“Medic!” James shouted, but I knew no one would come.

“Lyle, check if there’s a note in his jacket,” said James urgently.

I bent down and rummaged through his jacket until I found a flat envelope. I tucked it inside my pocket and reached down to take his dog tag.

“Oliver Commis,” I said, reading the metal disc.

We both looked down at the man lying dead and said nothing more.

It was nearing evening now, and I slurped at the stew I had cooked up with my rations.

“Nothing’s happened yet,” said James.

“Good,” I replied

As I wrapped myself in my trench coat, I heard the songbirds slow music fill my ear, it was as delightful as a fresh glass of icy water on a summer’s day. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on the beautiful harmony. Then suddenly, it was drowned out by the thunder of thousands of heavy boots pounding the earth. I sat up and dashed to look over the parapet. There I saw the terrifying sight I had long feared. Thousands of Germans were rushing towards our trench with the intent to kill.

James and I grabbed our rifles off the wall and climbed onto the firing step. The enemy got closer and closer until I could make out their faces. I stood frozen, however, too numb to move. I forced myself to turn and look at James, and we shared one last

horrified look. Then there was chaos as the Germans piled into the trench, stabbing, and shooting.

Still holding onto my gun, I climbed over the back parapets, and fell on my stomach. I could hear an officer shouting "Fight you, cowards, fight!" I saw several figures sprinting into the trees behind the trench. My eyes searched desperately for James, but all I could see were his broken glasses lying in the mud. I got to my knees before I felt something sharp hitting my back, stinging my flesh and taking my breath away. I stumbled to my feet, and hobbled towards the trees, moving deeper into them until I could no longer hear gunshots or the cries of wounded men.

I fell to the ground as the pain pulsed through my body like a bolt of lightning. I crawled up to a tree and rested my head on its trunk. My pants and my shirt were drenched in blood as I felt dizzy and faded in and out of consciousness. Everything fell silent for a moment as I rested my head against the tree. The only sound I could hear was the sweet sound of the songbird signing away.

I could have laid there for hours or minutes but when I opened my eyes everything was peaceful. The pain had gone and I felt tranquil. I looked around and heard the songbird, but this time it was different. I felt as though the songbird was calling me, bidding me to follow it. I lifted myself up from the ground and began to follow the melody. The woods no longer seemed dark and foreboding, but filled with light and shadow.

Eventually, I came across a quaint cabin with smoke snaking out of the chimney. I walked along the stone path towards the battered oak door with a lion's head knocker. I had no urge to knock as I felt as though it was home. I pushed the door open with a forceful nudge as warmth and light poured from within. I could see a red armchair with a knitted blanket sitting on top, and a table loaded with cornish pasties, hot sausages, and ale.

I pulled off my hat, gloves, and coat and sat in the chair. I enjoyed the warmth of the fire as it enveloped me. I got up and moved towards the corner of the room where a cozy bed with snowy white sheets beckoned me. I climbed in and felt as though I was finally at complete and total peace. I closed my eyes as I drifted off into my final, long sleep.