

16/2/06

The Somme Stare

My best mate Jonesy was sitting next to me when a bullet went through his left eye and splashed his brain all over the back of our trench. Must have seen countless stinkin' bloated bodies sitting in No Man's Land like big puffer fish stranded on rocks in the midday sun. And I'll never forget the day Dave Finlay had his head sheared off by a tank shell. I swear his left leg didn't stop shaking for nearly five minutes.

But even after all that... the endless mud and blood, the gloomy Pozières landscape, mates that lost their lives and mates that lost their love of life for a few yards gained and a few yards lost ... it's this one image from that time that chills me to the bone.



Probably because I never saw it with my own eyes.

The chairs from the family room have obviously been brought into the dining room as extra places for this special family gathering. See how the ones in the middle are a bit different? I'm sure they're from the family room. Or maybe the kitchen? Struth, they may have even come from next door. Mum always put streamers up for birthdays and Christmas Day, so it looks as if she's trying hard to lighten the mood here. That there are only six draped from the dining room chandelier says that no-one is really in a mood to celebrate. Having said that, ginger beer bottles are on the table – that's a luxury we couldn't afford. S'pose it's not every day your son comes home from the war.

Mum's seat is at the corner on the far side in front of the kitchen dresser where she can spin around for extra cutlery or a plate. It also affords her easy access to the kitchen immediately to her right. The smell of the roast is thick in the air. Three chickens in a big enamel baking dish and spuds all

round. Dad's spot is at the head just out of picture at the far left of the table. That was always his place. My sister in law, Laura sits next to her husband, my older brother George – the man who identified my body. George is in his dark blue suit for the first time in three years. It's hanging off him – he lost a lot of weight on the Western Front. We all did. Next to George and Laura is their three year old boy Jack, sitting up in a high chair. That little nephew of mine came into this world the day I left it and scored my name as a consequence. Poor little bugger. There's a weight to carry.

The table is set for fourteen. Uncles Will, Herbert and Charlie sit pretty quiet as they always seem to even after a few shandies. There's Grandma Reid. And sis Gladys. And a few of the Farthings. The cake on the pedestal in the middle is a lemon meringue. George's favourite. It says "Welcome home."

Dad looks around the table, raises his glass. 'To George. Welcome back son,' he says looking across to my brother, before taking an audible breath, 'and to Jackie, who will always be in our hearts.' The old man's as hard as nails, but the waver in his voice gives away the pain.

'George and Jack,' they all say.

There's an awkward moment where all eyes are on my brother. George clears his throat and looks up at mum. We all see the tears welling in her eyes. But he doesn't. He has the Somme Stare. He looks right through her, to the Sergeant standing in the half light at the back of the training room.

It's starting to get cold and it shouldn't be. It's spring back home. The training is exhausting... all the blokes want to do now is get out there and have a crack. They can't get to the front fast enough. If only they knew. George has had an intensive day of learning the complexities of tunneling and his brain's full.

'Bad news,' the Sergeant says flatly, 'it's your brother.'

George looks into the face of the Sergeant. Maybe it's a limb or shrapnel. We have to go home together. I'm responsible for him.

'He's dead,' the Sergeant says quickly to cut short the false hope he sees in George's eyes. 'Sorry son, they need you to go over and identify the body.'

This is the first time George has been anywhere near the front. The training centre at Hazebrouck might only be a few miles away from the lethal arm wrestle our boys are having with Fritz, but it might as well be a million miles away.

The Corporal in charge of getting him to my body is watching him closely.

'Welcome to Ypres. Your unit will no doubt end up somewhere around here reasonably soon.'

'No doubt,' George says bluntly, staring at what's left of a stone farmhouse.

It's starting to drizzle again and the mud leeches onto their boots as they pick their way along the roadside.

'Medical tent's this way,' the Corporal says to my brother. A shell explodes somewhere in the distance. And another. George looks up, wide-eyed.

'Get used to it,' says the Corporal.

George's eyes take a moment to adjust to the low light in the big tent when the Corporal pulls the canvas flap back. What he sees will stay with him forever. Bodies. Rows of them. Shoulder to shoulder. Some covered in mud. Some incomplete. Some staring as if frozen in their last moment. Then the smell hits.

'This is Private James,' the Corporal says to the medic, 'he's here to identify the body of his brother.'

'Number?' says the medic.

'1215.'

'Over here.'

The medic stops at a table of ten bodies, examines sets of tags on the boots, then turns to my brother.

'This him?'

My brother looks at my face. But he doesn't see me. He's got the Somme Stare. He looks right through me to my mum, standing next to my old man on a grey day at Circular Quay. There's tears welling in her eyes.

'We'll be fine. I'll bring him back. Promise.'