

*1918 - Meuse-Argonne Offensive - France*

The bombings never seemed to stop. Smoke darkened the sky, the explosions deafening. Shrapnel tore through the air like a swarm of angry wasps. Arthur lay curled in a ball, hugging his rifle and crying out for his mama. He was lying in mud, and covered with the blood of an unknown soldier. The trench that Arthur made home was collapsing on top of him. Arthur shook ferociously, unable to control his body.

Someone grabbed the back of his uniform and pulled him up in an impressive feat of strength, lodging him free from the dirt that was beginning to bury him. Arthur tried to jerk away from his attacker but he was too weak. He screamed for help, not realizing that the Germans had yet to enter their trench. To his surprise, a knife wasn't slipped between his ribs. Instead, a gloved hand struck hard across his face.

The slap shocked Arthur out of his shaking, and he finally looked at the man who was holding him up by his collar. It was Corporal Harris, his interim squad leader. Blood and dirt caked his face but his large crooked nose made it clear it was the Corporal.

Corporal Harris shouted something to Arthur but it was impossible to hear. The shrieking of incoming artillery, gunfire firing in all directions, men screaming either for intimidation or out of desperation. The sound of war was all Arthur could hear. Harris was yelling at Arthur one moment, then the next his helmet flew into the air, and his head busted open like a pinata, throwing candy all over Arthur's face. The man Arthur was just getting to know, who welcomed

him into his squad and reminisced on home with, fell to the unforgiving earth floor. Arthur dropped down, in fear of getting shot like his friend.

He was lying on top of Harris' body, and he reached under his uniform, pulled his dog tags free, and stashed it into his ammo pouch. Arthur knew that Harris didn't have a wife, but he did have a daughter back at home that he would talk about any chance he got. Arthur knew he had to stay alive if he wanted to give them to her. He couldn't dwell.

Now out of his stupor, Arthur moved into action. Grabbing his familiar rifle, Arthur moved over to the wall of the trench and started to belly climb up the slanted earth. He stuck his rifle over the edge first, then followed with his head, half expecting to meet the same fate as Harris.

He got his first glimpse of no man's land since the battle had started. Despite it being night, the sky above him would flash brighter than he'd ever seen the sun, and then return to a state of total darkness. Only able to see when the sky was lit up by artillery and gunfire, Arthur noticed smoke clouds hovering over the German trenches where his allies had seemingly launched a counterattack. The land before him was filled with nothing but craters and barbed wire. The earth was blackened and barren until the trench the Germans dug. Arthur looked through the scope on his Springfield and tried to find a German head poking out from their trench, but he couldn't even tell where the German's hideout was. Arthur knew it was a race, between him and a nameless German, to see who would spot the other head first and land their shot.

As he was meticulously scraping the German trench with his rifle, he noticed something that he should have realized sooner. All gunfire from the German side ceased. Artillery was no longer being fired, and the only sounds came from his own trench, still firing relentlessly at the

Germans. Arthur heard a horn blown from behind him in their support zone, signaling a cease-fire. Arthur didn't know what was happening but he obeyed his orders, as did the rest of the trench. Silence. A perfect, ominous silence. Everything stood still. The strange respite was soon broken by the scream of a faraway soldier. Arthur held his breath.

He took the opportunity to look to his side. On his right, his fellow soldiers were uncomfortably lying on the slanted trench wall similar to how he was, watching the German trench and the land in between. He couldn't find anyone from his squad. To his left, he saw a medic treating a Private with a large piece of shrapnel sticking out of his shoulder. The ringing in his ears made it hard for him to hear the soft whimpering coming from the man. Arthur didn't let himself glance back at Corporal Harris. He couldn't.

Realizing he was still holding his breath, he let it go. Perhaps this cease-fire would last. Arthur looked behind him into the distance where he could see the complex network of trenches he had helped dig, and saw for the first time how much damage the German artillery had done.

A piercing whistle screamed from the German line, startling Arthur enough to nearly drop his rifle. The whistle was quickly followed by what sounded like thousands of voices crying out at once. Guttural, animalistic noises were being carried across no man's land. Arthur looked back through his rifle's scope and watched what seemed like every soldier in the entire German Empire climbing out of their trench and charging straight toward Arthur and his comrades.

Arthur couldn't fight the shaking from coming back. His hands began to tremble violently. He couldn't hold the Springfield steady. He heard the German war cries and felt it in his bones. He watched wave after wave of Germans head straight for him. His allies fired back, desperately trying to hold back their advance. Arthur couldn't fire. They always said that you

can't know how you'll act when you first see combat. Arthur was a good shot. An expert shot.

But it wouldn't matter. He was frozen as he watched the Germans charge for his trench.

The trembling finally caused him to drop his rifle. It's a good thing Sergeant Peterson wasn't around to see that. He slid down the side of the trench, found the same puddle of mud and blood from earlier, and curled up in a ball. Corporal Harris wouldn't be saving him this time. Arthur rocked back and forth in his fetal position, and quietly sang a hymn to himself, subconsciously trying to block out the sound of war from his mind. It was a pretty hymn, one his mama would sing to him as a child.

The distant thud of artillery and the approaching scream of the Germans faded into the background as he became lost in the memories of home. For a fleeting moment, it felt as if he was in a different world far away from the front lines. His mother's voice, ever beautiful, became the only thing he could hear. He tried to match his mother's pitch, but he wasn't able to, just like when he was a boy. It didn't matter to Arthur, no, he was with his mama. Everything was just right.

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Seven gunshots fired, breaking Arthur out of his stupor. Another seven. Seven more after that. A solo trumpet rang through the night, screaming to the world, in remembrance of a fallen soldier. Arthur held in his hands a tri-folded flag, with dog tags nestled inside. He started his slow walk to the front of the funeral, to Harris' daughter, the Corporal's only kin. His hands

shook. They shook in a way they had only once before. But he knew the flag in his hands wouldn't be dropped like his rifle was.

Arthur did not want to attend Harris' funeral. Why should the man responsible for his death attend? It wasn't right for him to be there. Especially not in his dress uniform, when he has done nothing to earn wearing it. But he was informed that the young Harris insisted on his presence. As he approached her, he couldn't bear to look her in the face. He kept his eyes down, feeling the full weight of the shame and guilt that was always present in his heart. It was customary that he said something to her that would help ease her suffering. Arthur had no such words.

He bent down to a knee and placed the flag in her lap. He saw one of her hands reach out, not to grab the flag, but to grab his shaking hand. With her other, she reached into the tri-folded flag and pulled out the dog tags tucked inside. She flipped his hand over, placed the dog tags inside, and closed his hand. He finally looked up to meet the face of Harris' daughter. She looked every bit the same as her father. She said something to him, but all Arthur could hear was the sound of war.