



A SKY

O'N FIRE

RIP

A Sky Full Fire

Every once in a while the Germans sent up another flare or we did, and everyone froze where they were. A pun no less. Froze where they were. But that was all right, we weren't going anywhere until morning anyways, until the morning sun broke up through the cloudless dawn and swept everything and everybody into phantasms of red and black and all of forty feet tall in their comrades of the day, their shadows.

When that happened everyone would retreat a little deeper into their holes and into their dirty clothes and into their respective silences. Each thought ringing loud in the ears, each breath steaming forth in frosty white and each moment racing nearer and nearer until that moment when the holes would not be deep enough nor reality harsh enough nor the sky blue and red and black enough to hide either us or our thoughts. And we must attack.

I think the worst was the dirty clothes, that and the eternal chill racing through the ground you in and on.

Oh God In Heaven, you thought, how cold cold is, how frigid is frigidity, how far the stars, how clear the sky though frost seems to hang from every sparkling speck of light-years distant suns. Each gust with its accompanying scurry of snowy dust struck straight into the bones, turning the skin numb under your clothes and reducing your face and hands to lumps that made you cry and instantly regret doing so. For the tears traced patterns and paths of almost orgasmic pain and frigidity on your numbed face, imparting both heat and cold to an area that you had almost persuaded yourself no longer existed.

They talk of the sweat of approaching combat, in the truppenny thrillers, but sweat and heat and warmth seem unenforceable ages away, in another world, another age.

Maybe they're thinking of where the Boers are.

Surely this is the coldest cold in the world, the cold of laying in the chill hardness of mother earth, whilst the scurrying of northern wastes rush hither and yon over the landscape, bringing yet another shiver to your body.

But, like I said, I think the dirtiness is the worst. Of course I always was a bit of a fastidious type by preference, not that it's ever stopped me from working in dirty and grime if the need comes. But it still gets me down, this laying in weeks-old dirty sweaty underclothes, feeling the grime and grit under your fingernails. Once I could clean the face a little with my sleeves, but no they're dirtier, colder, filthier, and grittier than my hands. At least wear keeps the dirt from building up too much on my hands.

I must look a fright right now.

I remember that Joey, when we first got to Lebenstaedt and the Hun threw those howitzer canister at us all that first week on the line, I remember that Joey crapped in his drawers. But then so did most of us, it was rather frightening to suddenly realize that those blossoms and fire and movement and passage of whirling flocks of birds and vomiting of the most ear-shattering noises in the world could actually kill you. It's a pretty frightening thing to realize suddenly that you're mortal like other men and that maybe, just maybe, it won't be the other guy.

Anyways Joey and the rest of us just plain emptied ourselves in a quivering spasm of personal vulnerability, out there where we are each all alone. Each of us in our world of quaking fear and desperate need.

Poor Joey. He bought a packet later that day and I never heard about it till Mart came by with morning rations and told me. Mart

said he got his a bit before we were ordered to dig in, probably a fragment of some kind. I just sat there in my muddy scratch in the earth and wondered what a Registration must have thought. I mean, after all, I understand they're sending most of the dead ones back home and they've got to clean 'em up first.

They're supposed to have lots of supplies for us back at 'Dam and Hague and all. But we haven't seen a clean set of drawers for two weeks. Let's see now, we've been here seven weeks now. Ever since we got off the train at Arnheim and marched up here to drive the bloody Boche back.

Seven weeks? Is that all?

The dawn was starting to come in, like a ghostly white speck of whispered imagination, more a reflection of the cold of the fields than a reality. Soon enough the world will turn red, the stubble and posts and hummocks and trees will peer out in frightened surprise, a crescendo of stark relief. Soon enough, I guess, and far too soon.

I guess it was last night that.... No, that's the night before. It's hard sometimes, to realize what the time or day or month or year it is. Is it really four weeks past Guy Fawke's Day?

The beginning of a new century it is, 1901 Anno Domini like the Reverend says. Anno Domini. After the birth of Christ.

The cold winds shake the patches of snow in the hollows up into the night air and the sparkling specks of light blow up, around..... Around and down again as so many, well, flecks of snow. The flecks of snow blow about and about like so many flecks of snow.....

Shivering, I wonder about the birth of Christ. One thousand, nine hundred and one years ago, one thousand, nine hundred and one years ago, according to the Gregorian calendar, Our Lord Jesus Christ Was Brought Forth By The Virgin Mary in a stable.... Lord, I wish I had a stable about me now to break up the wind for me! That Hun up there by the three dead trees, he doesn't feel the wind any more. Standing back against the birch there, caught in the wire, he almost looks like he's been crucified to the tree. Despite the cold he's really beginning to stink now, but at least the wind blows him down most of the time towards those lucky bastards in the village. Except for that rare whiff of aroma.

That Lancashire Lieutenant, he said the Hun had been shooting at our stretcher carriers since Arnheim, so we should make sure to shoot at all of his people too. So the Hun's just been standing there, in the wire, leaning against the trees ever since they tried cutting out B Rank last night. I suppose if we succeed today they'll take him down and put him under somewhere in the rear here. If not I suppose he and his trees will become another bloody permanent feature to mark artillery range with.

Ah, the sky seems to be burning to the east, flaming almost as crimson as a General's tabs. I suppose it's beautiful except for the fact that we're going to have to move on out pretty soon.

You can see the spiked helmet he's still wearing. Has it strapped on, I think. Bad form. Concussion could take his head off when it lifts the helmet, but then I guess that's rather academic for him now at least.

I wonder why he thought he was here? At Hull they told us that we were going to help the poor Dutchman repel the Hun invaders, save the lowlands from their spiked helmet onslaught. I wonder if they told him much the same thing in Munich or Berlin or wherever he....

No, I forgot, this cold. The Lieutenant said that was the Madgeburg Grenadiers facing us. Well then, I wonder if they told him in Madgeburg that he was going to protect the Dutch from us? If so, it must have been a bit of a surprise to find the Dutch shooting at him.

It would be like them, our lot and theirs, to be so unimaginative.

Wasn't Madgeburg where they had a big battle during the 30 Year's War? They had so many then, everyone fighting over Germany. Killing and slaughtering and putting whole towns to the torch because their hymnal was a bit different or their catheticism was ten words too long or their prince had just simply made the wrong alliance.

Is it any different now?

The sun is almost up. The Hun is sending some morning wake-me-ups and they're blossoming in the woods behind us today. Lucky us. We get to live a few more minutes. Isn't it odd how the really big shells sound like some great giant piece of junk being hurled through the air? I understand that the big shells often go in sideways or end over end.

I guess Sergeant-Major will be up and about in a few moments to remind us where we're supposed to go.

Maybe today I'll tell him where to go, but then that's Courts Martial. It would be out of here, that's a certainty, but then that would be just for a little while. None of the others seem to think so, to them as soon as we get across the border the Hun will collapse. But I've a funny feeling that this is going to be a long, long war. So there would be no use taking a Courts and a tour in the glasshouse and then winding up back in the front in some bloody Z Battalion about to get ground up in some suicide mission. I understand that it's really tough going down around Njimigen, all that water. And that the Frenchies have lost two whole corps to the meatgrinder at Aachen. Or is it Aix-la-Chapelle? I suppose that's according to who's raised their flag on the town square flagpole.

Here comes Sergeant-Major. Some Hun is trying to pot him a good one but Sergeant-Major's got a charmed life. If any of us batch make it through, somehow or other I think he'll be one of them. He's plain got a charmed life. Just charmed.

I suppose at any rate, hugging the cover like he is and the sun the way it is, he's rather hard to spot. Of course I can see him plain as day but then the sun is behind him, from my vantage point.

Somewhere they've written that the rays of the sun, if looked into directly, are harmful to the eyes. So is a welding arc. Some sort of hocus-pocus about various rays being faster than the others we normally see. But right now I can look directly into the shining orb, burning and bulging through the tops of the birch, denuded and bare under the twin shocks of shell and cold.

It's getting time up, now. No barrage, they said. It's only a few hundred yards to cover, they say, so they won't have much time to get your range and besides this way they'll be too surprised to give any counter-fire from their batteries.

That's what they say.

The sun is rising slowly above the birch strands, a red blazing cancer full of majesty and dignity, unmindful of pity or our petty affairs here below. It's rising the same way over the ships at sea, I suppose. At least for the pickets off Texel and I suppose Bergen. Maybe they're having a battle out there too. Full of throbbing diesels and splashes of near misses and noisy arc of dreadnaught guns. Or maybe having a bit of black to help them stand watch, or belowdecks in their warm hammocks, plating between them and the ice.

Maybe I should have joined the Navy instead. Still, until now the Northampshire Yeomanry hasn't been too bad.

That sniper is still looking for Sergeant-Major's range, but he's way too low yet. Probably doesn't understand how he can be missing, but the spurts of dirt are much too low. Probably look like clean hits from where he is.

Maybe he'll be shooting at me next. No, snipers are supposed to pick off leaders if they can. All ye have to do, me lad, is not to be in front of the mob.

Oh my, the sun is cold and blazing hot, a red, fiery red, a blazing pool of incandescent chill, unable to warm the world or a man's poor cold hands or a man's soul upon the imminence of death.

Burn down, burn on, burn, burn the world into warmth before we go forth into the valley of the shadow of the cold cold cold man's hands of yon spiked-hat man and bring him to life if you can. Bring me warmth and blood and peace if you can.

Now the birch is turning from black to white and the dirt so cold and comforting and

the world explodes in a rush
of men and it heaves and it yells come on men ket's get em the
Sergeant-Major cries and I cry
and I turn and heave with the rolling of earth as it whirls
around the sun and run and run and run and totter upright with
bayonet on rifle and I
run

Trenors come and twist and turn and try to shake the earth out from under you like it was a twist carpeting and the humps and vomitings of mother earth

are far away you see and hope that they will never get your range. No, they haven't got your range. The Hun shells are falling far to the rear and at the village there. They do not the quiet fields, the quiet trees, the quiet breathless men, is it always to be so quiet in your run and your own breath comes out so fast that it leaves you in a breathless fall of white

silence. There comes the sparkling butterflies of the day, the red notes of light and smoke and fire flashing welcome welcome welcome from the birch strand of one thousand, nine hundred and one years oh my g

The world is ringing, ringing, you Not even a memory remains of how I came to fall. Was it a bullet? I check my body, no aches or pains denoting the passage of a bullet though I remember playing ball and how it took me till after the game to discover I'd tore my shin half off but there seems to be no special net hurts and no blood.

A puff of dirt rises by my foot, the Hun must still be shooting at me. My rifle is there so I lean over to it and use it to lever myself erect. What has happened?

Then you realize the silence has been replaced by a ringing, a rolling of ecstatic pure sound, a cacophony of a million million bells twenty miles away, a positive orgasm of pure unadulterated sound, a formless music of constancy. Concussion it must be, not even bothering to search for a smoking crater to back up my supposition. It must be concussion. A haze of other noise comes through, very far away and faintly, instantly dashing my sudden hopes of a warm aid station, smiling sisters, that hospital in Kent or Sussex and away from the cold. Just a concussion wave, didn't even deafen me.

The music of the spheres is interrupted for a second as other brown figures fly past me, must have just been down a second, was I in the forefront of the ranks like some sort of clot?

The rifle is cold, wood cold, metal cold, leather belt cold through the black gloves with the hole in the thumb of both hands. I wonder if everyone is retreating or advancing, which way is up and which way is back? Better move with the crowd, whatever.

Left foot, right foot, faster now, left foot, right foot, you can move now without having to balance back to the other side in a pendulum of reaction, a tick-tock of erratic steps. Pendulum right, pendulum left, one thousand, nine hundred and one years ago, ago, ago, ago, left, right, ago, ago, ago, left, right... and now here are the trees as if by magic am I already across?

As if by magic. And there's a pit of some sort. They don't see

me evidently. The four are just firing their machine gun through that slit there. Time to take a hand.

The rifle is already loaded, so I take aim with the aid of a tree to brace me. A bit of butt kick, a splinter rises up above the front log of the gun pit. A bit lower on the sights.

The ammo bearer turns around to leave the bunker and he sees you and you see him through the sights and surprise to actually be seeing a live german convulses the finger and somehow it hits. He curls up on the parapet and rolls on down a mere foot or so. He's dead I guess, not the first and not the last but a second ago his mouth was expelling warm air and he was but now he's

The other ammo bearer turns around and grabs a rifle. He must see you. I better shoot him before he shoots me survival of the.

Back with the bolt, in with the new, a steady pressure is the best one, he seems to be shooting at me, wonder why he doesn't correct his fire, can't even hear the rounds going by and there he is. He's falling into the pit now.

Then for a moment I'm sure he's Risen, but no, it's just one of the others in the pit, this one's got a pistol. He can't shoot either it seems. But the gunner is still shooting so I'd better get him first. He's such a big beautiful target, just like on the range.

It's funny how much broader people seem from the back than from the front, probably the shoulders and all. This one is fat and big shouldered so I can't hardly miss his big broad back, can I?

I'm through the clip, time to get a new one in my Infield I believe. Around the tree, cold numb fingers, off goes the old clip, open the belt, pull out a new one, careful, careful now, mustn't drop it now, mustn't.... It disappears into the brush around my feet.

What's happening in the pit? The one with the moustachio, the Kaiser moustachio, he's gone, no, there he is, he's firing the machine gun now. Where's the big fat one? He's gone, unless he's the one who seems to be praying against the bottom of the pit there, did I hit him after all?

You didn't miss him, why couldn't that lousy moustachioed Hun go ahead and hit you and put an end to the war for a while at least? Nothing fatal, just enough for a trip back across to England instead of this lousy stubbled fields, this lousy trees and this lousy cold the lousy Hun.

So I decide to sneak up on him and bayonet him. So I'm running forward instead and I run and run and almost trip on some of the brush and

did I remember to put my bayonet on my rifle? Yes I

did. The pit is there, no here and my rifle is out in front and I just lean into the pit and the bayonet is out far in front of my rifle and the rifle is far out or is the pit really quite small and it feels like you're hit a brick wall me led and the bayonet slides in.

Someone with a long nose comes by and asks if I'm all right and I say yes but I'm not really. I've got to climb down into that pit pull my rifle and bayonet out of that hun down there. For I think it's going to be a long hard war between here and Berlin. A lot of miles and maybe more after that, isn't the Austrians supposed to be going to join the Prussians? First time I've used the bayonet, maybe not the last, but I'm going to need it. Can't let it rust, I'll have to clean it off in the ground or something.

A vision comes up of marching miles and miles into a horrifyingly distant future, a treadmill of Europe, a journey into steppes and plains and forests forever. Who can survive a war that long.

That night Mart told me that Sergeant-Major had fallen into a disguised and abandoned gun pit and broken his neck.