

Declaration.

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Mail Boy

(By Shane Ward)

Hellfire continued to roar overhead as John made his way to the disease-ridden pit. His army clothes stuck to his skin like a plastic bag and the smell of piss, shit and blood was all over him. He could not get rid of the odor, no matter how hard he tried.

His mission was to deliver critical news and commands that failed to get across by radio. The trench commander had lost his communication device when the rainwater seeped into the underground bunker and fused the whole unit.

John slipped passed the uniformed men who were guarding the commander's underground bunker and covered his nose as he soon discovered that the cocktail of crap and putrefied flesh was worse inside than out.

"Come in, my boy!" a man exclaimed with a hearty tone that was just as earth shattering as the boots on the end of his feet. "Don't worry about the smell, you'll get used to it."

The general placed his beefy hand over his mug of tea and smiled. "You'd better cover your ears kid."

"Why?" asked John. The young man had a message from base and this was not the time to play games.

However, John soon realized that the screeching sound he was hearing was a motor shell about to hit. With only seconds to spare, he placed his gloved hands over his ears and fell over as the place shook violently, releasing rubble and soil that protected the people inside.

As the struggling oil lamps kept the darkness away and the chaos finally subsided, bewildered John picked himself up off the ground and patted down his military uniform.

"Damn Germans, why do they have to shell us while I'm having my tea? What's the matter with them?" the commander said, then stared at John who continued to fidget with his uniform. "Mail boy, don't bother with your uniform, you'll be dead soon. Or do you want to look pretty for the girls up there?" He gestured towards the heavens with his right hand.

The general picked up his metal mug and gulped down the contents only to spit it out all over John's uniform.

"Damn it, the dirt got into my tea. Ross, get me another one." He tossed the mug over to his second in command after he tipped the liquid onto the drenched floor. The rain pounded outside and streams of water began to fill up the command bunker.

The general jumped towards the door and shouted, "Get those foot pumps working now, I don't want the fucking rainwater flooding my base!"

The heavy handed general turned into the bunker and stared at John. "So? Do you have any messages? My radio has crapped on me and the top brass would not have sent you if there wasn't anything important."

"Y-yes sir," John said. "They regret to inform you that they can't send any front men to the lines."

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The general strolled into the center of his bunker, turned steadily and then replied, "Are you horsing around with me, boy? What do you mean they can't send any more men?"

John stood his ground, swallowed the knot that had taken hold in his throat. He replied, in a morose tone, "I'm not horsing around, sir. It's just what it means, sir. They can't spare any more men at the moment. You are to hold the lines until they can send more reinforcements."

The general sat back down on his wooden chair that had become wet by the rain that had seeped through planks on the roof. There must have been a dead body above the bunker because the rainwater was stained red. The general did not care if the chair was wet or not, nor did he care about his tea. Without those men, they had no hope in combating the approaching German army.

The general looked up, saying, "I'll be damned if those good for nothing Germans take this territory! I will make them pay for initiating this war!"

He shot to his feet and stormed out of the bunker into the pouring rain, dragging John along with him.

"Listen here, you messenger boy, I want you to send the brass a message. Scamper down to the communications trench and tell them that we don't need the men, tell them that I will defeat the invading army and then I will come for their heads!"

The commanding officer tossed John into a pool of murky brown water mixed with swimming insects, rats and dead soldiers that bobbed up and down. He stumbled to his feet and spat out the water, which tasted muddy and had a slight hint of salty iron. John acknowledged the source of the taste, but he chose not to think about it further. With a firm message set, John scampered down the communications trench back into the allied safe zone.

A small, long trench stood in his way and safety, but before he could run along the muddy planks of wood with bodies dumped on either side, he heard the familiar sound of screeching in the air. Hundreds of screeching sounds could only mean a mass launch of howitzers into the sky.

John did not know which way to turn; it was as if hell on earth had opened in front of him. Deafening explosions opened huge craters and sent men flying with the rats. Blood began to trickle down the loose dirt and mixed with a foot of water below his feet. The clouds above him churned and the heavens themselves opened with miniature suns that lit the entire area.

"The Germans are coming! They're storming the wires!" shouted one soldier as he tried to warn the rest of his team. But no matter where John looked, everyone was dead or dying. The general laid face down in a pool of brown water, the men in charge of watching the enemy had been blown to bits and half the trench had collapsed, which merged with the surrounding soil.

"Hurry up, we must get out of here," John shouted as he went to rescue the stricken soldier who appeared to be the only one left in the area.

"But what about the enemy?" the soldier asked.

Explosions erupted inside no man's land and John was unable to see what was happening. It seemed like land mines were going off. The Germans were being killed by land mines and allied artillery fire.

Body parts rained down from the sky. The only option left was to escape any way they could. The continuous sound of explosions and machine gun fire made John shake continually; he did not want to be in this disease-infested, war-torn place.

John and the soldier struggled back along the trench towards the command bunker. Perhaps the rest of the team had fled for cover and they were waiting for the shelling to stop. No matter where they turned; charred bodies and fires lit the place like a beacon.

Mail Boy

John dared not investigate the strange munching noises that came deep within the darkness of no man's land. He wasn't sure if it was bullets hitting the bodies, or rodents scurrying from one spot to another, eating the wounded or dead. John vowed not to get hit by a stray bullet; he was only a mail boy, after all, and not involved in this shit.

"Do you know how to fire a rifle, son?" the soldier asked. He bent down and picked up a weapon that was half-buried in soil and water. He yanked some ammo out of a dead soldier's pocket and loaded it into the empty gun. With brisk movements, he handed the loaded gun to him, but John could not keep his eyes off the dead soldier that had half his face ripped off by shrapnel.

"You better learn fast, son. The Germans think they've killed everyone here, but we're going to make our last stand before I let one of those pigs through." He picked up the periscope, which was just a stick with two angled pieces of mirror at the top and bottom, and pushed it over the edge of the trench parapet. He moved around and made his plans.

"It looks like a heavy German team has set up in an abandoned church over there. That's how they got the drop on us. Damn it. They have an overwhelming advantage on us!"

"What's your name, sir?" John asked. He wanted a name because thinking of him as just a soldier was too impersonal and he preferred to call him something proper.

"Baxter. Mathew Baxter."

"So, what are we going to do?"

"It looks like the shell bombardment took out this section off the front lines. We need to take out the German stronghold for the rest of our teams to secure this area. Without that church, the Germans are just as blind as we are."

"But how are we supposed to get there? It's chaos out there!"

Mathew moved his periscope around the area and analyzed the hostile situation. The light flairs had died down and the spot-fires had taken hold of the wooden fences and clothing of the dead bodies. It lit the area in a yellow glow that carried a hint of creepiness to it.

John slumped to the floor, then shot back up once he saw maggots crawling out of a soldier's mouth. He must have been dead for several days because his skin had changed to a shade of purple he'd never seen before. Even the smell was revolting.

Unable to hold back the sickness, John vomited into the puddle with his day's rations rising to the top. More gunshots and screeching artillery roared overhead, and both individuals ducked for cover.

"We've got to do something, kid, those German bastards can cover this whole area with artillery fire from that church. We must take it out!"

"B-but, I'm just the mail boy, I can't pull off an operation like that!"

"Don't think son, just act." Mathew wiped some sweat of his dirt-covered face, cleaning it slightly. His helmet had a hole and his uniform was black with shit and mud. John looked the same, but his face was cleaner.

"We're going to take this large gun and sneak into the church, plant some grenades, then leg it out. We'll be heroes..."

Mathew must have forgotten his positioning for a moment because when he stood over the parapet, a precise sniper shot from the church blew a huge hole in Mathew's head. His body twitched before it fell face first into a deep puddle.

It took a brief moment for the shock to settle in, but John felt even more vulnerable and the sudden silence settled in. He'd lost his only remaining companion. The only things he saw were dead corpses and blown-off limbs.

Mail Boy

Ducking low, John picked up the large gun and wrestled the grenades off Mathew's belt. He'd might as well do something because the entire trench was unmanned. If the Germans knew there was no one left, they would certainly storm the place.

Mathew had jerry-rigged a few machine guns with string. When he pulled on the string, they would fire. He set up several and now John was the one creating the diversion. With only a limited amount of ammo left, he had to act now.

This heart-stopping moment was similar to the moment when he had been called to serve his country. John had lived with his family on the outskirts of London in a small village. He had kept to himself and never wanted anything from anyone. Then when Britain had declared war on Germany in 1914, things slowly changed.

As the years had rolled on, the Germans began sinking merchant shipping and suffocating Britain from its supplies. With supplies dangerously low, people had to look after their possessions with great care. Shoes were kept in good condition and every scrap of food was used. Then conscription had meant that young men were called upon to join the army to fight the Germans. Some had resisted this law and others hid.

John was lucky. He had been out in the country and almost untouched by the war, but the army always knew when someone was hiding and fit to fight. It had been only a matter of time before they were discovered.

The disastrous news had struck when John's family were listening to the news on the radio about an attack on Great Yarmouth, and King's Lynn on the eastern coast of England. Hundreds of people lost their homes and some were killed. The news presenter sounded like he'd had enough of reporting the bad news and his tone saddened with each word he spoke. But the distortion and white noise that came from the speaker made it that much harder to understand.

"Can you turn it up, mother?" asked John.

John's mother sort of wiggled the knob to try and increase the volume, but the higher she put it, the more feedback was looped into the radio.

"Sorry my dear, this old thing is almost on its way out." John's mother fiddled with the knob some more, then gave up after the signal got worse.

"Do you think the Germans will invade England?"

"Don't be ridiculous, those Germans won't stand a chance, we have some of the finest officers in the world and our navy ships serve as good as they get. Don't worry my lad, we'll be perfectly fine, we will win this war in no time!" John's father stood straight like an erect pole. Then there was a knock at the door. Everyone stared at the wooden entrance and wondered who it could be.

"Are you expecting anyone, love?" John's father asked, directing the question to his mother.

"No. Lilly from down the road is supposed to come later this evening, but she never arrives early. She keeps a rigorous routine to walk her poodle Mosses for two hours."

John always had to laugh at that name, but he dared not do it in front of Lilly.

John's father went up to the strong, wood door and opened it. Standing outside were two men dressed in military uniforms, clean, pressed and very frightening.

"Yes, gentlemen, can I help you?" John's father asked politely.

"Is there a John Simmons living here?"

Immediately, the ball dropped. John's father knew they had come for him and he was about to answer when the two military personal spoke in a tone that was almost a threat, "I would think about your answer very carefully, sir..."

Mail Boy

They must have feared the man because John's dad noticed they stood straight with their hands over their weapons, ready to pull them out on a moment's notice. He didn't have to say or do anything because John rushed forward and pulled his dad away from the door. "Dad, I know why they're here. It's no use running anymore, they've found me and this is only going to get worse. I don't want them to kill you."

"John, do you know what will happen to you? Young men don't live that long in the trenches."

"Don't worry, father. We have no choice. You know the penalty if I don't go." The young man looked into his father's eyes. "I'll be okay."

John looked away and stared the armed men in the eyes. He bottled his fear and said the only words he could in a time like this. "Take me in. You've found me, there is nothing I can do."

"You can't escape from the British military. Everyone has to do their part." One of the men said respectfully. John mustered his courage and walked down the garden path, he felt sad. He was about to be involved in a war he did not want and quite possibly lose his life.

In one final act of defiance and freedom, John spoke his mind. "You don't have to worry about me running, boys. So you can take those guns and shove them up each other's asses."

John rubbed the spot where the two military men had whacked him four months ago. It still reminded him of that painful moment, but nothing could compare to the responsibility he now had as he scurried around the trench looking for the best spot to enter no man's land.

He'd seen it many times in the past; people run over the line and instantly shot. He found some smoke grenades and assumed that they should provide adequate cover. Lobbing them over the trench wall into the baron land, he waited for them to completely engulf the area in a cloud of smoke before making his death run into oblivion.

He recited a few words his mother had told him. It played on his mind, especially at this moment, "When a cornered bird flies into his pocket, the hunter will not shoot it. When a cornered bird flies into his pocket, the hunter will not shoot it."

The moment was now.

The gunfire that roared overhead from other trenches continued to blitz John with unrelenting fury. He felt his own heart beat out of his chest. His clothes drenched in blood, water and sweat weighed heavily on his body. He was trained in a short space of time to fire basic guns and deliver important messages. He was never trained to take on a battalion of enemy men camped out in a bloody church.

He felt his legs move, without command, as if something had taken control over his body. Was it the souls of the dead helping him along? Was it his adrenaline taking control? Or was it his need for some payback? He'd seen many men die in front of his face and no one should see that kind of horror.

The horizon of the smoke was in sight and he legged it through no man's land, kicking up mud and dead bodies as he lunged towards the memorized location on the church. No one could see his advance, but John could hear the high-pitched buzz of bullets as they flew dangerously close to his position. Some buried themselves into his already dead colleagues and others dived into the pools of water that sprinkled him like rain.

John kept moving.

Wind and rain was not going to stop him.

Bullets and bodies were not going to stop him.

Mail Boy

The only thing he wanted to see was that church. And there it was, in front of him. He ducked for cover as the cloud of gas finally subsided and he stood out like a sore thumb. He whooshed out a big breath once he discovered that he was safe, for now.

John heard voices from the blown out windows. He made his way around the church and located the best entry point. It was an old door that led to an underground cellar. With a cautious hand, he painstakingly opened the door and thanked God that it did not squeal like a pig. With hesitant steps and his shadow following behind, he crept down the stone staircase into the room below. John could not believe his luck when he saw the ordinance stored down there. Shells, explosives, bullets; everything John decided he would use to light the night sky with German blood.

He chuckled and inadvertently drew attention to himself. A German soldier, who was urinating in the dark, sputtered something out in German, spun around and stared John in the eyes.

It must have taken him a few seconds to realize that a British soldier had infiltrated the church because he quickly grabbed his weapon, leaving his manhood to hang free.

John grabbed his pocketknife and tossed it as if he were performing some circus act. He caught the scrawny German in his neck. Soon his cries bubbled up through the pool of blood in his mouth. The man fell with a satisfying hard thump to the concrete floor, creating a puddle of dark wet blood that spread outward.

John had to act fast. The Germans were shooting at his countrymen and they would undoubtedly come down to see a mutilated corpse in the middle of the room. It may have been dark, but a person sprawled out in the middle of the floor was a bit of a giveaway.

He moved around the twitching body and analyzed the explosives that were boxed. He could do one of two things: he could toss a grenade into the cellar and pray he could outrun the blast. Or, he could use the German dynamite and use the plunger when he got clear. There was a risk he could get caught, but it was still the safest option and he had to stop them. He chose the safest option.

However, when he tiptoed around to set the explosives, he discovered that he could do nothing. The damn explosives, detonator and boxes were all in German, John did not understand one word of it as the military had neglected to teach him any of it before he left England.

So he did what any would-be bomber did. He connected what he thought was the detonator to the end of cable, wedged the silver tube into the stick of dynamite and began unwinding the real to safety.

As if fate had a cruel side, the moon began to shine through the clouds. The arid landscape was clearly visible with zigzagged holes and thousands of dead bodies laid out everywhere. Barbed wire fencing and poles stuck out like fingers and several spot fires still burned in the background.

John realized that he could escape by the left side of the church because it had no windows and the Germans could not see him until he was past the first crater.

With some shelling from the English on the north side, John took advantage of the distraction and crawled through the blood-drenched mud to safety. However, he had more pressing matters to worry about, like a gun to his back.

"Halt!" A German voice shouted.

John froze on the spot and quickly connected the plunger, his fear ran rampant throughout his body. He knew that his time was up. Then more demands were shouted as they gave him orders. John was puzzled as to why they did not shoot him on the spot.

Mail Boy

When he craned his neck around to see the Germans, two of them pointed their machine guns at him and the third smoked a cigarette. The third chatted to the other two. John could tell, by their body language, that they were debating on what to do with him. John was not going to wait around to find out.

As the third German jammed his cigarette into his mouth, John placed his hand on the plunger and pushed down.

With a swift movement of his hand, John saw the church erupt in a ball of superheated flames and the German group vanished, like moths in a blast furnace. As he watched the fireball blast outward towards him, he felt the unrelenting need to run. But when he attempted to move forward, he tripped on a corpse and came tumbling to the ground, face first into the maggot infested water. He felt the blast singe his back and then the rubble collapse all around him.

It was all over within seconds, but John stayed down until the calamity had settled. He did not like this situation; he did not like it at all. He preferred to be at home and not face down in the mud. How could he gain respect and promotion in the ranks? How was he supposed to survive this mess? The war had been going on for a few years and the Germans continued to make things worse for the world. There was nothing he could do to change that. John was a cog in the machine, just a small component that wouldn't be missed if he was killed.

The hellfire came to a stop and silence filled the war torn land. The church was leveled and the young man was partly buried in rubble. He could move, but he didn't want to give any hopeful shots to the enemy, and there was also the chance he could get shot by his own countrymen. How ironic that would be?

He crawled out from under a collapsed wall that had fallen on top of a bolder, preventing him from being pinned to the ground. Freed, he moved forward in any direction. He would have preferred to crawl all the way to his own trench, but when he heard footsteps approaching, John grabbed at anything he could use to defend himself.

The battlefield was a useful place, anyone could just pick up a weapon and use it if they had to. New weapons were as rare as getting new requites to go over the top, only to be mowed down by a wall of bullets from the enemy side. The war was a mess, and so were the command decisions.

John held the rifle and prayed it worked. It was wet and oily and the soldier that must have dropped it must have crawled away for some time because the weapon was all alone. Then he heard voices.

"Did you see that? Someone blew up the Germans in the church."

John recognized the language, struggled to his feet and yelled out waving his gun in the air.

Six British soldiers stormed to his immediate attention and initially held their weapons at him, thinking he was a German. After realizing he was one of their own men, they huddled John away to safety, supporting him any way they could.

"You all right mate? One soldier asked, astonished. "What the hell are you doing out there on your lonesome?"

"Did you see the explosion, it lit the area like a bomb fire..." another said.

John could hardly breathe, he was too exhausted and in great pain.

"Bleeding hell man, look at your back, were you the one that set off the explosion?" said the first man, looking even more astonished.

John only mumbled a stuttered 'yes' before passing out into darkness. He could only hear the words, "Holy mother of Jesus, you're a bloody hero mate..."

Mail Boy

A few days later, John woke up in a sterile hospital ward. The first thing he saw was the sun beaming through the single-paned window and the white curtain that separated his bed from the others. But it wasn't very isolated. People coughing and movement beckoned his attention to a prominent general who stood over his bed. His mustache sat perfectly under his long nose. His brown hat and well-pressed uniform indicated high status and seriousness.

"You've done your country a great service, Mr. Simmons. Thanks to you, we've pushed the Germans back and you saved many lives." He sat at the end of the bed and removed his hat, placing it on the side of his bed. "I wish we had more people like you. We could have stopped this unnecessary war a long time ago. A lot of people see you as a hero, son."

That was something John did not want. He'd seen countless lives lost on the battlefield and claiming glory over their dead bodies was not something he would stoop down to. No, he never wanted to be involved in this war; he wanted to stay at home and look after his family.

However, destiny had a different path for him. He was a hero in the eyes of the country because he was able to save lives. He gave hope to all the people that fought on the battlefield. He gave others the inspiration to use skill and bravery in the line of fire and most of all, it was a life-changer for a young countryman who took on a whole German battalion.

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