

Lest We Forget

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It was another oppressive, smothering morning in Eastern Africa, the type of atmosphere that could only be elicited by the imminent threat of violence. Innocent and unblemished mounds adorned the surrounding area, except for a large space to the East of the landscape, where deep patterns of train tracks of trenches were cut into the skin of the earth. These incisions were so vast and complex that they seemed, in some perverse way, to be a city of their own. The morning sun was rising, glowering purple anger over the land of Mahiwa, casting a deep, powerful hue over myself and all the other trees who stood like paralysed guardians around the land. Slowly the seconds ticked by, thick and heavy with a meaning that to us was not yet apparent. Then suddenly, so suddenly, the blanket of morning peace crumbled.

The orchestra of war began to play in total harmony, resonant and sonorous. Frenzied choirs of howling shells began to ring out, complemented by the hellfire of furious artillery and the cackle of laughing guns. Abruptly, swarming and buzzing, the men appeared like houseflies, bearing down on the trenches at remarkable speed. Almost instantly, the bustling city of trenches reared its head and removed its disguise, allowing its true nature as a hellish war machine to emerge. Black stubs of gun muzzles emerged and began licking their lips with fire and blood; heavier weapons were loaded and fired, creating their own symphony from the depth of hell itself. Gas masks were fumbled onto faces in a cacophony of discord, an organised panic that only war can bring. Then the bloodshed started.

The once peaceful, undefiled soil was drenched with the wild blood of young men; men who were sons, fathers and husbands. The measureless fields, once as lush and verdant as the core of nature itself, were no longer green but an unadulterated red. Even the air was soon corrupted, viscous as soup and opaque as concrete. Those with the masks lived, those without died a death far too inhuman to articulate. I could not recoil nor could I intervene. Instead, all I could do was watch these men tear themselves and others so similar to themselves to bitter shreds. Men were not simply murdered nor were they killed. They were annihilated, mown down in a manner so brutal and efficient that it was scarcely believable that anyone with a soul could have contributed to such an act.

Yet, somehow, as quickly as the men were slaughtered like cows in an abattoir, more clambered over ridges, faces ghostly and pale while at the same time lined with a determination and a willingness fuelled by utter bravery. These men, these great patriots of men on both sides, continued to kill and to die in a cycle that was almost as vicious as it was mindless. As the scene unfolded in front of me, I was aware of what many of the men were not. Night was beginning to creep in, hushed and stealthy. The extra layer of darkness only thickened the confusion of the brutality. Soon the cursed chatter of machine gun fire was not only hitting opposing men but men wearing the same uniform and badge, those fighting

under the same flag. Within the gloom, more and more men found themselves relaxing into the warm and comforting embrace of death.

Some days later, the battle was won. The habitants of the city of the earth were driven away, fleeing backwards as fast as pride would allow. The intruders swiftly followed, lions hunting their deer. When all those alive had left, the new landscape was finally revealed from underneath the mask of violence. Only on the very outskirts of the battlefield was any green earth visible, every other inch of space was covered with dead bodies and the oozing, stinking brown bog that had been stamped into existence by thousands of battle hardened feet. The dead totalled 3,300 men, lying in their final resting place, hundreds of miles from anywhere they had ever called home. The silence left was not simply an absence of noise but a crushing weight that bore down on this place. So many fathers perished, so many sons and so many husbands. Yet whilst they gave their lives for the freedom of others, they will not be remembered. They will merely make up a number, their lives will be boiled down to a statistic, a page on a textbook that will simply induce innocent shock and disbelief in a child in a classroom. It is seemingly beyond the comprehension, beyond the ability of most humans to hold these heroes in the blaze of glory they merit, so perhaps it is down to nature and to the natural laws of our universe to do so. One day, I will too die and join these valiant warriors but until then, with every fibre in me, I will remember them.