

The Day

by Michael J. Hollows

The noise grew to a cacophony as it had done each time before, wailing like sirens before finishing in a calamitous bang. British artillery shells fell in the distance, throwing up great clods of dirt that could be seen from the British army's position. Each shell whined overhead, causing the assembled men to flinch and duck instinctively each time, despite the distance. It was always the same, the noise. Each time the commanders decided to try and pummel the Bosch into the ground, the boys at the back would aim their cannons and the shells would fly. The sound of massed artillery was not easily forgotten. But they had been through it before, countless times, to get to where they were today. It didn't make it any less uncomfortable though.

Private Gerald Harlow ducked again as he heard the wash of another shell go overhead. He cursed as his foot slipped off the boarding and threw mud up his fatigues. The mud added to the wetness around his ankles as he placed his sodden boot back on the boarding with a squelch. He looked at the men lined up either side of him, they were all soaked through. Gerald had run out of fresh socks weeks ago, he had even forgotten what dry feet felt like. His comrades likened this

place to hell, but at least hell is supposed to be warm, he thought bitterly.

The dull crump of the artillery added to the misery as Gerald surveyed his surroundings once more, trying to warm himself up. The equally miserable men around him were all of similar age. Young men gone from their homes to fight in the British Expeditionary Force. Many of them had had no other choice, no prospects. Some had chosen it. But Gerry, as the others called him, had enlisted underage to get away from his home; to get away from a difficult life. His family were poor and aging, few were left. Only his sister had managed to make any money for herself by marrying in to a somewhat wealthy family. If he had stayed at home, he would have been living in poverty now, the army had given him a way out. Looking around, it didn't seem like such a good idea now.

The captain was moving along the line of men, swagger stick under his arm, whistle held lightly in the other hand. He was a good man, as he passed each soldier he offered words of encouragement and a brief smile. As Gerald knew from experience this was a rarity in the army. The man also reminded him of home, whether it was the comforting Hampshire accent, or the body language that reminded him so much of his late father, he couldn't quite tell. A note in his diary that morning, that had also been transcribed as a letter waiting to

head home, said as much.

Today was the first of July, 1916 and the letter had told his elderly mother about his experiences in the army at great length and about the men he had met. He had ended it with the line, "Today is the day, today I become a man." After writing it he had thrown up into a latrine and headed out on duty. Several hours later he found himself standing where he stood now, with his sodden boots and the deafening sounds of artillery.

The squelch of footfalls preceded the Captain reaching his position. As with all the others, he stopped briefly, putting a hand to Gerald's arm and with a commanding tone so easy to him he said, "Are you ready, son?"

Naturally, Gerald swallowed nervously and deeply, before raising his head to look his Captain in the eyes. He struggled to control his nerves and his hands were shaking gently by his sides, but he managed a curt nod. The Captain smiled knowingly and moved on, removing his hand from the Private's arm. An odd sense of relief flashed through Gerald, before he remembered the oncoming battle and his stomach fell again.

He hadn't noticed the absence of sound, but it seemed strange now. He had grown almost familiar with the noise of the artillery barrage and had somehow phased it out of conscious thought. Now it was gone however, its absence was

far more obvious and somehow disturbing. The cessation of the bombardment meant only one thing and Gerald swallowed deeply again while he shuffled his feet.

The Captain turned on his heel and looked along the line of his men. Breathing deeply he bellowed, "This is it, lads. The big push, get rea-"

His call was interrupted by a series of dull explosions nearby, which made Gerald's stomach lurch and almost tipped him forward where he stood.

Unperturbed the Captain continued his speech, "That's the mines, men. Now when you go over the top Fritz will be reeling so much you can walk all the way without seeing a single one alive! See you there! Ready?"

Gerald heard his Captain's words and felt reassured by them, surely a man of his experience knew exactly what he was talking about and as the Captain put the whistle to his mouth the Private felt an immense sense of pride. He was finally a man.

The sound of whistles broke out all along the trench as the officers signalled their men to battle and they were soon joined by the shouts of the soldiers, roaring at the top of their voices.

Gerald added his own voice to the chorus, screaming until his lungs burnt with the exertion. Without another thought he

followed his comrades up the ladder, placing his foot on the bottom rung and propelling himself into no man's land.