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In the Presence of Death

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Author Bio

Kevin Lavery is a History major from the Class of 2016. In a sense, he came to Gettysburg College for the Civil War but stayed for World War I. He is a Civil War Institute Fellow and a Peer Learning Associate for The Pity of War, the first-year seminar that inspired “In the Presence of Death.”

In the Presence of Death

Kevin Lavery

The screams that drifted across no man's land were as horrifying as Alfie had ever heard. The shrieks echoed, pleading for help or for death.

He lay awake in his damp dugout, unable to sleep amidst the wailing and begging of men he had known and loved like brothers. The guns, mercifully, were silent. There had been an offensive that day. It was no more effective than the half dozen others he had joined in since reaching the front. By some miracle, he had survived them all. The doctors were overwhelmed by the wounded men who had fallen within the first few meters of the trench, and those who had fallen farther into no man's land could not be helped without incurring more casualties. Whichever God-damned general had ordered the charge had once again underestimated both the strength of the German position and the blood price demanded by such tactics.

The charge had been a miserable failure. To what end did those men suffer and die? There was no victory to be had in this type of warfare, where lines could not be broken without inhuman suffering on both sides. Someday, when they had the manpower or firepower to blow the Bosch out of Belgium and France, maybe then the war would end. Or maybe the opposite would happen. Alfie didn't know which outcome was more likely these days. Perhaps the time would come when the generals would leave the safety of their posh headquarters and actually witness the futility of attrition. Then maybe both sides would cut their losses.

These bitter thoughts tormented Alfie Byrd, who had watched as friends on each side of him were blown to bits, shredded by chunks of shrapnel, or riddled with bullets from the mechanized menace that were machine guns. During his time as a private in the British Expeditionary Force, he had seen more friends buried than he had even had before the war began. He had arrived in Belgium as one of Kitchener's new boys, just in time for Wipers to again erupt in open warfare: the continuation of the savage battle from the previous fall that had decimated the British Army.

The fall of 1915 had been relatively quiet for his regiment, but it had been unlucky enough to be moved to France in anticipation of the Battle of the Somme. It had been brutal. He heard afterward that nearly twenty thousand of his compatriots had died in the first day alone. The generals had claimed that there was attritional value to the day and that the Ger-

mans had suffered as well. Of course they had, Alfie frowned. There was no way not to suffer during such a war. But what end could justify such suffering?

The screams of the men continued. No matter how much Alfie braced himself for the suffering following an attack, he was never prepared to hear the pleas for help from men who knew they would never live to receive it.

Looking around to make sure no one was watching his admittedly stupid act, Alfie stepped up onto the firestep and peaked his head over the top of the trench to see if there was anyone close by whom he could help. He looked around but could see nothing in the dark of night. Then, from a nearby section of the line, a flare lit up the ground. It was far enough away for Alfie to know it was not intended for them. For now, though, they were safe. He pitied the men down the line who weren't.

It was still very bright, however. Alfie had learned to close one eye to prevent being temporarily blinded by the flare, but he was so shocked to see the figure of a man walking amidst the carnage in no man's land that both eyes remained open. The flare burnt itself out and Alfie's vision went black for a few moments. Throwing caution to the winds, he hoisted himself up over the parapet. Their barbed wire was still cut from the offensive, so he found a hole and crawled through it. As he stood, he heard a gruff voice shouting at him from below.

"Bloody hell. What do you think you're doing?" Alfie could barely see the man in the trench, but he knew that the voice belonged to his corporal. "Get down before you attract their attention! That's an order."

"Look! There's someone out there," he said, pointing at the silhouette of the mystery soldier.

"I don't care. Private Byrd, get your arse down here now before you get shot! Did you hear me? I said get down!"

But Alfie wasn't listening anymore. He stepped calmly into no man's land, avoiding shell holes and deep puddles. Now that he was out of the trench, he could smell the rotting flesh even stronger than when it had been obscured by the shit and mud and sulfuric stench of his subterranean home. The dying laments grew louder and clearer as he strolled through no man's land, indifferent to the danger facing him.

One particular scream caught his attention. He marched across the devastated ground, having to step across a line of bodies, and knelt down beside the unfortunate owner of the voice.

Flecker, the man's name was. In Alfie's time with the army, Flecker had been the best captain he had known. He was brave and smart, unlike many of the spoiled aristocrats whose name alone won them their rank. It had been Flecker who bravely and foolishly led Alfie and the boys across

the field of battle that morning and who had paid the price along with his men. Alfie cared nothing for the staff officers and generals sitting comfortably in their headquarters, but he believed many of the field officers to be among the best men on the Western Front.

“Captain,” Alfie whispered over the broken body of his former officer. The man had been gunned down that morning, his leg torn off by a fateful hunk of shrapnel. The eyes opened wearily without seeing before the wailing resumed. It was horrible to see any man like that, covered in blood and sweat, but with no tears left to be shed. Alfie gave him a quick drink from his canteen. “I’ll go back and get a medical team. We’re going to bring you home.”

A silenced scream caught Alfie’s attention, and his eyes fell again on the soldier he had seen from his trench, who appeared at first to be tending the dead only a few meters away. Then Alfie realized what was truly taking place.

He watched as the soldier drifted from one weeping victim of the war to the next. In turn, he would kneel down next each with his smooth and sharp trench knife and finish the work of the machine guns, flame throwers, shells, and shrapnel. The blood drops that fell from his knife glimmered like rubies in the moonlight. One by one, the screams fell silent. Alfie looked at the ground, trying to come to grips with what he was witnessing.

He looked up again. To his surprise, the man had vanished. Behind him, Captain Flecker’s wailing lament ended abruptly. Alfie spun around to see that the stranger was now next to the captain’s dead body, knife in hand, his work there finished.

“Why did you do that?” he asked the man, astonished by the cruelty of the merciful act.

The mysterious soldier looked calmly over to him as he wiped his knife with a small patch of fabric. He was wearing a Tommy helmet and wore the greatcoat of a British soldier, but Alfie did not recognize this man from his company or any of the others nearby. Was he a newcomer to the front? The hardened look in the man’s cold eyes made Alfie feel like the answer must be no.

When he spoke, it was with a gravely and monotone voice that caused Alfie to shiver violently. “You’ve heard their cries in the night as they scream for water and for pity. You’ve heard them when they shriek.” He stared blankly as Alfie did not respond. “Listen to them,” he ordered. They looked around at the barren wasteland surrounding them, filled with the screams of dying men.

“I just saw him though,” Alfie pointed to Flecker. “He was going to live once stretcher bearers made it out here.”

“What stretcher bearers?” the other soldier sneered, his pointed and blackened teeth showing. He motioned around at the land, which was devoid of life apart from Alfie and the half-dead men on the ground. Every tree had been reduced to splinters by artillery and the poppies had been trampled into the mud by the latest offensive. “There is no one to tend them out here, not in no man’s land. No one but me.”

“Why are you here?”

The man sighed, sheathing his knife. “It is my duty. These men died at my brother’s hands. It is my responsibility to release them from the suffering he has brought.”

“You’re brother’s a fucking Fritz?” Alfie shouted, before coming to a realization. “Wait...” Two brothers cannot fight opposite each other in a battle of nations. “That coat, you stole it. You’re a bloody German, too.”

“I am not,” insisted the man, unbuttoning his greatcoat to reveal a bloodied and dirtied uniform that could have been khaki and could have been gray. “But let me ask you one thing. Why would you fight such a battle that can only bring such pain and such anguish? If you all threw down your weapons and refused to fight, this war would be over.”

“They tried it,” Alfie answered, remembering stories of the Christmas Truce he had never believed possible until he had experienced the universal horrors both sides faced daily. “But the generals put an end to it. This war can’t end until someone wins. I’m here to fight the Germans.”

“For what do you fight?”

“My family,” he said certainly, thinking of his beloved wife and the baby son he had never met. “And for King and Country,” he added, feeling obliged to include in his answer the patriotic response he had been trained to give.

“What king?” the stranger spat. “There is only one king here, and I am him.”

Another flare lit up the sky, this time even closer to their section of no man’s land. It was just bright enough to illuminate the pale and emaciated face of the other man. Alfie, now able to see the cold, dark eyes of the man, knew he was looking at the face that had haunted him since he arrived at the front.

“I know who you are,” Alfie murmured, his eyes glazing over with fear. Never before, even amidst chaotic battles or thundering artillery barrages, had he felt such immense terror. And yet, as in the face of fire, Alfie remained calm. “I’ve seen you before. You were at Wipers and the bloody Somme.”

“And Gallipoli, and Mons, Khartoum, Trafalgar, and the rest. Every single one. I was there for all of them, cleaning up after my brother.”

“War.” Alfie grimaced as he remembered his mother reading to him

from the Book of Revelation. Soldiering may have taken his beliefs from him, but he had not forgotten his lessons. “You are our reward for embracing War.” Could this conversation be real? “After what these people experience in life, do they really deserve you? Do they really deserve Death?”

“No,” the king shook his head sadly, drawing a pistol from his belt. “But this life is Hell. How could anything be worse than this?”

Alfie had no response.

“I give freedom to the living-who-are-dead. Others will take their places until humanity is either wiser or no more. You too, Private Byrd, have earned your sleep. Your family is proud of you and your comrades respect you. You’ve done well.”

“But I’m not done living,” Alfie insisted, suddenly feeling very, very weary. “I need to see my family again.”

“You will again, someday. But not in this life.”

“I want to stay and fight,” Alfie insisted, fighting the fading feeling in his head. He clutched a photograph in his jacket pocket.

“Unfortunately, the choice is not yours. The die was cast two years ago by men who will never suffer as you have. You’ve seen so much, Private Byrd. But do you really believe that you can survive this war? You will die before its end. The only question is whether you will suffer more before your death or allow me to end it now, to end it quickly.

“I am not usually thought of as kind,” concluded the soldier who was not a man. “But now that you know your choices, will you accept? Will you accept my offer of mercy?” He held up his gun and pointed it at Alfie.

It was several days before his body was recovered in a push that captured the nearest German trench. It was bloody and brutal fighting, won only ultimately not with guns or grenades, but with trench knives and sharpened spades. Although a counterattack had quickly sent them scurrying back to their own trenches, the British had been given the necessary time to collect their wounded and dying from the field.

During this short-lived success, one man had jumped into a shell hole to avoid machine gun fire and saw a slimy hand protruding from the contaminated water. He would have ignored it as he ignored all the dead for the sake of his sanity, but for the small photograph of a baby it clutched desperately. It had been showed to him weeks before by Alfie Byrd, the child’s proud father. Knowing the horrible fate of the man who had left his trench days before, the man had been unable to leave his body in the mud.

The man found some comrades and together they dragged Alfie’s body back to the trench. They climbed down and collapsed, exhausted, against the firestep. Two NCOs wandered over, wondering why the men had returned so soon.

“Fuckin’ God,” the sergeant grimaced, looking at the water logged corpse. “Alfie Byrd. How did he die?”

“Looks like a German bullet in his skull,” replied the corporal who had tried to stop Alfie’s final adventure. “The idiot got up over the trench a couple of nights ago and said he saw someone out in no man’s land. Well, of course he did. Their men and ours are out there screaming bloody murder every night. It’s enough to drive the best soldier mad. And I told him. I told him to leave them well enough alone. He didn’t listen to me; he went right on over the top.”

“Bloody hell. Bloody fuckin’ moron,” the sergeant cursed Alfie for his foolishness as a tear ran down his cheek. “Idiot boy survived everything the Bosch threw at him. One week till he got home leave and he had to go looking for fuckin’ Death itself.”