

The First Battle of Ypres

It is my first militaristic tour, and I'm stationed in possibly the worst place ever: Ypres's trenches are only three feet in places and full of water. As I sit in one of these my best friend Alex Helmer, turns to me: "Hey John, did you know on this day, April 22 415 years ago, Pedro Alvares Cabral discovered Brazil?" Alex is the only person I know who knows so many useless facts. I used to just nod my head and smile, but since we arrived at the front lines, there has been little entertainment except to listen to Alex's tidbits. After listening to Alex talk about the discovery of Brazil, I poke my head out of the trench and look around. There is nothing but the crater covered landscape, dotted with a few dead trees: the bodies of hundreds of soldiers from both sides, who are just left to rot in no man's land, while an endless cloud of shapeless grey covers the sky.

This morning was a little different from other days though; there is almost no artillery fire from the Germans. For once there was a pause between our shots where you could hear larks singing. While I'm enjoying this slow in the barrage, I poke my head out of my trench and check that the Germans aren't up to any trickery. The first thing that registers is a massive cloud of green-yellow, "Alex look! What is that?!" I instantly suspect big trouble: "It looks like some sort of gas," replies Alex.

We watch in horror as this mysterious wall of gas drifts over the lines to the north-west, right over the Algerian and French soldiers. Moments after watching the cloud reach our fellow troops I hear shouting and yells of agony coming from somewhere inside the cloud. They quickly grow fainter. Suddenly a man comes stumbling down the trench in our direction with a look of pure horror on his face. Alex and I rush to his aid but there is nothing we can do for him, the gas was killing him right before our eyes and we are helpless to stop it. Just moments later the man breathes his last and goes limp. With tears blurring my vision I close his eyelids and silently wept for this man I didn't know.

For the rest of the day, I watch and wait anxiously. By evening we have still not heard the whole story but could only guess. As the sun sets, a messenger on horseback races towards us as if his life depended on it. He went straight to our commanding officer, Major General R.E.W. Turner, and after a few minutes of quiet conversation, the Major General turns to us and gives orders. "The Germans have taken the Algerian and French lines, and we will take them back. I need all but the 2nd Brigade A Flight: you will stay and hold our position and the rest will join me in recapturing the lost lines." I nodded my head in agreement; this is exactly what I expected. "We will charge tomorrow morning at five thirty." I spent the rest of the night in fitful sleep and writing letters to friends and family back home in case this was my last night alive.

By quarter to six, I sneak towards a grove of oak trees we had been ordered to recapture. The trees had a foreboding look to them almost as if they themselves were trying to stop us. "I don't like the look of this," whispers Alex. No sooner did he finish and he is proven correct. Without warning, the Germans opened fire on us. Without a thought, we all charged! Before I gave three steps, I heard a sickening sound and a yell, I turn around to see Alex crumple to the ground shot by a German bullet. For the rest of the battle nothing could scare me, but seeing Alex the next day die in the hospital tent was just too much for me.

We bury Alex; a few men, still recovering from the battle both in body and spirit. After we finish, I sit down with my back against a tree to mourn for my friend and all the countless lives lost. I take out a piece of paper and write "*In Flanders field, the poppies blow between the crosses row on row...*"