



The advance in Flanders

By Panos Oikonomakos

This handwritten account you have come upon is a recollection of events from the Western Front offensive, specifically in the region of Flanders. What has happened throughout the years of this long-term campaign will not be subject to extensive detail, for this is not the primary purpose of this document. The War has been quite long - longer than most of us could have ever imagined it to be - and the hearts of men can only withstand a certain amount of shellshock and machinegun fire before they are ultimately broken.

Let it be known that my name is Thomas Bailey, Second Lieutenant of the 3rd Cavalry Division. I was in charge of a lot of good men during this bloody war; men that hadn't had their 18th birthday yet, but still fought with unmatched pride and purpose. Men that I have already forgotten the names of. They too thought, as did I at first, that the War would be a time to prove one's worth and duty towards his country. We believed that we would meet the Germans out in the fields and battle it out, till one surrendered and the other proved the mightier warrior. Unfortunately, it wasn't as romantic as we were led to believe.

The battles and deaths were innumerable. I cannot recall any of them I'm afraid, but what I do remember, is the ruined village of Wijtschate. According to our intelligence, it served as a forward HQ for the Germans since the beginning. When our forces finally broke through the Western Front, the battlelines moved along with our advance, slowly and steadily, up until we reached the settlement. The area was dug deep, and it was bombarded from both sides to oblivion. Whenever we managed to capture it, the enemy shelled us with Yellow Cross, forcing us to retreat for days from the contaminated area, giving them time to regroup and move into the village defenses once again. We never witnessed any signs of the enemy HQ, but Jerry was overly persistent in keeping control of that decrepit hamlet. Too many good lives had been lost by that point, so we weren't going to just leave them unavenged. No one was letting them have it.

It was before the break of dawn, as I recall, of that notable day that another grand assault had been launched. Covered by artillery fire, my men along with the infantry charged through no man's land and into the enemy trenches and flanks. We were met with tremendous amount of fire and metal, but we did not stop. Not until the position was finally conquered. But as we broke through their initial defense, we noticed that something was amiss. Most of their positions were unmanned, left only for rats, corpses, and dummies. And then it started. Shell after shell, the Germans started bombarding their own fortifications, with guns already zeroed in on the positions we'd be taking over first. They had already retreated to their back lines out of town, giving their artillery free fire over our confused heads. Explosive traps planted under the earth were going off, decimating our troops, and sending them flying into the air. It was a





massacre. But when I started seeing the yellow-brown mist covering the fields behind us, I knew right then and there that if I didn't take immediate action, my men and I would not see the light of dawn ever again.

Trapped between creeping mustard gas and artillery fire from the enemy, I led my men through the town, seeking the fabled forward HQ the Germans had established since the beginning of the War. We rode over countless bodies and rubble, through dust and sulfur until, finally, my eyes were met with hope. There, at the bottom of a cratered building, amongst dirt and ruin, laid an uncovered entrance to an underground bunker. Without any more thought, and with the well-being of my men in mind, I ordered the few that had survived to dismount and charged into the shelter.

After treading several stairs down below, we were met with the partially destroyed door of the bunker. It seemed that being over 20ft under the ground didn't save this place from cave-ins. We struggled through, pushing aside the debris that was in our path, and closed off the room behind us with whatever we could find: tables, boxes, army coats; enough to at least slow the passage of the gas inside.

The ceiling was low, mere inches above our heads, and filled with cement cracks, broken pipes, and jutting metal rods. The corridors, however much we wished, were not different in the slightest. Covered in darkness, with only a few distant lights flickering under artillery fire, we pressed on. For most of our journey below, we couldn't see a damned thing in front of us, and we couldn't shake the faint smell of caustic mustard in the air. The men argued whether we should stay put and wait it out, but I ordered them to push deeper; the heavy gas would reach us and throw all our efforts in the gutter otherwise.

Morale was hanging by a thread as the few badly-lit barracks and first aid wards we found weren't particularly reassuring either. They were all littered with bloody clothes, rifles, and various other paraphernalia left behind by the Germans. What deeply concerned us, though, was all the used-up ammunition that we found across the floor, with countless bullet holes along the walls. How could this have happened? The Allies hadn't found this place before. Was there a mutiny that had been carried out? An attempt at desertion? But where had all the bodies gone? It was pretty clear to us that the infighting had been fierce since we even found traces of explosions.

As we moved deeper, we noticed that the tunnels were crawling with irregular, drilled-out holes, big enough to fit a man and deep enough to not see where they led. Large gashes on their outlines revealed that something very sharp had bored through these walls; something that we struggled to find a clear answer to. Fatigue and lack of oxygen had engulfed us at that point, making it extremely hard to think straight. Therefore, we decided to continue further on, in hopes of finding a safer place to hold out.

It wasn't until hours of slow-paced travel later that we realized that one of the men was missing. I'm not entirely certain who it was, but everyone froze in place as I called out for him. We listened in under the trembling ceiling and falling dirt, but there was no response - only shells exploding, and the distant echo of my own voice. I attempted one more time, trying harder to make out any sound that traveled through those damnable corridors. Silence - at first. Then, after a brief lull, an answer was





heard from the distant back. 'Lieu...tenant. Lieu...tenant.' It was the man's voice! I pushed past the troops and ran towards his call, to be met by a gruesome and appalling sight. A few feet away, at the brink of total blackness, laid the man torn in half and crawling towards me. His innards were being scraped against the floor as he struggled to reach me, only to stutter: 'It's... it's in the walls!', right before being snatched by giant claws back into the darkness.

Panic ensued as everyone started to run in the opposite direction, further into the unexplored bunker. Punching, kicking, and pushing each other aside, there was no thought or reason left for us. Everyone was out for himself, splitting into different rooms, different tunnels, losing track of who was with whom, and where the entrance was. It was absolute mayhem. Some were trampled and left behind, never to be seen again. Others tried to fire back but were soon after silenced with a lumbering slash across their bodies, letting out abhorrent gurgling sounds as they were swept away by the void. The rest tried to find their way towards the entrance, frantically looking for familiar signs to follow. Tripping over stairs and bumping into walls and rabble, one by one they were all whisked away by the towering creature, who knew its way around the black halls like the back of its hand.

The disturbingly humanoid monstrosity had no eyes on its face, only a deformed circular maw in the middle with small pink tendrils all around it. It was dressed in heavily torn German soldier attire - which it had long outgrown - and wreaked of mustard gas. The wretched thing had made shortcuts through the walls with its long and razor-edged claws, which it could use with perfect ease to catch up to us. We were like disoriented prey in a mole's subterranean playground.

All that running around had made me dizzy and exhausted, as the air was heavy and unclean. The poisonous gas had definitely slipped through the cracks and into these corridors long before we had entered this blasted bunker. It was seeping into my mind, making my vision hazy and my thoughts muddled. I could not remember my way out; nothing looked familiar. So I decided to hide; hold out in this small crevice and be as quiet as I can, waiting for the right moment to come out, when the lurking beast was not around.

My mind is a mess. My recollection of past events is fading away. I don't remember how I ended up here. Was it all my fault? Of all things, one I must remember at all costs. One thing above all. Something that you must know as well. Let it be known that your name is Thomas Bailey, Second Lieutenant of the 3rd Cavalry Division. You were in charge of a lot of good men during this bloody war; men that fought with unmatched pride and purpose. Men that you have already forgotten the names of. You thought that you would meet the Germans out in the fields and battle it out, till one surrendered and the other proved the mightier warrior. Unfortunately, It wasn't as romantic as you were led to believe.

