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Introduction

As a young middle schooler growing up in Jefferson City, Missouri I had the opportunity to watch a performer whose specialty was keeping several china plates spinning on poles simultaneously. The performer would rush to get a plate spinning in the air, and double back to make sure her previous charges were still going strong. The routine continues on for a couple of minutes until suddenly ten china plates are whirring and the performer is running around frantically every time a pole gives just a hint of instability. At the time, the act did very little to interest or excite me (in fact, my youthful self judged professional plate spinner as a very odd choice of vocation), but now there is something about the performer jumping desperately from pole to pole to keep the plates airborne that sticks out in my mind. Metaphorically, I’ve always seen the plate spinner as a normal person, and her plates are the various spheres in someone’s life: family, friends, work, hobby, love; all a different plate to keep spinning. Now, as I attempt to describe the events leading up to World War I and detail a few of the atrocities within it, I keep seeing the performer running in between her plates, trying to delay the inevitable crashes to the surface. The Great War was first and foremost the world trying to keep too many plates in the air.

The story of civilization’s crashing to reality is one of convergence. A death by a thousand cuts. Think of almost any political issue that is likely to cause a fierce debate at the family holiday table. These issues tend to be those of governance, ideologies, religion, human rights, and perhaps more recently personal/sexual freedoms. What created the morass of “The Great War” was the convergence of almost all these issues happening at the same time. For
example, through only preliminary research one can find writings and beliefs that echo World War I as a modern crusade, with much of the same religious zeal streaming from the pulpits of England in a similar way that it would have in past crusades. Then you can find others, whether allies or enemies, who remove all religious meaning from their wartime experience. Now, if you throw that into a pot, mix it with a couple of despots, and add in huge ideological arguments about things like nationalism and isolationism, one might begin to see the possible flaws with this mix. The world in 1914 did not see the plates wobbling on their poles, and so they proudly marched into a horrific opera that lasted four years, killed more than 16 million people, and solved nothing.

For the thesis, I wanted to tell a story about World War 1 because I think there are enough parallels to modern society to make it important. Also, too few people in my generation know enough about the Great War. In school it just isn’t remembered with as much patriotism as the borderline overcooked stories of American and Allied heroism in World War II. Lastly, within all the suffering embedded into World War I, there is yet a feeling of creation among destruction. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon wrote from inside the trenches themselves, lending a psychological and first person view of a war a non-participant will likely never fully understand. Furthermore, the great mythologies of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien were borne from the horrors witnessed by the respective authors at battles like The Somme. This literature of World War 1 is important to me as a writer because it has the ability to capture beauty in the face of unfathomable slaughter. It was a simple love of history, and my interest in the writers of World War 1, that led me to the creation of this story.

One plate that began wobbling before the start of the war was that of religious ideologies. It is almost impossible to study any war throughout the course of human history that did not
involve religious beliefs in some way, so it is no surprise that it played a large role here for both sides of the war. In Britain, for example, many of the clergy used the same patriotic jargon that the government was using to encourage volunteers. For the young soldier, his job was to serve his King and country, and in doing so, he would also be fighting god’s battle. As Joseph Loconte says in his book, “the aims of the state became almost identical to those of the church… this meant that political and military objectives were given a religious rationale, backed up by the Bible” (33-34). Defining not only their objectives, but their enemy as well, with religious meaning is significantly more important than just a simple changing of rhetoric. In fact, it changes everything from what terms of surrender are acceptable, when the war should end, and the totality of their mission in preserving the world. The easiest way to explain its significance is to show an example of how just switching words can change World War 1 from a military conflict into an ideological slaughter. Say a particular army’s objective is to attack and capture a single hill. How does the army know when the war is over? Obviously the war is over when the army either successfully captures the hill or they fail in their attempt. Now, however, let’s say an army’s particular objective is to fight against the very nature of evil. How does the army know when the war is over? When does the fight against evil truly end? Unfortunately, as many countries were soon to find out, the war against evil is a total war, with no terms of surrender acceptable except complete surrender.

A second interesting thing to note about the religious undertones of World War 1 is that almost all of the participating countries followed Christianity. Although they all used Christianity in slightly different ways in order to support the war effort, it is interesting that multiple entities conclude from the same set of doctrines that the other side was the embodiment of the devil. Take for example England, Germany, and The United States. At first glance it might
seem as though the messages from the governments and churches should be different, since they all took vastly different roles in the course of the conflict. On one hand, there are two countries who participated in the war since its inception, but they fought on opposite sides. On the other hand, there is the United States, whose late venture into the war effort made its experiences quite different from even their own allies. However, as the tide of war dawned, it is interesting to compare how these countries roused their citizens to battle. During a speech given to Parliament, Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith stated clearly, “I do not believe any nation ever entered into a greater controversy…with a clearer conscience…that it is fighting… not for the maintenance of its own selfish interest…but… in defense of principles…vital to the civilization of the world” (Asquith). Similarly, at the same time in Germany, Emperor Wilhelm II was giving his own speech at the beginning of the war, “Remember that the German people are the chosen of God. On me… the Spirit of God has descended. I am his weapon. His sword and his visor…” (Wilhelm).

The United States was no stranger to this type of providential rhetoric. For example, there are several parallels in the speech President Woodrow Wilson gave in his address to congress while on the brink of the U.S. entering the war. “The world must be made safe for democracy…We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion… we are but champions of the rights of mankind” (Wilson).

There are three things that stick out in the world leaders’ respective speeches: 1. That the world is in a state of flux and needs to change. 2. Each leader tells their citizens that they are the chosen people to fight evil, and 3. That none of them have unjust goals of any kind. It was less a war for territory, economic gain, or even the direct freedom of the oppressed than it was a war fought because world leaders wanted the world to change, and furthermore believed that it was
their country’s personal, divine duty to lead the world into a rebirth. As Richard Gamble notes, “The Great War became as terrible as it did in part because of how religion was co-opted to wage war against flesh and blood, to sustain or expand earthly kingdoms, and to legitimate ideologies of worldly redemption,” (56).

In the thesis, the scene with Simeon and Clémence talking about religion in Langres, attempts to showcase the differences between religious meanings from the homefront, and those from the front lines. For Clémence, it does not make complete sense as to why a cross necklace would be protective to Simeon, who is fighting a war against other Christians. Furthermore, his real experience in combat has shown him how truly far away World War I is from being divine. His confusion at Simeon’s necklace is not to belittle soldiers who carry crosses or bibles with them, but to simply show that he knows deep down that this war was created by human hands, not god’s. It also shows the differences between the religious ideals of the individual soldiers in comparison to their respective states’ governments and churches. The soldiers on the ground were keenly aware of the absence of God’s presence in the trenches. Unfortunately, very few outside the combat zones truly understood the nature of the destruction being wrought. The plate of religious ideologies comes shattering down to the ground, as the war turns into seemingly unending conflict.

The advancement of technology also played a part in shaping the landscape of World War I. As machines continued to evolve, so did weapons continue to become more efficient killing machines. Everything from easier to use machine guns, advanced artillery pieces, aircraft, tanks, wireless communication, and even submarines first began to see major action during The Great War (Burton). Furthermore, the Germans were the first to employ chemical weapons in battle. These new weapons helped to create a picture of war unlike anything the world had ever
seen, and stated very clearly that their old world was wrong. One French soldier described an artillery barrage in gruesome detail, “Men were squashed. Cut in two or divided from top to bottom. Blown into showers; bellies turned inside out; skulls forced into the chest as if by a blow from a club,” (Ferguson). This was not the artillery barrage of cumbersome front loaded cannons employed in the last century by Napoleon. These artillery pieces were more mobile, easier to use, fired deadlier ammunition more accurately, and penned a new doctrine of warfare.

The artillery barrage that officially began the battle of St. Mihiel began early in the morning of September 13th just after 1 a.m. One soldier who witnessed it described it as such: “It was zero hour. In one instant the entire front as far as the eye could reach in either direction was a sheet of flame while the heavy artillery made the earth quake,” (Cpl. Kennedy). A horizon lined with fire, and guns that shook the very core of the earth awaited soldiers in the trenches. One question that became pervasive as the combatants continued to watch this new destruction, and it questioned the relationship between human advancement and nature. Had humans advanced too far with their technology? Is progress for the sake of progress really progress at all? Soldiers and civilians alike were forced to confront these questions in their new world where “Trees leap into the air like wisps of straw; it is an unheard-of spectacle” (Horne). One French Lieutenant summarized the feeling most succinctly in his diaries during the battle of Verdun. “Humanity is mad. It must be mad to do what it is doing…Hell cannot be so terrible” (Horne). The world had advanced to the point where it was difficult to see any shreds of “humanity” left.

This battle between technology and progress is perhaps most interestingly reflected on in the works of author J.R.R. Tolkien. Having served at battles like the infamous Somme, it was impossible for his experiences in war to not seep into the threads of his literary works. According to Loconte, it was Tolkien’s disdain for these technological advances that created the picturesque
scenes of the Shire. “Tolkien’s love of the English countryside, his attachment to nature, rebelled against the chaotic industrialization of his day. His dissent found an imaginative outlet: the bucolic world of the hobbits, the region of Middle-earth known as the Shire” (6). It is not a surprise to see Tolkien’s beloved hobbits enjoy things like open farmlands, meals eaten outside in the sunshine, and smoking pipes leisurely. They start no wars of their own, and their community of Hobbiton is devoid of most modern technologies. However, a comparison is made between the idyllic, rural lives of the Hobbits and his descriptions of the more sinister characters. For example, in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien describes the hideous goblins who spend their entire lives underground committing wicked acts as creators, specifically, creators of weapons. “It is not unlikely that they (goblins) invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them” (59). After seeing unfathomable killing throughout his service, it makes sense as to why the Hobbits foiled creatures like the goblins so well. There are the World War I belligerents who rely on horrible machines to achieve their ends, and then there is the rural England farmland of Tolkien’s pre industrial childhood. There are goblins and there are Hobbits.

Technology specifically changed the tide of the battle of St. Mihiel because of the actions of Colonel George Patton. The scene from the thesis where Patton impatiently sent three tanks and five foot soldiers ahead without supporting infantry ended up becoming one of extreme importance in the war. This was the first time that tanks from the United States had ever gone into battle unsupported by infantry, or “cavalry-styled” (Doughboy Center). The final battle in the thesis between the tanks headed to Jonville, and the company of Germans that they ran into, happened on September 13th, 1918, and was an overwhelming success. The tanks were winning
the battle against the machine gunners and artillery crews when Patton continued the attack by adding an additional five Renault FT tanks to the battle. The tank that John and Simeon drive in the thesis is fictional, and in truth, the tankers dominated the battle that day with little damage taken (Doughboy Center). The audacity of Col. Patton and his other officers was not exaggerated in the story, as 2nd. Lieutenant Julian K. Morrison was a very real person, who indeed led the tank charge on foot and captured an artillery crew with nothing but a Colt .45 and two wounds in the right hand (Doughboy Center). Without the incredibly bold actions of Patton and his officers, it would have been doubtful that the tanks would have been committed without infantry support, and one of the most famous tactical decisions in either world war would not have happened.

Finally, within all of the things that stands to make World War I so terrible, it yet inspired several writers besides just Tolkien to create. Soldiers wrote poems from inside the trenches, providing completely undiscovered depths into the psychology of a soldier in combat. In my Junior year at Mizzou, I took a class with Professor Frances Dickey that focused on a lot of the poetry circulating from that time. To this day, I have yet to find another period of writing that provides the same level of emotional rawness while also providing insights into what it means to be human. At that point, when humans were being killed in droves in the span of a few seconds, the question of what humanity was exactly, became a gray area. Men were getting killed like animals in this new age. One of the best known poets during the war was an Englishmen named Siegfried Sassoon. He added to this cannon of literature almost more than any other poet during this time, and part of his popularity may stem from the realism with which he wrote his experiences in combat. As poetry foundation says, “Avoiding the sentimentality and jingoism of many war poets, Sassoon wrote of the horror and brutality of trench warfare and contemptuously satirized generals, politicians, and churchmen for their incompetence and blind support of the
The second part of this analysis speaks to why his poetry was so important. Sassoon’s poems were in direct conflict with the same religious and patriotic messages that the world’s leaders were pumping out during the time. It yet again underscores the difference between how people far away from the front spoke of the heroism of war, and how that actually played out in the trenches.

One of the clearest examples of Sassoon’s commitment to not hiding the horrors of war from his poems, comes from a short work called “Suicide in the Trenches.” The three stanzas speak of a young soldier going to war, and it includes a scene of cheering crowds saluting the young men as they left. However, it is the second stanza where Sassoon embeds the harsh realities facing a young soldier. “In winter trenches, cowed and glum, / With crumps and lice and lack of rum,/ He put a bullet through his brain,/ No one spoke of him again” (Sassoon 5-8). This anonymous soldier could have been any number of the millions that lost their lives, but what makes the stanza from Sassoon so striking is that this soldier died with no glory against the enemy (he took his own life), and absolutely no eternal praise for his great sacrifice (no one spoke of him again). This quiet death in the midst of misery was not the death being promised to soldiers from the recruiting offices, churches, or patriotic government speeches. It was a death that seemingly not a soul witnessed, and very few people felt.

It was these brutal poems that inspired the personal stories that Clémence and Emile told to Simeon and his friends in the thesis. The two French veterans spare no details of their experiences, and in the face of this raw picture of war, Simeon can hardly handle even listening to it. The poems of Siegfried Sassoon and other writers from World War I are not easy to read, nor are they easy to reconcile with emotionally speaking. Nevertheless, they create some of the most accurate portraits of any war.
It was for a combination of all these reasons that I chose to tackle the story of World War I in my thesis. This was a period in the world that hosted global arguments of cataclysmic proportions, new technologies that redefined humans’ place in nature, fierce religious battles, and literature that captures a range of human emotion and experience rarely depicted. It is a hope that people in modern societies can use past turmoil to navigate through future conflicts without feeling it necessary to send several million men and women exactly my age to die as human capital. So far, that hope has largely been in vain.

Finally, it may seem that “The Yanks Are Coming” ends on a rather unresolved note, with Simeon thinking to himself in a hospital bed, and then a rather abrupt close. The reason for this is because an ending that is “neat and tidy” is the exact opposite of what a story about World War I deserves. Literally nothing about World War I finished “neat and tidy.” If you google it today in 2018, websites will tell you that the allies won the war and the central powers were defeated. However, the victorious French saw almost 900 of its young men die per day during the war. The Russians did not even make it to the end of the war, with their political and social upheaval becoming so strong that many units of their soldiers simply dropped their weapons and went home. The only countries that can likely be described as “winners” by the standard definition are maybe the United Kingdom and the United States. The war devastated the United Kingdom, and The United States was mostly a winner because they joined the war in its twilight, but their involvement still began to thrust them forward as a world power. Either way, the armistice of World War I did absolutely nothing to curb future conflicts on a global scale, and in fact its harsh terms of surrender for the Germans are often linked with the rise of the even more radical political parties that emerged in the 1930s.
So although it would have been nice for Simeon to put himself together by the end of the piece and reflect on the causes of war, and how he’s changed through it, I *highly* doubt that this sort of black and white thinking would have ever occurred inside the mind of an actual soldier. Simeon has willingly put himself through hell to protect a world that he suddenly cannot understand. There are no conclusions for him to draw from what he has witnessed. Simply destruction seemingly for destruction’s sake. So, in much the same way Simeon did in the final scene, the global community had to wonder if the world would ever be the same after the end of the war. The answer, again, is quite simple. No. No it would not be.
The Yanks Are Coming

September 12/13th, 1918
Near Pont-a-Mousson, France

The sky above Simeon’s head thundered with a deafening crack, shaking the earth and Simeon from where he was huddled inside of his trench. He could see the rolling hills that lead to the top of the St. Mihiel defensive line as lightning flashes danced across the sky. After several days of constant downpour and driving wind, the trenches were filled with brown water that stopped just about knee level. Being knee deep in the chilled water, it had been several hours since Simeon could remember having feeling in his lower legs. He and his unit had all tried to keep dry, and had been successful for almost five minutes before they were all soaked to the bone. After a week of Simeon’s division trying to maneuver their cumbersome Renault FT tanks through miles of earthworks and fresh mud, they had finally made it to their objective. Now they huddled in their own individual worlds, all miserable and trying to picture what the next day’s fight would bring. Their first taste of real combat.

Simeon’s two closest friends in his unit, John and Wyatt, suddenly plopped down into the trench next to where he was huddled.

“Any luck?” he asked them as they returned from their mission to scrounge more rations.

John scoffed.

“Right. Either everyone else is as hungry as we are, or they don’t want to be and refuse to share.”

On cue Simeon’s stomach grumbled in protest.
“Did you try any of the French units?” he asked. “I hear most of them can at least speak a little English.”

“We tried everything,” Wyatt said. His face turned sour, “maybe tonight’s the night we finally get to try these rats everyone’s talking about.”

Suddenly Simeon’s hunger receded slightly at the thought of eating the trench rats. For years they had gorged themselves on fallen corpses, and now they were as large as house cats. On their march towards St. Mihiel, they had heard stories from some of the veterans who had woken up to find one gnawing on their clothes. You could shoot them, you could stab them, or you could try and drown them, but you could not get rid of them.

This is their world now.

This world which Simeon now hunkered down in was one of decay and destruction, a rat’s paradise. He couldn’t help but think of it as an omen. Some sort of cryptic sign that hinted of a future world without humans, overflowing with the beasts that rule after. Simeon hoped this war would end before his vision could turn into reality.

“I honestly think I’d rather die on an empty stomach,” John grumbled miserably.

An uneasy silence swept over the three young soldiers, and Simeon felt a long shiver run down the length of his spine. John looked up suddenly.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean that we are going to…” he said voice trailing off.

Wyatt gave a casual shrug.

“No worries,” he said. But that was all he said, and for a while they sat silently through the downpour.

They never talked about death. No one did. At least not directly.
Of course, death was a constant presence in each of their minds through training, traveling, marching, but there was some unwritten rule between those at or headed to the front that promised to never speak of it. As if the mere mention of death would suddenly turn its focus on them personally, so they all tried to live with their backs turned away from death’s direct gaze. But Simeon sensed what knew he would never revel to the others, that they were all slowly marching into death’s outstretched arms. He thought again of the rats. Death’s messengers.

Suddenly Simeon heard a snort come from John, and he looked to see his old friend grinning stupidly through another flash of lightning.

“What’s so funny?” he asked him, almost shouting as the deluge continued.

“Just look around you,” he said almost hysterically. “There’s rats bigger than me, I haven’t felt my feet for days, and we’re about to willingly drive our tanks into carnage with a bunch of Frenchmen.”

“And?” Wyatt asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied still laughing. “It’s just kind of absurd, you know?”

He paused and Simeon and Wyatt exchanged a glance.

“It’s just…” he stopped. “It’s just that we’re a really long way from Missouri.”

His laughter and his smile deteriorated, and Simeon knew as John’s eyes glazed that his mind was far away at home. Simeon thought of his own home. The porch swing where he could spend his evenings thinking, the younger sister who made him believe that the future was worth fighting for, it all came back to him now. He thumbed the small, cross necklace that his family had given him the day he left for training.

_one day_, he thought hopefully.
“Anybody have any idea what time it is?” he asked trying to remove himself from his homesickness.

Wyatt checked the wrist watch that his family had given him as a parting memento. The watch, along with the small note tucked inside his left breast pocket, were the only two things he wanted to be shipped home with in case he didn’t make it. On the ship to France he made Simeon and John promise that one of them would make sure his family got those two belongs. They hadn’t wanted to promise it, didn’t want to imagine themselves going home without Wyatt, but finally they relented.

“Hm,” he said frowning at his watch. “I just realized I still haven’t set this thing for France. It’s 5:56 in the evening back home.”

He began to fiddle with the dials to set his watch as John and Simeon tried to do mental math.

“So that’s means it’s almost 1 a.m. here” John concluded.

The rain finally slowed, and without the driving water Simeon could actually make out more of the landscape of tomorrow’s objective. Their personal objective was not the township of St. Mihiel, which actually sat several miles to the west behind the cover of Mt. Sec. Their objective was to support the eastern most assault of the 1st corps with their tanks, commanded by their firebrand Colonel, George Patton. Simeon and the rest of the enlistees loved Patton and his group of officers. Patton believed that the individual actions of a leader on the battlefield could change the tide of an engagement, so unlike most units in the war, he and his other officers led from the front. Simeon smiled to himself picturing Patton charging through fields of fire, fearless. He hoped that Patton’s bravery was not all peacetime bravado.
“What do you think the chances are Col. Patton is actually with us tomorrow?” he asked the other two.

“Oh he’ll be there,” Wyatt said firmly. “Well, probably at least. Lt. Morrison will definitely be there, and that’s more officers than most will have.”

Morrison was one of Patton’s 2nd Lieutenants and he wore the same intense scowl that the rest of Patton’s officers did making it seem like they had been preparing for this fight their entire lives. In each of their scowls Simeon noticed the whisper of a smile.

“Do you guys think people like Patton and Morrison enjoy war?” he asked.

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Wyatt said. “I think it’s more so—“

Suddenly, far off to their left, they all heard a distant and unnatural rumbling. Then seemingly the entire landscape from behind them erupted in deep roar. It was their own artillery. The first shell landed to the west of Mount Sec., near the main area of St. Mihiel, and they could see a distant, red glow coming up from over the hills that spoke of fire. Then the rest of the shells landed.

The three men watched, awestruck, as the horizon suddenly transformed into sheets of flame. Plumes of earth sprang into the air, as the very ground underneath the German lines began to crack. Simeon had never seen anything like this in the world, hadn’t even read anything like this in books. The American and French artillery lobbed shell after shell from about a mile behind their own trenches into the defensive positions surrounding St. Mihiel.

He couldn’t hardly see the tops of the hills in front of him anymore through all the smoke and debris shooting into the sky like lava. Simeon knew that shortly after the preparatory barrage the western infantry units would start their slow walk towards the peak of Mt. Sec and across the
river Meuse and into St. Mihiel. Then, shortly later, it would be their turn to follow the infantry in their tanks and sweep up the eastern slopes. Their wait was finally almost over.

The water in the trenches sloshed around their legs as the bombardment continued. Simeon could not imagine what being on the receiving end of this would be like. At one point the ground shook so forcefully that Wyatt lost his balance and almost completely submerged himself in the frigid trench soup.

“God Damnit!” he snarled ripping his arms out of the muck and trying to regain his balance.

John thought this was hilarious, and his laughter was one of the only things Simeon heard over the scream of artillery shells.

“We’re a long way from Missouri!” he said laughing with the same crazy look he had earlier.

Wyatt replied succinctly with a slow raise of the middle finger on his left hand.

Yeah we are a long way from Missouri, Simeon thought, but more importantly,

How the hell did we end up here?

August 15th, 1917
Near Jefferson City, Missouri

The night air struck Simeon’s face, sweeping his bangs across his forehead. He propped his leg on the wooden boards in front of him from where he was seated on the porch swing, eyes scanning the dark Missouri night looking for nothing in particular. In the dark, he could see only
the whispers of the boundaries that made up his family’s farm, guessing that the large black lumps dotted periodically across the plane were the cows sleeping peacefully.

He had found himself a more frequent visitor of the old porch swing that guarded the front of the house he shared with his parents and younger sister, finding that only the late summer breezes hitting his cheeks could take his mind off his current troubles. On the inside of his right coat pocket he fingered the corners of paper that so plagued his mind.

Registration Card. It stated in bold, red letters across the top of the official document. He did not need to see the card now to clearly picture his scribbled handwriting across the top lines that officially made him a part of the United States Military. Edward Simeon Bear, from Jefferson City, Missouri, born August 1st, 1898.

The war in Europe and the building tensions for the United States to join it had been impossible for Simeon to ignore the last couple of months, even from his family’s perch of relative isolation in rural Mid-Missouri. Nonetheless, he knew from the debates raging in D.C. and Missouri’s nearby legislature that more than likely this war would eventually sweep him into its ever broadening reach, so he signed up before he could get drafted. It was his duty. But, as the shadow grew ever nearer, Simeon could not help himself but to wander off each night to the porch swing, sitting in silence.

He had stopped reading the reports from the front lines long ago, having trouble coming to a comprehension of the capacity of destruction being written about. The world that spoke plainly, and almost tiredly, of bombs uprooting hundred-year-old trees in an instant was not the same world he had grown up in. Past the far edge of his family’s farm he could see the first copse of large trees that eventually fanned out into the forest that surrounded the home. He
imagined it now, ringed in bright flames that popped and hissed, seeing in his mind’s eye a large pine shatter into splinters.

He exhaled anxiously, a breath that had been stuck for some time in his throat without his notice. Could these visions of horror that now swam in his mind truly speak of his future? It was not until the final letter of his last name had been clearly printed on the registration card that he realized he had volunteered to join the part of the world that was willingly tearing itself apart. In less than a year he would be submerged in a new world of chemical weapons, machine guns, and an enveloping sense of hardship that left no one outside of its suffocating cloud. But he had to sign up without being drafted to prove his commitment to a free world, to preserve the future for his younger sister. Or so he had once thought.

Simeon tried to conjure up the same pride he had felt while registering for the army, joined by a couple of local friends. In front of each other, they had all spoken excitedly about finally getting a chance to fulfill their obligation as citizens to the United States. He remembered his closest friend John, who he had known since they were both young, smiling as he told the story of his reaction to the U.S. finally joining the war effort.

“Ask my parents and they’ll tell you clear as I have,” he’d say, eyes shining brightly as he scanned the small ring of young men forming near the line to register. “that every time I saw a newspaper headline talking about the War, I would stop where I was and pray. Literally on my hands and knees wherever I was, that we would finally wise up and join.”

Having been in the direct presence of John in at least three occasions while discussing the war effort, Simeon knew firsthand that John had failed to let truth get in the way of his story. There had been no prayers asking God for his chance to prove himself, but simply other, even
bolder comments made easier from several thousand miles away from the front lines. Now the gathering recruits were all eager to prove that their bravery was no façade.

“If it was me,” started a thicker man with a mustache who appeared slightly older than Simeon, “we would’ve been over there since 14’. Kicking Wilhelm back under whatever rock he crawled out of.”

There were a couple of mumbled approvals from the group. John grinned widely and stepped closer to the man.

“And it is this exact spirit that we will introduce to our friend Wilhelm,” he said gesturing to the larger man. “This American spirit that refuses to allow the atrocities of the Germans to go unpunished. We will see how long they can stand in front us, these proud United States.”

Now a few cheers rose from the group of young men, all of them feeling an impenetrable courage that they would each try and carry with them throughout their days in the trenches.

Simeon and John introduced themselves to the mustachioed stranger who had spoken earlier with a shake of their hands.

“I’m Wyatt,” he said firmly but politely in response.

He was fairly new to the Jefferson City area, having recently started factory work after growing up with his family near the city of St. Louis. He did end up being slightly older than Simeon, albeit just 22-years of age, but he spoke with a clarity and a wisdom that most naïve young recruits like John and Simeon would have followed blindly. As the three made their way through the slow moving registration line, Wyatt regaled the two young men with stories of the bravery coming out of France.

John and Simeon listened with amazement, picturing themselves as the young, nameless soldier risking everything to carry a fallen flag across a smoking battlefield. They felt the weight
on their shoulders even in daydream as they carried wounded soldiers back to safety from a
terrible and unseen enemy, never stopping to rest until everyone had made it out of the dreaded
no man’s land. However, nothing stood out in Simeon’s mind as much as the stories about yet
another new piece of technology this war had developed: Tanks.

“Well first, they’re absolutely massive,” Wyatt began, spreading his arms broadly to
indicate the sheer propensity in scale. “Picture one of the biggest things with a motor you’ve ever
seen, and then slap one of the biggest guns you’ve ever seen on the top.”

John whistled with contentment.

“Sounds unbeatable,” he observed.

“That’s kind of the idea,” Wyatt replied.

Finally they made it to the front of the table where a man in his early thirties sat
unexcitedly in front of a stack of blank registration cards. His head had retained all the sharp
edges of the skull, causing his cheeks to jut out sharply, and giving his crew-cut head an even
more square shape.

*Will my head become that square looking when I’m in the army?* Simeon wondered to
himself as he pictured all the hard-edged crew cuts that came army issued. With little personality
or style on top of their head, and with mostly square jawlines and athletic builds, Simeon
couldn’t help but see an army of mannequins descending out of the sky upon the enemy.

“So you’re joining the U.S. army infantry?” the army recruiter said without wasting the
necessary energy that would have been required by making eye contact.

Standing in front of the recruiter that day, with the images of Wyatt’s rolling tanks still
fresh and active in his mind, Simeon could not find himself to answer the simple question. The
man in front of him sighed, frustrated after waiting almost 2 seconds, and finally looked at Simeon.

“Or are you still in the decision making process?” he asked sarcastically, stating clearly in his insincere smile that the answer to his previous question should’ve either been ‘yes’ or a hasty exit from his line and morning. Simeon still could not work up the courage to answer the man’s question as he felt a pocket of air steadily growing in his throat. He exhaled it all in a sudden when he felt John’s anxious bump on the shoulder.

“Hey Sim, you alright?”

Whether it was the bump on the shoulder or the encouragement Simeon never truly found out, but as he exhaled the trapped, stale air from his lungs he heard himself say,

“Isthereanythingwithtanks?”

John shot a confused look at the recruiter as if to show him that he also thought Simeon was insane.

“Come again?” the man said leaning his elbows forward on the table.

Simeon swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Sorry,” he said. “Tanks. I was trying to ask if there was anything I could do with tanks?”

The recruiter looked at John as if he had three heads.

“Son, the war effort in Europe just needs bodies. If you’re signing up we’re going to take you, that’s just how the situation is,” he said as if explaining something unknown to Simeon. “If you want to hold a rifle and sit in a trench you will. If you want to sit in a metal box with wheels firing a turret than you will. Just fill out the damn card and we’ll send you on your way.”

Simeon’s cheeks flushed with anger.

“Listen, I was just asking if-“
“Next!” the recruiter yelled, nodding off to an open space to beside the table where Simeon could fill out his registration card. John, who in truth could not find the grizzled soldier embarrassing his friend more enjoyable, stepped confidently up to the table.

“So you’re joining the U.S. Ar-“

“I’ll stop you there because there’s been a change of plans,” John said haphazardly waving his hand in front of the recruiters face. “I’ve decided to likewise join the tank division with my friend here.”

“As will I,” said Wyatt preemptively from his place in line behind John.

“Well doesn’t this touching moment just butter my biscuits,” said the recruiter, who clearly did not enjoy having 18-year-olds haphazardly waving their hands in his face. He ushered the three friends away to fill out their registration cards, not hiding the approval on his face as he watched them leave his table.

“First impression of the armed forces,” John said quietly with a sidewise glance to the recruiting line, “is that their customer service skills need serious grooming.”

They filled their cards out in silence, still riding their earlier bouts of confidence to give them the courage to sign their names. When they each had finished filling out the necessary information, John spoke.

“Well boys,” he said, “Erhem, gentlemen I mean. We are all officially apart of the U.S. Army.”

“Let’s show the rest of the world what Missourians can do,” Wyatt said.

They both looked at Simeon expectantly waiting for his one-liner to throw into their toast.

“Let’s give em hell over there!” he said finally.
He tried to smile confidently as they had but it ended up feeling as if someone stuck their own smile on his face. He luckily didn’t think his friends noticed that his fervor did not quite match their own. John and Wyatt both looked pleased that he had finally contributed, and at least partially pleased that his one-liner was not as creative or triumphant as they felt their own had been, and the three finally parted ways to make arrangements with their families.

Simeon hadn’t even made it halfway down the long, country road that led to his farm before the waves of impending dread started crashing down upon his youthful optimism. By the time he made it all the way home to now, where he sat ruminating on the porch swing alone, the tightness in his chest had swollen to the point where it was impossible to ignore.

He did not know how to describe the slow, yet complete, terror that gripped him, he just knew that nowhere within his own head could he find his usual repose in deep thought. He clenched his knuckles white on the arm of the porch swing, trying to steady his increasing heart rate.

*How can I face a war that already has the strength to break me from thousands of miles away on a porch swing?*

His fear of breaking down mentally over the course of his service was easily his greatest in these moments, even more so than his fear of never returning. He had read stories about the soldiers who never came back from their experiences in combat, and it was this that kept him awake so often now.

*Will I, the person who is sitting on the porch swing now, August 15th, 1917, ever be the same again as the person afterwards, when all is said and done?*

*Can my soul truly abandon me?*
It was with this final thought that Simeon realized he was already far more afraid than he had ever been.

March 13th, 1918

From Langres, France

Simeon limped with each step he took, trying in vain to find a comfortable landing spot for his foot amongst all his blisters. He wore a size 8 or 9 boot like every single other member of the army regardless of how large they were, and after more than 7 months of constant drilling and marching during training in Atlanta, Georgia and France, the bottom of his feet had been rubbed raw. Georgia was hell for the young recruits as their new officers slowly broke them down mentally in basic training in order to piece them back together as real soldiers. Furthermore, Atlanta in August when they started their training actually felt about as close to hell as they could get. Simeon hoped that he would never have to set foot in Camp Gordon again.

Luckily Simeon, John, Wyatt, and the rest of the recruits hoping to join the tank force had their basic training’s cut shorter than the regular infantry men, where they were then shipped to Langres, France to practice under Colonel George Patton specifically how to operate the Renault FT tank. It was cramped, difficult to maneuver, and as operator of the main battery on top of the tank, Simeon’s ears rang constantly from so many close range reports. Unfortunately for Simeon, the early models of the Renault FT did not have a turret that rotated 360 degrees, so it was a constant battle of communication between he and John, the tank’s driver, to get into a position where Simeon could aim. The turret was operated from a standing position behind the driver’s seat of the two-person interior. Straps from the wall wrapped around Simeon’s shoulders to give him more or less the comfortability of sitting.
As the gunner on the turret, Simeon also had the clearest view of the two of the battlefield, and so he was by definition the tank’s commander. A general of two. They practiced driving the tanks over deep trenches, firing the turret, and formations to use when in a group of tanks.

As Col. Patton and his officers explained on their first day in Langres, the request to form a tank unit had come down from General Pershing himself, who was amazed at how the British forces had begun to employ them in battle. It was now Patton’s directive to organize three tank battalions that they hoped would change the tide of the war in France.

Langres was a nice enough town, although he did not have any other place in France to compare it to, and it was filled with new recruits and veterans alike preparing for their next campaigns. Among the American Expeditionary Forces there were also several units of French soldiers. Some of them had been fighting this war since it began in 1914, and Simeon noticed that most of them moved slowly through the town, blank looks on their faces, some little more than husks. Several among them spoke enough English to converse with the American soldiers, and the differences between their stories of the war and those Simeon had heard prior became clear very quickly.

Joined by John and Wyatt in a local pub, they spent one evening chatting with some young French allies.

“A man woke up next to me one-night screaming,” one of the soldiers, Clémence began solemnly. “One of the rats mistook him for a dead body, and he woke to it gnawing on his leg.”

The three Americans watched Clémence as he remembered the gruesome story.
“But, even after he had woken up and chased the rat off, it never really left,” he continued. “It just hunched in the shadows and watched us, as if it wasn’t in the wrong place, just too early.”

Simeon took a long drink of the beer he held in his hands and tried to avoid making direct eye contact with the French veterans. Another soldier in Clémence’s unit, Emile, picked up with his own story.

“I was at the Somme,” he said and Simeon could tell that mentally he was there again. Looking off into space he began his story. “I watched my closest friends get cut down like stalks of wheat by machine gun fire. Row after row of mostly French boys were ordered straight into bullets, and that’s exactly where they went.”

There was absolutely nothing to dislike about the French soldiers, they were more or less friendly, but Simeon had trouble listening to the stories they told. They had been fighting almost the entire time, had the best insight to what exactly Simeon and his friends were joining. The stories they told terrified him. He wondered how he would stand in the face of such machine gun fire, walking forward towards certain death because that was the job seemingly required. It also pained him to hear the stories of Emile’s experience at the Somme, he couldn’t get the image of the rows of French and British soldiers getting systematically cut down where they stood.

“Luckily for me,” Emile resumed, “I took a hit from a machine gun in the shin within seconds of jumping out into no man’s land. From there I crawled back into the trench and to a hospital.”

_Luckily for me_, Simeon thought, amazed at how Emile seemed so thankful to be wounded.
He looked up and noticed that Clémence was staring at him intently, seemingly focused on the small cross necklace he wore. He shot Simeon a puzzling look and then returned to drinking his beer. Simeon wanted to leave the pub immediately, walk out into the night air and clear his head.

“Now let me tell you about the syphilis in the trenches…” began Emile anew as Simeon stood up abruptly.

“I think I’m going to head in early tonight,” he said nodding at everyone at the table. “It was nice to meet you guys, I’ll probably see you around Langres.”

They all nodded their goodbyes to him, except Emile who looked positively put-off that he was leaving during what was sure to be a riveting story about syphilis. Simeon heard him began again as he left the table, laughed to himself as he saw John and Wyatt lean in, clearly wired into the story.

That was the last time he saw Clémence and Emile for a while, until now, as Simeon continued to limp down the almost empty Langres streets. The door to a restaurant off to his left burst open abruptly, and out stumbled Clémence from enjoying an evening drink.

“Simeon!” he cried cheerfully as he spotted the young American. “Where have you been lately?”

“Stuck in the inside of a shoebox called the Renault FT, mostly,” he said shaking Clémence’s hand as he approached.

He roared with laughter, and Simeon guessed that Clémence might have been out this night for a drink or three. After he stopped laughing an awkward silence descended upon the two. Again Clémence’s eyes fell upon the silver cross necklace Simeon wore around his neck. Finally, Clémence mentioned it.
“So you’re a Christian then?” he said pointing at the small necklace.

“Yes,” he said holding up the necklace to give Clémence a better look at the silver. “Do you have a cross necklace as well?”

He had noticed several soldiers had brought some sort of religious memento or another, perhaps Clémence did as well.

“No,” he said flatly. “But…”

“What is it?” Simeon asked urging him to continue.

Clémence looked at the ground, and then started slowly.

“Can I ask you something friend?”

Simeon nodded. Clémence pointed towards the necklace.

“Do you really think it right?” he said. “To bring God to where you’re going?”

A chill formed in the pit of Simeon’s stomach. Suddenly he wished again to leave the conversation early.

“What do you mean?” he asked stalling.

Clémence curled his lips into a smile that was a lot sadder than it was happy. He now spoke so softly that Simeon had to take a step closer to hear all of what he was saying.

“It just seems wrong,” he whispered towards his feet. “To bring The Maker to the place where his creations are killing each other. Where he can watch his children…”

He never finished his sentence, and Simeon racked his mind for anything to say to the French soldier standing in front of him. Before he could Clémence looked up.

“Forget I said anything,” he said cheerfully, apparently back to his present state of jovial drunkenness. He pulled a crumpled hat out of his coat pocket and stuffed it on his head. With
another grin and one final salute, which Simeon returned, Clémence left and continued his way up the street, whistling as he looked up at the stars.

That was the last time Simeon ever saw Clémence, watching him whistle his way through Langres, France, leaving Simeon standing alone in the dim lamplight still holding his cross necklace.

September 13th, 1918
Near Pont-a-Mousson, France

“Where the hell are they?!”

Col. George Patton’s palpable anger exploded into the air around the rest of his officers. Simeon and the rest of his unit stood a safe distance away from the red faced man as he began his tirade again. The tank battalion was supposed to link up the morning of the battle with General Samuel D. Rockenbach, and here they still waited at the rendezvous point for the generals supporting infantry. Patton had been fuming as soon as the clock went one minute passed their desired meeting time.

“Mount Sec. has already been taken!” he yelled. “The left continues to move against the main town of St. Mihiel, while the right just god damn sits here!”

He spun away from his cadre of officers and raised his field binoculars to where smoke could be seen rising from Mt. Sec and beyond.

“And the right just god damn sits here…” he said again to absolutely nobody. He furrowed his brow and twisted his mouth, but it was a scowl of action, not anger.

“Like hell we will,” he turned around again and pointed at one of his officers.

“Lieutenant Morrison!”
“Sir,” Morrison said as he stepped closer.

“We need to get started now,” Patton began. “Take a few guys on foot and three tanks and head down the road towards Jonville. We’ll wait here until either the infantry show up or you make contact with the enemy.”

Morrison saluted and strode over to where Simeon and the rest of the grunts waited. He pointed at Simeon’s pair, Wyatt’s pair, and two more soldiers from the tank battalion and barked orders.

“You six mount up and start your tanks down the road to Jonville,” he said pointing over his shoulder to their objective. He pointed at a few more gathered men. “You four on foot. You’re walking with me.”

John, Wyatt, and Simeon all looked at each other, none of them knowing what to say. They decided on nothing, simply an exhale, a nod, and three silent walks to their respective tanks. The time was now.

After Simeon had strapped himself into the turret seat, John started the engine and, for the first time in an actual engagement, the tank battalion roared to life. The rest of the men who had not been chosen whooped and cheered as the battalion’s moment finally arrived.

“Give em hell,” Patton said to Lt. Morrison with a salute. Morrison returned it.

“We’ll try and leave some work for the rest of you to do,” he said. And with that, he and the other four dismounted soldiers began their walk down the road to Jonville. The three Renault’s chugged along behind them. As they continued on down the road towards real danger, Simeon couldn’t get a line from the song Battle Hymn of the Republic out of his head.

*God’s truth is marching on.*
He held the cross necklace to his lips, kissed it once for his family, again for those who had passed before, and once more for himself and his friends.

“Any sign of them?” John shouted from his place driving the tank. From down below the visibility of the driver was quite limited.

“Believe me,” Simeon shouted back. “You’ll be the first person I tell when I do.”

They rumbled on down the road for some time when suddenly Lt. Morrison raised his hand and dropped to a knee in front of the tanks. When the line finally stopped he ran back to John and Simeon’s lead tank. He climbed halfway up the tanks hull to where he could better talk to Simeon at the turret.

“I can’t see them exactly,” he started, nodding towards an approaching hill around a bend of the road to Jonville. “But our intelligence says we’ve gone too far to avoid them now. The woods up there have clearly been worked on.”

Simeon grabbed the pair of binoculars he kept next to the turret and scanned the nearby hillside. Sure enough, it was apparent that the Germans had been here, and recently. Trees and sticks had been clumped together at regular intervals up the hillside. Cover.

“They’ve created a lot of cover here seemingly for no one.”

Lt. Morrison nodded.

“They’re here. We just can’t see them yet. Machine gun nests I’ll bet,” he slapped the side of the tank. “this thing can take a machine gun bullet a helluva lot better than us on the ground can. You lead until you make contact, and we’ll follow in behind.”

Morrison scrambled off the tank and stood off to the side of the road with the foot soldiers. Simeon’s breaths grew shallower.

_We’re the bait._
Lt. Morrison stared at Simeon expectantly. He yelled to John.

“Alright John, we’re up,” he shouted down. “Just keep it straight and stop when I say so.”

He heard the gears of the tanks shift noisily and the Renault lurched back into reluctant motion down the road. The road bent slightly before beginning the climb, and Simeon knew that as soon as the tank became fully exposed to the hillside after the turn they would be in trouble.

Lt. Morrison saluted as the three tanks kept on. They approached the turn in the road, and then slowly began to ease themselves onto the road up the slope. Now they were in plain sight.

“John! Slow down for a second,” he yelled. He pulled the binoculars back up to his eyes and scanned the hillside. Still nothing. He was about to put down the binoculars, when somewhere from the hill he heard a boom, and saw the briefest flash of fire from its crest.

His throat caught and he dropped the binoculars with a crash down into the tank. He couldn’t hear anything but the sound of his terrified breathing.

*God’s truth is marching on.*

The ground in front of the tank shattered with a definite crack, the concussion of the blast slamming Simeon against the back wall of the turret.

“We have contact! We have contact!” he shouted as suddenly the hillside came alive with lead. He heard more artillery reports and knew they didn’t have any more time to sit in the middle of the road. “John get us the hell out of here!”

John slammed the tank into motion and dove off the side of the road into a ditch as the ground they were only just sitting on ruptured as a shell fell. The clumps of sticks and trees for cover had indeed disguised the many machine gun nests that dotted their objective. Simeon turned around looking for help and saw Wyatt’s tank begin to make the slow turn into the main
road. More bombs fell all around the two tanks, shrapnel whizzing past Simeon’s face and sparking the tank as it collided with the steel.

“Simeon!” he looked behind him and was shocked to see Lt. Morrison sprinting down the road towards him, bullets kicking the dirt by his feet as he ran. He made it somehow and crouched behind the cover of the Renault. He pointed at the hillside. “We’ve got to get some fire on that hill or we’ll be gone before the reinforcements arrive!”

_Restrictions? Patton!

He spun around and shouted commands back to John.

“Stay off the main road but start going up the hill, their 77s have the main road targeted. We’ll be fine if we can avoid a direct hit,” he said as the tank started up again. “We just have to hold on until Patton and the other tanks get here.”

Avoiding the main road made the tanks a lot harder to hit for the slow to aim 77mm artillery guns employed by the Germans on the hillside. It did nothing to stop the constant Prattling from the machine gun nests, filling the air with so many bullets that Simeon felt he could reach out and catch one if he so wanted. He did not.

The Renault finally motored to within range of the enemy. Simeon aimed the turret. Took a deep breath. The FT shook horribly with the blast of the turret, and Simeon watched in wonder as one of the machine gun nests in front of him exploded into splinters.

_I just..._ he thought to himself but couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence. He shook his head forcefully to clear his head and continued to blast the hill with the turret of the Renault. Little pockets of earth shot skyward, and the boughs of trees were shredded like paper as Simeon, now joined by the other two lead tanks, peppered the hillside. A machine gun bullet
ricocheted off the tank’s hull to his left and he felt something like fire slash across the side of his neck.

“Ah!!” he screamed almost falling through the turret and into the tank’s interior.

“Simeon!” John shouted turning around.

“I’m fine!” he yelled back as he felt a warm, thick stream begin to run down the side of his neck. “Keep forward!”

As many of them as there were, the poor machine gunners still could do nothing to the steel bodies of the approaching Renaults save for a perfectly placed shot at the operator of the turret. The Germans were beginning to panic when suddenly another five Renault FTs came charging out of the woods and up the slope. Simeon shouted and pumped his fist in the air as Patton’s reinforcements arrived.

“John! It’s Patton’s reinforcements!” he yelled down below.

He heard John scream in triumph.

“Well then let’s-“ he started as suddenly the ground around them gave way in a deafening explosion. The sound of metal being ripped apart was the last thing Simeon heard before the world around him faded.

September 17th, 1918

From the field hospital at St. Mihiel
“Screw you, you know that?” Wyatt said to Simeon after he had given him the news. “So you get some teeth, part of your ear, and almost your entire left side blown off and suddenly the army wants to send you home?”

Simeon smiled and coughed weakly.

“I’ve always been lucky I guess.”

Wyatt snorted.

“And now you’re leaving me with crazy Lt. Morrison and the rest of these guys.”

Morrison had continued leading the charge up the hill on foot, capturing an artillery crew with nothing but a colt .45 and two new bullet holes in his right hand. For this unit, “crazy,” actually was more of a compliment. Simeon glanced down the row of beds to where the more severe injuries were being treated. He nodded towards one bed that was surrounded by four sheet walls.

“Someone has to keep an eye out on John, I guess,” he said sadly.

Wyatt reached down and laid a hand on Simeon’s shoulder.

“John will be fine,” he said. “He’s too dramatic to die without a final goodbye.”

The artillery shell that fell from the German’s 77mm gun wasn’t a direct hit on Simeon and John’s tank, but it was about as close as one could get. It landed just off the front left of the tank, blasting the front of the tracks, and giving John the full brunt of the explosion. It tore apart some of the front half of the Renault, close to where John was sitting in the pilot’s chair. The explosion was close enough to severely damage Simeon’s left side from where he was behind relative cover at the turret. He could no longer hear out of his left ear because it had been partially blown off, and irreparably damaged. The left side of his jaw was still unworkable
after the doctors had worked to fix his shattered mandible. They said that eventually it would heal, but it was unlikely that his jaw would ever function the same.

And nevertheless, Simeon was lucky. The attack on the eastern most flank led by the tanks was an overwhelming success, capturing prisoners, machine guns, and artillery pieces alike as they continued to sweep their way towards Jonville. The western most flanks took more casualties, but had easily captured Mt. Sec and continued across the river Meuse and into St. Mihiel. Yet Simeon knew how lucky he was to be amongst the living after having stood amongst a hail of machine gun fire and artillery shells. Knew how lucky he was compared to….

*John.*

He could hardly bring himself to think about his friend just a few beds down the hall. The Renault had turned against him when the bomb fell, sending pieces of its broken hull flying inside the cockpit and into John’s lower abdomen. He had a severe head injury from how close the explosion was and from being thrown around inside the cockpit. The doctors had worked incessantly, and now although his injuries were not getting worse, John had still yet to wake up in the four days since the explosion.

The pain of thinking of his fallen friend hurt him in a way he didn’t understand, tore him apart at his core. Nothing about anything seemed right anymore. There was also something that Simeon hated about winning this battle. Just down the hallway one of his oldest friends lay dying, but Simeon could not avoid the sounds of victory the last few days coming from the town of St. Mihiel.

*Was the win worth it?*

Whether it was, or it wasn’t, Simeon cared little. If John was willing to give his life to this cause, then that *had* to mean something.
Didn’t it?

Wyatt finally said his goodbyes before rejoining the unit for what everyone hoped would be the last offensive of the war. He watched Wyatt leave, without John and Simeon in tow, and that’s when he finally broke down. He sobbed, racking sobs that hurt his damaged side. This man Wyatt, who he had known for little more than a single year, was now seemingly one of his only lifelines to his life before combat. He remembered the night before the battle, John laughing hysterically.

*We’re a long way from Missouri.* Simeon thought.

September 18th, 1918

From the field hospital at St. Mihiel

John passed away early in the morning of September 18th, 1918. His breathing had become even more labored as the night wore on, and by the time 3 a.m. had rolled around it finally stopped.

The doctors stopped by Simeon’s bed to give him the news. He was numb all over, too broken to even feel sad anymore. One of the doctors was holding a small envelope, slightly stained with blood.

“He had this letter with him,” he said extending it towards Simeon. “It’s apparently addressed to his family; can you deliver it to them?”

Simeon could not bring himself to make eye contact with the doctor or the scrawled handwriting across the front of the envelope. He simply nodded at the bedside table where he could lay the letter, and waited for the doctors to leave him be. Finally, he glanced at it.
So John didn’t see himself as invincible after all. He thought remembering his bravado when they first signed up for the army. He remembered the night on the porch swing, and thinking about whether he would be the same when he returned from combat. That seemed like a lifetime ago, but now, after more than a year, he knew for sure.

No. He would not be.
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