

GAS!

by

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Inspired by the poem Dulce Et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owen

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First Draft 2003

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OVER BLACK.

A faint ghostly howling wind. The distant pounding of artillery fire shatters the calm.

FADE IN:

EXT. FRONTLINE - FLANDERS FIELDS - DAWN

Darkness gives way to meager daylight beneath dirty gray clouds, and smoke.

Flashes of cannon fire on the horizon, the 'Ypress Express', reveal Hell on Earth: a vast, barren, mud-covered landscape, littered with water-filled shell holes and battle debris.

Smoke drifts lazily across the land. It rolls through shell blasted trees that stand like ghostly, emaciated, angel silhouettes, glowing in the fire of nearby explosions.

The smoke dissipates. The unforgiving horror is exposed.

Distant cries of the wounded and dying, stuck in no man's land, echo across the wasteland in-between artillery bursts. Twisted remnants of the recently dead lie hither and yon.

One body sags and falls limp, impaled on barbed wire. It's hand reaching for assistance, safety and -

EXT. TRENCH - CONTINUOUS

- a huge trench, showing signs of disrepair, spans the breadth of this Godforsaken land. With other smaller trenches visible behind it.

It's a hotbed of planned evacuation. Broken, retreating forces.

MONTAGE:

Worn-out buckboards lie overturned in the foul mud alongside scattered empty ammo cases. Rusty barbed wire snakes it's way up and down the lip of the trench.

Blood-spotted muddy Ladders, with missing or cracked rungs, stand upright, rotting against the trench walls as a chilling reminder of the Tommies who went over the top.

Mess tins, helmets, ruined boots and other army supply remnants, lay scattered around in the pungent watery mud.

Waterlogged dugouts (rooms), appear every few yards, carved into the mud walls. Some with humorous makeshift wooden name signs above the doors - like DUNFIGHTIN, TOMMY'S REST etc. One holds dead and rotting occupants, slowly being consumed by the muddy water.

A few fresh-faced recruits hand out new ordnance, food and meager medical supplies, to weary soldiers. Despite fresh supplies, the soldiers head off with downcast faces.

A cart is loaded with the dead as a fresh troop of Tommies walk grimly past it; witnesses to their impending fate.

Seasoned troops bustle, crouched over, as artillery and sniper fire picks off a few random careless targets. The vets merely duck occasionally; the new recruits dive and cower. DEAFENING EXPLOSIONS cover their SCREAMS.

Earth, from a shell hit, is catapulted into the air.

END MONTAGE:

EXT. RETREAT ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Down beyond a small rise, the trenches give way to a makeshift cart track limping away from the frontline.

A small convoy of WOUNDED TOMMIES turn wearily onto a mud-slick track, retreating from the front and following Red Cross "Casualty clearing station" signs.

Seven Tommies lead the way at the front of the convoy. Haggard, hunched over in defeat, shivering in the cold damp and deathly tired. Chin-strapped. They struggle awkwardly through the mud. Trench coats and equipment weighing them down. Some use crutches; all have sodden field dressings.

They duck, crouching as a 'Hissing Jennie' shell, passes over, sounding too close for comfort.

Behind them, four more able-bodied Tommies pull a cart laden with dead. Desperately they tug and heave-push the beaten up cart, avoiding obstacles and deep pools of treacherous ooze.

A lance-jack - his lapel reads: DAVEY - brings up the rear. 30s, but looks much older. War-aged and baptized by fire. On lookout duty, fingers his circular dog tags nervously.

A new whistle sounds, another Jennie, overhead, closer.

DAVEY
Remember lads, a loud one'll kill
ye.

They duck.

It hits mere yards away, over a small rise. The impact is deafening, flinging earth high into the air.

Fragments ping off their helmets and cowed backs.

The Tommies heave themselves up again with great agonising effort, cursing. Two in particular struggling more than most - ROBERTS and TUBBS - terminal malingerers and self-confessed bunk lizards.

ROBERTS
Stone the crows! Too bleedin'
close.

TUBBS
Those buggers never give up!

DAVEY
On your feet.

Tubbs spits into a muddy pool, glaring at Davey. Roberts notices and calms his pal, using his shoulder to lean on as he examines a boot.

ROBERTS
My feet don't half hurt. I'll do
anything to get back on home soil,
with a nice warm fire to warm them.

TUBBS
If I knew life was this bad here
I'd've stayed in the slums.
(Spits)
God and country. Fucking joke!

Roberts helps a comrade with his pack, a 'crow' (a wet behind the ears 'Combat Recruit of War', straight off the troop train) helping him to rise - his lapel reads: GRIEVES.

GRIEVES
Ta.

A glint of light, by his boots as Grieves pushes on.

Roberts sees something on the ground. Looks to see if anyone else saw it. He pats his empty haversack kit bag, thinking.

ROBERTS

You go on, I'll catch you up. Need
to lay an egg.

Tubbs nods and slogs on through the quagmire. Roberts
lingers.

Onward the Tommies go again in silence, the incoming shelling
stops.

Davey stops walking and turns. A view clears briefly through
mist and smoke, revealing the now distant front. Unnaturally
calm, save for the light wind. A brief shivery respite.

His eyes reflect cannon-fire flashes and plumes of earth in
the air. A momentary silent ballet of pyrotechnics, until the
distant barrage is audible - windborne.

He rubs his mouth with a filthy hand. Lifts his helmet and
mops brow sweat away; mesmerized once more by the onslaught.

A voice shouts from behind.

ROBERTS (CONT'D)

Oi mate, come on! We want to get
back this year like!

TUBBS

Get a decent cuppa - for a change!

Davey nods, takes one last gander and then double-times
towards the rear of the convoy. Stops short.

A faint whistle. He turns and scans the sky.

The whistle is louder now. It's coming their way.

Towards the convoy, running at full pelt, waving his arms, he
screams:

DAVEY

Down! Get down! Incoming!

Realisation dawns, at different speeds, among the troops.

DAVEY (CONT'D)

Get the fuck down lads!

The able-bodied throw themselves to the ground; some scramble
a few yards away to the nearest abandoned trench. A weary one-
armed soldier, with a game leg and crutch, leans on the wagon
and waits; head down. Resigned to his fate.

Davey lies in the mud, half submerged in the watery muck, head tucked and waiting as the whistling descends upon them.

Frantically scanning sky, they grit teeth and clench eyes.

Deafening hellion screams reach a crescendo, as three shells barely miss the soldiers, landing just several yards away; they hit with heavy thuds, just out of sight over a rise.

Then silence, save for the wind.

The Tommies stir, cautious and confused, looking to each other for an explanation.

TUBBS

Where's the explosion?

DAVEY

Something's wrong.

The Tommies rise slowly, warily.

Davey is the first to get to his feet.

The others look to him for answers. He signals, palm up: Wait.

DAVEY (CONT'D)

Stand fast. I'll take a butchers'.

He clambers up the edge of the nearest crater and peers over.

Gliding, floating eerily on the breeze, a ghostly, yellow-brown Mustard gas mist leaks from the wreckage.

His hand drops to his haversack buckle. Instant recognition.

He jumps back, sliding down from the lip of the crater, already tugging his mask free of the haversack.

DAVEY (CONT'D)

GAS! GAS! GAS!

He runs and stumbles towards the others.

DAVEY (CONT'D)

Get your bloody masks on now!

Startled, the Tommies scramble, frantically grabbing at their own bags and moving away from the crater.

Darting frenetic glances at the air around them, the quickest remove their helmets, don their masks and replace helmets again with practiced efficiency.

Davey is the first to make the final adjustment to his mask headstrap, locking it tight. He watches the others.

Roberts is next. He doesn't offer to assist Tubbs, who's struggling with his and cursing Roberts under his breath.

Some still fiddle with theirs, or drop them, hands shaking with nerves. But, one by one, as they pull masks on, the shouting and commotion rapidly dies out.

One good Samaritan helps the one-armed soldier with his mask.

They sight-check one another as the air becomes murky.

DAVEY (CONT'D)

C'mon, move. I don't need any more blisters today.

They form up into a convoy. DAVEY leads, signals to move. But hesitates as he looks past them.

At the rear, one lone straggler mumbles to himself: Grieves. The others turn to see what the mumbling's about.

Grieves turns to his comrades, waving an empty gas mask bag.

GRIEVES

I've got no mask! No fucking mask!

Shaking with bug-eyed terror, he drops his eyes from the men to the empty gas bag.

GRIEVES (CONT'D)

Where is it?

(Rummaging a hand within)

I had it yesterday!

He upends the empty bag. Nothing falls out.

DAVEY

Any spares?

The troops stare at the empty haversack and their comrade, then rummage furiously through their own kit bags.

A couple search in the watery mud, retracing their steps, in case he dropped it in panic. And others hurriedly check the kit bags of the dead, on the cart.

They find one with a bullet hole right through the filter and a missing eyepiece. Despite the flaws, they offer the mask to him.

He backs away, shaking his head in refusal.

GRIEVES

I want mine!

Grievess doesn't see the gas creeping around his feet. He grabs Roberts' lapels, shaking him imploringly. A soundless scream forming.

GRIEVES (CONT'D)

Where is it?

ROBERTS

(muffled)

Easy mate! How should I know?

Roberts pries his fingers loose. Grievess moves on, searching, grabs at Tubbs.

TUBBS

Oi!

Tubbs shoves him away.

The other Tommy's stop looking. Head's downcast. Unable to watch him digging around the trench. The mist deepening.

Davey rummages in the back of the cart. He grabs material and tears it free; hunts for a puddle, soaks it in muddy water. Then grabs the broken mask and tries to block the filter.

Grievess looks up, yellow-brown mist all around. He gasps, lungs hitching, eyes swelling and tearing up. He screams in agonizing pain as the gas takes hold. His lips blister.

Davey reaches for the convulsing Grievess, tries to cover his mouth with the makeshift repaired mask, filled with sodden material.

Grievess shrugs him off in agony, striking Davey in panic.

The others back away from Grievess and the gas as Grievess' hands fly to his eyes.

GRIEVES

I can't fucking see!

Davey tries again, dashing in to hold him, to cover his mouth. Tubbs tries to help; it's too late. A fine mist of blood and vomit sprays from Grievess' mouth.

GRIEVES (CONT'D)

My eyes! Burns!...

His breathing becomes ragged and less frequent. His body wracked by spasms.

GRIEVES (CONT'D)
Want... home!

It starts to rain.

GRIEVES (CONT'D)
(Gasping)
I don't... want... die here! Help
... Please!

Grievess reaches a hand out to Roberts and dies, one finger pointing, as the last dying breath leaves his body.

Davey places the mask over his fallen comrades' eyes.

The others look on. Silent. Rain pings off their helmets.

Tubbs collapses back on his heels, kneeling, head in his hands.

TUBBS
Why now? Our bloody tour's over!

Roberts stifles a sobbing (muffled) retch. Turns away.

Davey releases Grievess' corpse and he sinks into the muddy red water. One hand remains above the water, pointing.

Roberts averts his eyes from the pointing finger.

Wind and rain disperse the gas.

FADE OUT:

EXT. FRONT - LATER:

Grievess' dead body is pulled from the water.

Roberts furtively scratches at the painted name 'GRIEVES' - trying to remove it from the inside seam of a mask; gives up and then stashes it.

Grievess' body is lowered onto the cart, atop the other bodies.

Roberts follows behind, tries to avert his eyes, until he stumbles and is forced to drop to his knees.

Grievess eyes are open, accusing; his head sways with the rocking of the cart.

Roberts sobs. Tubbs tries to help him up, but Roberts is beside himself with guilt, pushes him away. Tubbs leaves him.

Behind them, his back to the rest, Davey's face still covered with mask, looks up at the sky that is reflected in the goggles.

A glimpse of clear skies for a second, between the clouds, and then darkness returns.

Robert's lags behind, wanting to be alone.

The distant relentless artillery bombardment illuminates Davey's back, as he wearily follows the rest, in silhouette.

Soon the convoy is swallowed by the smoke, as if they were never there.

FADE TO BLACK:

THE END