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Passchendaele, Belgium
November 7, 1917

Dear Brian,

Four hundred eighty-seven days, six hours, twenty-two minutes. Or something like that. Time means everything and nothing in this place. Everything, because each second that you are still breathing, you know that you could be dead the next. Nothing, because every second is exactly the same, as long as you're in this hell. As we both know, there are only two ways to truly get out of here: we win the war, or you die. Right now, the latter seems far more plausible, especially after what happened to Jimmy. I saw the whole thing happen, Brian, and I could do nothing to prevent it. You know I would have if I possibly could have, you have to know that! I would have taken the bullet for him. Everything just happened far too quickly.

We were fighting through the mud when it happened, Jimmy and I, along with three other men from our unit. We wanted a closer shot on the Fritz's front lines, to try and get at some of those bastards hiding in the pillboxes. I was leading, with Jimmy bringing up the rear. That's why no one noticed when he got caught in some deep mud. Somehow, I heard him call my name, and turned to see Jimmy, unable to writh himself from the waist deep sludge. I nearly laughed - a rarity in this place - but then I saw the Fritz soldier. Before I could even think of shouting out a warning, the son of a bitch shot him straight in the back of the head. That's when everything went numb. I knew Jimmy was gone, and I also knew I was going to kill that man who took my best friend's life. But that's all I knew.

The roar of the battle, the pounding rain, the cries of the fallen soldiers as they realized they were taking their last breath - I barely heard these anymore. I easily tore through the muck now, my desperate, burning need to avenge Jimmy's death seeming to make the mud insubstantial to me and only me. I easily gained on the Fritz soldier, who, upon realizing he was being pursued, turned and started firing at me. By some miracle, every shot blew past me. That's when he fell, losing his Mauser somewhere in the mess. I looked him directly in the face, straight into his blue eyes, and pulled the trigger. Then I pulled it four more times.

I'd killed before. But I'd never watched the life leave someone's face, knowing that it was my fault. Doing so made the kill seem more like murder than an act of war. I stood close as I took his life - so close, his blood drenched my hands and fatigues before the rain washed it away. I can still feel the blood on my hands. Sometimes I swear I can actually see the warm dark redness of it

dripping over them. I must have washed my hands at least a thousand times since this happened five day ago, but it's still there. I can't lie, Brian, I am ashamed of how I took his life. Yet at the same time I am ashamed that I am ashamed. This is war; I shouldn't allow myself to feel for the enemy. I took his life for Jimmy, but who is avenging this German's death? This place can drive you mad.

Then there is the mud, Brian. I can't get away from it. Remember when you, Jimmy, and I used to play in the mud by the river? Our vivid boyish imaginations could not have fathomed so much, nor could they have dreamt of such a formidable foe. The mud here is not a game as it was when we were young. No, it is yet another enemy, and a formidable one at that. The sludge is a monster that attempts to swallow you, and has taken the lives of many. Those who manage to keep their heads high trudge hour after hour, exhausted, through torrential rains and ceaseless, howling winds, knowing that they can't stop, because they have to get the Fritz before the Fritz gets them. However, that's not the worst part, not even close. No, the most horrendous part is fighting through the bodies, hundreds of thousands of them. At least, there seems to be that many. Faces are everywhere. I once dropped my gun, and when I reached down to retrieve it came up with a bodiless arm. This place, this Passchendaele, this is the darkest place on earth.

Reinforcements arrived yesterday, and our forces are told we took Passchendaele from the Fritz. Apparently, we've won this battle. Well, it doesn't feel like a victory to me. As far as I can tell, we haven't gained much. All I can see is a wasteland running with blood and scattered with the corpses of fallen comrades. I keep telling myself that these men died fighting for what they believed was right. At times like this, remembering why we are here is a feat in itself.

Four hundred eighty-seven days, six hours, fifty five minutes. Forever, and an instant. It doesn't matter how long we've been here, what matters is how long we have left. I hope to God I am home soon. I hope you get home safely. But Brian, will we ever be at home again the way we used to be? Jimmy's gone, there's blood on our hands, and it sure doesn't seem possible. How can home be the same, after seeing what we've seen, after doing what we've done?

Your buddy,
Charlie