

## War in the Wasteland

### 1. Birthday Conscription

Standing at attention on the crowded pier in Dover, Nigel Hopkins could not ignore the war of emotions gnawing inside his chest like rats at a rubbish heap. Hooking his thumbs in the straps of his rucksack, he tried easing the weight. On tip-tie, he strained to get a better look over the broad shoulders in front of him. The gangplank seemed miles away, and the column of khaki-uniformed soldiers waiting to board the troopship seemed endless. Back on his heels, Nigel adjusted seemed endless. Back on his heels, Nigel adjusted the strap on his Tin hat, and swallowed hard at the lump that had lodged in his throat three weeks ago.

“Ayes! Wallace! Spike! Perrett! Hopkins!” Barking in a penetrating monotone, as easy to ignore as an air-raid siren, a sergeant read off names of platoons and squads, and shouted orders – always shouting.

Crammed together like kippered herring in a tin, there was little space for the men to move. The back of the soldier ahead of Nigel was so close to his nose he could smell the bacon and buttered toast the fellow had eaten for breakfast – and the minty scent of his shave cream. His khaki shoulders did not move. Nobody moved. In three weeks of training, he’d learned at least one thing about soldiering: hurry up and wait. Or was that two things?

Rising like the cold walls of a prison, the topsides of a troop carrier towered above the pier. Nigel scowled. How were all these men going to fit in that boat? The pier was enshrouded with a vast sea of British wool and Tin hats containing men waiting to board one-time merchant ship RMS Amazon. Like the men, it too had been conscripted to serve the British Expeditionary

Force. Thousands of men, not hundreds. Crammed inside its iron confines, off to France, and war. As if finger painted by Gulliver's children, the troopship had been splashed with white, gray, and charcoal paint, apparently to create a camouflage that would be harder for German reconnaissance biplanes to spot from the air, or U-boats to pick off as the floating coffin rose and fell with the roiling swell of the English Channel.

Turbulent as the sea swell, the war of emotions heaved in Nigel's insides. For three years he had read the news reports of the war to end all wars. He had been fifteen years old August 4, 1914 when the Kaiser mobilized his troops, in defiance of international treaty, to invade neutral Belgium. Fifteen when King George V and his Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith declared war on Germany and the Central Powers and threw in the lot of all Britain with France and Russia in the Triple Entente.

Along with everyone else in England, Nigel had been thrilled with the prospect of war – at first. He could think of little else. Lying awake at night, he would imagine his exploits, his skill in marksmanship, his valor in the teeth of danger, his prowess in killing Germans, his rapid climbing up the ranks, a battlefield commission, a company command – giving instead of taking orders.

Nigel would imagine the king pinning the Victoria Cross over his heart, the swelling adulation of all Britain gathered in the streets to welcome her courageous son home from war. A speedy war, a decisive victory, a glorious triumph. Newspapers had been filled with little else. Fueling the initial euphoria, poets had sharpened their quills, enflaming the young men of Britain to volunteer and drive back the enemy...