Forgive, but never forget

Short story by: Santiago Almada

I wake up on a sunny, Monday morning. I had had a horrible dream about my close friends dying by my side in combat. I get up and stretch. I look in the mirror and notice my messed up short, black hair. My dark brown eyes go well with my hair. I'm not very tall but most obviously not the tallest in the army. I get into my uniform and head out for breakfast.

I go over and see my good friend Dave saving my spot in the line. "Hello," I say with my English accent. "Hey John," Dave replies. "General wishes to speak to us. Promotion might be coming." I am immediately lightened. We have a quick breakfast (the usual porridge with one or two raisins) and head for the general's tent. We find the general in his chair. "John, Dave," he says without looking up. "YES SIR!" we reply in unison. "At ease." General fires back. "You boys are going to work in the trenches today."

My heart races. I get a weird feeling in my stomach. "Your ride leaves in ten minutes. You may leave to get prepared." I am in shock. "Yes Sir", I reply with my voice cracking at the end. I look over at Dave, and he is extremely pale. He **hates** all forms of violence. He can't even stand the thought of taking someone's life in order to save his… We walk back to our tent in silence, only to find two machine guns sitting on my bed. We pick them up, quietly, when Dave suddenly says: "John, if this is my last act, the last thing I do, the last thing I accomplish, I want you to remind my family that I love them and hope that their future is bright and beautiful."

My jaw drops as if I could not bear to hear those words. "Dave", I exclaim, "how can you say something like that!? You have to look at this as an opportunity. This is an opportunity to show that you can handle these situations." I see Dave lift his head a little. "Dave", I continue, "nothing bad will happen. Trust me." He smiles. I then notice his dark, hazel eyes. "Okay", he finally says as we get into the car.

♦ ♦ ♦

The drive takes a good two hours. As we get near a small city, the driver announces: "Okay, boys, this is your stop". I say "Thanks!" and we both get out of the car. The city looks bleak, desolated. I know it's a French town, but I can't find any clue of a name. "Follow me", says a soldier that had ridden with us. We do as we're told and that's how we find the trenches. There is a nasty, unbearable smell of blood, sweat and death. To my surprise, Dave doesn't seem to mind, at least judging by his face. We put our guns around our necks and we head to our 'stations'.

We are assigned to look out towards 'No Man's Land' in search of any attacking Germans. We work for 5 hours straight and see absolutely nothing. I say to Dave: "Man, this is tough, sitting on these rocks for 5 hours. Where do we sleep anyway?" A man overhears my complaint and quickly replies: "Oh, are you guys new? Ah, freshmen... You sleep in the holes of the trenches. It may be uncomfortable but you'll adjust eventually." He chuckles and then keeps walking.

"Wow!", says Dave. "We sleep in the walls. Oh, and we get to use rocks as pillows! I hate this job!" We walk along until we find a couple of holes in the wall. That's when the attack begins.

♦ ♦ ♦

At first, all I hear is screaming: "Heads up!!", "Man down!!", "Attack!!". We get up quickly and sprint to our station. Dave is in awe as we see soldiers going down and bullets flying everywhere. "We have to go!", Dave screams. "Are you crazy?", I reply, "You'll get killed!!" But that doesn't stop him; he jumps over the trench wall and onto the battlefield. "Oh, no!" I exclaim and then I think: "*I have to go after him. It's what is right. I <u>have</u> to do this.*"

I jump over the trench and go in search of my friend. I hold the gun in my hands. I am shivering, but I know that if I stay still for too long, I could end up… I don't even want to think about it. I stumble around, amidst screams of pain and bullets flying everywhere. I look up and finally see my comrade. "Dave!!" I yell, trying to get him to hear me. He turns around and sees me. "Look out!", I scream. Dave turns, only to see himself confronted with one of Hitler's top assassins. "Shoot!!!" I bellow. Dave tries to get his gun ready but can't. The Nazi loads and shoots. "Nooo!!!!!!!!" I scream as I load and shoot the Nazi assassin, who falls down, instantly dead.

I sprint over to my fallen friend. "Dave, Dave, wake up, Dave. Stay awake, buddy, it's gonna be all right!" I see blood coming off his chest. Dave opens his eyes. *"He's alive",* I think, *"I have to take him back".* I put his arms around my shoulders, and carry him back to the trenches. I feel his blood oozing through my clothes. I suddenly feel an incredible pain in my left foot. I scream and fall to the ground along with my friend. I am just inches away from the main trench; I somehow manage to crawl, dragging Dave along until we eventually get there.

In the trench, we both are on the ground; I intimately know that my friend might not have too much time left. I rip off his shirt and reveal the wound. Dave screams in pain: "John….John…remember what I told you." I grab his hand and feel his pulse. "*Don't forget……*", he whispers, and then I cannot feel his pulse anymore. Dave has died. I turn around and only then I notice the pain in my left leg. I use what I had ripped off Dave's shirt to stop the bleeding. Then I pass out.

♦ ♦ ♦

I wake up in the hospital. I look around to see the general and all my friends and family standing by my side. I look at my shirt and notice all but 3 medals. "John, it's good to see you awake", the general says. I try to reply: "Yes si—". "John", he interrupts, "don't say anything. You have been honoured for your bravery, courage, and you have national honours in all of France. You are no longer required in the Army. It's time to go home".

I struggle to find any words to say. Finally, I somehow manage to whisper: "I know I should feel happy to be alive, but all I can think about right now is my fallen friend. I killed a man, trying to save Dave's life, but I have no regrets. After all, he was doing exactly the same thing, trying to take down an enemy; he was fighting for what he believed in, and I can certainly respect that".

"I saw many people die, on both bands, many of them even younger than me. They all left families who will cry for them. What's the difference between them and us? We're all the same, yet we end killing each other on a battlefield. My friend hated violence, yet he ended fighting in a war; I bet many of our enemies have gone through the same situation. I know I will eventually forgive them, but I will never forget what we have been through".

The End