

AT DAWN
by
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FADE IN:

EXT. A RED FLARE BURSTS IN THE NIGHT SKY

Red smoky contrails illuminate a horrific death-scape below. ARTILLERY SHELLS in the distance.

Crimson surges expose rotten soldiers, horses and artillery stuck in a vast muddy grave. In the recess of a howitzer: a motionless body -- a CORPSE.

The Corpse's eye glows red. Flares reflect off the retina. The eye follows a flare down -- through bullet-riddled trees.

QUIET. Void of life. A BREATH. A HAUNTING WHISPER: CORPSE'S VOICE SINGS, "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire."

MAN'S VOICE / MAC
Whole battalion, hanging on the old
barbed wire...On the barbed wire.

Corpse's eyes dart upon a message satchel strapped to his body. Double-checks it -- it's safe. Camera reveals his British badges. It not a corpse. It's SERGEANT "MAC" MACKENNA, 28, a grizzled "Yank" in a British Army uniform.

The flare's reflection cools in his eyes. His mud-stained body trudges in mud, carries the satchel like the Grail.

Above, the flare embers burn out. DARKNESS --

TITLE: WESTERN FRONT. PASSCHENDALE. JUNE 26, 1918.

EXT. SHELL HOLE BEHIND THE BRITISH FRONT LINE - NIGHT - LATER

METERS IN FRONT OF MAC --

-- A BRITISH TRENCH -- the only barrier between him and NO MAN'S LAND. Grey smoke and shadows linger. EERIE SILENCE.

MAC
Bonnie!

A British rifle whirls toward Mac. Mac drops in a shell hole. BANG. A bullet hits him in the chest.

His fingers follow the hole in his jacket. Inside, his bare chest is red -- no bullet hole.

He pulls out small pieces of shrapnel. Blood oozes. A broken metal harmonica falls into his hand. Behind it, a tin of Bully Beef holds the lodged bullet. He exhales.

MAC (CONT'D)

Who's the damn asshole that shot at me?! Give me the countersign!

TOM

P...P...Prince Charlie.

Mac tosses the tin the air -- a distraction. German BULLETS HIT the tin. Mac crouch runs from shell hole to Trench, disappears, as enemy BULLETS SPRAY past him. Allied guns return fire.

INT. COMMAND POST - BRITISH TRENCH - MOMENTS LATER

A wooden plank reads BUCKINGHAM PALACE. Unceremonious. Wet.

ENTRENCHED BUNKER

Lantern lit. TWO BRITISH CAPTAINS (MALORY & THOMPSON) TALK to LIEUTENANT COLONEL TOWNSEND.

MALORY

Found two more deserters.

TOWNSEND

Shoot them with the others.

Mac enters.

TOWNSEND (CONT'D)

MacBolla.

MAC

Lieutenant Colonel Townsend.

Mac hands Townsend the letter. He reads it. Thompson, Malory and Mac talk in asides to each other.

THOMPSON

I bloody bet reinforcements are smoking their Jack Johnsons back at Command.

Mac is SILENT.

MALORY

Our asses hang on the line and you won't give up anything. Will you?

MAC

Haven't yet. Won't start now.

MALORY

You never do.

TOWNSEND

Fritz gains more ground each day.
Two days ago the front line was
half a mile east. Now we're on it.
Some tight-ass Commander Heinrichs
leads the Krauts and won't give me
a centi-fucking-meter. Cocksuckers.

He reads from the letter.

TOWNSEND (CONT'D)

"Reinforcements delayed. Hold the
line."...You made it through.
Bloody Hell.

Malory and Thompson whisper to each other.

THOMPSON

It's a damn sight easier for one
man to get through.

MALORY

MacBolla's the only runner getting
through now.

TOWNSEND

I need an army of MacBollas, not
nancy boys. Damn it! Get the rum.

Captains pull out jugs. Townsend scribbles a letter.

TOWNSEND (CONT'D)

Get some rest, MacBolla. You're
running a letter back at 0600.

MAC

Yes, sir.

EXT. TRENCH - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Wet. Gloomy. MEN wade in knee-high water. Body parts caked
into muddy walls. Above, a vast sky.

MAC

Who sprayed bullets at me?

MIXED ALLIED SOLDIERS sit by a muddy nook: a wall of slots that houses letters and keepsakes. SOLDIERS see Mac; their faces go white. In front of Mac is TOM, 19, a new US recruit, farm fresh.

TOM

S...sorry, Sir. You're from the States. How come you're wearing a British uniform?

MAC

Save it for the ladies.

Mac hands out letters to the soldiers. Compared to muddy, bloody and bandaged soldiers, Tom looks like a new penny. JAMES, 25, a U.S. Soldier and PAUL, 23, a British Soldier, old timers, overhear. James hits Tom.

JAMES

You'd curse us all if you killed MacBolla.

TOM

Mac...Bolla?

PAUL

...Bolla means "ghost."

On the bright side...

MAC

It'd be his only kill before the Jerries get him.

James smells his letter.

PAUL

And God made woman. How come you never get a letter, MacBolla?

MAC

Just fancy words on pretty paper.

JAMES

MacBolla sleeps with the Valkyrie.

MAC

More than I can say for all of you.

All letters handed out, Tom's hands are empty. Mac hands him the broken harmonica.

INT. TRENCH - LATER THAT NIGHT

SOLDIERS LAUGH, drunk. Paul pours rum in tin cups. They talk by the muddy wall of letters and trinkets.

Aside, Mac tends to his wound.

PAUL
MacBolla, give us some music.

MAC
Thank Bullseye over there.

They look at Tom.

JAMES
You don't shoot your own. Hell, if you're here long enough you may ask one of us to shoot you. But Bible is you don't shoot MacBolla.

PAUL
He's got one foot here; one with the boatman.

TOM
You and your superstitions.

JAMES
You got odds on how many missions a runner does before he meets St. Peter?

Tom shakes his head "no."

JAMES (CONT'D)
One. MacBolla is two years behind the lines.

Mac bandages his wound. Last piece of harmonica shrapnel out, a trail of blood on his chest leads him to a photo of JANE, pretty, 22. The photo is splattered in red and shredded from shrapnel.

MAC
Damn.

Tom appears like a dog with his tail between his legs.

TOM
Is that your girl?

MAC
What's it to you?

TOM
She'll send you another.

MAC
Doesn't matter. Lost her long ago.

EXT. TRENCH -- 0:600 -- NEXT MORNING

Twilight before dawn. RAT-A-TAT of bullets. Mac fires his rifle over the parapet. He sees --

NO MAN'S LAND

Dying men burn on the barbed wire. Germans cut through the barbed wire, rushing toward the trench.

IN THE TRENCH

SOLDIERS fall from gun shots. Thompson SHOUTS at Mac.

THOMPSON
Get your bloody ass over the wall
and deliver that letter.

MAC
Not leaving the men. I'm not
running.

THOMPSON
Move your ass or I'll shoot you
dead and make you the ghost they
say you are.

Mac turns away and continues shooting at GERMANS. He sees --

NO MAN'S LAND

He shoots a GERMAN SOLDIER dead. In the --

TRENCH

Thompson pulls his gun on Mac, who still shoots.

THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Three...Two...

CLICK of the gun trigger. Mac turns, sees the gun barrel.

THOMPSON (CONT'D)

...One...

BANG -- a gun shot. Blood splatters Mac's face. Pause. He wipes the blood out of his eyes.

Thompson falls on top of Mac. Above: GERMANS shoot down at all BRITISH SOLDIERS. It's a turkey shoot.

MOMENTS LATER --

From under Thompson, Mac sees German BOOTS run over the wooden plank atop the trench. Mac is alone.

MOMENTS LATER --

WAR SOUNDS moved past Mac. He slumps Thompson off him. Suddenly, Mac sees LUKAS HERRMAN, 26, a German Soldier. In the trench, Lukas' gun is trained on Mac. It's jammed.

Lukas aims his bayonet and rushes. Mac parries his strike. Hand-to-hand fighting. Mac fights for his life.

Lukas is a superior trained fighter. Mac is scrappy. Wet mud gives Mac the upper hand. Lukas stabs Mac in the shoulder. Mac turns the blade, FATALLY stabs Lukas in the stomach.

Lukas' helmet comes off. Mac sees his face. They look similar. A defining feature, a scar on his face -- a schmiss. Mac drops him to the ground.

Lukas speaks German with ENGLISH SUBTITLES.

LUKAS

Far behind German lines now.

MAC

Go to Hell.

LUKAS

Where do you think we are?

He looks through the periscope -- more Germans further down.

LUKAS (CONT'D)

You Americans. Think you're cowboys. Never know when you're defeated.

Mac turns on Lukas, SPEAKS TO HIM IN GERMAN.

MAC

And you Germans have more arrogance
than Custer at Little Big Horn.

Lukas musters a chuckle. They speak English, Lukas with a
German accent.

LUKAS

I die by the hands of a man who
speaks German.

WHIZ BANG. The wall of letters explodes. Burning letters
shower down. Letters fall through Mac's hand like snowflakes.
In the trench, he sees everyone is dead...everyone but Lukas.

Pause.

Lukas' wound. Mac stops the blood with a rag. Lukas watches.

MAC

It's not so bad. There's hope.

LATER THAT NIGHT --

Lukas chokes on his blood. He musters energy to get a letter
from his pocket. A sepia tone photo falls out. Mac picks it
up. It's a woman: Aurelie, 24 -- beautiful, full of life.

LUKAS

You have hope?

Pause. Mac really looks at him.

MAC

No. You?

LUKAS

Aurelie, my fiancée, does.

Lukas is lost, almost dead. He MURMURS, talking to a lover.

LUKAS (CONT'D)

Jeder Sonnenaufgang, denke ich an
Sie, Aurelie, da wir warten...

Lukas hands the letter to Mac.

LUKAS (CONT'D)

Please.

Mac puts Aurelie's photo and letter to Lukas' chest.

MAC
I deliver this, and I'm dead.

LUKAS
Are you not already?

LATER THAT NIGHT --

Mac LIGHTS A CIGARETTE. He takes a drag. He holds it up to Lukas. He inhales -- barely breathing.

NEXT MORNING - DAWN

Ash falls like snow on Mac's hand. His fingers hold the old cigarette. Mac wakes up. Lukas leans on him -- dead.

Mac looks at all the DEAD SOLDIERS around him: James. Paul. Tom. OTHERS. A gaping hole instead of the nook of letters. Burned letters litter the mud and bodies.

MOMENTS LATER --

-- Mac buckles Lukas's belt on his own waist-band. He wears German uniform. Lukas now wears his.

Mac puts his dog tags around Lukas' neck, and Lukas' dog tag around his own neck.

Mac wears a German jacket. AURELIE'S LETTER/PHOTO go in it.

MOMENTS LATER --

He crawls to the parapet --

EXT. NO MAN'S LAND - DAWN - CONTINUOUS

WOMAN (V.O.)
With the first glimpse of light,
you greet me as your Beloved.

-- At the top of the parapet, Mac looks out --

Darkness lifts. BRILLIANT ORANGE and GOLD. Dawn spills across carnage. Thousands of dead bodies litter the scorched earth.

THE HORRIFIC SITE LOOKS OTHERWORLDLY AND BEAUTIFUL.

Mac sneaks over the top. BOOM. A stray shell goes off. GOLDEN LIGHT floods his eyes --