

When The Guns Fell silent

By R. A. Hollingsworth

To Victory, To Glory

Chapter 1

8th September 1915 - Outskirts of Etaples, France

War — the dream he and Kurt had once carved out of sticks and air rifles, never fearful of the ultimate outcome. Now Sidney's Webley fired real .455 cartridges. Somewhere, Kurt's Luger fired 9mm.

That faint crackle on the wind wasn't just a far cry from the noises Sidney heard on fine autumnal nights in Stoke; It was everything he lived for.

The grasshoppers called, a rustic odour from burnt wood, and when the wind blew, it brought a distant thunderstorm.

He dipped his pen — the ink trembled on the nib. He hadn't written since leaving England.

Dear Vera,

I have been in France for nigh on two minutes, and every second I've spent wondering if Kurt has his gun pointed at me; if, when I first roar at the enemy, my friend will be the one to kill me? I didn't expect to be thinking this on the eve of battle. The thought of doing something so grand, of great importance, is marred by the thought of ultimate betrayal.

Even visits from Kitchener, and the King, have done little to tip the scales of pride in my favour. This isn't the glory I sought. I know not whether these words will comfort or frustrate you, but you were right. I should have stayed home, because what weighs heavier in my mind is not a bullet from Kurt's gun hitting me in the heart, but it's one from mine into his.

I'll do my duty for the King. I'll keep my promise to you. No matter the circumstance.

Sidney held his pen on the paper; ink spread as if a tear fell onto the page.

If he were to survive, he could not sympathise with a German.

Giles's head and shoulders — which could hardly fit into Sidney's field of vision — peaked over the ladders. "They're you are," his voice boomed, like the moos which still clung to the walls of the barn.

He makes quite a target for a sniper.

Sidney pressed his finger on his lip and shushed, nodding his head toward Jimmy, who faced the other way in his bed.

A smile crossed Giles' lips, like when he connected with a tackle in rugby. He crept over to Jimmy's bed — a task with his heavy feet — and unclipped his webbing and pistol holster.

Sidney shook his head, but Giles' smile grew. He leant his gear over Jimmy and dropped them on the sleeping Lieutenant.

Jimmy jumped out of bed, hollering curses that Giles would deem polite. "What are you doing?" The thin strands of black hair fell into his eyes and strands of his weak moustache needed pruning. He looked like a drunk, but drunk? Jimmy was not. Sidney knew from the first time they met at Sandhurst that liquor had never touched his lips.

"You're on duty, Lieutenant," Giles said. His lip shook; his authority faltered. He looked at Sidney, who matched his quiver. They both burst out laughing.

"I'll tell Murphy about this," Jimmy said, throwing Giles's gear on the ground.

Giles walked to his bed and started removing his boots. "I've had to discipline one of your guys, Sidders."

"Oh, yeah." Sidney picked up his pen and reread the last line of his letter, but the words weren't processing in his mind. "Why's that?"

“I caught him fighting with one of those Oriental chaps—”

“They’ve just fought at Neuve-Chapelle; I’m surprised he’s not dead.”

“I’m surprised I broke up the fight.” Giles sat back at home as in Stoke. “Murphy had seen. Chaining him to a wheel made up for it.”

“What was his name?” Sidney shuffled for another piece of paper. “I shall make a note.”

“Private Billy Bailey.”

A frog jumped up Sidney’s throat. “Billy Bailey?”

“Mhmm.”

Sidney pushed the chair from underneath him and marched to the ladder.

“That’s not a problem, is it?” Giles said.

Sidney foresaw how little a damn Giles would give if it were a problem.

As Sidney turned to descend the ladder, Jimmy’s eyes flickered towards Giles. He scrambled to put on his boots. “Wait for me.” Jimmy said.

At the bottom of the ladder, Sidney rested his forehead on the wooden cross. *Billy Bailey*. The problem in his platoon since before he met him. *You must protect them, Sidney. You must. They are all I have.* Mary-Anne’s voice echoed through his head.

He centred himself when he heard Jimmy approaching the ladder. “Hurry, Davies. I need a smoke.”

They walked out of the barn into the camp, where North Staffordshires sprawled like an infestation of bedbugs on the French countryside. Fires burnt, lighting up khaki groups playing card games and smoking cigarettes to the sound of harmonicas. Sidney opened his cigarette case and placed one in his mouth before offering one to Jimmy.

Jimmy raised his hand, refusing.

The rolling thunder on the wind. Not one gun, or a few, but the whole of the frontline congregated into one distant storm. Jimmy shivered.

“You should have worn your jacket.” Sidney took a drag of his cigarette. The smell of tobacco burned through his body as if Vera had wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s not that.” Jimmy folded his arms. He was a pace behind Sidney as they walked.

“Then what is it? You’re not windy, are you?” Sidney said, knowing full well that Jimmy was windy.

“I’m not windy.” Jimmy said, with a firm finality to the suggestion. “I just don’t see the sense of war.” He looked at the group of NCOs who were laughing outside their tent.

At Sandhurt, Sidney tried to like Jimmy. The Black silky hair, his softness, the similarity to Kurt was uncanny. He was too naïve for this world. But unlike Kurt, Jimmy was sharp and unwilling.

By graduation, he hoped to God they’d part, but to war they headed. Together.

“You’ll see the sense of it soon enough.” Sidney said.

“How can you act so sure?” Jimmy’s face searched for whatever resoluteness Sidney held.

Sidney flicked a smile onto his face — it wasn’t genuine. He’d be ready if Kurt wasn’t aiming at him through iron sights that shot real ammunition.

He might have been sent to Russia anyway.

“What we’re doing, where we are, we will be immortalised. Whether we live or die. Isn’t that a privilege?” Sidney said.

The thin black hairs of Jimmy's moustache twitched like a nervous leg, and he swiped his hair from his eyes. "Every time I hear a rattle or a bang, I wonder if that's the sound of someone dying."

"Sound travels slowly. So when you hear the bang, the person who might have died, will have died minutes ago." Sidney puffed his chest and held his cigarette from his mouth.

"Is that supposed to ease me?" Jimmy stared wide-eyed.

"People die. Whether nicely in bed next to their wife, or after they have fallen off the white cliffs of Dover. This is all the same; when you hear thunder rolling, no-one is dying in that moment. They are already dead. Like the person in China who got trampled by a horse, or the man in America whose heart suddenly seized."

"I've looked at the casualty figures this year; the old guard—"

"Jimmy, it bears not to dwell." Sidney said, offering as kind of a smile as he could muster.

Jimmy scoffed, and his legs hurried to keep up with Sidney.

And there he was. Billy Bailey. Tied to the spokes of a wheel, arms splayed like Jesus Christ. Sergeant Evans guarded him, but a few of Billy's mates sat out of the firelight, teasing him with pulled faces. Fred Bailey, his younger brother, only 16-years-old, sat on the outskirts of the group, not engaging in the banter. Sidney flicked the butt of his cigarette onto the ground.

"I'll handle this, sergeant." Sidney said.

"He's been fighting; I'd have him in a —"

Sidney put his hand up to stop Evans from talking. "Very good, sergeant. I'll handle this."

Evans scoffed, then tightened into a salute and walked away. Sidney could hear him muttering, but he couldn't decipher the words. He didn't care. Instead, he started loosening the chains around Billy's arms. Billy gave no gratitude. In fact, he wouldn't meet Sidney's eye.

Jimmy tugged Sidney away, pulling him with more conviction than he's shown ever. "What are you doing?"

"We have just got here; I'm not being seen as the platoon that has unruly—"

"He's been fighting—"

"I will handle my men, Second Lieutenant," Sidney said. Firm, but quiet enough that the enlisted men wouldn't hear them. He continued unchaining Billy.

When he freed Billy, he tried to walk off to his mates. Sidney grabbed his arm and yanked him into the dark, away from the firelight. Jimmy tried to follow, but Sidney used his free arm to put a stop to him. "Go back to the barn, Lieutenant. You're not needed here."

He heard Jimmy scoff, and then the sound of his footsteps walking away on dry grass.

"Fighting with the Gurkhas?" Sidney said. He heard his father's voice. "Do you know how far they've come to fight our battles?"

Billy was looking away, scrunching his face in a display of pure hatred. For the Gurkhas? Why would he hate them so much?

"I'm doing my best for you here, for Mary—"

"Don't you mention my sister." Billy's saliva splattered his face as if someone had hammered a tomato right in front of him.

Sidney had played rugby all his life; he was the most naturally athletic player on every team he played. Playing for Wales, he was the tallest toothpick in the back-line of the photo, but this scrawny lad — the same height as Mary-Anne — could've had him.

“Sort yourself out, Private. I won’t always be here to cover for you.”

“Fuck. Off.”

Sidney could slap him, as mother did when he misbehaved, but an evening gust blew the fire, carrying light over Billy’s face. He saw her. Mary-Anne. He couldn’t bring himself to look at such pain on her face.

He pushed Billy away, towards his mates, who received him as a hero.

He wasn’t the officer he imagined he’d be, but he only ever imagined himself — lance in hand — leading his men at the enemy.

When Sidney got back to the barn, he could hear Giles snoring from outside, as if a lively horse was housed inside. Up the ladders, Jimmy was in bed too, back turned. He might be asleep; he might not be. Giles turned over, and the dust snowed from the rafters.

Where was Kurt? Was he under artillery fire? Was he warm in a barn like this one? Kurt would write a novel about this, or he’s writing romance poems to the first girl he’s attached to. Sidney chuckled to himself, but cheery? He was not. Instead, he wished he could clink a glass with his best friend.

Candle wax filled the candleholder. He dipped his pen in ink.

Hair like autumnal oak leaves. Lips red and puckered. He kissed them.

I’m sure you’re eager to hear about France? I’m afraid I can’t give you stories of walking the Champs-Élysées. I suppose it would be comparable to Shoreham where I’m billeted, but a little more quaint, a little dirtier. The smell of sweat and soil follows you here, Vera — it clings, even to sleep. Not a place to bring someone so fair as

yourself. The roads are so chewed up that the engineers have their work cut out for them — I've never seen so many trucks and horses.

The people have been friendly enough. Most can't speak English at all; some know broken English, and such jumbled conversations have taken me back to when I was a child meeting Kurt for the first time. At least the sale of wine seems universal, and while their town is being chewed up, their purses grow heavier.

Sidney stewed at the sound of a crackle riding a gust. *I will be a soldier*, he heard his ten-year-old self say. *I will earn a Victoria Cross*. He laughed remembering Kurt's bewildered face, not understanding a word he was saying.

Vera. This letter is to Vera.

Oh, how I miss you, my fine wife. I find my fingers tracing the fine lines of your body while we're lying in bed at night. But more than that, in the monotony, I crave to know what you are doing day to day? Do you think of me often? The front is over 100km away, and I suppose I will have to march it. Thoughts of you will be all too prevalent in my mind.

What we may do in front of the fireplace, the light touch of your fingertips that shakes my breath like a dunk in frozen water. I'll think of the warmth that our pressing skin would offer.

Then I'd have to stop, because I'd be pointing to the front and not with my finger.

Sidney heard footsteps up the ladder. He instinctively turned — Captain Murphy.

He took his cap off and placed it under his arm. "Jones, what are you still doing up?" He whispered.

"Finishing this letter for my wife, sir."

"There's a lad in your platoon—"

“I’ve addressed it, sir.”

“Please, Murphy’ll do. You should get sleep, son.” Murphy’s heavy hand fell on Sidney’s shoulder. “We have long marches ahead of us.”

“Where to?”

“That I can’t tell you, but it’s not Ypres, thank God.”

Sidney flickered a smile that did not last. He supposed Neuve-Chapelle wasn’t Ypres; fighting could happen anywhere, after all. But the Waterloo, the Trafalgar was Ypres. “Thank God.”

“Finish your writing, and get to bed, son.”

Sidney watched the captain climb into his bed by the open barn window.

I must wrap this letter up, the yarn I have spun, ha. Know that you will warm my bed tonight.

I love you, and I miss you.

Yours lovingly,

Sidney.