

## **WE ARE THE DEAD....**

By India Edghill

“The war will be over by Christmas.”

—Famous last words

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In Flanders fields

IF HE SURVIVED THE NIGHT, tomorrow would be his fourth Christmas Day in the trenches. He had survived three Christmases in this purgatory of mud and noise and blood they called the Western Front. Three ice-cold Christmas Eves, three frozen Christmas mornings. Surely he could manage to live long enough to mark one more anniversary of the birth of the Prince of Peace?

Already he had outlived his two brothers, his best friend, and half his classmates at Trinity. He had even outlived his youngest sister. Lily had been a VAD nurse; sacrosanct. A nine-inch shell had killed her and taken half a field hospital ward with her. That had been last spring, just before the brief cease-fire that had celebrated Easter.

Simon firmly closed away the memories of the endless dead and he tried desperately to forget the count of his survival. It was bad luck. Instead, he bent once more to his self-imposed task: the creation of a star. A Christmas star; a beacon to mark the turn of another frozen year. For this year, this dead Christmas of 1917, there was to be a tree. Somewhere in the mud and despair in which they existed, Sergeant Bunter had found — no one had dared ask how — a holly tree. More of a bush, really, if one were honest, and a bush more dead than alive at that. But some of the holly leaves still grew green —

“And parts of it are excellent,” as Peter had gleefully remarked upon confrontation with the wretched object.

“So they are,” Simon had said, and, “Well done, Sergeant.”

And so for once they would keep a proper Christmas. Each man of Simon’s squad had been told off to produce a suitable ornament for the miraculous tree —

“No questions asked or answered,” Peter had carolled, and then giggled in a girlish fashion that would once have appalled Simon.

But such conventional reactions belonged to the living, not to the walking dead. Peter had come to France only two months ago, arriving at Simon’s hard-won section of the trenches on November First —

“All Saints Day,” the newcomer had informed Simon, and handed him the paperwork without which Those Above thought the war could be neither fought nor won. “But I’m no ghost, I assure you,” he had added with a too-clear-eyed glance around the room Simon’s men had dug deep into the mud of France.

That gay defiance was true no longer; eight weeks of hunger and cold, mortar barrages and fleas, sickness and stench, had begun the rot. Peter’s first go Over the Top had completed his destruction. Untouched himself, Peter had — as Simon’s letter of dutiful commendation had phrased it — “nobly and without thought of his own safety killed two of the enemy and carried Private Mellors back to the safety of our own lines.”

Or, in plain English, Peter had ripped the throats out of two German soldiers no older than first-term schoolboys with his bayonet and dragged a screaming man across one hundred yards of shell-poxed dirt, leaving a trail of blood and flesh behind.

The C.O. had put Peter in for a medal. Private Mellors had died five minutes after being tumbled into their own trench. And all that was left of Peter was a pleasantly witty ghost.

Don’t think, Simon reminded himself, and picked up another empty tin. His contribution to the Christmas cheer was to be a star to grace the makeshift Christmas tree. A silver star, bright and false as hope.

A star created of bully beef tins clumsily banged into hammered brightness with the butt of a Webley service revolver. When it was finished, he would wait until Christmas morning dawned, and then he would tie the star to the top of the half-dead holly tree.

And celebrate his fourth Christmas spent in the mud and ice of this trench near what was left of Cambrai, France.

The poppies blow

Another day over and done with. At first she had tried to keep count, but now she could no longer remember how long she had been here. Nearly a year, she thought, and thought that only because she had heard some of the older women whispering that it was Hanukkah again next week. She didn’t know how they knew that. All she knew was that the days were now short and cold instead of long and hot. And that there was less food; less even than the little there had been before, when it was too hot.

Nearly a year, and that only because she was lucky. The fortunate one; the family’s golden girl. She had been the fair twin, and Hannah the darker sister. And so Hannah had been sent to one line, and she to another. Because her hair was blonde.

A mitzvah, some of the women here had told her. She was still alive; be happy.

“No! No, I want to go with my sister!” Her own voice screaming, and her arms clinging, and then her fingers, and Hannah being ripped away inch by inch, until she held only one of Hannah’s bright red mittens in her desperate hands, and Hannah was gone ....

Of all her family, only she was left, to endure. And wait until the day she didn’t pass inspection; didn’t meet whatever arbitrary standard held that inevitable day. Then she too would be gone, like Hannah, and Mama and Papa and her little brothers. David had been a big boy of six. But Saul had only just learned to walk. Only a baby.

Judith shifted on the narrow bunk and pried her only remaining treasure from its hiding place between the wooden slats. She mustn’t think; she wouldn’t think, or she would go mad. She would use her talisman; she would fly beyond this place of cold and filth and the stench of long-unwashed female bodies. She would use her star.

The metal star filled her hand with memories. Papa had brought the simple ornament home from his war, the Great One. “I found it when we took a trench from the enemy — that was not an easy thing, you know, to take a trench — so I claimed it as a souvenir.”

She had always demanded to know what the star had been doing half-buried in bloody mud, what it was for. Papa had looked at her strangely, then. “It is what stars are always for, Judith. It is for hope.” The star had waited in the velvet-lined box with Papa’s medal for valiant service as a German infantryman. When the family had been told to pack — only one suitcase each, and be sure to label it neatly — Judith had remembered the medal, and the star. And when they had been told to leave their suitcases, she had hastily taken out both medal and star and tucked them securely into her coat pocket.

She no longer owned her father’s medal for valorous service to the Fatherland. It had been silver; it had been confiscated by the first guard who had pawed her. But the star —

“Nothing but an old piece of tin.” The guard had tried to toss away the star, but she had been unable to let it go. When he couldn’t easily pull the star out of her rigid fingers, he had looked at her again, and then glanced around the crowded station platform, canny as a fox. “A kiss, and you can keep it.”

Unable to lose the star when she had already lost so much, Judith had lifted her mouth, mute and frozen, and paid for the old tin star with a rapine kiss.

“You can’t be a real Jew,” the guard had said afterwards, staring covetously

at the golden hair that had saved her for the iron mercy of a work camp. Such a little thing, to save a life. Had her hair been brown, like her sister's, she too would have climbed into a crowded boxcar, and been gone. Sent to one of the konzentrationslager ....

Her hair did not shine so brightly now; the gold was tarnished with grease and filth. She could not remember when last she had been clean. "But you LIVE, liebchen. Live." Her mother's voice echoed silent in her ears. Mama, who had grabbed Hannah away and held her fast in that other line, and called "Go, Judith. Go —"

Now Judith turned the little tin star over and over in her hands. The star flashed in the dimming light from the bare bulb far overhead. If she stared far enough into its silvery light, she could pretend she wasn't here. Pretend that someday this might be over, and she might even survive. But someday was as far away as tomorrow, or as near as all eternity.

She had learned to lock out reality, to focus only on the star's bright inner dream, to forget place and cold and fear and hunger. She had already forgotten the passage of time. It was not important.

Time held very little meaning in hell.

Between the crosses

PROPOSITION: A YEAR wasn't such a long time. Not really. Not when properly calculated. A year held only 8,760 hours, and he'd already survived 2,400 of them. Only 6,360 more hours, and then he could go home —

A shadow loomed over him. "Christmas speech at 1800 hours, boy. You come now, you hear?"

Jeff didn't look up; what was the point? "Sure." After a pause, he added. "Thanks." He no longer bothered to object to Roy Slattery's mode of address. Why make a federal case out of something that had ceased to matter? Like the rest of them, Roy was doing the best he could with what he had left.

Second Lieutenant Slattery had been a good ol' redneck boy once. That had been six months ago, when he'd been fresh meat right off the plane from L.A. A lifetime's endurance ago. Now something lived in Roy Slattery's pale eyes that it wasn't good to see. That it wasn't safe to see.

No one looked into anyone's eyes here. Like counting the days left until rotation out, it simply wasn't done.

It wasn't safe.

“Anything else?” Jeff asked, when Roy still stood over him, waiting.

“The party,” Roy said. “We need ornaments for the Christmas tree.”

“It’s a palm tree, Lieutenant. I don’t think you can decorate them.” Jeff spoke as gently as possible to keep from either slugging Roy or bursting into tears. A Christmas tree, here in the mud and blood and insanity that was Firebase Alpha, Quang Lai, South Vietnam. How crazy could you get?

But they all knew the answer to that, so nobody asked the question. Just like nobody asked what they were doing here, trapped in a country where their alleged allies were petty tyrants to a man, and where all the average Vietnamese peasant wanted was to be left alone and get his rice crop in. And not get killed by either side for his own political good ....

“The tree, boy.” Roy’s hominy-grits drawl, his Deep South prejudices, had been irritants once. Now Roy’s drawl was flattened, his prejudices deadened by fear, the universal anesthetic. For this year out of time, all lesser fears and dangers were subsumed in the simple need to survive another day, another hour. Even another minute mattered.

While we pretend we’re normal. That this life is normal. That the United States Armed Forces weren’t mired in the middle of the most unwinnable military disaster since the Peloponnesian Wars. That the American soldiers weren’t really nothing but a pack of scared kids who couldn’t believe they were really stuck here with the bugs and the mud and the adorable golden-skinned children with live grenades strapped to their scrawny chests.

According to the news clippings sent from home, they were winning the war. Must win, no matter how many twenty-year-old boys never saw or walked again. No matter how many trees or children burned—

Endless pretense, filtering down from the highest levels like poison silt. A random statistic slithered through Roy’s mind: thirty-eight species of snake dwelt in the jungles of South Vietnam. Thirty-seven of them were venomous.

Roy stood before him, endlessly patient now. Waiting.

We wait, and pretend we’re still alive.

“Yeah, I’ve got something,” Jeff said at last, and shook his dog-tag chain. “How about this?”

The tin-can star chinked against his tags. It was old, and bore the dent-marks of long service. But it was still a silver star, and could certainly do emergency duty

as a Christmas-tree ornament.

“Just a loan for the Christmas tree. I’ll want it back.” The star had been one of his dad’s souvenirs from the ETO in the last big one. Dad had found it in one of the camps. When Jeff had been posted to Vietnam, Dad had given him the star — “For luck, son. And for remembrance.”

“Thanks, boy. Bring it to the cook-tent at 1700.” And Second Lieutenant Roy Slattery wandered off across the planks pretending to be dry pathways through the mud. Jeff didn’t bother to watch him slog off through the ankle-deep mud.

Instead, he looked at the cheap metal star shining bright against the darkness of his hands. Too bright. Bright like Christmas lights, and Boston streets where snow fell white and icy cold. Where the lights of the bookstores cast shadows on the snow —

It wasn’t good to think about home; it was a dangerous distraction. Perhaps it wasn’t good to look into the time-battered surface of the star, either. For there he could look into his own eyes, and know that what waited in Roy’s eyes waited in his as well —

Slowly, he spun the star and the blurred image of his face vanished. Thinking like that was stupid; thinking like that would get you killed. There was nothing waiting. Nothing but mud and sweat and blood, and one foot placed carefully in front of the other, step by step, until you at last reached peace.

6,359 hours to go —

A ragged edge of one of the star’s points caught his thumb, left a thin red line tracing his skin. Fastidious, Jeff held the cut hand away from the star. The star was for tomorrow’s Christmas tree; you didn’t want blood marring a Christmas star.

Not even here.

It was bad luck.

Row on row

The crisis would be over any day now — they said so every hour on the newscasts. They said it real calm, and cool, and convincing. They’d been saying it that way for almost three weeks. Ever since the assassination.

The killing had happened someplace foreign. Someplace unimportant. Someplace she’d never even heard of before. Neither had anyone else she knew.

But now it was someplace vital. Someplace where violence simmered like a

poison soup, ready to boil over the edges of the pot, spilling and burning —

Sojie shook her head to drive the image out, but the pictures in her mind refused to vanish. All those bright TV shows of troops heading off into nowhere, all of them young and motivated and waving at the news-cameras. Reports of tactical strength, repeated over and over, like wishing would make it so. Like this wasn't anything. Just another drill.

So maybe it is. So what if they were fighting somewhere? They were always fighting somewhere, like they couldn't stop; like a string of real big family feuds. This was only another local disturbance. Nothing to worry about. They said so on the news every day.

Just remember to have a good supply of canned food on hand. And bottled water and basic first aid supplies. Please stay off the streets if possible. And stay tuned to your local station —

A dutiful citizen all her life, Sojie obediently stockpiled food and water and blankets, and kept the TV turned to CNN, and tried not to worry. Just like they told you, over and over, on all the newscasts.

But soundbites stalked her as she paced from room to room. "Embargo...Advancing rebel troops...Possible cease-fire... U.N. mediators...President's message...Resolved to settle the conflict before..."

Restless, she checked and rechecked her supplies of food, of clothing, of medicines. Not that I'll need them. Course not. What do we have all those troops of ours on their way over there FOR, anyway?

She frowned; hadn't they already had some troops over there? Before all this? She couldn't remember, and none of the news stories mentioned it.

She needed something to do; something cheerful. Something to take her mind off those newscasters and their smooth unreassuring voices. The kids were coming tomorrow, bringing their own kids to Grandma's for the holidays. So why didn't she haul down the box of holiday pretties and hang them in the windows now?

Decorating the house windows was a family tradition. Just like the old tin star Sojie lifted out of the box of holiday ornaments was a tradition. The metal star was old, and not all that pretty, really. But her own mother had found it a long time back. Way back, just before she'd been plucked safely from a place whose horrors Sojie couldn't even imagine and airlifted out with a hundred other orphans.

Her mother had never wanted to talk much about living in Vietnam. She was an American now, she'd said, and anyway, she didn't remember; she'd only been a very little girl .... But her mother had always kept the star she'd picked out of a pool

of mud and bones so long ago. And each year her mother's lucky star held the place of honor during the holidays. "To remind me how fortunate I am," her mother had said once, when Sojie's husband had asked why they hung such a battered thing up as a Christmas ornament.

Now the star dangled from Sojie's fingers, turned slowly on its twist of red ribbon, glowed dull silver in the TV's constant light. It was odd, but the star never looked really clean, somehow. And this year it seemed like darkness etched every crevice, and there were shadows on the metal.

But the star was traditional. And tradition was important, especially for the kids.

Sojie stood up and walked into the hall. She'd hang the old star in the living room window, just the way she always did. Because this year was no different than any other —

And now that she came to look, it was the old ribbon wound around the star that was the trouble. That was why the star seemed to look so ugly this year — that shabby ribbon, all worn and faded and hardly red at all any more.

“The government asks that any Reservists who have not yet reported please \_\_\_”

Yeah. That was it. After the holidays, when the crisis was over, then she'd replace the red ribbon.

That mark our place ....

Thirteen was the lucky number. You made thirteen patrols, you got recycled to Admin. That's what they told us, anyway. Thirteen, and out. I'd done four already B

But it was bad luck to count them. Just keep your mind focused on today and your sensors primed. Four, and today would tally five

They said some had lived to walk all thirteen. I knew someone who knew someone who'd really done it.

Today at least was quiet. Hard to be anything else, when there's nothing around but you and a lot of flat asphalt and a bunch of flaking ruins. Oh, yeah, and the enemy. Whoever it is this week.

We covered the ruins on the morning stomp. I don't know what they are, but you find them all over the place; Rissa, our platoon brain, says they're supposed to be some weird old stores or museums or something like that. Maybe they were, but



they aren't much to look at now. Mostly rubble, and sometimes a lot of plastic flows and heaps of metal. Sometimes there's a standing wall Mostly there isn't, which is better.

After the ruins, we got a break. Guess who got posted picket? And I didn't even volunteer, neither. I know better than that.

So I stood at the edge of what I guess was a wall a long time ago and kept my sensors turned up high. But that wasn't how I found it. I was just scuffing my foot in the dirt, ignoring the shadows burned into the wall I was walking. You learn never to look at the shadows.

It's bad luck.

My boot bumped something harder than dirt and I looked down and there it was, shining like a new-issue gun before you oiled it dark. I crouched down and dug it out of the dirt — yeah, real bright. The thing could've been an anti-personnel device or worse. But I was sick of seeing all that battered brown that seemed to go on forever all around us. And something seemed to whisper, how could dying quick be worse than this....?

It's too easy to get sort of sideways out here.

Anyway, the bright thing didn't blow, and came away from the dirt easy, sort of like it wanted me to pick it up. Like it wanted me — which just shows I'd been in the field a little too long and was maybe one private short of a platoon.

The thing wasn't much, to have taken that kind of damnfool risk to get. Turned out to be a battered star made out of some kind of silvery metal, the kind of star with five points. Dark stuff crusted in the cracks where metal'd been folded over. Maybe someone'd painted the thing once.

I brushed the dirt off the star. The wind picked up, and the dust blew past, and sunlight bounced off the metal star. The light made the burn-shadows dance on the ruined wall, like ghosts waiting to walk

Never look at them.

I guess it was a real old-fashioned holocam or something like that, because when I held the star up and the sun hit it again, I saw pictures.

A young white guy with dark hair and real weird clothes all covered with mud. A real thin pale girl with chopped-off hair. A tired-looking black guy carting a gun so old it didn't have even basic sensorpac. They all sort of faded in and out, one after the other.

— a guy lying in a ditch, scummy water dripping all over the place—

The pictures flashed by pretty fast, lots of them, and sort of shimmered, like the cam'd been off-focus when it shot.

— a woman wearing a ruby necklace and wet red skirt

— gone by the time I realized the red line across her throat wasn't rubies, and her skirt didn't start out to be red —

The real funny thing was that all the people in the holo were holding the same damn star I'd just picked out of the dirt. Like maybe it was a family heirloom or something. The bolo-people all looked like ghosts, but you could see the star shining just as bright as a little free-atmosphere nuke.

Weird.

I turned the thing over in my hand and looked at it again. Pretty. There wasn't much that was pretty anymore. And I'd found it while on lone patrol, so it was all mine. That was the rule.

I tucked the silver metal star into one of my belt carry-pocs. It felt good to have it there. Probably because it was good luck. Later I'd ask; Rissa would know if stars were supposed to be lucky.

But I was already sure the thing would bring me luck. They said luck warmed your bones, and that was how I could feel it, deep in mine. Like I owned all the time in the world.

And my star would make a nice service souvenir after I'd done my thirteenth patrol, or when the war ended. Whichever came first. Because the end for me might come even sooner than Lucky Thirteen.

After all, they say we'll be home by Christmas.

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By India Edghill

India Edghill lives in upstate New York and has sold short fiction to *Catfantastic IV*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, and other anthologies and magazines. She places the blame for this, her first F&SF story, squarely upon her lather, who engendered her interest in both fantasy and war by reading her such arcane masterpieces as *Alf's Button* before she was old enough to object. (She also notes, a bit grumpily, that he later insisted she read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Cruel Sea*, and *The Theory and Practice of Hell*.) Naturally, this story is for

him.