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Opening extract from

When the Guns Fall Silent

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Published by

Oxford University Press

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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First published 2000
First published in this edition 2013

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273570-6
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
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To the memory of my grandfather,
Private James 'Kit' Riordan
(1881-1962)
and for my grandson,
Perry James Riordan

BRITONS



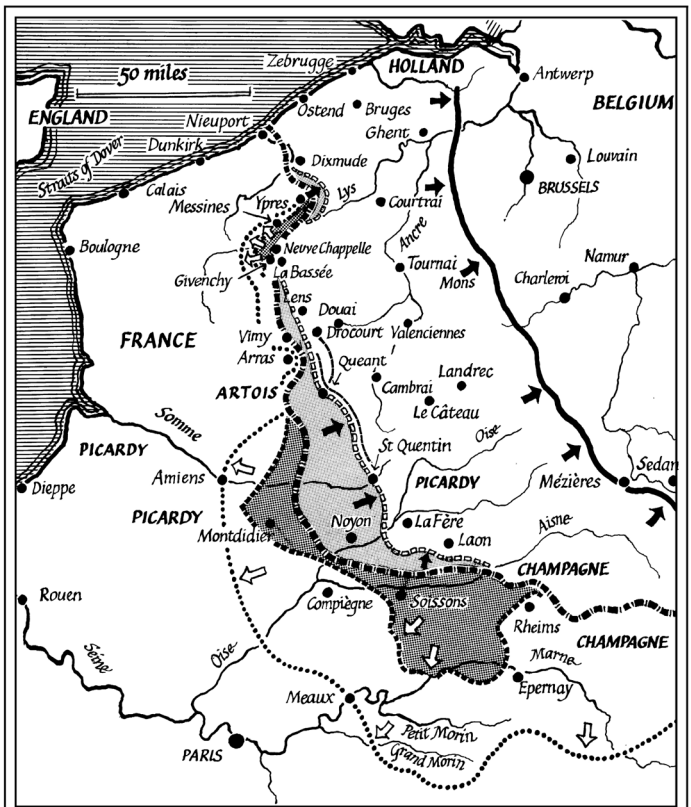
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GOD SAVE THE KING

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Printed by the Victoria House Printing Co., Ltd., Tudor Street, London, E.C.



German advance

Allied advance

1914: limit of German advance

end 1914 - 13 June 1916: General front line (prior to Somme)

1916-17: Allied gains

1918: German gains

11 Nov 1918: Armistice line

Hindenburg Line

1

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
from 'In Flanders Fields' by John McCrae

IT WAS SO peaceful.

Just the cawing of the crows and the moaning of the wind. Like battlecries mingling with a mother's sighs.

'Up'n at 'em! Up'n at 'em!'

'Hush, my son, sleep, sleep.'

As far as the eye could see stretched row upon row of low headstones: white and clean and even. Like a ghostly army lined up for inspection. Not on a grey parade ground, but on soft green grass, recently mown and dotted with poppies sheltering by the headstones.

It was as if the earth was sown with dragons' teeth. Yet instead of fierce warriors springing forth, the soil

had yielded a gentle harvest of stone, lawn, and poppy.

White on green on red.

Truth on Life on Blood.

Why are Flanders poppies such a deep scarlet hue? Are their roots nurtured by Hell's dark streams of blood?

A glossy crow with beady eyes perched on a headstone, like an Angel of Death. Black on white. For all the world resembling that black-edged letter from the King:

The King commands me to assure you
of the true sympathy of His Majesty
and the Queen in your sorrow.

Lombardy poplars stood tall and straight, sentinels of the dead, marking the cemetery boundaries. And dipping and diving in the blue sky above the trees were carefree larks. Today the whole world could hear their song. The guns were silent.

It was so peaceful.

'Grandad, how many Germans did you kill?'

The old man didn't hear. His eyes and ears were in a faraway time that seemed to him like yesterday.

'Grandad, did you stick 'em or shoot their heads off?'

'Grandad!'

'What? Oh, er, sorry, Perry. I was miles away.'

The white-haired old man, pained by memory, looked into the freckled face untouched by war. And his grey eyes wrinkled in a sad smile.

'It was a tidy time ago.'

To a twelve year old that wasn't good enough.

'Did you really kill Germans?'

The last two words crushed the smile.

They opened a door long closed to prying eyes. He'd never spoken about it before. He couldn't.

How would they understand?

Yet now, confronted by dead comrades and a trusting grandson, it was time. It was 1964, fifty years on. He couldn't put it off any more. They all deserved an answer.

It was time.

With a deep sigh that dredged up memories from beneath the silt of time, he said hoarsely, 'Yeah, I s'pose I did.'

'Weren't you scared?'

That was a tough one. How can you explain Fear?

Fear for your own life. Fear for those at home. Fear of being a coward. Fear of letting your mates down. Fear of killing another human being: a son, a brother, a sweetheart . . . a friend.

He was scared all right.

Dead scared. Shivers-down-the-spine, hair-standing-on-end, shit-your-pants scared.

He never told Perry lies. Trust is based on truth. And what greater trust is there than that between grandchild and grandparent?

'I was terrified.'

Perry was disappointed. He'd never seen Grandad scared, never thought of him scared. When they'd started the Great War project at school, he'd boasted of his grandad, the Great War Hero, with ribbons and medals and stuff.

That's how it had all begun.

Yet when he'd asked about the war, all he got was 'It was too long ago.' Grandad wouldn't even come to school to talk about it. He'd written back to Mrs Meneely, 'Sorry, marm, I don't remember.'

What he really meant was, 'I don't *want* to remember.'

Grandad could see he'd let Perry down. In the eyes of his mates, Perry was a 'big-'ed', a 'show-off'. The boy was beginning to wonder whether Grandad really had won the medals. Perhaps he'd bought them second-hand?

The old fellow couldn't bear the doubting look. So he had an idea: what if he showed him the old battlefields 'over there'? A quick whizz round France and Belgium. He could take the car on a weekend ferry trip to France and nip round a few war cemeteries.

That way Perry could tell his class what he'd seen for himself.

The old man had never been back. Not in fifty years. Never wanted to. Not even to pay respects to his chum Harry Newell. Nor to his mates Freddie Feltham, Taff Morris . . . and Fritz 'Ginger' Muller.

How *could* they understand?