

The French Drummer Boy

by Joshua Wilson

Part I - George

“George, George! Es- tu réveillé?”

Who was that? I couldn't work out where I was. Questions surged around my brain. Then it hit me...

We are pouring into our battle positions. We are proud to be members of the Coldstream Guards and hoist our flag high above the Hougomont farm which we have been sent to defend from the French aggressors. We are all exhausted from a merciless battle at Quatre Bras, but we must hold Hougomont if we are to win the Battle of Waterloo. The fate of the battle rests on our shoulders. Even though we are heavily outnumbered, we are Wellington's elite fighting force, especially our commander, Colonel MacDonnell, the finest in the British Army. Now is the time to live out our motto *Nulli Secundus*: Second to None.

The sky has been a leaden grey for days now and it is reflecting the sombre mood of our men. As if that's not bad enough it hasn't stopped raining for two days. Looking up, a ball of latent brightness stuns my eyes and the sun finally wins its own battle over the oppressive clouds. Its tentative rays illuminate the golden corn fields, reminding me tenderly of home...

“Come on George!” Mum said, “Remember to help Edward cut the corn with Clover.”

I caught up to my brother and helped him attach the harvester and told Clover - our faithful Clydesdale - to walk on. She trotted along gleefully. The golden fields glistened in their pulchritude in the rich evening sunlight. We were going to have a bountiful harvest!

Suddenly, shots pierce my tranquil nostalgia and I am back in the fields of Belgium. The French recommence their barrage, each shot more deafening than the last. I hurl myself into my sniper hole and make sure that no French soldier has entered. A commotion comes from behind me, about thirty of the opposing force have stormed the northern gate (which had been open for supplies and reinforcements). With lightning reactions we manage to shoot them all and we lose only six of our own. The Colonel commands everyone back to their positions. As I hasten back, I hear a shuffling and faint whimpering. It seems to be coming from behind a hay bale. I creep towards it. Has a French soldier managed to survive? I ready my gun. When I see who is there, I take a step back. Has anyone else seen him? I look again. A boy - no older than twelve - looks up at me, eyes wide. His lips tremble and his hands quiver. He looks so much like my brother, Edward. His face full of freckles, his hair a mop of brown and his nose small and slightly pointy. The sun shines onto his blue uniform making the buttons stars of their own. I can't turn him in, he isn't armed, unless you count his two drumsticks.

“S'il vous plait, s'il vous plait” he pleads.

I cannot understand him, but his eyes implore me to help him. I look around and find a farm boy's clothes and gesture to him to put them on. They are scruffy and tatty but they look like they'll fit. I then point to an empty barrel. At first he looks like he doesn't know what to do but then he realises and jumps in. I hope he won't be found but at least now they'll only think he is one of the farm boys who live here and are helping us, not a French drummer boy.

I get back into position; the sulphurous stench of gun smoke makes my eyes water obscuring my sight. If I squint, I can see bodies piling up in the fields outside the farm. It no longer reminds me of the idyllic countryside of my Somerset home. Even though they are the troops of the tyrant Bonaparte, I bear some remorse for the men, really boys, of my age lying in a crimson sea of spilt blood. My hand aches from loading my musket and my shoulder seems to shatter a little as each shot slams the butt of my gun into the bone. The waves of blue uniforms remind me of the sea, each soldier crashing to the ground like a wave breaking on the beach. Every fibre of our beings is racked with exhaustion. Can we hold Hougoumont? Will the waves of blue ever end? Where are the Prussians that the Colonel has promised are on their way? How can we succeed if we can barely feel our arms? No! We **will** see victory. We are the strongest, most powerful nation in the world. We will triumph over the French and Napoleon Bonaparte will be exiled once again! This time for good!

As I resolve to keep fighting valiantly and to make the Colonel - Wellington, my country - proud, one shot rings out above the cacophony of the others. Time seems to grind to a halt. I look straight ahead. The world goes black.

Part II – Pierre

“Charge!” yelled l’Enforcer.

I struck my drum, to keep the soldiers in time and signal to the other regiments that we were about to mount an attack on the northern perimeter of the Hougoumont farm. The British had left the gate open so we seized our chance.

Few dared to say it in France, but Napoleon is a tyrant who tried to take over the whole of Europe. He's the reason I was in that awful place. I thought we had got rid of him when he was exiled to Elba a few years ago but somehow he managed to escape and had seized the throne again.

The fields of corn reminded me of the day of my parents' funeral which had also taken place in mid June. They died of diphtheria when I was ten – could it have been only two years before? It seemed like a lifetime ago. I could barely remember my father's voice or my mother singing one of her favourite songs. I had wandered the streets lost and lonely, having no one left in the world. A group of soldiers found me and joined me up as a drummer boy. I'd been beating the drums ever since.

We charged through the open gate and almost immediately saw that this was a grave mistake. The British quickly closed the gate behind before no more than thirty of us could

enter. They easily outnumbered us. I hid behind a hay bale and tried to block out the sounds of screams and gunshots. All went eerily quiet as our last man fell. I started whimpering but, fearing discovery, managed to stop by biting on my knuckles. But it was too late. Footsteps approached and an English soldier towered above me pointing his musket straight at me. He was at least six feet tall with shoulders as broad as my late father's. His scarlet uniform and shiny buttons were a vivid contrast to my ragged mud smeared jacket. My heart skipped several beats. He could shoot me, turn me in or....

"S'il vous plait, s'il vous plait!", I pleaded.

His expression changed. It was as if he recognised me. He looked around frantically and threw some old farm clothes at me. He said something to me but I couldn't understand him. Then I realised he must be telling me to change my blue uniform for the old clothes. He gestured to a large barrel which stood at the edge of the farmyard. It was empty but for some rainwater sitting at the bottom. I jumped in. It reminded me of playing 'cache-cache' with my father. I peered out of a hole in the barrel. The scene I observed looked terrible. The smoke made my eyes water and every once in a while, a British soldier would fall to the ground with a hideous thud. I could hear the French shouting from the other side of the farm walls and I saw the British keeping them at bay. But who did I want to win? If the French had found me, I would have been shot for deserting but if the British had discovered my true identity, they would have shot me too.

I kept checking on the man who had saved me hoping he would look after me again when it was all over. He was absorbed in the struggle, firing shot after shot. He looked bone-weary. My own eyes closed momentarily as if in sympathy and when I forced them open again he was no longer there. I desperately scanned the farmyard looking for him and then saw him sprawled face down on the ground. The other soldiers around him must have thought he was dead as they appeared to ignore him. Suddenly I saw him twitch. He had saved my life, it was time to repay the favour...

I jumped out of the barrel and pointed at him. They understood what I was pointing at and I heard them call towards the barn. Two other farm boys appeared with a stretcher and ran over to scoop him up. I followed them into the barn where there were lots of English soldiers lying on hay bales being treated by a few doctors and nurses. One of the doctors could speak French and must have thought I knew the soldier. "Get him to the back of the farm and onto the next gun carriage which is leaving for Brussels. He needs to go to a hospital if he is to have any chance".

I helped take him to the carriage and loaded him on the back. "To Brussels", I commanded. The soldier was groaning and writhing. "Edward" he kept mumbling. Was that his name? "Me Pierre," I said but I'm not sure he could hear me. We started moving. I looked back and saw that the barn was now ablaze. Orange tongues of flames licked at the wooden walls and consumed the straw roof. We had left just in time.

Part III George

“George, George! Es- tu réveillé?”

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I wondered where I was and what had happened. Each breath was agony, each movement so excruciating I surely must have been shot. As I strained to make sense of my surroundings, I saw beds of wounded soldiers, groaning and crying out. The acrid smell of iodine filled my nostrils. Doctors and nurses bustled around speaking French amongst themselves. I tried to see if there were any others from the Coldstream Guards but I couldn't make out anyone I knew.

I had so many questions. I decided to ask one of the nurses but was not sure if they even spoke English. I lifted my arm to wave at one of them and searing pain coursed through my body but she saw me and rushed over. First she reached for the flask next to my bed and put it to my lips. My parched mouth welcomed the cold water, gradually quenching my raging thirst. It tasted so good, unlike any other water I can remember drinking. The first question sprang from my refreshed lips and was surely the most important, “Who won the battle?”

The nurse looked at me strangely and replied in broken English, “You British, bien sûr ”. “So we're safe?”, I asked.

“Yes, for now” she replied in an uneasy tone.

I could at least relax a little knowing that the French and Napoleon had been defeated. Napoleon had managed to escape exile before but perhaps now he would be banished for good. Now I had to get to the bottom of all my mixed up memories of a boy who kept appearing in my mind. Who was he? I couldn't have seen my brother Edward – he was safely on the farm back in Somerset.

“Have you seen a boy who may have arrived with me?” I asked.

The nurse's face softened and a smile spread across it.

“Ah,” she exclaimed, “your devoted friend. You see zat blanket on ze floor, 'e's been sleeping there by your side zese last five days as you recovered. 'E went out to try to find some food. 'E has been very worried about you. 'E will be pleased to see you are awake.”

I was so happy and waited anxiously for his return. As the afternoon sun outside started to fade and the nurses lit the candles, the boy returned with a hunk of bread and wedge of cheese. I recognised him immediately – of course, it was the French drummer boy who I had saved. And looking just like my brother Edward! That explained the mix up. I was overjoyed to see him. As he approached the bed, he smiled and held out the bread for me to eat.

“Me Pierre” he said.

“Me George” I replied with as much of a smile as I could manage.

He sat on the blanket and beamed back.

I was growing tired and my eyelids felt heavy. A curtain of sleep enveloped me and I dreamt wistfully.

Over the next few weeks, as I continued to recover, Pierre and I learned more about each other. The nurses helped us translate although we never let them know the whole story.

Pierre explained how he'd convinced the other soldiers that I wasn't dead and that were it not for him, my lifeless corpse would still be lying at Hougoumont. So I'd saved his life and he had saved mine on the very same day – 18th June 1815.

Pierre explained that he was an orphan following the death of his parents and, at only twelve years old, he had no one left in the world. He'd reluctantly joined the army as he had nowhere else to go and had been taught the rhythms and tunes of the drummers. He didn't understand why we had to be at war at all and thought it was all a result of Napoleon's unstoppable ambition.

A few days later, I was told that I was well enough to return home. It would be a long journey and also a boat trip across the Channel but word had been sent to my family that I would be returning. As it was such a long journey and my dressings still had to be changed, the commander asked if Pierre could go with me as it was clear that he was such a devoted friend. They asked Pierre who delightedly agreed. He rushed over to my bed after they told him to share the good news with me. I couldn't wait to introduce him to my family and tell them the whole story.

The Battle of Waterloo seemed to change the course of history for the whole of Europe and it also changed the history for me and Pierre, the French drummer boy.