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Retold Memories, Unspoken Horrors

By: John Munro

"Are you ready?" the reporter asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Okay, I'm going to ask you a few questions, alright? Just answer as best as you can, and I'll record them." I nodded in understanding. I adjusted myself in my chair, clearing my throat as I watched the reporter get his tape-recorder and check his notepad for questions.

The reporter had come to my house situated in the peaceful prairies of the reservation. I was sitting on my recliner while he sat on a kitchen chair. He was writing a book or something, and apparently tracked me down, an 80-year-old veteran of World War 11. I was very nervous as these questions were going to unlock painful memories of the past that I tried to forget. This was going to be hard.

The reporter took up his tape-recorder and began to speak into it. "Okay it is ..." He paused to check his watch. "1 :05 PM, Saturday March 2pm, 2007. I'm here with Mark Buffalo Child, who's about to give us some thoughts about his war experiences." He set the recorder down on the coffee table. I took a deep breath. He began.

"So, why did you sign up for duty? How old were you? What was it like?"

The question brought me back 63 years. "Well," I began, "I came from a poor reservation. My family was not doing so good financially. So I signed up, and said that I was..."

"...18 years old" I said to the army officer sitting behind the sign-up table in the community center. The officer looked at me very suspiciously.. He had good reason because I was actually only 17 years of age. I bit my lip nervously. If I didn't get a position, my family would have a very hard winter money-wise. I felt very self-conscious with my old clothes and smallpack of belongings. All the other boys had nice jackets, hats, shoes...

"Okay, go in" the officer finally said. My heart skipped a beat as I walked to the doorway, where my duty as a Canadian soldier would start. I passed through the doors, instantly regretting it.

"There's no tipis around here, boy!" a soldier called. The room was filled with young men who had signed up and were now getting their instructions. The taunts and insults that I was receiving were very hard to ignore, but somehow I got through. What had I..



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"...gotten myself into I had thought." With my answer, the reporter crossed off his questions.

"Okay, next few questions," he continued "How did you end up in battle? What was going through your mind? Were you scared or confident?" This took me a little more time to formulate my answer, but with my memories unlocked, I carefully crafted a response.

"I was very on edge. I was crammed into a landing craft with 30 other soldiers, and we were off to the beaches of Normandy, France. It was about ..."

... 4 o'clock in the morning, June 6th, on the day of Operation Overlord. Our landing craft was similar to the other 3,500 approaching the beaches: tight, uncomfortable, cold, and scary. The soldiers around me were as anxious as I was; most were exited, but they all probably had some form of fear deep down. I thought about my situation. I, a Native boy, was in a war that was not even my own, yet the white man was actually depending on me. Ironic.

I craned my neck to see around the front of the boat, and saw the beaches that we were about to attack I checked my Thompson submachine gun to make sure there was a clip of ammunition in it. Unfortunately, there was. I straightened my helmet and adjusted my field jacket and pack

"Two minutes!" the sergeant at the front called out. Machine gunfire hit the craft and pinged off the metal. Mortar blasts could be heard exploding upon our approaching invasion force.

The sergeant continued, "Once you get off the ramp, run for cover, and fire your weapons into those Jerries! Get to the barricades inland about 200 yards from the water and wait there for everyone else! It's them or you! Good luck!" As if on cue the poor of the craft rumbled and shook as the bottom ran into sand in shallow waters. The front of the boat lowered into the waters, forming a ramp. I was in the middle of the soldiers, immediately witnessing death.

Another wave of machine-gun fire was heard pelting the boat, and a barrage of bullets swept through the first few soldiers exiting the craft, sending them to watery graves. The rest of us looked on in horror, and quickly ran off the boat. I felt my boots fill with water as I jolted for the same beach that thousands of other soldiers were running to.

A mortar blast to the right knocked me off balance, sending me to my knees in the foot high waters. About 12 other soldiers passed me while I was down. They ran about



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10 feet ahead when the familiar sound of MG42 bullets swept through the water, taking out the dozen men. With my pant legs now stained with bloody water, I got up and ran.

Someone parallel to me and yelled "Pick up the pace, soldier! We gotta get to the-" A sniper's bullet stopped him cold.

How could this be happening? As I ran, I gazed at all the scattered dead bodies. I never saw anyone die before, and suddenly hundreds are being slaughtered in front of me. I pressed on, through the sand, the water, the...

"...living and the dead." I closed my eyes in thought.

"Are you okay?" I looked up and found the reporter's concerned face.

"Uh, yes. I'm just caught up in my thoughts," I replied, realizing I was tearing up. Taking off my glasses, I wiped my eyes with a tissue.

The reporter spoke gently, "If it's alright, I would only like to ask a few more questions, but I understand if you're not ready. This can certainly wait for another time. It's totally up to you."

I took another deep breath. "No, I'll answer a few more."

"Okay," he said, satisfied with my choice. "After you got introduced to the horrors of war, what were your thoughts? Were you still treated different?"

I answered right away. "Yes. Most definitely."

"How So?"

"Well when you're exposed to so much death, you change. It was such a contrast within those hours on the beach. The cries, the hail of..."

... Bullets disrupted our little cover of sand. I had made it from the beach, and was now lying behind a mound of sand with about twenty other soldiers. We were about to take out a machine gun nest, because at that moment we were being pinned down by their MG42.

"Garcia! Flush 'em out!" a soldier from behind called. Garcia, next to me, pulled the pin from a grenade, waited 2 seconds, and then lobbed it in the direction of the nest.

We heard the blast and the cries. Our squad immediately double-timed it up to clear the Germans. My trigger finger was shaking. I watched as Garcia emptied a clip of ammunition into a dying German. Blood splattered.



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"Okay! Let's clear out the machine gun bunkers ahead, so the others on the beach can move!" a soldier called. I was pushed forward and we advanced toward the first bunker. As we entered through the bunker doorway, I saw movement. I pulled the trigger, bringing down three German soldiers who were firing a machine gun over the beaches. I stopped in my tracks.

"So much for his bow-arrow" someone muttered. I really didn't hear it because I couldn't believe myself. I just killed 3 people. I took someone's life from them. I wept silently as...

"...tears flowed down my face." I finished. The reporter, now deeply moved, showed signs of emotion.

"I'm sorry, Mark," he said with a tear rolling down his face.

I managed to talk between snuffles and tears. "They were so young, the soldiers! The ones around me and the ones we shot at! We were all misled into killing and Wing killed!"

"Was it worth it?" he asked softly.

I looked at him, and gave the best answer I could think of.

"Isn't that a question you need to ask yourself?"