

The Smell of Death

By Rolfe Porter

Most people seemed to be worried about the Angel of Death that hovered over the battlefield. But it was the smell, not the thought of Death that worried him. Everywhere he went it was the same obnoxious smell of death and decay that cast a long shadow.

The stinking wet mud that clung to his boots and seeped through the eyelets was a further unnecessary torture. Unluckily for him, this allowed the wool of his socks to suck in more moisture, leaving his feet to feel permanently wet and adding to, rather than diluting the stench that they released. The mere thought of the smell that arose from those same socks, when he took them off in the evening, was enough to make him start to gag.

Surrounded by mud and balanced on the crumbling wooden chair, the pervasive thought of the puke gathering in his throat made him sweat violently and he wiped his forehead with his rough jacket sleeve. In doing so, he caught a whiff of the stale blood that caked his cuffs and the sick in his throat materialised, came up and past his tongue, projecting outwards through his instinctively clenched teeth. He kept throwing up until there was nothing left but acidic bile. Wiping away the last pieces of his breakfast from his mouth, he reached for the sickly sweet smelling brew that was laughingly called tea and used it to wash away the bitter after taste that remained in his throat.

Throwing the tin mug to the ground, he stared up through the entrance to his retreat. The grey clouds were gathering in the sky, as much as they were gathering on the ground, time to re-enter the battle.

He quickly turned his head and then everything changed. He was lying in his bed, the mud on the floor had gone and the smell of puke had vanished. The coarse feel of the first world-war uniform was no more. The sides of the tent rustled, as he sniffed the dry desert air.

His peace was suddenly broken by a tannoy announcement, "Roll call in 10 minutes". Then he remembered, they were on the outskirts of Baghdad, the war was nearly over.