

## One Simple Word by Peter Collins

‘Your teenage years were the best years of your life,’ people say. ‘There’s no going back to them,’ they often add.

Well take it from me; they’re wrong on both counts. I’m 30 now but my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was spent in a trench on the Somme. I can remember July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916 like it was yesterday; the start of the worst few days of my life, and I was one of the lucky ones. It was even worse for my mates in the 18th West Yorkshire Regiment, or the Bradford Pals as we were known. I go back there all the time. I wish I didn’t, but I do. Like last night. It was just after tea and the wife and I were sat together on the sofa in a companionable silence, the oil lamp flickering at our side, when the wife shivered and pulled her shawl tight about her shoulders. She smiled and nodded at the empty grate in front of us.

‘Fire?’

That was all she said; one simple word. But that word sent me travelling through time and space to one of the most fateful days in Yorkshire history. I was back in a grimy, muddy trench, where Major Ronson was ordering me to lay some cable for the field telephones before the big push later that day; the Somme offensive that was to change the course of the war.

‘Oh, and Private White,’ the Major added quietly.

‘Sir.’

‘Take Parsons with you.’

I looked across at the gaunt, young figure of Billy Parsons, huddled against the side of the trench, talking softly to himself. He’d been like that for the last week, growing gradually more distant as the German shelling got more intense.

‘Best to keep him occupied,’ said the Major gently.

I roused Billy from his trance and we set off towards the communication trenches, unwinding the cable as we went. We were laying the cable in one of the outlying trenches just as the Jerry shelling started. It was bad timing. We’d have to wait here until it stopped. At least in the main trench, there were other people around to help keep Billy distracted. Here there were just the two of us. I could hear him whimpering as the shells burst all around us.

I set the cable reel down between us and lit a couple of cigarettes, passing one across to Billy. He took it gratefully and for a few minutes we lay together puffing clouds of smoke across the trench.

Billy was staring into the distance; I could see his young face in profile, drawn and thin, making him seem old before his years.

‘Be dawn soon.’ The tremor was evident in his voice. He didn’t have to say any more. We both knew that dawn meant only one thing; the push over the top.

‘You’ll be all right, mate.’ The words were right, but my voice lacked conviction and Billy knew it. He said nothing, but I saw his hand shake as he took a deep drag on his cigarette.

It was a few minutes before Billy spoke again, a nervous rasp in his voice.

‘We’ve got to get out of here, Chalky, while there’s still time.’

I picked up the cable reel so I could move closer. I was looking directly at him, his bloodshot eyes dark against his pale, washed-out face.

‘We’ll be all right, Billy.’

I was trying to keep him quiet. But it was no use. This had been coming for weeks. I could tell he wasn’t to be stopped.

‘We could go back now along the old trench line. You’ve still got Major Ronson’s chit for cable. If anybody stops us we’re picking up supplies. We could just disappear. No more shelling. Just peace and quiet.’

God knows I wanted to get out of there. But it had never crossed my mind to desert. I was going to say no. I swear I would have said no. And then, just at that moment; I mean that exact moment, like it had been scripted in a play, a shell exploded causing the trench wall beside us to collapse. The muck and soil came tumbling down all over us and for a terrifying moment, I thought we were going to be buried alive. I screamed and grabbed Billy’s hand and we ran. God we ran. We went as far as the communications trench would take us, which was right to the edge of the line. It was only when I got there that I realised I still had the reel of cable in my hand. Billy pointed the way and we hauled ourselves over the edge of the trench. And then there was the most terrifying noise I’d ever heard. Something smashed hard into my leg and head. I toppled back into the trench and it all went black.

I suppose I must have briefly come in and out of consciousness because I had fleeting memories of people shouting and then a stretcher and a horse-drawn ambulance. But the next thing I knew for certain, I was waking up on a hospital floor. I'll never forget that moment. It was like a scene from hell. I was in a room full of injured and crying men. Bloodied and battered bodies were sprawled all over the place. The air was full of the sound of men in pain, and the stench of blood, muck and death was everywhere. A small band of harassed and overworked nurses were tending as best they could among the carnage. I felt a fraud lying there. My left leg was sore, but my head felt pretty much normal.

As I looked about me, I saw a tall middle-aged Colonel striding purposefully through the ward, pointedly ignoring all the injured men as if their wounds had been their own fault. To my horror, he came straight towards me and I knew I was in deep trouble. But to my amazement he took my arm and began to shake my hand like he was pumping a well.

‘Well done, Private White, well done, indeed. A great example.’

I had no idea how to react. ‘Sorry, sir,’ I mumbled, ‘but I’m still a little woozy.’

‘Of course, of course,’ he laughed, and then it all came out. I was in field hospital at Amiens with shrapnel wounds in my left leg and recovering from mild concussion; not serious, but because of my gallantry, it was enough to get me shipped home in a few weeks. Major Ronson had reported how I had been following orders to lay cable in the communications trench, but had exceeded my orders by taking the cable to the most exposed part of the trench under severe enemy fire. I was being put forward for a Military Medal.

I lay dumbstruck as the colonel related all this to me. I was being sent home a hero. The Colonel seemed to expect some response, but obviously I couldn't say anything about what really happened. But the Colonel saw this as modesty and he started to praise me even more.

For a few days I was left alone with my thoughts, as the ward around me filled up with even more of the maimed and damaged survivors of the pride of Yorkshire. It seemed that the big push had been a disaster and the Yorkshire Regiments had taken the worst of the casualties. I learned from one of the boys that Billy had been reported AWOL just hours before the advance. Then the Colonel called again. He said a hero like me should set an example. I was to draw a rifle and present myself to the Adjutant at 0600 hours the following

morning. I suppose I should probably have realised what was happening, but to be honest I was still too numb to take it all in.

So at 6am the following morning, I joined a small group of other walking wounded outside the Adjutant's office. The Adjutant just nodded and ordered us to unload our rifles and leave the ammunition with the desk Corporal. He then marched us the few hundred yards to a wall behind the base prison that had been packed with badly-filled sandbags, and handed each of us a single round. It was only then that I realised what was happening, and the first terrifying sense of foreboding overtook me.

The prisoner was marched out in front of us. My stomach churned as I saw who it was, and for a moment I thought I was going to lose my breakfast there and then. But I stayed upright and forced myself to watch. An ill-fitting uniform of prison grey hung on his gaunt, young frame. His arms were tied behind his back and he was roughly pushed down on an old and battered chair. A reluctant-looking chaplain was rustled up from somewhere and he hurried through a few cursory prayers before making himself scarce. The Adjutant offered the prisoner a grimy black hood. I saw him look blankly at it for a few moments, as if not understanding what it was. The Adjutant just shrugged, put the hood away and pinned a small piece of red cloth over the prisoner's heart.

Billy looked along the line of the firing squad, his unfocused eyes staring blankly. I wondered if his troubled mind realised what was happening. From a thousand miles away I heard the Adjutant give the order to load our rifles and stand to attention. I stood perfectly still, more precise than I'd ever been on any parade ground. I desperately wanted to look away, but I knew I couldn't abandon Billy now. Our eyes met, and I could see the contortion in his face as he struggled to place the memory. Eventually it must have come back to him for his lips parted in a grotesque parody of a smile.

'Take me out of here, Chalky.' His voice was cracked and hoarse, but there was no mistaking the utter desperation. 'Take me out of here.'

The Adjutant gave the order to take aim. I focused on the small patch of cloth like nothing else in the world mattered. Then the next order came. One simple word. I squeezed the trigger and watched Billy jerk backwards off the chair to the hard floor. I knew from the recoil at my shoulder that I had fired a live round. I also knew that my bullet had hit the target.

The Adjutant inspected Billy's body and was satisfied there was no need to add the coup de grâce. He gave the order for us to dismiss. We were led to the Mess where one table had been set aside from the rest. None of the other diners spoke, but they all stared at us with hard, hostile faces. The Mess staff served hot tea and gave us each a generous ration of rum. We drank the lot.

I got shipped out two days later; came home to a hero's welcome. After two weeks' leave, I reported to barracks where I was awarded the MM and promoted to Lance Corporal. I was given a posting in the Training Section and I never went overseas again. I finished the war a Sergeant.

I suppose it's the ultimate irony, really. Over 500 of the Bradford Pals died in that battle. Not to mention the losses of the Leeds Pals, the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, the 8th York & Lancaster and the 10th West Yorkshires. Hundreds of Yorkshire's finest, slaughtered at the Somme. And I survived without even facing a single bullet. But the memory of the one shot I did fire never leaves me. All it takes is one simple word. Even now, twelve years later, when the missus feels cold and that word is mentioned, I'm back in the trench covered in muck and filth and I live those good old days all over again.

**ENDS**

**(1,993 words)**