

**THE
OLD LIE**

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*For my grandfather and the other Black Diggers,
who went to war for a country that did not see them as people*

For Kate, you deserved better

For Lily, Always

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

- WILFRED OWEN, *DULCE ET DECORUM EST*

My subject is war, and the pity of war.
The poetry is in the pity.

- WILFRED OWEN



CHAPTER 0

THE CITY OF Melbourne was sweltering under a damp, oppressive forty-six degrees centigrade, the sweat-enveloped citizens cocooned in air-conditioned rooms, escaping to others when the air-con in their offices failed. The streets were mostly empty of pedestrians; even the homeless were indoors, hiding in the shopping centres which were showing unexpected mercy and letting them stay. Drivers stared out at a white-hot world from their climate-controlled cars.

The ‘whoomph’ could be heard in every corner of the city – in the forest of grey stone they called the central business district it blew out windows letting in the heat, and popped eardrums, protecting those victims from the sound of screaming, even their own. The flash had been bright enough to turn night into day though few noticed in the heat and light of the daytime city, wrapped as it was in the throes of global warming. Then, for those who could still hear, came the sound of sirens, echoing through the

man-made canyons, approaching from everywhere and converging on the west end.

Those in surrounding buildings evacuated into the heat – receiving as they did a view of the Department of Births, Deaths and Marriages afire, the flames shooting up as high as the surrounding skyscrapers, the vortex the heat created throwing burning paper and sparks into the sky, there to settle on the city, on the people. People scattered to the nearest climate-controlled safety as firefighters came from all around the city and pumped water on the fire but the flames would not die.

Passers-by, people watching the inferno from their windows, spoke of how lucky it was that nobody worked there any more, well, almost nobody, only a couple of guards and an archivist or two, protecting the paper from mould and insects; there was paper in that building from all the state's bureaucracies, backups stored in case digital copies were lost. Despite advances in technology, data rot had been discovered to be inevitable, a paper backup was a vital precaution.

Four days later, when the fire had burned itself out, the pavement was buckled around the building, the road melted by the heat, the façade of the building, already ancient for that young city, was crumbling and threatening to fall. Debris, turned into shrapnel by what had been more of an explosion, a string of explosions, than a fire, had embedded itself in the surrounding buildings, not one of which still had windows. Investigators entered the mess, but there was not much left to investigate, not much that was not burned to ash or cinders, broken or fallen. The building, full of records that nobody needed, was gutted and nearly completely destroyed.

After weeks of the wounded city holding its collective breath for news of what had happened, an arson specialist devised a theory; it was mad, ludicrous, too crazy to believe, but it was the best

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available. All the investigators, the journalists, the citizens latched onto it as a lifeline – better to announce a half-crazed, half-baked, ludicrously implausible theory than say they knew nothing. The attack, they knew it must have been an attack, was as spectacular as it was old-school, as brilliant as it was mind-bogglingly meticulous.

People could not even imagine the sort of mind that could think of it.

It must have taken years, some said a decade or more, to set up and execute. Every day, day after day, one of the archivists or one of the guards, more than one person, surely it must have been more than one. Page by page, sheet by sheet, book by book, the paper in the building had been turned into nitrocellulose, flashpaper. One of the guards, or the archivists, whose carbonised bones had probably turned to ash then to vapour in the heat of the explosion, had spent countless days turning the entire contents of the building into a bomb.

Fear then a desperate, dangerous paranoia swept the city. How was this possible? Who could have done this? Why would anyone do this? People spied on people, reported their friends for suspicious behaviour. The surprising, impossible nature of the attack turned everything into a reporting matter, anything could be another attack. Trust melted and dissolved in the heat.

People passed the ruin, the ring of fire, the surrounding buildings that were still not safe to enter – maybe never would be. People asked ‘What is next, what is next, who did it, what is next?’

Nobody could answer.



CHAPTER 1

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-nines that dropped behind.

- WILFRED OWEN, *DULCE ET DECORUM EST*

THE SKY WAS dull, dark, granite-grey overhead, the kind of grey that sucks all joy from a face as it steals the very breath from terrified lungs. It had stayed that way for days, maybe even weeks, for so long the beginning of the gloom was immemorial. At least the hammering of the rain, its rippling spatter so like the marching of tiny boots, had finally stopped, though there was nothing to

say it would not return. Sticky mud lined the bottoms of the mud-coloured puddles and the sides and bottoms of Corporal Daniels' boots, was splattered up the corporal's legs. The sludge, once grey-brown, had grown over the last days steadily redder until the mud, even the water, was tinged a dull maroon.

Corpses floated, drifted, forming log-jams of bodies, leaking themselves bloodless, bone white, staining the once fertile plains with their life, their loss. There were so many corpses, so many, too many, how could so many die? How could there even be that many people in the world to kill?

Corporal Shane Daniels was lost, the grey uniformity of the sky and dirt, the rain, the muck, had rendered the flat, bomb-wracked plain featureless. What trees, what buildings there must have been were long since gone, all there was to navigate by was foxholes, trenches and bomb-craters, all now full of corpses, rainwater and diluted soupy viscera.

Sticks, timber, broken, leafless limbs poked up out of the mud – some buried enough to be invisible in the slush, sharp enough to penetrate the rubber sole of a boot; some embedded well enough to trip the unwary. Some were almost certainly trees, dead and half-destroyed, almost completely buried, where they had grown for years, for decades. Nothing living was visible.

Tangled barbed wire was a constant obstacle, tangling, tearing, hidden, trampled into the soupy mud, it stopped walkers dead, it cut through the sides of boots, it chewed away at feet. The holes in boots let the filthy mud and water in – there to rot the skin.

Momentum stolen by the heavy, coated footwear, by despair and the bone-cold damp, Daniels collapsed, knees down, then face-down. Only instinct, head turned sideways, preventing death by drowning in the bloody puddle.

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Pure luck, there was nothing dangerous in the depression but the mud and water itself.

It was peaceful there, it felt safe, lying in the mud, nothing to smell but the scent of dirt, miraculously clean mud – wet soil from which one day, after the war had ended, life might spring. Seeds were in that mud, there would always be seeds – no matter how much death the war rained down upon it. Shane would not be there when life returned but could smell it, feel it in that eternal soil. The smell spoke of potential still there; it would be heartening, in a heart still capable of hope.

‘Daniels,’ the familiar voice, parade-ground loud, tore through the restless silence between the relentless screams and whomps of shells, between explosions, between the wails of cannon fire, the wails of the wounded, the soft touch of sound from falling globs of mud and viscera. ‘If you are not dead yet, don’t just lie there like you have nothing to do, get moving, we are leaving.’

Shane rose to the voice like an automaton, complete lack of impetus converted temporarily into utter lack of will. Standing there, swaying slightly from the after-effect of the burst of energy it had taken to stand. Shane stared at the shouter, the sergeant, with an expression both sheepish and impertinent.

There were other survivors milling around, just as muddy, as bloody and bent with despair as Daniels, so covered in muck they were barely human-shaped. If not for the slight swaying of the human-height mounds, the swaying of people who were only standing at all by pure will, they would not be readily recognisable as people. They could have just been columns of mud, holding shape by some miracle, or mud-coated tree stumps, cut off at about human height and left to die. No uniforms, no insignia, were visible under the thick coating of muck, it was only their universal air of defeat, of dejection, that identified them as being on the same

side. The other side were entrenched, secure, warm if not actually dry, hiding in wood-lined crevices in the mud. Surely they were happier and better fed.

‘Retreat finally, Sarge?’ There was hope in Corporal Daniels’ voice, flavoured by relief and the fear that the relief was unfounded.

‘They just called it in, thank fuck,’ Sarge replied, ‘we are finally getting off the front line, heading for a hot meal and a warm bed. Hopefully someone else’s warm bed.’ Only Shane seemed too tired to laugh at that one, the giggle moved in a wave through the crowd before it stumbled and stopped. ‘I won’t even ask what the fuck happened to your gun, Daniels.’ It was only then that Shane realised there was indeed no rifle at hand. Shit.

‘Almost time for a beer,’ squawked a voice from the back of the milling, undisciplined mob, ‘for beer, for beers.’

The talker was known for his whining, you could tell he was a whiner from the tone in his voice. Everyone called him ‘Shut-up’. Shane barely managed the energy for a brief smile, knowing what was coming.

‘You still owe me a beer from last time, Shut-up,’ came a cry from the left. Laughter again bubbled and washed through the mob.

‘I think I owe everybody beer from last time,’ said Shut-up with a strained whiny laugh.

Corporal Daniels wondered how everybody else had enough energy to laugh, it wasn’t even funny.



Corporal Daniels was trudging, in the rear, boots heavier with every laboured step, herding the stragglers, keeping them in line, despite standing itself having, long since, become a chore. The mud at the back of the migrating mob must be even worse than it would be up front because every soldier who went before had churned

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the puddles into soup; left sticky, ankle-breaking foot holes in the few patches where the mud was thick enough to hold a shape; left holes in the thick sticky bottoms of puddles to get a boot stuck in; tripped and left what they tripped over exposed, a bony arm, a limb of a tree, more dangerous as each seeking, tripping foot lifted it higher. Someone had found a spare rifle, or could no longer carry theirs. Shane held onto this one, kept it ready, tried to keep a watch for the enemy, but was too tired.

The rain had returned, the incessant hammering rain that some would say was trying to drive them all mad, sapping the energy they needed to understand: the falling water was impersonal, of course it was, though the rain on their heads, on their helmets, felt spiteful.

Someone fell in the line with a splatter, when the mud settled they were face-down in it. Someone tried to help them stand, yet they could not, the faller was too weak, their joints flopped like cloth. Daniels gave the order, someone unrolled a stretcher, the unconscious man was rolled like a bundle of linen onto it.

They marched on, slowing to the pace of the slowest, four terminally tired troops lugging the dead weight of a poor half-dead bastard, even worse off than them, on a stretcher. Daniels ordered the troops to rotate the stretcher-bearers out, give those wretched souls a needed rest. There were heartfelt, tired and mumbled moans, shouts of complaint but the change went smoothly. Briefly they marched a little faster and Sarge, always cranky, had less to whine about.

Sarge noticed those in the back were lagging, dragging in the mud, and ordered a rotation, the troops at the back to the front, troops from the front, relatively clean, to the back; everyone but Daniels. Corporals were meant to be harder than the privates and were constantly forced to prove it. The other corporals were dead, or hiding from those expectations among lesser soldiers.

To an observer the column might have appeared to be the walking dead, rough-made statues, golems of myth, creatures of mud, not men; they looked barely formed, as if a creator had breathed life into a child's mud pie. Blood stained the mud they wore, blood dripped and trailed behind them from myriad small wounds. Death stalked in their footprints.

Rolling the collapsed man off the stretcher, nobody had noticed he had died, they rolled on another who had simply fallen over onto his face; no warning, no clue why he fell. There was nothing they could do for the dead man, the mud claimed him, embraced him. His flesh would become part of the mud, his bones would abide there forever, he might have friends, family, there in that mud, so many had died, he would join them.

Corporal Daniels wanted to take him home. His dog-tags would have to be enough, at least his family would know he was dead, not missing. The death report, the paperwork, was already being composed in Daniels' overwhelmed, tired head. It was technically a sergeant's job if the lieutenant was missing, but shit rolls downhill.

Daniels took out a photo, wet and mouldering, the last evidence of a life before the war, of a family, of something to live for; something to fight for, maybe to die for. Maybe it was a mistake to let thoughts go that way, towards family, towards home. The photo was disintegrating, age, time and mud were the enemy; the smiling faces from a better time were fading, only memory could fill in the features of the people worth dying for. Shane stared at it in hope of memorising what was left before it disappeared completely and forever.

One day, at the end of the war, the embrace pictured would be repeated. It must be, for what else was worth fighting for, what other reason would there be for the ultimate sin: leaving them.

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Their numbers had swelled during the long march. Men without their comrades, men who had lost their units, men without orders, without officers, without even sergeants, accreted to them like the sticky brown muck. The rain ceased, suddenly, miraculously, their hearts lifted until the mud dried to the texture of dog-shit with the smell of an abattoir.

Corporal Daniels could no longer see any familiar faces in the crowd when they stopped to eat whatever scraps or reserved treats they could find from their packs. Except Sarge, he was everywhere Shane turned, learning all the mob's names, finding out where they all came from, not just which unit they were lost from, but where they called home.

Home, best not to think about Home. It was so far away, maybe never to be seen again. They were dying to defend a distant home they might never return to; family they might never see again. Maybe it was worth it, knowing they had kept home safe. Knowing they had kept loved ones safe too. Maybe. At that moment though, the cost felt too great.

Shane Daniels walked in a daze thinking of beloved books, of remembered stories, of poems about Home. The only stories memorable were about blood, blood and rain and death, pointless death, gory death, cold-soaked-freezing slow death. All the poems were compressed tears.

All around was the scrawled signature of a massacre, a rain of fire had descended through the coming storm, catching so many unprepared as they advanced, or as they retreated. People still lay where they had been blown to bloody bits or cut down by shrapnel as they ran.

There were bodies already half buried by mud and dirt where explosions had upturned the land they stood upon. No doubt some had drowned in the mud, nobody had been there, standing, able,

to help them to their feet, to roll them from the sludge, dig them out. Somewhere nearby there would be soldiers buried alive by the mud that had flown in the fury of the assault. The tortured earth left no evidence, kept no memorial, of these burials.

They found a pair of uniformed legs, shins and feet sticking out of the mud like sticks, miraculously undamaged. Not knowing if there was someone alive down there, not willing to give up on them, the exhausted soldiers dug their comrade out. Dead, his face contorted, his mouth open to scream, filled with the mud that had drowned him.

The hammering of artillery fire, the wailing of shells returned with the rain and did not cease. Attacks came without warning, with no regularity, all they could do was react and fatigue had slowed their reactions. There was nothing that Daniels and Sarge could have done to keep their people alive that day, there was too much death, too much fire – those who had survived that far could do nothing more to load the dice.

People lived or did not.

From the ruined camps and trenches, from the scatterings of corpses, Daniels could see the survivors had simply been luckier than most others. Whole squads lay dead and bloodied where they had been hit.

As they retreated.

Having no idea what else to do, Daniels and Sarge collected the scattered remnants, the lost and bewildered, the walking wounded. There were no orders to do so, there seemed to be nobody left alive to give orders.

A man walked blind, his eyes destroyed, nothing there but bloody holes. Someone covered his sockets with a rag, not because they thought it would do him any good but because they could not bear to look at his ruin.

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A soldier stared at the stumps of his legs, no sign of pain on that lost, confused face. Another man carried him as best as he could.

Someone lay, no sign of a face, the only sign of life a bubbling and fizzing, bubbles in the blood coating a side of meat. Another soldier stood, mindless, eyes clouded, unreacting, the back of his skull sheared open as if he had been hit with a giant's axe.

An officer lay in the ground, his face the only part of him visible in the field of mud, the only clue to his existence. Two men dug him out barehanded, the cleaner one gaining mud-smears up to his elbows; the other was so dirty he would not have noticed.

The officer seemed unharmed yet his eyes were blank, no reactions to stimuli at all. Insensible, half mad, incapable of giving orders, his rank insignia all but invisible under bloodstains and crusted mud, he was nothing but another burden. A soldier the same height gave him a shoulder to lean on, they led him blindly forward.

All around there was nothing visible but devastation. The shelling, the bombing, had reached their rear, had hit the command post where officers went to be safe while their troops died. Tents, mess-tents, motor pool, all were in shambles. The bodies were uncountable in the camp as they had been in the field but here the density of death left Daniels breathless. The men tripped on the dead, they picked their way between limbs, between faces of their friends and comrades. Viscera-stained tent canvas, scattered among the bodies, was all that remained of the medical post.

Some bodies were contorted yet had no visible wounds, faces twisted in pain, mouths stained, brushed with bloody foam.

'Gas,' one man hissed and all desperately fingered their gas masks, some men found their masks were missing, their faces assumed rictuses of terror.

'Everybody look sharp,' Sarge hollered, 'check your masks, if your mask is faulty or if you have somehow lost your mask, and

just this once I will not bust your arse over it, find someone who was too slow to put theirs on and take it. They don't need it as much as you.' He stalked around the chaos, searching for who knew what, maybe for a conscious, coherent officer. They could sure use one, or maybe not, they had done all right without one so far.

'Move,' Sarge roared at a terrified soldier, 'get yourself a mask, I don't care whose, they are all the same, get cracking.' He turned on the spot, glared into every pair of eyes looking his way, so all could absorb how angry he was. 'All of you move!' he screamed.

'You and you and you,' Corporal Daniels did not bother to try and read the muddy name tags on the three nearest soldiers who were apparently still capable of standing. They were all from other units, tag-alongs, comrades for the moment rather than dear friends. 'Keep sharp, fan out, guard the perimeter, we can't have the enemy catching us here unprepared.'

Sarge must have heard, he looked over and nodded to Daniels faintly.

Sarge was so loud the enemy must have heard him. 'I need a working party, we need to find whatever we can that is of use: ammo, rations.' He laughed pre-emptively, 'A tank, artillery, we need to search for survivors. Corporal Daniels has the perimeter guard sorted already, if there are any other corporals out there ask yourselves why you didn't think of it then organise the work parties. If there's a sergeant out there hiding among the troops, gods help you if the rain cleans the mud off your stripes. Get moving people, food, supplies, guns, ammo, a first aid kit, if you can't guess what we need you clearly shouldn't be here.'

'None of us should be here, Sarge,' said a moaning voice.

'Shut up, Shut-up,' someone said. Laughter moved in a wave through the group.

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Soon, they marched on although many of them wished they were dead. Perhaps in an hour or so some would have that wish granted. It was no longer a retreat, it felt like a death-march.

‘This is the place,’ barked Sarge, not even needing to shout for the rear to hear it, moments before Shane would have collapsed. He had stopped the troops at a nondescript patch of mud in a vast, uniform field of mud – it was impossible even to guess how he had identified, or chosen, that particular place.

Corporal Daniels followed the stragglers as they staggered in, making sure none of them completely ceased moving or wandered off in a daze, caught up, shrugged and sent out perimeter guards again. They were faster to react this time, they had recovered somewhat from the disastrous battle, they were taking orders like good soldiers. Maybe they were simply too scared or too tired to rebel or whine.

Even the inveterate whiners had ceased to make noise at every order.

The troops fanned out into the mud, they stood waiting. Nobody but Sarge seemed to have any idea what they were waiting for.

A wailing noise chased a shell overhead, it hit the ground nearby, fireballed, splattering them all with steaming water and dangerously hot mud. The troops scattered in a chaotic cacophony, desperate for whatever poor cover they could find. Sarge had already disappeared – you don’t live long enough to make sergeant if you are not faster to react, more paranoid, than everyone else.

The wail of shells came and, again, the air filled with the boom of ordnance, with flying mud, with fire, with whirring steel, with screams as soldiers were hit by shrapnel, with mud hot enough to burn the skin through clothes, to soak through and keep scalding until, after an eternity, it cooled.

Drizzling rain grew into a relentless hammering storm yet brought no cool relief to the scorched soldiers. More boiling mud from the thumping of shells, still falling, was mixed in the rain, fell trailing steam. Daniels could see almost nothing through the mist, through rain so thick it was like standing in the bottom of a lake. More shells, then more fell.

Corporal Daniels screamed through a smoke-hoarse throat over the violence, hoping someone would hear the orders despite knowing nobody could. There was another scream, louder than even imaginable, a terrible wail, a tall building afire, the crack of thunder, a hurricane, it was all these things but somehow louder; louder even than the wail of shells. Daniels saw others look up and did the same.

A column of fire was descending from the clouds.

Silence, there was just too much sound, it overwhelmed Shane's ears until hearing shut down.

The mud sizzled, hissed then boiled, filling the air with steam and the smell of scorched earth, with the screams of the soldiers standing too close to the inferno. Daniels dashed from the heat, hoping everyone else had too, certain some would not be fast enough, yet there was no time to do anything about it. The roaring stopped, Corporal Daniels stopped running and turned tentatively, ready to restart running at a breath.

In the middle of a circle of cracked ceramic, burned mud and stinking, smoking, still afire corpses – there would be words with the pilot about that – sitting jauntily on its struts was a scorched, battered lander. Its cooling engines clicked and clattered as the loading ramp lowered with a roar and hiss of pneumatics. Shells were still flying, one, a lucky shot, landed on the ship with a splashing explosion. Parts Daniels hoped were not critical to their flight careened noisily into the burning crimson sky.

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Sarge was somehow already at the loading ramp. A magic trick Daniels would love to learn one day.

‘We are leaving, get the fuck up this fucking ramp now!’ His voice was somehow audible through the ear-shattering roar of another shell hitting the ship. ‘This bastard pilot was happy to cook some of us landing so I am sure he would be bastard enough to leave some of us behind if we are not quick enough. Everybody move!’

In the silent chaos of running soldiers, Daniels fought towards the quivering ramp, scrambled towards the hatch, helped someone stand, dragged them through. Fighters flashed overhead, there was a rattle as they strafed the transport, screams as men were hit, as more men died. There was a shudder, Daniels was thrown to the floor of the transport as it lifted off, the ramp was still down, wind blasted in, a soldier fell out without even having time to scream.

A hand helped Daniels stand, it was Sarge and his smile was feral. They fought their way in through the standing and fallen troops in the entrance tunnel to safety just before the ramp started lifting. Others were slower, they tumbled and fell off the rising and tilting ramp, landing in a bloody, moaning mass of scattered limbs just inside the hatch, a moment before it closed with a whoosh. At least they had fallen inside, not out.

‘Daniels,’ Sarge snarled, ‘let’s go have a little talk with our friendly pilot.’

‘Don’t shoot anyone,’ Daniels said with a faint tinge of hysterical laughter, ‘they don’t like it when grunts shoot the bus drivers. Pilots are officers, or so I have been told.’