

JOHNNY'S STORY

By
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In 1938 when I was ten years old Canada was still in the midst of the Great Depression that had begun after the Crash of 1929. It was a dark time for Canada with the lines of unemployed growing, it seemed, with every passing year. Even those lucky enough to have jobs had to accept sharp cuts in salary. My father was a Manufacturer's Agent who managed by hard work and a winning manner to hold onto his customers, which were the big department stores and wholesale houses. Not that it was an easy life for him since he had to get around on a set of metal limbs and canes which he had had to learn to use after his own legs were shot off during the Battle of Amiens in 1918. The trouble was that gangrene had got into the stumps after the first amputation and he had to suffer through three more amputations before he was in the clear, one of them without anesthetic.

It may stretch credulity a little to say that he was lucky to have lived through the experience, but in fact he was. He had been an athlete before the war and became engaged to an equally healthy young woman, my mother to be, before going into the trenches as a lieutenant commanding a platoon. After being hit he was carried in a stretcher by German war prisoners to the field dressing station which had been a sports stadium, now covered by the stretchers of the wounded. By that time my father had lost a lot of blood and everything depended on his getting quick attention, and it looked to him as though about a thousand of the wounded were ahead of him. Then, incredibly, one of the nurses happened to come up the line of the wounded and stared down at my father with a shock of recognition. He was the young officer she had danced with in a get-together behind the lines. She took out a whistle and signaled the orderlies to take Lieutenant Erickson into the dressing station immediately. The doctors amputated – the first of four – stitched up the wounds and stopped the flow of blood. He would live as a result of dancing with Nurse Elizabeth Pearse – who used to come to our house for Sunday dinners during the years I was growing up. I remember her well and the stories she told me which curdled my blood for she had served in several field dressing stations that came under heavy bombardment from German artillery, and lived to tell of it. One item which really curdled my young blood was her remark about how the nurses were always glad to see a soldier's open wound filled with crawling maggots. She said nothing equaled maggots for cleaning out a wound and so preventing infection.

I realize that I am taking my time getting to the main story which is after all Johnny's story. But I have to mention one other thing first. After my father began to recover and was moved to a hospital in England which specialized in prosthetics, he wrote to his fiancée saying that, given the serious damage done to his body, he could no longer hold her to her promise of marriage. By next mail there was a return letter in which my mother said she would not release him from his promise to marry her, and that was that. They had a happy marriage and were the parents of two sons – myself and my brother Arthur, the outstanding Canadian architect.

Okay, Johnny – at last its your turn, but I think you know why I had to put all that other stuff in first. Oh. Just one other thing that needs explaining. You see, Johnny served as my father's batman during the war, and the word "batman" may mean nothing to anyone today, especially since officers don't have batmen anymore. though they may have drivers and personal assistants. Batmen in the Great War were attached to officers as their servants – running messages for them, keeping their uniforms clean and ironed, shining their buttons and their boots, though that was a singularly useless task in the trenches.

So one day in 1938 Johnny phoned my father to tell him that like so many others he was out of work, didn't have a penny to his name, and could he live at our home for awhile and work around the place. My father said that if Johnny didn't mind sleeping in the basement on a cot he'd be glad to help out, meaning of course that all meals would be freely provided. When I asked him who this Johnny was my father only said that any help he could give Johnny was hardly enough since the man had saved his life during the war. And that's all he would say, so I naturally burned with curiosity.

Luckily for me, Johnny and I hit it off. For one thing Johnny was physically a slight man, only a little taller than I was, and he did not have the air of self importance that afflicts so many men, especially in relation to clueless children. He was simple and unassuming and he seemed interested in teaching me things he knew such as how to tie knots – a very useful skill, by the way, especially if you have ideas about lassoing the school bully.

Naturally, I wasted no time asking Johnny how he'd saved my father's life in the war, but only after endless requests did he tell me, probably in order to shut me up, for I was nothing if not persistent.

So here at last is Johnny's story. One rainy evening in the trenches my father was ordered by the company commander to eliminate a German machine gun nest which had been causing a number of casualties. The Germans placed such nests each manned by teams of eight to ten men well in front of their own defence line. To eliminate one of these nests the assault platoon would divide into three sections, two on either side of the nest and one in front. This operation would always occur at night to avoid detection. At a prearranged time five men from each section would hurl in grenades on a six second fuse, and the other five men, or fifteen in all, would charge the nest with fixed bayonets and eliminate any remaining opposition. This bayonet assault would always be led by the commanding officer, in this case my father, armed with his service revolver. Then the men of the platoon would return to their own trenches as rapidly as travel on hands and knees would allow them because German flares would be turning the night into day, and there would be heavy fire from the German lines.

The success of such operations depended on the rapid delivery of maximum explosive power. The trouble was that the section my father commanded which was to take its position in front of the machine gun nest had the poorest ground cover because of a lack of shell holes and consequently was going to be the last to get into position. He realized that if the other two sections made their assault at the agreed upon time my father's section would still be out of grenade throwing range. They would, however, be

committed to making the charge anyway over unbroken ground exposed to fire from the German lines because the sky would be lit up by flares. Not only would my father's chances of survival be minimal, but the success of the whole operation would be greatly reduced.

So he decided that the time of the attack must be changed and sent his batman, Johnny, to convey the change of time to the other sections. This meant that Johnny would have to get to what we will call C section on the right side of the machine-gun nest, deliver the news about the change of time, then circle around behind A section commanded by my father in order to reach B section on the other side of the nest. He could not afford any delays.

Guess what. On hands and knees he had not yet reached C section on the right when he heard a sharp whispered command to halt and was staring into the muzzle of a German rifle. "Give me your rifle," the man ordered in English. It was a young German soldier who had been sent out on patrol. Johnny handed over his rifle.

"What's your name?" the young German said, much to Johnny's surprise.

So Johnny told him.

"Good. Johnny. And I am Hans."

"Like Hansel and Gretel?" queried Johnny, though in later years he could never figure out why he asked such a dumb question.

Hans was amused. "Yes, yes."

"How is it you speak English?" Johnny asked. "And it sounds like we speak it in Canada."

"That's because I worked there for two years. In Toronto. Wish I were there now."

"So do I," whispered Johnny. "So do I."

All this time that the two young men were establishing a kind of relationship in the middle of the horror of war, the muzzle of the German's rifle was lowering and Johnny's right hand was moving behind him to the only remaining weapon he possessed – an 8" dagger.

Then he moved with lightning speed – shoving the rifle aside and driving his knife into the young man's throat. There was a strangled gasp, then a horrible gurgling sound as a jet of blood spurted. Hans fell with a muffled sob, and then was still.

The attack was launched twenty minutes later and the machine gun nest was reduced to rubble. Flares brightened the sky as the Canadians scurried on hands and knees back to

their own trenches. There was only one casualty and that was Sergeant Murphy who had been hit in the stomach by a German bullet. On Johnny's suggestion Johnny helped the wounded man onto my father's back as he crouched on the ground. Then on hands and knees despite the heavy fire my father managed to reach the Canadian trenches unharmed. However, two more slugs from the German lines had pierced the Sergeant's back and he was dead..

Due to Johnny two fine young men died that day – Sergeant Murphy and Hans, the German soldier. Also, due to Johnny the life of another fine young man was saved – my father. Johnny was offered a medal for his bravery, but he turned it down.

The ten year old boy that was me was disappointed, and asked Johnny why he turned down the medal for bravery. Johnny was silent for a full minute. Finally he said: "Every day of my life I wish I hadn't done what I had to do." And he would say no more.
