

At last...



By Gillian Parsons

10:00am - 11am 11 November 2014

Corporal Tom Andrews

Unteroffizier Dieter Mulder

Radio Announcer

ACT I

A dilapidated hut. Ancient military kit.

Two young men, military uniforms, cropped hair. One blond, one dark sit by their fire.

The blond man battles with a tin and a jumble of wires. It balances on a box that serves as a table.

He produces headphones from a rucksack and puts them on the ground.

Blond young man: *(strange accent)* It'll be time soon, Tom.....

"Tom" takes out his watch.

Tom: Yes, it is. Your Teutonic accuracy's never failed..

Dieter: That is how my family has made clocks in Hamburg for more than one hundred years and..

Tom: *(amused)* Come on, Det... turn on your 'magic' machine..

Dieter turns on the "contraption"; uncoils the 'length of wire' aerial and moves it around to find the best signal

He throws it over the hut roof. He sits back down and hands Tom one side of the headphones.

O/S: Crackles. A booming signal from the "contraption".

Big Ben chimes 10:00am, a couple of seconds of silence. An announcement.

O/S Radio Announcer: Good morning from sunny Ypres. I have a lovely view from our commentary box high in the Belfry, near the Menin Gate and..

Dieter: It is not sensible, to climb so high..

Tom gestures that he should be quiet

O/S Radio Announcer: I can see crowds lining the Meensestraat below me. From the Market Square all the way to the Menin Gate itself..

The commentary goes on.

Dieter: *(yawning)* Boring and more worse.. always the same.....

Tom: Unteroffizier Mulder, of course it's the same! History books are written by the winning side... (*chuckles*)... Let's try to listen eh? In 2014, it might be different.

They shake hands.

Tom: By the way, you can't say 'more worse' in English...

Dieter grabs a handful of fallen leaves and throws them at Tom. He dodges them and they settle back to listen.

O/S Radio Announcer: Just before 11 o'clock David Cameron and Angela Merkel will arrive and...

Dieter: I remember him. He was here last year... but who the lady visitor was...?

Tom: (*sighs*) Oh, I don't know. Does it matter? They're just two more people who'd cause trouble that poor blokes like us have to sort out!

Tom retrieves a kettle from the pile of kit. He peers inside, pulls a face and then sets it to heat on the campfire. Dieter turns the radio down slightly

Dieter: We'll imagine having a cup of tea until it is time?

Dieter takes a pair of rusty cups and a dented tin from his bag and passes them to Tom.

Tom: After all that we've endured rusty tea can't do us much harm.....

Dieter sniffs sadly.

Dieter: It might, if we could drink it... We have been coming here, on this day, for so many time, Tom. It feels like we come here for always...

The kettle hisses. Tom hurries over to it, fills the cups and hands one to Dieter.

Dieter: It looks so bad as I remember and...

Tom, who has been lost in his thoughts 'wakes up'. He tries to joke.

Tom: Sorry. It's the best we've got at the moment till we get our delivery from a posh shop in London...

Dieter: (*smile*) You British... You always have to make yokes...

Tom struggles with the need to correct him.

Tom: Harry always reckoned that it was a plot by your Field Marshal Hindenburg... If your army didn't scare us off, this "infiltrated" poison certainly would and...

Dieter stares into space.

Dieter: *(monotone)* They gave me tea the day that I was captured. It was also the day that you British killed "Strolch"... *(swallows, tries not to cry)*... The best ambulance dog in the Imperial Army! He tried to save lives...

Tom shuffles sideways to sit closer

Tom: He was a fine animal, Det. It was wrong. I see that now. He was only serving his Kaiser..... like you... Tell me about him again eh? It'll help.....?

ACT II

Tom stares at his teaspoon as he stirs his tea.

Dieter: Strolch had been with me half a year. He was two years old on that day...

Dieter sips tea.

Dieter: ... in 1915. The breeze sent our gas the wrong way. It came back to us. I was alright. My gas mask seemed to be working. I can still remember how smelly the mask was...

Tom: It can't be worse than dead...

Dieter: No, of course not! Anyway, we released the gas canisters again at the front of our trenches and sat waiting for it to cross 'No Man's Land'. Minutes later, we heard many crying and screaming and...

Tom stares into his cup.

Dieter: Suddenly it became quiet. Strolch was pulling on his lead. Happy to go to work... (*swallows*). I took off his mask and let him loose. He ran into the smoke and mud... I stood on our trench ladder and watched. (*Distressed*) He was with a wounded man, Tom... He was doing his job...

Tom lays his free hand on Dieter's trembling shoulder.

Tom : (*sadly*) A British soldier killed him. Just "doing his job"... if Strolch had helped save that injured soldier...

Dieter: He could have killed another poor English boy fighting for King George against the awful Hun...

Tom: The Kaiser's cousin... King George. He was a quarter German, too...

Dieter: (*irritably*) I know. How stupid! So many good people and animals die for the family fight!

Tom: "Strolch" is your word for Tramp? I think you told me before?

Dieter nods.

Tom: It just occurred to me. He sifted in the mud trying to find things he could use...?

Dieter nods, unable to speak. Tom remains silent. After several seconds.

Dieter: Tommy, my friend. You talk to me now. It will help if we always share our memories. Tell me again the story of Harry...

Tom: (*doubtful*) My turn? In the prison, the doctor said we must 'talk', but it didn't help. (*chuckles*)... strangely, the best medicine I did have was meeting this German, a prisoner; a corporal like me...

Dieter: (*smiles*) His dog was died and you were his guard in the prison. He was... still is, this awful Hun...

Tom: You weren't awful, Det. I've known you a long time... you had no choice any more than I did...

Dieter: (*smiles*) No, that is true... tell me about Harry...p-l-e-a-s-e...

Tom puts his cup down, wipes his mouth on his sleeve.

Tom: As you know, I'm a quiet bloke. A bit shy... especially meeting girls and...

Dieter: We would wish it... (*chuckles*) girls I mean...

Tom frowns.

Dieter: Sorry, I am not good with English yokes...

Tom: (*supressed smile*) As I was saying, I hated life in our trench. The food or the lack of it. The filth, the noise...

Dieter nods.

Tom: Having lice was worst I think. I tried to deal with most of it but the scratching...

Dieter: What did you use? We lit candles and put the wax on the stitches of our uniforms and blanket...

Tom: We did too. We had Naphthalene. It kills insects.

Both silently consider their memories of lice.

Tom: As I was saying; I'd been at The Front for two weeks. I missed my family so badly, but at least so far I'd managed to stay alive. I'm not good with people but I had made one friend. His name was Harry Lewis... (*he pauses, to regain his composure*)

Dieter: Go on...

Tom: Harry was a Yorkshireman, from Scarborough, near the Humber. We got talking. He laughed at my Cockney rhyming slang... You lot bombed Scarborough...

Dieter interrupts. He holds one finger to his lips, gesturing Tom should be quiet. He turns up the volume on the radio.

O/S Radio Announcer: ...and now we will witness the laying of wreaths by all the combatant nations.

Tom: Leave it like that. Just for a minute. We don't want to miss the hour chime!

O/S Radio Announcer: ...and now, just after 10:30 we can see the first...

Dieter: It is OK, Tom. We have time. Continue with the story.

Dieter turns the radio volume down a little.

Tom: (sniffs) There isn't much to tell. We sat one night, eight of us that were left out of thirty that first came. We shared two bottles of flat beer and talked about home. Some played cards... *(he swallows to recover his composure)*

Dieter: Come on, Tom. Keep talking.

Tom: Next morning, we went "over the top". We attacked the German lines. Harry ran beside me. He fell, face down. He'd been shot... I threw myself into the mud next to him. I wanted to carry him back to our trench to a doctor. I turned him over, to keep his face out of the filth.

Tom: (sobs) He'd been shot in the stomach...

Dieter hugs him.

ACT III

The Radio is now much louder.

O/S Radio Announcer: This is the second wreath being laid by King Philippe of Belgium. It's made of white peace poppies and ribbons. Just behind him are the King & Queen of The Netherlands and...

Tom: (*chuckles*) D'you remember in 1964?

Det: Beetles?

Tom: (amused) No, you stupid Hun... The B-E-A-T-L-E-S! Pop music they called it...

Det: Oh yes, I know it now. They were from Hamburg like me...

Tom: Mmm, not sure. I thought they were English but I might be wrong...

Det: If they are musicians, we had lots of bars in Hamburg...

Tom: Yes, you might be right. (*smiles*) You were right earlier too... about "telling" I mean... I feel much better now... Let's reminisce...

Dieter: (struggling) That word r-remi...'

Tom: "Reminisce." Talk about old things and old times.

Dieter: All things?

Tom: I think it'd be good things but I don't think it really matters... Like in, 1962. All the builders and strange machines came...

Dieter: I'm glad that they repaired our building, Tommy...

Tom: (*nods*) "They", the people of today, I mean... I hope that they learn the lessons that we can teach them...

Dieter: I think they do, Tommy. They built the Menin Gate for you, your family have something. Almost they know where you are... but me, I'm the villain...

Dieter turns away. His face a picture of misery.)

Tom: (*exasperated*) Dieter! How many times have I told you over the years... !

Dieter: D'you remember in 2012. They opened our Museum? My family looked for me on a... oh, what was that stupid English word... There is no record of me! They spoke to workers in the Museum... A man said to my great granddaughter that...

Tom puts his arm around Dieter's shoulder.

Tom: You mean "database". They're making a sort of "list" of what happened to your army... it'll take a while, Mate. No-one ever tried until now...

Dieter: A "d-database" *yes I know it now. It was written on a sign the last time I walked in the Museum. Sorry, I didn't know what was that word in English!*

Tom: *(amused) I thought you were the technical part of this friendship!*

Dieter: I'm glad that they do things for us now, after one hundred years. I was not monster, Tom. The others in my battalion also not...

Tom: No, I know. But people have feelings, Det and also very long memories! Our War, that was bad... but, try to imagine that you're not German... come on, just for a minute...

Dieter looks doubtful.

Tom: A baby boy born in 1918...

Dieter: *(chastened)* Will be twenty one years in 1939!

Tom: Exactly! Come on, what's done is done. D'you remember that terrific party in 1927? The day the Menin Gate was opened. I could almost taste some of those cakes that they made in the Market Square...

Dieter: *(chuckles)* And you complained, like always, about the fizzy, yellow beer!

Tom: *(sheepish)* I still think it looks awful... I imagine you have to be foreign to appreciate it?

Dieter: *(tongue in cheek)* And you are British, Tommy Old Chap? Bad luck...!

Tommy looks around for something to throw at him. Dieter grabs him and they have a mock fight. Tommy surrenders.

Tommy: OK Mate, I give in. We'd better check the time and what's happening outside!

Dieter walks to look out of the window, near to their camp. He stands on tiptoe.

Dieter: Ten minutes to eleven.

Tommy: What's happening? What can you see?

Dieter: There is a very big crowd. Lots and lots of poppy flowers. Like always. There are soldiers and sailors and the Royal Flying Corp...

Dieter hurries to the radio and turns up the volume.

O/S Radio Announcer: The time is now 10:50. Any moment now we expect the arrival of the Prime Minister and...

The Radio Announcer's voice is drowned by the swirl of bagpipes.

Tommy: We've had that one before.....

Dieter: (nods) It's called "Battle of the Somme"...

Tommy: My clearest memory is Christmas '14...

Dieter: The football. No one was harmed for the whole Weihnachten. I knew him... the soldier who walked alone towards you British...

Tommy: Yes, you told me. What happened to him after? Was he OK?

Dieter shakes his head sadly.

Tom: Sorry. Silly question.

Dieter: A British soldier did throw his ball to us when we had been singing songs of Christmas. After we did sing, in our language what you call "Silent Night".

Tommy: There's your proof then. If I'd thought that all you "horrible Hun" were monsters why did I trust you with my football...! It was a "silent night" too! No guns, no killing..

Tommy: (beaming smile) 19-66!!

Dieter: How did I know that you would say that...?

O/S: Bagpipe band.

O/S Radio Announcer: Bagpipes have played their part many times in "Remembrance Day" parades and services. They are...

Dieter: "Bloody Fields of Flanders"

Tommy: *(nods)* And only now, one hundred years later are people trying to make amends and stop it happening again...

Dieter: *(doubtful)* You're really sure that my country will be forgiven one day?

Tommy: Before we leave we should have a good look around the Museum, Det. We could learn a lot...

Dieter: Do you think that my dog will be remembered too?

Dieter hurriedly checks the time

O/S Cheering crowds

O/S Radio Announcer: David Cameron stands with a British soldier who holds a large poppy wreath. They stand heads bowed, close to the steps, waiting for... yes, I can see now... A black BMW flying small pennants in black, red and gold. The car stops and Chancellor Merkel is helped from the back seat by a young pilot.

Mrs Merkel and her pilot join the British couple. Both Heads of State are handed their floral tributes and the young men step aside. The dignitaries exchange smiles and proceed to the bottom of the steps perfectly in sync. They pause for several seconds and then, without speaking Mrs Merkel offers her free hand to Mr Cameron. He takes it and they walk up the steps. I've never seen anything so...

Dieter and Tom race to a window and stand on tip toe looking down. The two dignitaries, still in perfect sync stand, hand in hand, heads bowed in front of the Memorial

Tommy: *(thrilled)* T-that's it, Det Old Chap! I always thought that this could happen!

They run from window to window, frantic to get a better view.

O/S: Radio Announcer The two leaders back slowly away from the Memorial heads bowed, hands linked. They drop hands and turn to face each other and... that's amazing! They're hugging. The crowd here in Ypres is going crazy! Flags waving, cheering... I almost can't hear myself speak.

Tommy: We're free, Dieter. D'you realise that? We're at peace at last... we just saw it happen! You and I've served our time here. No more returning to the place where we died every November...

Dieter: *(sad)* It was a muddy field then, but now the ruins of the Cloth Hall is the Museum and my family can maybe find what happened to me...

Tommy: Shall we pack up our things and head back, Det eh?

Dieter: Peace for ever sounds good, "British Tommy"... We can meet with Harry and with my friends now. Come on...

Dieter and Tom start packing.

Dieter: I almost forgot it, Tommy! Strolch! Strolch! Come here Boy. We're going home...

O/S: *A bugle plays "The Last Post". A barking dog. It starts to "rain" poppy petals.*

CURTAIN