

THE LAST GAME

Butch Clark

As a child Kyle liked to play with the other children on the block. The favorite game at the time was Army, a game in which two opposing "teams" would stalk the countryside looking for the other side, and shoot them with their toy rifles and pistols. Kyle like this game especially, because he was usually the one to take the fate of his country in his hands and undertake daring missions against unspeakable odds. He always felt he belonged when he played this. He was a leader, and the rest of the boys and girls would look up to him in a time of despair. This feeling was planted strongly in his mind, and, though he could never actually remember why, he always felt a certain love for war.

By the time he was thirteen, he had read practically every book on the World Wars. He knew the names of particular battles, numbers of casualties, and all the types of weapons used. He didn't outgrow the reading madness and eventually started writing books about true and fictional occurrences.

So let us now join him but three short hours before his death

. . . . Kyle Caldeth stopped not ten feet from the open doorway of the Convention Center. The collection of WW I relics had been touring the nation for nearly three months now. Each piece was carefully packed and unpacked by highly paid "servants of history." They knew the invaluable meaning of these old, rugged, often rusted and stained rifles and pistols.

They also carted out rafts of yellowish pictures that were on the verge of crumbling in their laminated plastic encasements. Most of the pictures were a testament to mankind, to end its warfare. They captured obscene scenes of total destruction and turmoil. Men missing arms and legs were common. A favorite picture at the time was a shot of an empty trench on the French front. Kyle examined the photo intensely. He was glad he could get in the room before the official opening. He didn't feel rushed by a line of impatient mothers and their anxious children. He could take all the time he wished. He peered deep into the frame and saw everything as it was so many years ago. The lonely men and their pitiful wounded were captured forever.

He felt a tingling sensation on the back of his neck. He could have really been a leader then. He could have come home a hero, when most

lay in France either dead or dying. The sensation came back again only stronger this time. His vision blurred and finally diminished. He thought he felt himself hit the floor, but he wasn't sure

. . . . Kyle shook his head slowly as to restore clear sight. He was lying in mud that covered his field jacket; his rifle was half buried nearby. Whatever hit him had surely . . . Field jacket? Rifle?

He looked around madly, not sure he could handle what he thought he might see. There in front of him was the door to the officer's hole; a small underground room used behind the trenches in the First World War. He cast a glance to the right. There was a body a few hundred yards away. It was in the trench. He looked to the right. There was a small animal scampering away from him. It was in the trench. Finally he looked behind himself. There was a huge open space. Directly in front of him and again about a half a mile beyond was roll upon roll of barbed wire; and on the other side of that was the enemy. HE was in the trench.

His head spun. He faintly remembered a similar sensation before but he couldn't quite place it.

His next thought was to find somebody. He ran to the right. As he approached the body, he at once realized the smell. A sort of liquid stench hung ten feet in the air. There was no escaping it. It smelled of rotten eggs, rotted wood, and decaying flesh. His stomach heaved as he neared the sprawled body. The head was missing and tendons hung from the ripped neck. Its uniform was hard from dried blood, and one boot was missing. Kyle staggered past it, stopping to support his weight against an upright beam. They were used to keep the dirt from falling in the trench. He coughed and spat out the material from his mouth. Again, venturing on, he came upon a man sitting up against the wall. Excitedly he sped to the man and tapped the soldier on the shoulder. The man moved minutely. Kyle grabbed the arm and shook. With a flurry of mud and tears, Kyle scrambled back from the figure. He had been touching a dead man; a man totally void of life.

Kyle stumbled back, falling on a pile of rubber suits. They were used for protection against gas warfare.

Pressing onward, he noticed his legs had begun to get irritated. The walking in the mud-caked pants had taken its toll. His underarms, too, felt the effect. The grit on his hands was more of a mental burden than an actual physical one.

At the bend of the trench was another soldier. He was walking. Kyle rushed toward the man. As Kyle got closer, he noticed with horror that

the man was bleeding profusely from his abdomen. As he clutched his stomach, the man saw Kyle and reached out for help. Kyle was only twelve feet away when the soldier fell. Kyle ran blindly from the soldier.

All at once there was a heavy explosion, followed by another, and another. The ground shook. His legs trembled as dirt piled in around him. Another smell filled his lungs, the smell of garlic or horseradish. Once again his memory served him. He must be in the presence of mustard gas. A burning sensation filled his throat. His arms burned also. He had to get back to those rubber suits he had seen a few minutes ago.

Stumbling over canteens and mess kits, he saw the suits only a few hundred yards away. His pace slowed down though when his lungs began to burn. He dropped to his knees, but forced himself to stand. Stumbling forward, he felt his chest grow tight.

There were only fifteen feet left now. He dropped to his knees once more. His bare arms now were blistered from wrist to elbow from the gas. His weight came crashing down on his left forearm and tore the skin from the blister. He crawled to the pile inch by inch, his breath coming harder and harder as the seconds ticked by. Finally he could go no farther. He laid his head on his raw arm. The dirt in his hair made the wound sting and burn.

He ended up only a few feet from the spot he started from. A boy with a camera was shooting a picture as Kyle lay there in all his agony.

The gas had inflamed his lungs so much that he wished he didn't have to breathe. It had also caused huge blisters on his face and arms. This wasn't what Kyle had dreamed about all his life. He had never really thought of the grim, ungodly actions and situations arising from war. He had not thought of the pain and suffering, for when he was shot before, all he had to do was get up and start a new game. Kyle was now at the end of his games. He took his last breath in his last game . . .

. . . The hired mover had never noticed the body in the popular photograph of the trench. He always thought it was an empty trench, but there it was in black and white; the body of a man in a field jacket, with his head on his arm.

Ten minutes later he found the body of a young reporter lying on the floor. The reporter's position looked strangely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. As he lifted the man's head from his arm, he noticed small blisters on the journalist's arm and face . . .