

DEATH! A Story of Mortality

by John Burkitt

CHARLIE REMEMBERED HOW HIS MARINE uniform made him feel like a real man. But he had never felt so much like a child in a man's body as he did that moment. As his landing craft approached the beach, he reached up with a trembling hand to finger the crucifix that hung about his neck under his khaki shirt next to his dog tag. *"Our Father, who art in Heaven...hallowed be Thy name..."*

A shell exploded into the water nearly tipping the craft. The smell of the explosion reminded him briefly of hunting in the Maine woods with his father. Only now he was the prey. He checked his rifle nervously. It was armed and ready. He only wished he were equally ready.

"Thy Kingdom come...Thy will be done...on Earth as it is in Heaven..."

He felt a slap on the back. It was Nick. Good old Nick.

"Give us this day our daily bread..."

Out of the corner of his eye, Aslan saw the shreds of his mane in the flickering torchlight as yard by painful yard he was dragged over the stony ground toward the Stone Table. He thought about Susan and Lucy, filling his mind with love of them to drown out the hatred and malice that surrounded him. He knew they saw everything. Even if he would give Jadis the satisfaction of hearing his shrieks, he would never let the girls know how badly they were hurting him.

The edge of the Stone Table brutally raked him as he was yanked the last few feet. Many ugly things went through his mind as the evil could not longer be distanced. He had urinated before he came so they would not laugh when he wet himself at the end. Still it never occurred to him that they would feel such glee at clipping him bald.

"Muzzle him!" Jadis yelled.

Aslan sighed. No one brings shears to a battle. No one brings a muzzle. She had planned that carefully.

The landing craft bottomed out a few feet from the shore. Its front end was a ramp, and when it dropped with a splash, the sergeant's cry of "Go, go!" was hardly necessary.

Charlie's heart pounded in his chest. He felt the cold briny water as he plunged into the surf. He felt the sand beneath his boots as he waded forward. He felt the warm wind in his face.

On the shore the advancing troops were being picked off by Japanese fire. Charlie tried very hard not to think about it. He concentrated on the barbed wire. He fell to the ground and shuffled forward beneath the cruel strands of steel just as he had been trained, moving forward on his belly, pushing his gun ahead of him. One thing at a time. That's all he could afford to think about.

Aslan breathed rapidly, his heart pounding in his chest. The rapid pulses only made the ropes around his limbs throb all the worse. "Edmund," he thought, "at least you are safe. At least you..."

Jadis voice punctuated his thoughts again. "Your death will appease the Deep Magic. But after you're

dead, what is to stop me from killing him? You have given me Narnia forever! You have lost your life and have not saved his!"

She held high the obsidian knife. He knew this though he could not look around to see her trembling hands.

"In that knowledge, despair...and die!"

Charlie had just cleared the barbed wire. He stood, raised his rifle, and then looked into the face of death. He caught a glint of light on a rifle barrel. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" he muttered. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

The slug felt like just that, being slugged in the abdomen by a boxer. Warm blood poured down his legs. The rifle slipped from his grasp. The ground was falling toward him. He could not catch himself. "That's it," he thought.

Aslan felt the click when the knife, wielded with such force, pierced his heart and hit a rib on the other side. Even in his final agony he noticed how cold the

stone felt against his warm body. Then the pain resurged as she rudely wrenched the knife from the wound.

His legs stiffened for a moment, then fell limp. It was to him as if the torches all went out at once and a night with no moon or stars swallowed up everything in deadly darkness.

The marine walked forward. The tunnel through which he traveled was couched in shadows but at the end beckoned a brilliant white light.

He ambled along serenely, noting that he felt no more pain. Despite the surreality of everything he saw, he felt no more fear. That is not to say he felt no regrets. There would be the usual telegram from the War Department coming for Dad. His name would be added to the "Pro Patria Mori" list hanging in the church. Janice would have to put her dreams on hold until another love came into her life. Todd would get his hunting rifle...his letters home made that quite clear...

The passage seemed to go on for hours...or it could have been days. He passed the shadows of people he had once known. They seemed to regard him with friendly recognition but no surprise. He waved at his Grandmother Tuttle and she nodded her head in reply.

Finally he emerged into the light. He stood at the edge of a bottomless canyon. Crossing it was a large ornate stone bridge that looked wide enough to drive a jeep across easily. Beyond it, on the other side, were green meadows with flowers and trees and on past that distant misty mountains reaching into a cloudless, pure sky.

As he approached the bridge, he heard something behind him and looked around. What he saw startled him, or the closest feeling to being startled he could manage in death.

It was a lion. A very large lion. His face was surrounded by a rough stubble of mane. In his side was a terrible gaping wound.

The serenity of the moment was shattered. Charlie went to the lion without fear. Somehow he knew it was all right.

"Hey there, fellow, what happened to you?"

"The same thing that happened to you. I died for my country."

For some reason Charlie was not shocked that the lion answered him. What disturbed him the most was the suffering the lion had no doubt endured. Though Charlie was a hunter, he had never bagged anything bigger than rabbits and squirrels, and the large, sad, noble face of the

lion broke his heart. Besides, it was clear this was no clean kill. That cat had been tortured and desecrated.

"Who did this to you?"

"In a way, it was a good friend."

"Are you saying it was an accident?"

"More like poor judgment."

Charlie put his arms around the lion's neck and gave him a pat. "Kind of like my running down to enlist, hmm? We old soldiers ought to stick together. Stay with me friend, and I'll look after you."

The lion looked up at him. "Would you will look after me, Charlie?" Aslan smiled. "Then I will look after you. While I must go on alone, your time has not yet come. Go home, get well, and go squirrel hunting with your dad. I'll come back when you're ready. Remember me."

The pain was back but it felt different somehow. Charlie could not move much but he glanced about at the bottles, the doctors, the bright light.

"He's coming around," the orderly said.

"You're quite lucky," the Navy doctor said. "One of your buddies pulled you to safety."

"Two of them," Charlie whispered.

"We can save this arm if infection doesn't set in. This is a ticket home, you lucky stiff."

"My arm?" Charlie asked. "I was shot in the arm?" His eyes closed and as he slipped back into unconsciousness, he muttered "Remember me."

THE END