

The Unknown Soldier

By Bracken Martyn

'What's he want now?'

A small nondescript man in a white coat was standing at the bottom of Neil's bed studying a clipboard. It told how the occupant of B9 was found unconscious on the beach and had been in a vegetative state ever since. The patient was plugged into a bank of machines with a hi-tech screen showing all his vital functions. A second white coat arrived and the two medical men scrutinised Neil.

'It's strange; the police can't seem to find out who he is. You'd think in this modern age someone would have claimed him.'

'Yes, they said he was known as Sarg. Maybe dental records will help; or is that only done after death?'

Neil listened attentively to the dialogue and wondered why they didn't ask him his name.

'Are we agreed then?'

'Yes, we'll give him 24-hours to respond.'

Respond to what thought Neil, then suddenly he got it and a surge of fear and panic swamped him. *Hello*, I'm Sergeant Neil Morgan and I was a soldier and I'm a dad. My son's called Joe. The two doctors had finished their consultation and had updated the notes for B9.

'Fancy a coffee, my shout.'

'Sounds good, cheers.'

Neil was alone again. It would all be Ok; he'd use his training to defeat these disturbing men in white coats and then head home to see Joe. God, I'd kill for a drink he thought and drifting away was back on the hillside.

Errrat tat tat

'Sergeant, we need to gain elevation and stop those bastards.'

'Yes *Sir*, I understand.'

Sergeant Morgan had often fantasised about being in the heat of battle and backed himself to deal with whatever war could throw at him. There were no cracks in his armour and he assumed that was how his men saw him. Suddenly though, the reality of his situation knocked him for six. What was he doing in this cold, arid place, a million miles from home? A voice inside his head yelled, *Soldier*, rely on your training.

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He tried to clear the doubt from his mind; there was a job to do. The low lying fog made navigation a lottery and the constant clatter of automatic weapons from ahead and to the side created uncertainty. Taking two men with him and using the natural undulations of the hillside for what little cover it could offer, they headed towards the fire storm.

An echoed scream ping-ponged between random bursts of gun fire.

‘Sarg, I’ve been hit.’

A simple statement and the last words of an 18-year old boy.

Sergeant Morgan had lost a man on his watch, that wasn’t in the plan. He was a professional soldier, well, he hid his fear and yes, followed orders and fuelled by anger captured the machine gun post. In the process he killed one of those evil bastards and his country rewarded him with a medal for gallantry and a discharge on medical grounds! When the shooting stopped he looked down to see two dead young men, both denied a tomorrow. A teardrop tried to escape his lower eyelid, Neil was torn between letting it flow and denying it access to his cheek.

He’d never felt so scared and useless; they made him dress up in a thin blue one-piece costume with matching overshoes and gloves and he’d shuffled into the surgical room watching a busy team fussing over Amanda.

He’d joined the army in search of adventure and a new life, with no intention of returning to that provincial little town. After discharge he’d headed for The Smoke with designs on an exciting new life in the metropolis. The reality though, was too much sauce, regular punch ups, a few squalid flat shares and crap jobs that never lasted. After what he called the wilderness year he’d drifted home to the security blanket of his mum’s cooking, Amanda and all that other stuff he’d run away from.

Amanda’s dad had got him a job with a security company doing nights. It was deadly tedious, like century duty, but without the discipline. After a while he’d started taking a can or four with him to work, these helped tick away the hours.

They’d talked about getting a place together, but the rents were out of reach and then one day, Amanda announced she was pregnant and that she’d been down the Council to try and sort some housing. They wanted her to stay at home with her folks and said the best they could offer would be a bed and breakfast. Not the sort of sweet coastal town holiday place, but a grimy room in a semi derelict block inhabited by drunks and drug addicts. Neil wasn’t having any of that for his son and paid the corporation a visit with the intention of sorting everything. Coming straight from work and fuelled on super strength lager he soon found himself being asked to leave the premises before they called the police.

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And so, there he was, watching the birth of his son, who was going to live in a bed and breakfast. They named him Joe after his fallen colleague and Neil was determined that for this little bundle of life it would be different, it would be wonderful and exciting. He'd teach him survival skills and they'd go out camping on the moor.

They kept Amanda and Joe in for observations and Neil headed down his local to celebrate fatherhood. Two-years down the line he was sitting in the same pub with his rucksack and a train ticket to the coast.

His eyelids felt glued together and when he eventually convinced them to part he lacked the ability to focus. The percussive and rhythmical sound of breaking waves kick-started his memory and he recalled sitting round a fire on the beach, drinking and laughing with his mates. His eyes were beginning to function again and he could see the detritus from last night's merriments. One of those large blue plastic cider bottles scuttled past on the breeze. In this moment of lucidity he wondered why he drunk that cheap synthetic crap and then instantly put that thought to bed as he perused his surroundings in search of some booze, anything, some dregs would be fine, but all the bottles were empty. The fire had long been extinguished and his co-drinkers had vanished into the night. He lay back on his bed of pebbles and shivered.

What was he doing here with these drunken losers; he really should quit the booze and head home to see Joe and be a proper dad. He surrendered, conceding that some cider would be the best way to manage the situation and tomorrow he could think about home. It was time to get up and go in search of his friends, in the forlorn hope that someone had cash and they could head down the all-night Offie.

He didn't see it coming, but reeled under the vicious attack as something smashed into the side of his head. It was too late to fall back on his training, for just as he acquired awareness and saw the silhouette of his enemy, there was a further impact and Neil drifted away to a place of phosphorescent lights and cascading starbursts.

The ubiquitous white coats were back and they were joined by a petite nurse who reminded Neil of someone from back home, from the old days; but he couldn't recall who. At that moment his attention was drawn to a nondescript fellow in a dark blue jacket who'd sneaked up in a stealthy manor and was now looking earnestly at the patient. After what seemed like an eternity he turned on his heels and addressed the three person medical team:

'Ok'

Neil thought he was going to say, Attention!

A white coat walked slowly down the side of patient B9's bed, avoiding eye contact with its unconscious occupier.