AWC Story Competition

500 words (or less) short story

Three years. Three years to the day.

That’s how long it’s been since I first seen a live grenade. I remember the way Sergeant O’Neill addressed us as we stood there in our army fatigues.

“This here is a magnetic grenade pin”, he barked, pointing at the small clasp around the top of the grapefruit-shaped explosive he was holding. “The likes of which none of you are as yet trained to use. Over the course of the next couple a months, I will show you how to utilise it to your advantage, amongst other explosives and weaponry.” Without further warning, he pulled the pin and threw the grenade into the ready-made trenches opposite us. The explosion, although relatively far away and therefore safe, sent most of us candidates flying to the ground clutching our heads for dear life. I even heard that a few of the grunts wet themselves or shat their pants.

Later that day, in the barracks, I was bored. So, being the nosy type, I decided to have a snoop around the barracks. I remember coming across a suspicious-looking bed and stopping to inspect. There was something bulging out from underneath the pillow. I lifted it and saw a flowery fronted diary. Taking a quick peek around to make sure no one could see what I was doing, I shoved the diary down my combat pants and walked away from the bedsit, whistling.

I got away with it, too. My fellow recruits were lounging on the hand-me-down sofas, watching the old, busted satellite receiver TV whilst making uncouth remarks about the woman presenting the news. I guess these boys hadn’t seen much action in a while. Little did they know, though, they were going to see a lot more action in just a few months – most of which they did not expect and would not be prepared for.

I will admit I am guilty on the count of reading that poor grunt’s diary. It was so full of personal stuff (letters to his family (pictures, even), love-notes to his wife) that I nearly started bawling underneath the rough, standard-issue sheets, or at least anonymously referring the guy to the counsellor. I didn’t, though. I just continued with the candidate programme like the good, brainwashed soldier-in-training that I was. I decided not to read the rest of the diary, even though I wanted to and hadn’t been found out as the perpetrator of this heinous crime.

I wouldn’t say I passed the army regime with flying colours, but I’m certainly flying now. At least, in the Apache helicopter with the rest of my squad, that is. In fact, it was the explosion from the heat-seeking missile that made me lose my focus on the mission at hand and think back to my training days. Why did I even join the army? Would I ever be held responsible for stealing the diary? So many questions, so little space for thinking left in my guilt-ridden, war-torn, shell-shocked mind.