

## The Cost of Freedom

In a foggy, bloodstained battlefield in a mud-ridden trench, Thomas Clifton falls to the ground. William-not only a comrade but a lifelong friend- stands in shock, trembling in fear. He runs to Thomas's side and hovers over him. William attempts to cover the gaping wound on Clifton's chest, but it's useless. Their faces fill with horror; they both know he can't be saved. Thomas's eyes begin to glisten as tears cascade down his face; he knows it's the end. Thomas lies there-William by his side- covered in blood, shivering from the cold October winds, life draining from him. Thomas's breathing slows, his trembling body goes limp, and then there is nothing... Thomas Clifton is dead.

William stands up, his mind unable to think and body unable to move, stunned at the scene before him. Clifton's remains are now just one of the many corpses of yet another brother-in-arms that lies among the barren wastelands. No longer does he consider this a battlefield but rather a mass graveyard. The sky begins to whistle, interrupting William's thoughts; that sound was all too familiar-it was a bomb. He tries to outrun the blast, but it is of no use. Violently he's pushed to the ground, the earth-shaking, dust and debris filling the air, and shrapnel plunging into the ground. Everything is becoming hazy; William lies there, in fear, for himself, his family, and the lives he's fighting for. And his heart throbbing at the loss of his dear friend. Then everything goes dark.

William is forced back to reality as he jolts upright from his bed. His heart is pounding through his chest, his body is quivering uncontrollably, and his face is lined with sweat. He lays back down for a moment, taking long breaths to calm himself. It's been seven years since William has seen combat, yet he still is fighting a battle within himself that is slowly consuming him. The nightmares never go away; they terrorize his soul, keeping him stuck in the past. He blames himself for Clifton's death, he forces himself to believe he is the reason Thomas's family is shattered; a daughter and two sons growing up without their father and a wife who remains heartbroken but pushes herself forward, to honor her husband.

After the tremors subside, and he finds a glimmer of serenity he gets up and gets dressed. On the side table right before the door, he reaches for a pen and looks up at the calendar which reads November in big letters. He hatches off the fourth day and then drops the pen back. He picks up two vibrant red poppies that are sprawled on the table, delicately pinning one to the left side of his chest. He takes the other poppy and places it in his pocket. William makes his way outside, hops in his old pick-up, and begins to drive. He can't stop his mind from wandering back to his nightmare, he only remembers bits and pieces. He has tried therapy, medication and even drinking away his problems. Still, nothing is strong enough to help, to help him find peace. He pulls up to an entrance and drives through. Within the gates lie rows of headstones, crosses and flowers. William turns off the ignition and exits the vehicle.

It's quiet; all that is heard is the rustling of leaves below William's feet as he makes his way over to a headstone that reads: Thomas Cliffton, a beloved father, husband, and friend. William stands in silence, tears escaping his eyes. He brushes his face with his sleeve and reaches for his pocket, grasping the poppy he had placed there earlier. He takes it and gently places it on the ground below the headstone. He stands back up, but this time, he stands strong and tall. He raises his right arm so it slightly touches his forehead and salutes his fallen comrade. As he brings his arm down, he whispers to himself,

"Never will I Forget."

And this is why we Remember. This is why we remember the sacrifices that generations of soldiers have made and continue to make for us so we can live our lives how we do today. This is why we wear the vibrant red poppies close to our hearts, attend Remembrance Day ceremonies, and stand for two minutes of silence. It's why we honor these peacekeepers who are laying their lives on the lines to provide people like us with hope and peace. Never will we forget these heroes, who have stood up against oppression and continue to do so, defending our freedoms and our lives.

We will Remember You.