

In the footsteps

My head is spinning, my stomach is churning. I can't think. I don't have time to feel sorrow or reminisce about the days that knew a sliver of peace. Yet, I look up to the sky and allow myself one singular moment.

In the deepest parts of my mind, where shame has no name, I'm scared I'm not strong enough. Father fought in the war, now I will continue his legacy.

Mother says that I must not break down, that I am brave. Grandpa says I will serve well and bring honor to my family. Will I bring honor or shame? My eyes water, and my vision blurs, but I quickly compose myself. I will persevere. For my home, for my country, for you.

Time has passed. Battles have been fought. It's August of 1942 now, and we head to Dieppe, a strongly guarded port that will take much force to bring freedom to. However, I have confidence in myself that only comes with time. I am no longer the scared boy I was before.

Hours pass, and our element of surprise is gone. My energy is dwindling, and my body screams for a break. But there are no breaks in war, it knows no mercy. Bodies are scattered, and blood paints the ground.

Cries of soldiers echo the field. Amongst the chaos and carnage, a bullet found its mark deep in my chest, leaving no replies. I clutch my wound and crumple to the ground. Everything slows, sound and sight. I have learned so much in so little time: how to work a rifle, fight, and hold life in my hands. I must not let the Germans win; I must be stronger than them.

My eyes burn as salt streams out of my eyes into my ears. Flashes of memories float around in my mind. I see Mother, wrinkles growing more prominent each year I see her. I see Father, smiling down at me as a child. I see a younger me, grief shadowing what should be a young boy's bright face.

Pain, unimaginable pain hits me. Realization dawns, *I am dying*. I look up as the sun sinks below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple. A gentle breeze hits me as a light flashes, the world around me fading. Father appears before me, and says "Son, come with me." He stretches out his hand.

Disbelief shadows my face, and then I suddenly stop, "Wait, what about the raid? I have to help them!" I say. Father turns around, a small smile on his face. "Brave soldier, I admire your persistence, even in death. Worry not of the port, fate is in your favor. You have played your part in the scheme of things." With that reassurance, I continue toward the light and welcome death.

Years later on the ground where the soldier passed on, a seed of a promise grew into a sapling, and then into a bright, everlasting poppy.