

Title (up to 20 words) - 27 miles

Strapline (up to 40 words) -

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

Our camp was in the middle of the countryside, yet the shadow cast by the wall reached even this far. 27 miles of concrete wall and barbed wire sliced through East and West Berlin. Reality was beginning to dawn on me the more I saw; this shell of a city used to be a home before it was torn apart. Menacing tanks and guards had been stationed across the border, patiently waiting for somebody brave enough to try and escape the broken city. Rumours simmered of people digging tunnels from their houses and underneath the wall to reach their family on the other side. I hope they survived. After a 9 month wait to be vetted by the Royal Signals and thorough checks whilst being contained in a train cabin on the way into Berlin that made my stomach squirm, we had finally arrived. For me, this was my first post, and it was the same for Evans and many others in our regiment.

When we entered the village of Langeleben, the locals had smiles plastered on their faces. To them we were comfort and protection from potential violence, giving us all a grave responsibility. The camp used to be just tents, but there were now living quarters and other facilities like the kitchens where I would be working. My gaze flickered from each group of men at their stations who were all a few years older than me, some of them were practicing their German to chat with people in the village.

"I wonder if we'll ever get that good eh, Williams? You've got a long way to go but maybe you could put together a sentence by the time we leave" Evans said under his breath with a chuckle as our superior approached.

He stood tall before us and began to brief us: "You must always be prepared for the worst. A bag full of kit must always be at your disposal so that you are ready if this camp is compromised. If you're lucky we'll give you a twenty minute warning! Phosphorus bombs have been planted underneath this camp which will be used if they ever find us. This is an important job for our country, never forget that boys"

Stalking off, he left us in silence, stunned at the gravity of us being here and how fatal our jobs could be.

“Let’s go make ourselves at home then” Jackson declared, breaking the silence. We ventured forwards to roam the camp and find our sleeping quarters.

To ease us into our new lives, we had been invited to the pub that the others were going to, so that we could meet the locals and get used to the surroundings. That evening, we headed out into town, and after having to deal with Evans’ constant jokes about Russian spies, we made it to our destination. We were instantly met with the loud buzz of people drinking together. Three girls ran to hug their friends next to us.

“Lads, this is Sophia, Hedy and Clara” bellowed the soldier that was putting his arm around who I just found out was Hedy. They looked around our age or a little bit older, all stood with a drink in their hand.

“Nice to meet you!” I unsuccessfully tried to say over the noise. I was dragged off by Sophia to get a drink and the same happened to Evans and Jackson, who were talking to different girls that I didn’t know the name of. Now that I had a pint in my hand, Sophia seemed satisfied and began talking to me.

“What is your name?” she implored with a beaming smile.

“Williams, I work in the kitchens on the camp, what about you?” A little bewildered, I bounced back the same smile as hers, but her expression faltered slightly.

“I work at my family’s farm nearby.” Sophia took the last swig of her drink, placed the empty glass on the bar and started looking around.

“Your English is great! I’m hoping to improve on my language skills too whilst I’m here.” I was trying to keep the conversation flowing but she seemed suddenly disinterested.

“I’m a quick learner. Entschuldigung.” As quick as she had appeared, she left, swiftly moving between the crowd of people. I racked my brain for some explanation for the bizarre interaction but came up with nothing. Puzzled, I went and sat next to some familiar faces at the bar and scanned the pub for Evans. He’ll enjoy laughing at me when I tell him the story.

After a few minutes, it became clear he wasn’t in the room, so I made my way to the most likely place he would be after drinking that many drinks. As I weaved my way through, trying to navigate through the mass of people, I noticed Sophia and Jackson talking together. He looked smugly at me, knowing that she had gotten bored talking to me and moved on to him. I stopped myself from rolling my eyes at him, kept my head down and continued past them. I knew better than to start something with Jackson, he never backed down. Something I heard halted me in my tracks.

“What does a brave man like you do in the camp?” Sophia inquired.

“Oh well, we intercept messages from the Russians. I heard that-” Jackson was divulging classified information. What was he doing? My heart quickened and my thoughts reeled with panic.

“Jackson! Where’s Evans?” I shouted, interrupting him mid-sentence. Anything to stop him drivelling on.

“Toilets, mate” Jackson bristled, clearly irritated by my presence.

I continued my way to Evans feeling my palms get clammy, picking apart our encounter. She must have realised that because I work in the kitchens, I would have no information regarding the intercepted communications like Jackson would. Sophia was easily retrieving secrets from him in his drunken state. We were never briefed about this. I need to find Evan’s and leave. Now.