From Flanders Fields

Deborah J. Sheridan

> Then Abram . . .
> . . . . . .
> stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son,
> When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . Offer the Ram of Pride, instead.
> But the old man would not do so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.
> (Wilfred Owen, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young")

A LITTLE OVER TWENTY YEARS AGO on a beautiful July day in London when the sun glittered in a cloudless sky, warm breezes blew the music of the Royal Green Jackets band across Hyde Park. English families and tourists wandered the park or settled themselves on the grass and benches to listen. Close by, the Household Cavalry gathered inside the gates of their barracks and, when the hour struck, rode out on their magnificent steeds to stand guard at Horseguards Parade on the other side of the park. Their armor shone in the sun, the plumes on their helmets swaying rhythmically. The horses' hooves clattering on the cobbles, they made their way down

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Rotten Row and through the park. Twenty-five miles away, I left my office and went in search of some lunch.

When my brother Chris joined the British army, his entrance scores were so high he was allowed to choose any regiment. He had always loved the pomp and ceremony of our small island, and what could be more romantic and eccentrically English than to join the antiquated, ceremonial Household Cavalry? This regiment is two brigades combined: the Life Guards and the Blues and Royals. Having chosen the pageantry and glamour of the ceremonial, mounted division, Chris started his equestrian career. He polished his knee-length boots until his face gazed patiently back at him from the burnished depths, cleaned his white leather breeches to pristine condition, shined his dazzling silver breastplate and helmet, and combed the horsetail plume springing from the crown of his helm. He spent hours grooming and exercising his horse.

Chris and I grew up in a blended family that had not blended well. As children we fought; but since he had left home, I had missed him dreadfully. My heart swelled with pride as he made his way through the rigors of training and became a fully fledged trooper. He was finally engaged in something he loved, and I delighted in seeing him so absorbed in a task he found worthwhile.

Now in the warm, breezy afternoon, belly full, I drove the country lanes back to my office, the sun filtering through the leaves. I mused on how good it was to be alive, to breathe in the beauty of life afforded us on our "sceptered isle," the blitheness of youth guiding me through each day. We lived in violent times. Terrorist bombs irrevocably changed the course of people's lives in nearby London, but we were untouched, safe, our small town a safe harbor. I returned to my office and was greeted by the receptionist's grave face. Handing me a note, she advised me to phone the number scribbled across it. Bombs had exploded in Rotten Row and Hyde Park. Soldiers had been killed.

Trembling, I hurried to the office and grabbed the phone, dialing as I sank into the chair. The calm, measured tones of a policewoman at the crime scene asked me for my brother's name. She asked for his height, the color of his eyes and hair. "Any distinguishing marks?" she probed. I was silent while screaming filled my head. She was going to take those details and search through the bodies strewn across the street. She would have to step over the fallen, mutilated horses, searching to see if I had identified one of the dead and dying men. I shook from head to foot as scenes of our

childhood barreled into each other in my mind: me, the big sister when he had started school; at the beach in summers past; laughing with his father; scrapes, wounds, sitting on the back step counting our scabs; his recent graduation parades from basic training. I recounted the victories, minor and major, of Chris's life as it had touched my own.

Why were I and other sisters, mothers, brothers, and fathers staggering through these minutes wondering where our soldiers were? Terrorists, willing to die for their cause and take as many others with them as they could, had attacked bandsmen armed only with wind instruments. When military bandsmen are called to active service, they serve as stretcher bearers, never carrying a gun. In times of war, Chris and his fellow troopers would serve in the palace guarding the monarch, the last defense between her and the enemy. These were not boys who would go into battle, fire weapons in anger, destroy homes, property, lives. They were not "legal targets."

A couple of agonizing hours passed before I heard the news that the soldiers killed in Hyde Park were Blues and Royals. Chris was a Life Guard. Guilty tears of gratitude fell. My brother was safe. Other sisters' brothers lay dead. Eight soldiers and seven horses died in the park that day, three soldiers died later from their injuries, and forty-one spectators were maimed. Those hours have left an indelible mark on my soul. Not a lover of the army before Chris joined, I found my dislike growing into antagonism toward those who created the need for defensive forces. I'd been sympathetic to the Catholic Ulstermen's desire for equality, not because my own father was a Catholic Irishman, nor from my studies of history, but because they were part of God's family. But terrorism is never justified, whatever the cause, whatever name or excuse we may use to disguise it.

Until 1999 when I moved to Utah to study, I lived in the United Kingdom, where my family was converted to Mormonism in the early sixties. Reared in a country still recovering from the ravages of World War II, where city streets are battlefields for terrorists, I learned both to fear war and to loathe it. As we were led into other wars in patriotic fevers induced by double-speaking politicians, I learned to abhor their endorsements of the use of force. In anticipation of the U.S. attack on Iraq, I actively demonstrated and spoke at public meetings against it. Thankfully, in neither the United States nor Europe am I alone.

War has dogged Europe for tens of centuries, and we are tired of it. We have lived through its horrors firsthand in our own countries, not just

witnessed it on the TV screen. We have built, and lost, our empires. In the process we have learned the evil of subjugating other nations while hiding behind the claims of civilizing, modernizing, and proselytizing for God. We created misery, resentment, poverty, hatred, and untold suffering. With these lessons emblazoned across the pages of our history, why would we fall for the same idiocy in the twenty-first century? That is not to say that all Europeans opposed the attack on Iraq, but the numbers of those who supported the war were small. From where we sit, the war was a nightmarish replay of every empire-building conflict and excuse we have already invented, pursued, and justified to our deluded imperialist selves. All over Europe, in acts of terrorism brought to our doorsteps by our empire-building, politicians and ordinary citizens alike have been bombed, mortared, and shot. Our experience has cost and is still costing us an exorbitant price in lives, property, and taxes. Why would Europeans want another war?

In 1939 my mother was a small child living in London. My granny, who had survived London's bombing by the Kaiser's Zeppelins during the First World War, evacuated my mother to a small town called Chelmsford, the first place to be bombed in the Second World War. Despite Hitler's *Blitzkreig* on London, my granny took her young daughter back to the center of the city to be safe. Later my mother was evacuated to Wales and didn't see her family for four years. Children were regularly sent home from school to collect their belongings, then loaded onto boats and transported to Australia for safety—until a U-boat sank one of those boats and all the children were lost. My grandfather and stepfather, who saw active service in that war, remain silent to this day about their experiences.

In the early summer of 1997, I accompanied twenty high school students on a trip to the area of the River Somme in Flanders. We visited some of the thousands of First World War cemeteries there, row upon row of young men and boys, slaughtered. The largest ones are the last resting places of thousands of soldiers. Thousands more whose bodies were swallowed in the mire are merely names engraved in lists on the huge walls at the graveyards. The smallest graveyards hold only hundreds of bodies. Alive, these young men were filled with the patriotic fervor of "For the Fatherland" or "Kill the Kaiser." Dead, they are a grim reminder of war's utter waste.

As night fell, we listened in solemn silence to the bugler's last call. We were standing on the edge of Ypres, by the monolithic gate covered

with the half million names of soldiers who died in that town. I was overwhelmed, left inarticulate at the unbounded, pointless destruction of humanity witnessed by the fields of Flanders. At one lonely graveyard, as I searched for Sheridans, I felt a whisper and sensed that the man whose body lay in the forlorn grave before me, Philip Sheridan, was a member of my family. Overcome with despondency, I wondered if he had felt the same futility about the "the war to end all wars" that I did eighty years later. Some of those men stood in the trenches for four years, some for mere hours before their supreme sacrifice was wrenched from them. After a few weeks' fighting, no longer blinded by political or patriotic rhetoric, they were trapped.

Carefully maintained by the governments of the countries involved in the conflict, the tidy rows of patient dead and the orderliness in which they rest belie the horror of the Battle of the Somme. But scrunching my eyes, I pictured the victory recounted in the groans and screams of the wounded and dying. They had lived—and died—in appalling circumstances, feet rotting as they stood knee-deep in their comrades' blood and guts, fighting rats for food and a place to sleep. It was not a heroic war, and it robbed my beloved homeland of untold potential.[1]

Tony Blair supported the attack on Iraq with less than 30 percent of the population behind him. He faced a revolt in his cabinet and lost a very

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1. Of the 9.5 million British forces mobilized during World War I, 908,371 were killed in action or died from wounds. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1,328. About 57,000 British lives were lost on the first day of the Battle of the Somme alone, with about 420,000 perishing over the course of the battle. Davies, *The Isles: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 896. Paul Kennedy notes that, of the 40.7 million Allied troops (including British) mobilized in the war, "Around 8 million men were killed in actual fighting, with another 7 million permanently disabled, and a further 15 million [sustaining serious wounds]—the vast majority of these being in the prime of their productive life. In addition, Europe *excluding* Russia lost over 5 million civilian casualties through what [D. H. Aldcroft in *From Versailles to Wall Street, 1919–1929* (London: n.pub., 1977), 15] termed 'war-induced causes'. . . . The Russian total, compounded by the heavy losses in the civil war, was much larger." Kennedy also cites such collateral damage as a "birth deficit," the genocidal massacres of displaced ethnic populations, and the severity of the 1917–18 influenza epidemic—with "the final casualty list for this extended period . . . as much as 60 million people." He estimates that the war's total expense, including munitions, mobilizations, and destruction of such facilities as railroads, factories,

able cabinet member. The French and German attitudes toward the war are now the stuff of stories to frighten children. Are they all cowards—or simply weary? The face of the U.K. countryside and the hearts of her people teem with reminders of past conflicts, while the countryside of France and her citizens' souls are pockmarked with war tokens of their own. Every year the fields of Flanders vomit forth bombs and bodies buried in the quagmires of the First World War battlefields. Some German cities were almost entirely obliterated. From the death camps in Germany, never dismantled, evil emanates from the ground they infest, and no birds sing. Reminded constantly of man's inhumanity to man, both by our geography and by the legions of our disabled and disturbed, why would we want another war, especially one declared on tired, spurious claims?

In the two decades between the July day of the IRA attacks and this, thousands of people have died on my small island home, victims of terror. Chris has married and had a son of his own. I have five children, three girls and two boys, big strapping lads named after prophets, all of whom joined with me in objecting to the attack on Iraq. I live thousands of miles from my oldest three children, but that invisible cord which binds us to our Heavenly Father is replicated in the feelings I have for them, whatever they choose to do or be. I tremble at the thought of severing the mortal cord that ties their lives to mine, and I understand the ferocity with which a lioness defends her cubs. I dread the day when some maniac will precipitate another war, one which will engulf us all. I do not want my children to fight against their brothers and sisters, from whatever shore they hail, or see other mothers weep over the bodies of children they have battled to bring into the world.

I demonstrated against the attack on Iraq because it went against the teachings of Jesus Christ as I understand them. Peace is not bought by aggression, hatred, or murder by the military. War destroys the sensitivities of the souls we compel to commit those crimes against humanity, breeds hatred in their hearts, and violates the very earth over which we are stewards. War diffuses darkness and fear over this glowing orb, a darkness and

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and warehouses, exceeded $260 billion, more than the total accumulated GNPs of European countries from 1800 to 1920, with even the most industrialized countries taking an additional ten years to make up economically for where they would otherwise have been in 1921. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), 278–79.

fear which infiltrated my heart ten thousand miles from the scene of the attack. What damage has it done in the hearts and souls of those on whom the attack was perpetrated?

As an apostle, Spencer W. Kimball taught that the Book of Mormon "should convince all living souls of the futility of war." Indeed, he seemed unequivocal when he stated:

> We do not favor war. We do not like the blood of war, the stench of war, the suffering of war, the deprivations of war, the cruelty of war, the degradation of war. We hate war. . . .
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> It seems almost a hopeless undertaking to establish peace on earth and good will to men throughout the world, when at this very moment nations are in civil combat and are armed to the teeth. . . . All great movements had their small beginnings. . . .
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> First we make ourselves humble. We change our own lives; that is the beginning.[2]

In general conference on October 4, 2003, Elder Shirley D. Christensen reaffirmed the LDS position that we believe and revere the words of our present prophet and those of past prophets.[3] Spencer W. Kimball's words ring hopefully in my head.

As I write now in late November 2003, President George W. Bush is visiting the small, war-weary island I have called my home. There he will face tens of thousands of my countrymen and women, anti-war protestors whose courage I praise, demonstrating against a colonial enterprise that will yield the same chaotic crises Europe now yearns to leave behind. For our own sakes and our children's, we must humble ourselves, change our lives, and require that our leaders change, too. As weary as we are of war, it is up to us to begin a revolution of peace.

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2. Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 414–15.

3. See Shirley D. Christensen, "The Clarion Call of Prophets," *Ensign*, November 2003, 32–34.