

## Johnny Got His Gun (An Excerpt) by Dalton Trumbo 1939

He shot up through cool waters wondering whether he'd ever make the surface or not. That was a lot of guff about people sinking three times and then drowning. He'd been rising and sinking for days weeks months who could tell? But he hadn't drowned. As he came to the surface each time he fainted into reality and as he went down again he fainted into nothingness. Long slow faints all of them while he struggled for air and life. He was fighting too hard and he knew it. A man can't fight always. If he's drowning or suffocating he's got to be smart and hold back some of his strength for the last the final the death struggle.

He lay back quietly because he was no fool. If you lie back you can float. He used to float a lot when he was a kid. He knew how to do it. His last strength going into that fight when all he had to do was float. What a fool.

They were working on him. It took him a little while to understand this because he couldn't hear them. Then he remembered that he was deaf. It was funny to lie there and have people in the room who were touching you watching you doctoring you and yet not within hearing distance. The bandages were still all over his head so he couldn't see them either. He only knew that way out there in the darkness beyond the reach of his ears people were working over him and trying to help him.

They were taking part of his bandages off. He could feel the coolness the sudden drying of sweat on his left side. They were working on his arm. He felt the pinch of a sharp little instrument grabbing something and getting a bit of his skin with each grab. He didn't jump. He simply lay there because he had to save his strength. He tried to figure out why they were pinching him. After each pinch there was a little pull in the flesh of his upper arm and an unpleasant point of heat like friction. The pulling kept on in short little jerks with his skin getting hot each time. It hurt. He wished they'd stop. It itched. He wished they'd scratch him.

He froze all over stiff and rigid like a dead cat. There was something wrong about this pricking and pulling and friction heat. He could feel the things they were doing to his arm and yet he couldn't rightly feel his arm at all. It was like he felt inside his arm. It was like he felt through the end of his arm. The nearest thing he could think of to the end of his arm was the heel of his hand. But the heel of his hand the end of his arm was high high high as his shoulder.

Jesus Christ they'd cut his left arm off.

They'd cut it right off at the shoulder he could feel it plain now.

Oh my god why did they do a thing like that to him?

They couldn't do it the dirty bastards they couldn't do it. They had to have a paper signed or something. It was the law. You can't just go out and cut a man's arm off without asking him without getting permission because a man's arm is his own and he needs it. Oh Jesus I have to work with that arm why did you cut it off? Why did you cut my arm off answer me why did you cut my arm off? Why did you why did you why did you?

He went down into the water again and fought and fought and then came up with his belly jumping and his throat aching. And all the time that he was under the water fighting with only one arm to get back he was having conversation with himself about how this thing couldn't possibly happen to him only it had. So they cut my arm off.

How am I going to work now? They don't think of that. They don't think of anything but doing it their own way. Just another guy with a hole in his arm let's cut it off what do you say boys? Sure cut the guy's arm off. It takes a lot of work and a lot of money to fix up a guy's arm. This is a war and war is hell and what the hell and so to hell with it. Come on boys watch this. Pretty slick hey? He's down in bed and can't say anything and it's his tough luck and we're tired and this is a stinking war anyhow so let's cut the damn thing off and be done with it.

My arm. My arm they've cut my arm off. See that stump there? That used to be my arm. Oh sure I had an arm I was born with one I was normal just I like you and I could hear and I had a left arm like I anybody. But what do you think of those lazy bastards cutting it off?

How's that

I can't hear either. I can't hear. Write it down. Put it on a piece of paper. I can read all right. But I can't hear. Put it down on a piece of paper and hand the paper to my right arm because I have no left arm.

My left arm. I wonder what they've done with it. When you cut a man's arm off you have to do something with it. You can't just leave it lying around. Do you send it to hospitals so guys can pick it to pieces and see how an arm works? Do you wrap it up in an old newspaper and throw it onto the junk heap? Do you bury it? After all it's part of a man a very important part of a man and it should be treated respectfully. Do you take it out and bury it and say a little prayer? You should because it's human flesh and it died young and it deserves a good sendoff.

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Then things quieted down all of a sudden. Everything went still inside his head. The lights before his eyes snapped out as quickly as if somebody had shut them off with a switch. The pain went away too. The only feeling he had was the strong throb of blood in his brain swelling and contracting his head. But it was peaceful. It was painless. It was such a relief that he came out of his drowning. He could think. He thought well kid you're deaf as a post but there isn't the pain. You've got no arms but you don't hurt. You'll never burn your hand or cut your finger or smash a nail you lucky stiff. You're alive and you don't hurt and that's much better than being alive and hurting. There are lots of things a deaf guy without arms can do if he doesn't hurt so much he goes crazy from pain. He can get hooks or something for arms and he can learn to read lips and while that doesn't exactly put him on top of the world still he's not drowned in the bottom of a river with pain tearing his brain to pieces. He's still got air and he's not struggling and he's got willow trees and he can think and he's not in pain.

He couldn't understand why the nurses or whoever had charge of him wouldn't lay him out level. The lower half of him was light as a feather while his head and chest were dead weights. That was why he had thought he was drowning. His head was too low.

If he could move whatever was under his legs and bring his body to an even level he'd feel better. He wouldn't have that drowning dream any more.

He started to kick out with his feet to move what was under his legs. He only started because he didn't have any legs to

kick with. Somewhere just below his hip joints they had cut both of his legs off.

No legs.

No more running walking crawling if you have no legs. No more working.

No legs you see.

Never again to wiggle your toes. What a hell of a thing what a wonderful beautiful thing to wiggle your toes.

No no.

If he could only think of real things he would destroy this dream of having no legs. Steamships, loaves of bread, girls, Kareen, machine guns, books, chewing gum, pieces of wood, Kareen, but thinking of real things didn't help because it wasn't a dream.

It was the truth.

That was why his head had seemed lower than his legs.

Because he had no legs. Naturally they seemed light. Air is light too. Even a toenail is heavy compared to air.

He had no arms and no legs.

He threw back his head and started to yell from fright. But he only started because he had no mouth to yell with. He was so surprised at not yelling when he tried that he began to work his jaws like a man who has found something interesting and wants to test it. He was so sure the idea of no mouth was a dream that he could investigate it calmly. He tried to work his jaws and he had no jaws. He tried to run his tongue around the inside of his teeth and over the roof of his mouth as if he were chasing a raspberry seed. But he didn't have any tongue and he hadn't any teeth. There was no roof to his mouth and there was no mouth. He tried to swallow but he couldn't because he had no palate and there weren't any muscles left to swallow with.

He began to smother and pant. It was as if someone had pushed a mattress over his face and was holding it there. He was breathing hard and fast now but he wasn't really breathing because there wasn't any air passing through his nose. He didn't have a nose. He could feel his chest rise and fall and quiver but not a breath of air was passing through the place where his nose used to be.

He got a wild panicky eagerness to die to kill himself. He tried to calm his breathing to stop breathing entirely so he would suffocate. He could feel the muscles at the bottom of his throat close tight against the air but the breathing in his chest kept right on. There wasn't any air in his throat to be stopped. His lungs were sucking it in somewhere below his throat.

He knew now that he was surely dying but he was curious. He didn't want to die until he had found out everything. If a man has no nose and no mouth and no palate and no tongue why it stands to reason he might be shy a few other parts as well. But that was nonsense because a man in that shape would be dead. You couldn't lose that much of yourself and still keep on living. Yet if you knew you had lost them and were thinking about it why then you must be alive because dead men don't think. Dead men aren't curious and he was sick with curiosity so he must not be dead yet

He began to reach out with the nerves of his face. He began to strain to feel the nothingness that was there. Where his mouth and nose had been there must now be nothing but a hole covered with bandages. He was trying to find out how far up that hole went. He was trying to feel the edges of the

hole. He was grasping with the nerves and pores of his face to follow the borders of that hole and see how far up they extended.

It was like staring into complete darkness with your eyes popping out of your head. It was a process of feeling with his skin of exploring with something that couldn't move where his mind told it to. The nerves and muscles of his face were crawling like snakes toward his forehead.

The hole began at the base of his throat just below where his jaw should be and went upward in a widening circle. He could feel his skin creeping around the rim of the circle. The hole was getting bigger and bigger. It widened out almost to the base of his ears if he had any and then narrowed again. It ended somewhere above the top of what used to be his nose.

The hole went too high to have any eyes in it.

He was blind.

It was funny how calm he was. He was quiet just like a storekeeper taking spring inventory and saying to himself I see I have no eyes better put that down in the order book. He had no legs and no arms and no eyes and no ears and no nose and no mouth and no tongue What a hell of a dream. It must be a dream. Of course sweet god it's a dream. He'd have to wake up or he'd go nuts. Nobody could live like that. A person in that condition would be dead and he wasn't dead so he wasn't in that condition. Just dreaming. But it wasn't a dream.

He could want it to be a dream forever and that wouldn't change things. Because he was alive alive. He was nothing but a piece of meat like the chunks of cartilage old Prof Vogel used to have in biology. Chunks of cartilage that didn't have anything except life so they grew on chemicals. But he was one up on the cartilage. He had a mind and it was thinking. That's more than Prof Vogel could ever say of his cartilages. He was thinking and he was just a thing.

Oh no. No no no.

He couldn't live like this because he would go crazy. But he couldn't die because he couldn't kill himself. If he could only breathe he could die. That was funny but it was true. He could hold his breath and kill himself. That was the only way left. Except that he wasn't breathing. His lungs were pumping air, but he couldn't stop them from doing it. He couldn't live and he couldn't die.

No no no that can't be right.

No no.

Mother.

Mother where are you

Hurry mother hurry, hurry, hurry and wake me up. I'm having a nightmare mother where are you? Hurry mother. I'm down here. Here mother. Here in the darkness. Pick me up. Rockabye baby. Now I lay me down to sleep. Oh mother hurry because I can't wake up. Over here mother. When the wind blows the cradle will rock. Hold me up high, high.

Mother you've gone away and forgotten me. Here I am. I can't wake up mother. Wake me up. I can't move. Hold me. I'm scared. Oh mother, mother sing to me and rub me and bathe me and comb my hair and wash out my ears and play with my toes and clap my hands together and blow my nose and kiss my eyes and mouth like I've seen you do with Elizabeth like you must have done with me. Then I'll wake

up and I'll be with you and I'll never leave or be afraid or dream again.

Oh no.

I can't. I can't stand it. Scream. Move. Shake something.

Make a noise any noise. I can't stand it. Oh no no no.

Please I can't. Please no. Somebody come. Help me. I can't lie here forever like this until maybe years from now I die. I can't. Nobody can. It isn't possible.

I can't breathe but I'm breathing. I'm so scared I can't think but I'm thinking. Oh please please no. No no. It isn't me.

Help me. It can't be me. Not me. No no no.

Oh please oh oh please. No no no please no. Please.

Not me.

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Lying on your back without anything to do and anywhere to go was kind of like being on a high hill far away from noise and people. It was like being on a camping trip all by yourself. You had plenty of time to think. You had time to figure things out. Things you'd never thought of before.

Things like for example going to war. You were so completely alone on your hill that noise and people didn't enter in your figuring of things at all. You figured only for yourself without considering a single little thing outside yourself. It seemed that you thought clearer and that your answers made more sense. And even if they didn't make sense it didn't matter because you weren't ever going to be able to do anything about them anyhow.

He thought here you are Joe Bonham lying like a side of beef all the rest of your life and for what? Somebody tapped you on the shoulder and said come along son we're going to war. So you went.

But why? In any other deal even like buying a car or running an errand you had the right to say what's there in it for me? Otherwise you'd be buying bad cars for too much money or running errands for fools and starving to death. It was a kind of duty you owed yourself that when anybody said come on son do this or do that you should stand up and say look mister why should I do this for who am I doing it and what am I going to get out of it in the end? But when a guy comes along and says here come with me and risk your life and maybe die or be crippled why then you've got no rights. You haven't even the right to say yes or no or I'll think it over. There are plenty of laws to protect guys' money even in war time but there's nothing on the books says a man's life's his own.

Of course a lot of guys were ashamed. Somebody said let's go out and fight for liberty and so they went and got killed without ever once thinking about liberty. And what kind of liberty were they fighting for anyway? How much liberty and whose idea of liberty? Were they fighting for the liberty of eating free ice cream cones all their lives or for the liberty of robbing anybody they pleased whenever they wanted to or what? You tell a man he can't rob and you take away some of his liberty. You've got to. What the hell does liberty mean anyhow? It's just a word like house or table or any other word. Only it's a special kind of word. A guy says house and he can point to a house to prove it. But a guy says come on let's fight for liberty and he can't show you liberty. He can't prove the thing he's talking about so how in the hell can he be telling you to fight for it?

No sir anybody who went out and got into the front line trenches to fight for liberty was a goddamn fool and the guy who got him there was a liar. Next time anybody came gabbling to him about liberty- what did he mean next time? There wasn't going to be any next time for him. But the hell with that. If there could be a next time and somebody said let's fight for liberty he would say mister my life is important. I'm not a fool and when I swap my life for liberty I've got to know in advance what liberty is and whose idea of liberty we're talking about and just how much of that liberty we're going to have. And what's more mister are you as much interested in liberty as you want me to be? And maybe too much liberty will be as bad as too little liberty and I think you're a goddamn fourflusher (*a person who makes false or pretentious claims*) talking through your hat and I've already decided that I like the liberty I've got right here the liberty to walk and see and hear and talk and eat and sleep with my girl I think I like that liberty better than fighting for a lot of things we won't get and ending up without any liberty at all. Ending up dead and rotting before my life is even begun good or ending up like a side of beef. Thank you mister. You fight for liberty. Me I don't care for some.

Hell's fire guys had always been fighting for liberty.

America fought a war for liberty in 1776. Lots of guys died. And in the end does America have any more liberty than Canada or Australia who didn't fight at all? Maybe so I'm not arguing I'm just asking. Can you look at a guy and say he's an American who fought for his liberty and anybody can see he's a very different guy from a Canadian who didn't? No by god you can't and that's that. So maybe a lot of guys with wives and kids died in 1776 when they didn't need to die at all. They're dead now anyway. Sure but that doesn't do any good. A guy can think of being dead a hundred years from now and he doesn't mind it. But to think of being dead tomorrow morning and to be dead forever to be nothing but dust and stink in the earth is that liberty?

They were always fighting for something the bastards and if anyone dared say the hell with fighting it's all the same each war is like the other and nobody gets any good out of it why they hollered coward. If they weren't fighting for liberty they were fighting for independence or democracy or freedom or decency or honor or their native land or something else that didn't mean anything. The war was to make the world safe for democracy for the little countries for everybody. If the war was over now then the world must be all safe for democracy. Was it? And what kind of democracy? And how much? And whose?

Then there was this freedom the little guys were always getting killed for. Was it freedom from another country? Freedom from work or disease or death? Freedom from your mother-in-law? Please mister give us a bill of sale on this freedom before we go out and get killed. Give us a bill of sale drawn up plainly so we know in advance what we're getting killed for and give us also a first mortgage on something as security so we can be sure after we've won your war that we've got the same kind of freedom we bargained for.

And take decency. Everybody said America was fighting a war for the triumph of decency. But whose idea of decency? And decency for who? Speak up and tell us what decency

is. Tell us how much better a decent dead man feels that an indecent live one. Make a comparison there in facts like houses and tables. Make it in words we can understand. And don't talk about honor. The honor of a Chinese or an Englishman or an African negro or an American or a Mexican? Please all you guys who want to fight to preserve our honor let us know what the hell honor is. Is it American honor for the whole world we're fighting for? Maybe the world doesn't like it. Maybe the South Sea Islanders like their honor better.

For Christ sake give us things to fight for we can see and feel and pin down and understand. No more highfalutin words that mean nothing like native land. Motherland fatherland homeland native land. It's all the same. What the hell good to you is your native land after you're dead? Whose native land is it after you're dead? If you get killed fighting for your native land you've bought a pig in a poke. You've paid for something you'll never collect.

And when they couldn't hook the little guys into fighting for liberty or freedom or democracy or independence or decency or honor they tried the women. Look at the dirty Huns they would say look at them how they rape the beautiful French and Belgian girls. Somebody's got to stop all that raping. So come on little au' join the army and save the beautiful French and Belgian girls. So the little guy got bewildered and he signed up and in a little while a shell hit him and his life spattered out of him in red meat pulp and he was dead. Dead for another word and all the fierce old bats of the D.A.R. (*Daughters of the American Revolution*) get out and hurrah themselves hoarse over his grave because he died for womanhood.

Now it might be that a guy would risk getting killed if his women were being raped. But if he did why he was only striking a bargain. He was simply saying that according to the way he felt at the time the safety of his women was worth more than his own life. But there wasn't anything particularly noble or heroic about it. It was a straight deal his life for something he valued more. It was more or less like any other deal a man might make. But when you change your women to all the women in the world why you begin to defend women in the bulk. To do that you have to fight in the bulk. And by that time you're fighting for a word again.

When armies begin to move and flags wave and slogans pop up watch out little guy because it's somebody else's chestnuts in the fire not yours. It's words you're fighting for and you're not making an honest deal your life for something better. You're being noble and after you're killed the thing you traded your life for won't do you any good and chances are it won't do anybody else any good either. Maybe that's a bad way to think. There are lots of idealists around who will say have we got so low that nothing is more precious than life? Surely there are ideals worth fighting for even dying for. If not then we are worse than the beasts of the field and have sunk into barbarity. Then you say that's all right let's be barbarous just so long as we don't have war. You keep your ideals just as long as they don't cost me my life. And they say but surely life isn't as important as principle. Then you say oh no? Maybe not yours but mine is. What the hell is principle? Name it and you can have it.

You can always hear the people who are willing to sacrifice somebody else's life. They're plenty loud and they talk all the time. You can find them in churches and schools and newspapers and legislatures and congress. That's their business. They sound wonderful. Death before dishonor. This ground sanctified by blood. These men who died so gloriously.

They shall not have died in vain. Our noble dead.

Hmmmm.

But what do the dead say?

Did anybody ever come back from the dead any single one of the millions who got killed did any one of them ever come back and say by god I'm glad I'm dead because death is always better than dishonor? Did they say I'm glad I died to make the world safe for democracy. Did they say I like death better than losing liberty? Did any of them ever say it's good to think I got my guts blown out for the honor of my country? Did any of them ever say look at me I'm dead but I died for decency and that's better than being alive? Did any of them ever say here I am and I've been rotting for two years in a foreign grave but it's wonderful to die for your native land? Did any of them say hurray I died for womanhood and I'm happy see how I sing even though my mouth choked with worms?

Nobody but the dead know whether all these things people talk about are worth dying for or not. And the dead can't talk. So the words about noble deaths and sacred blood and honor and such are all put into dead lips by grave robbers and fakes who have no right to speak for the dead. If a man says death before dishonor he is either a fool or a liar because he doesn't know what death is. He isn't able to judge. He only knows about living. He doesn't know anything about dying. If he is a fool and believes in death before dishonor let him go ahead and die. But all the little guys who are too busy to fight should be left alone. And all the guys who say death before dishonor is pure bull the important thing is life before death they should be left alone too. Because the guys who say life isn't worth living without some principle so important you're willing to die for it they are all nuts. And the guys who say you'll see there'll come a time you can't escape you're going to have to fight and die because it'll mean your very life why they are also nuts. They are talking like fools. They are saying that two and two make nothing. They are saying that a man will have to die in order to protect his life. If you agree to fight you agree to die. Now if you die to protect your life you aren't alive anyhow so how is there any sense in a thing like that? A man doesn't say I will starve myself to death to keep from starving. He doesn't say I will spend all my money in order to save my money. He doesn't say I will burn my house down in order to keep it from burning. Why then should he be willing to die for the privilege of living There ought to be at least as much common sense about living and dying as there is about going to the grocery store and buying a loaf of bread.

And all the guys who died all the five million or seven million or ten million who went out and died to make the world safe for democracy to make the world safe for words without meaning how did they feel about it just before they died? How did they feel as they watched their blood pump out into the mud? How did they feel when the gas hit their

lungs and began eating them all away? How did they feel as they lay crazed in hospitals and looked death straight in the face and saw him come and take them? I! the thing they were fighting for was important enough to die for then it was also important enough for them to be thinking about it in the last minutes of their lives. That stood to reason. Life is awfully important so if you've given it away you'd ought to think with all your mind in the last moments of your life about the thing you traded it for. So did all those kids die thinking of democracy and freedom and liberty and honor and the safety of the home and the stars and stripes forever? You're goddamn right they didn't.

They died crying in their minds like little babies. They forgot the thing they were fighting for the things they were dying for. They thought about things a man can understand. They died yearning for the face of a friend. They died whimpering for the voice of a mother a father a wife a child They died with their hearts sick for one more look at the place where they were born please god just one more look. They died moaning and sighing for life. They knew what was important They knew that life was everything and they died with screams and sobs. They died with only one thought in their minds and that was I want to live I want to live I want to live.

He ought to know.

He was the nearest thing to a dead man on earth.

He was a dead man with a mind that could still think. He knew all the answers that the dead knew and couldn't think about. He could speak for the dead because he was one of them. He was the first of all the soldiers who had died since the beginning of time who still had a brain left to think with. Nobody could dispute with him. Nobody could prove him wrong. Because nobody knew but he.

He could tell all these high-talking murdering sonsofbitches who screamed for blood just how wrong they were. He could tell them mister there's nothing worth dying for I know because I'm dead.

There's no word worth your life. I would rather work in a coal mine deep under the earth and never see sunlight and eat crusts and water and work twenty hours a day. I would rather do that than be dead. I would trade democracy for life. I would trade independence and honor and freedom and decency for life. I will give you all these things and you give me the power to walk and see and hear and breathe the air and taste my food. You take the words. Give me back my life. I'm not asking for a happy life now. I'm not asking for a decent life or an honorable life or a free life. I'm beyond that. I'm dead so I'm simply asking for life. To live. To feel. To be something that moves over the ground and isn't dead. I know what death is and all you people who talk about dying for words don't even know what life is.

There's nothing noble about dying. Not even if you die for honor. Not even if you die the greatest hero the world ever saw. Not even if you're so great your name will never be forgotten and who's that great? The most important thing is your life little guys. You're worth nothing dead except for speeches. Don't let them kid you any more. Pay no attention when they tap you on the shoulder and say come along we've got to fight for liberty or whatever their word is there's always a word.

Just say mister I'm sorry I got no time to die I'm too busy and then turn and run like hell. If they say coward why don't pay any attention because it's your job to live not to die. If they talk about dying for principles that are bigger than life you say mister you're a liar Nothing is bigger than life There's nothing noble in death. What's noble about lying in the ground and rotting. What's noble about never seeing the sunshine again? What's noble about having your legs and arms blown off? What's noble about being an idiot? What's noble about being blind and deaf and dumb? What's noble about being dead. Because when you're dead mister it's all over. It's the end. You're less than a dog less than a rat less than a bee or an ant less than a white maggot crawling around on a dungheap. You're dead mister and you died for nothing.

You're dead mister. Dead.

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Somebody was plucking at his nightshirt over his left breast. It was as if a forefinger and thumb were pinching up a portion of it. He lay very quiet now deathly quiet his mind jumping in a hundred different directions at once. He could sense that something important was about to happen. There was a little more fumbling with the pinch of nightshirt and then the cloth fell back against his chest once more. It was heavy now weighted down by something. He felt the sudden coolness of metal through his nightshirt against his chest over his heart. They had pinned something on him.

Suddenly he did a curious thing he hadn't done for months. He started to reach with his right hand for the heavy thing they had pinned on him and it seemed that he almost clutched it in his fingers before he realized that he had no arm to reach with and no fingers for clutching.

Someone was kissing his temple. There was a slight tickling of hair as the kiss was given. He was being kissed by a man with a moustache. First his left temple and then his right one. Then he knew what they had done to him. They had come into his room and they had decorated him with a medal. He knew furthermore that he must be in France instead of England because French generals were the ones who always kissed you when they handed out medals. Still that might not be true. American generals and English generals shook your hand but since he had no hand to shake maybe this was an Englishman or an American who had decided to follow the French custom because there was no other way to do it. But still the chances now seemed even that he was in France.

When he snapped back from thinking of where he was and adjusting himself to the idea that it might be France he was a little surprised to find that he was getting mad. They had given him a medal. Three or four big guys famous guys who still had arms and legs and who could see and talk and smell and taste had come into his room and they had pinned a medal on him. They could afford to couldn't they the dirty bastards? That was all they ever had time to do just run around putting medals on guys and feeling important and smug about it. How many generals got killed in the war? There was Kitchener of course but that was an accident. How many others? Name them name any of the soft-living sonsofbitches and you could have them. How many of them had got all shot up so they had to live wrapped in a sheet for

the rest of their lives? They had a lot of guts coming around and giving medals.

When he had thought for an instant that his mother and his sisters and Kareen might be standing beside the bed he had wanted to hide. But now that he had generals and big guys he felt a sudden fierce surging desire for them to see him. Just as before he had started to reach for the medal without an arm to reach with so now he began to blow the mask off his face without having mouth and lips to blow with. He wanted them to get just one look at that hole in his head. He wanted them to get their fill of a face that began and ended with a forehead. He lay there blowing and then he realized that the air from his lungs was all escaping through his tube. He began to roll again from shoulder to shoulder hoping to dislodge the mask.

While he lay there rolling and puffing he felt a vibration way down in his throat a vibration that might be a voice. It was a short deep vibration and he knew that it was making a sound to their ears. Not a very big sound not a very intelligent sound but it must seem to them at least as interesting as the grunting of a pig. And if he could grunt like a pig why then he was accomplishing a great thing because before he had been completely silent. So he lay thrashing and puffing and grunting like a pig hoping that they would see darned well how much he appreciated their medal. While he was in the middle of this there was an indefinite churning of footsteps and then the departing vibrations of his guests. A moment later he was all alone in the blackness in the silence. He was all alone with his medal.

Suddenly he quieted. He was thinking about the vibrations of those footsteps. He had always carefully felt for vibrations. He had measured the size of his nurses and the dimensions of his room by them. But suddenly to feel the vibrations of four or five people tramping across the room made him think. It made him realize that vibrations were very important. He had thought of them up to this time only as vibrations coming to him. Now he began to consider that also there could be vibrations going from him. The vibrations which he received told him everything—height weight distance time. Why shouldn't he be able to tell something to the outside world by vibrations also?

In the back of his mind something began to glimmer. If he could in some way make use of vibrations he could communicate with these people. Then the glimmer became a great dazzling white light. It opened up such breathless prospects that he thought he might suffocate from sheer excitement. Vibrations were a very important part of communication. The fall of a foot on the floor is one kind of vibration. The tap of a telegraph key is simply another kind. When he was a kid way back maybe four years ago or five he had a wireless set. He and Bill Harper used to telegraph each other. Dot dash dot dash dot. Particularly on rainy nights when their folks wouldn't let them go out and there was nothing to do and they just lounged around the house and got in everybody's way. On such nights he and Bill Harper used to dot and dash at each other and they had a hell of a good time. He still remembered the Morse code. All he had to do in order to break through to people in the outside world was to lie in bed and dot dash to the nurse. Then he could talk. Then he would have smashed through

his silence and blackness and helplessness. Then the stump of a man without lips would talk. He had captured time and he had tried to figure geography and now he would do the greatest thing of them all he would talk. He would give messages and receive messages and he would have made another step forward in his struggle to get back to people in his terrible lonely eagerness for the feel of people near him for the things that were in their minds for the thoughts they might give him his own thoughts were so puny so unfinished so incomplete. He would talk.

Tentatively he raised his head from the pillow and let it fall back again. Then he did it twice quickly. That would be a dash and two dots. The letter d. He tapped out SOS against his pillow. Dot-dot-dot dot dot dot-dot-dot. SOS. Help. If there was anybody in the whole world needed help he was the guy and now he was asking for it. He wished the nurse would hurry back. He began to tap out questions. What time is it? What's the date? Where am I? Is the sun shining or is it cloudy? Does anybody know who I am? Do my folks know I'm lying here? Don't tell them. Don't let them know anything about it. SOS. Help.

The door of the room jarred open and the nurse's footsteps came up to the bed. He began to tap out more frantically now. Here he was right on the brink of finding people of finding the world of finding a big part of life itself. Tap tap tap. He was waiting for her tap tap tap in response. A tap against his forehead or his chest. Even if she didn't know the code she could tap just to let him know she understood what he was doing. Then she could rush away for someone who could help her get what he was saying. SOS. SOS. SOS. Help.

He felt the nurse standing there looking down at him trying to figure out what he was doing. The mere possibility that she didn't understand after all he had gone through before discovering it himself shocked him into such excitement and fear that he began to grunt again. He lay grunting and tapping grunting and tapping until the muscles in the back of his neck ached until his head ached until he felt that his chest would burst from his eagerness to shout out to explain to her what he was trying to do. And still he felt her standing motionless beside his bed looking down and wondering.

Then he felt her hand against his forehead. For just a moment she held it there. He kept on tapping growing angry now and hopeless and feeling like he wanted to throw up. She began to stroke his forehead in slow gentle motions. She was stroking it in a way she had never done it before. He felt pity in the softness of her touch. Then her hand went from his forehead clear back through his hair and he remembered that Kareen used to do that sometimes. But he put Kareen out of his mind and kept right on tapping because this was such an important thing that he couldn't stop for pleasant sensations.

The pressure of the hand against his forehead was getting heavier. He realized that she was trying by the weight of her hand to make him tired so he'd quit tapping. He began to tap all the harder all the faster to show her that her plan wouldn't work. He could feel the vertebrae in the back of his neck crack and pop from the strain of this unexpected work. The nurse's hand grew heavier and heavier on his head. His neck grew tireder and tireder. It had been a terrible day a

long day an exciting day. His tapping grew slower and her hand got still heavier and finally he lay back very quietly against the pillow while she brushed his forehead.

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He would be an educational exhibit. People wouldn't learn much about anatomy from him but they would learn all there was to know about war. That would be a great thing to concentrate war in one stump of a body and to show it to people so they could see the difference between a war that's in newspaper headlines and liberty loan drives and a war that is fought out lonesomely in the mud somewhere a war between a man and a high explosive shell. Suddenly he took fire with the idea he got so excited over it he forgot about his longing for air and people this new idea was so wonderful. He would make an exhibit of himself to show all the little guys what would happen to them and while he was doing it he would be self-supporting and free. He would do a favor to everybody including himself. He would show himself to the little guys and to their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and wives and sweethearts and grandmothers and grandfathers and he would have a sign over himself and the sign would say here is war and he would concentrate the whole war into such a small piece of meat and bone and hair that they would never forget it as long as they lived.

He began to tap that he wanted out. His mind ran way ahead of his tapping but he kept on tapping dust the same. What did he want? He'd tell them what he wanted the goddam fools. He'd tell them he'd tap it out to them word by word he'd remember every bit of it and put it down in dots and dashes and then they would know. As he tapped he thought faster. He grew angrier and more excited and he tapped faster and faster trying to keep up with the words that were pounding on the inside of his mind the words he could finally use all the words he had thought of in all the years he had lain silent for he was talking now for the first time he had learned how and he was talking to someone outside. . Let me out he tapped let me out of here let me out. I won't give you any trouble. I won't be any care. I can earn my keep. I can do a job like anybody else. Take of my nightshirt and build a glass case for me and take me down to the places where people are having fun where they are on the lookout for freakish things. Take me in my glass case to the beaches and the country fairs and the church bazaars and the circuses and the traveling carnivals.

You could do a wonderful business with me I could pay you for the trouble. You could give them a good spiel. They've heard of the half-man half-woman. They've heard of the bearded woman and the thin man and the midget. They've seen the human mermaids and the wild men from Borneo and the meateating girl from the Congo throw her a fish and watch her snap for it. They've seen the man who writes with his toes and the man who walks on his hands and the Siamese twins and those little rows of unborn babies pickled in alcohol.

But they've seen nothing like this. This will be the goddamndest dime's worth a man ever had. This will be a sensation in the show world and whoever sponsors my tour will be a new Barnum and have fine notices in all the newspapers because I am something you can really holler about. I am something you can push with a money back

guarantee. I am the deadman-who-is-alive. I am the live-man-who-is-dead. If they won't come into our tent with that build-up then I am something more. I'm the man who made the world safe for democracy. If they won't fall for that then for Christ sake they're no men. Let them join the army because the army makes men.

Take me along country roads and stop by every farmhouse and every field and ring a dinner gong so that the farmers and their wives and their children and their hired men and women can see me. Say to the farmers here is something I'll bet you haven't seen before. Here is something you can't plow under. Here is something that will never grow and flower. The manure you plow into your fields is filthy enough but here is something less than manure because it won't die and decay and nourish even a weed. Here is something so terrible that if it were born to a mare or a heifer or a sow or a ewe you would kill it on the spot but you can't kill this because it is a human being. It has a brain. It is thinking all the time. Believe it or not this thing thinks and it is alive and it goes against every rule of nature although nature doesn't make it so. You know what made it so. Look at it medals real medals probably of solid gold. Lift up the top of the case and you'll know what made it so. It stinks of glory.

Take me into the places where men work and make things. Take me there and say boys here is a cheap way to get by. Maybe times are bad and your salaries are low. Don't worry boys because there is always a way to cure things like that. Have a war and then prices go up and wages go up and everybody makes a hell of a lot of money. There'll be one along pretty soon boys so don't get impatient. It'll come and then you'll have your chance.

Either way you win. If you don't have to fight why you stay at home and make sixteen bucks a day working in the shipyards. And if they draft you why you've got a good chance of coming back without so many needs. Maybe you'll need only one shoe instead of two that's saving money. Maybe you'll be blind and if you are why then you never need worry about the expense of glasses. Maybe you'll be lucky like me. Look at me close boys I don't need anything. A little broth or something three times a day and that's all. No shoes no socks no underwear no shirt no gloves no hat no necktie no collar-buttons no vest no coat no movies no vaudeville no football not even a shave. Look at me boys I have no expenses at all You're suckers boys. Get on the gravy train. I know what I'm talking about. I used to need all the things that you need right now. I used to be a consumer. I've consumed a lot in my time. I've consumed more shrapnel and gunpowder than any living man. So don't get blue boys because you'll have your chance there'll be another war along pretty soon and then maybe you'll be lucky like me.

Take me into the schoolhouses all the schoolhouses in the world. Suffer little children to come unto me isn't that right? They may scream at first and have nightmares at night but they'll get used to it because they've got to get used to it and it's best to start them young. Gather them around my case and say here little girl here little boy come and take a look at your daddy. Come and look at yourself. You'll be like that when you grow up to be great big strong men and women. You'll have a chance to die for your country. And you may

not die you may come back like this. Not everybody dies little kiddies

Closer please. You over there against the blackboard what's the matter with you? Quit crying you silly little girl come over here and look at the nice man the nice man who was a soldier boy. You remember him don't you? Don't you remember little crybaby how you waved flags and saved tinfoil and put your savings in thrift stamps? Of course you do you silly. Well here's the soldier you did it for. Come on youngsters take a nice look and then we'll go into our nursery rhymes. New nursery rhymes for new times. Hickory dickory dock my daddy's nuts from shellshock. Humpty dumpty thought he was wise till gas came along and burned out his eyes. A dillar a dollar a ten o'clock scholar blow off his legs and then watch him holler. Rockabye baby in the treetop don't stop a bomb or you'll probably flop. Now I lay me down to sleep my bombproof cellar's good and deep but if I'm killed before I wake remember god it's for your sake amen.

Take me into the colleges and universities and academies and convents. Call the girls together all the healthy beautiful young girls. Point down to me and say here girls is your father. Here is that boy who was strong last night. Here is your little son your baby son the fruit of your love the hope of your future. Look down on him girls so you won't forget him. See that red gash there with mucus hanging to it? That was his face girls. Here girls touch it don't be afraid. Bend down and kiss it. You'll have to wipe your lips afterward because they will have a strange rotten stuff on them but that's all right because a lover is a lover and here is your lover.

Call all the young men together and say here is your brother here is your best friend here you are young men. This is a very interesting case young men because we know there is a mind buried down there. Technically this thing is living meat like that tissue we kept alive all last summer in the lab. But this is a different cut of meat because it also contains a brain. Now listen to me closely young gentlemen. That brain is thinking. Maybe it's thinking about music. Maybe it has a great symphony all thought out or a mathematical formula that would change the world or a book that would make people kinder or the germ of an idea that would save a hundred million people from cancer. This is a very interesting problem young gentlemen because if this brain does hold such decess how in the world are we ever going to find out. In any event there you are young gentlemen breathing and thinking and dead like a frog under chloroform with it's stomach laid open so that its heartbeat may be seen so quiet so helpless but yet alive. There is your future and your sweet wild dreams there is the thing your sweethearts loved and there is the thing your leaders urged it to be. Think well young gentlemen. Think sharply young gentlemen and then we will go back to our studies of the barbarians who sacked Rome.

Take me wherever there are parliaments and diets and congresses and chambers of statesmen. I want to be there when they talk about honor and justice and making the world safe for democracy and fourteen points and the self determination of peoples. I want to be there to remind them I haven't got a tongue to stick into the cheek I haven't got either. But the statesmen have tongues. The statesmen have

cheek. Put my glass case upon the speaker's desk and every time the gavel descends let me feel its vibration through my little jewel case. Then let them speak of trade policies and embargoes and new colonies and old grudges. Let them debate the menace of the yellow race and the white man's burden and the course of empire and why should we take all this crap off Germany or whoever the next Germany is. Let them talk about the South American market and why so-and-so is beating us out of it and why our merchant marine can't compete and oh what the hell let's send a good stiff note. Let them talk more munitions and airplanes and battleships and tanks and gases why of course we've got to have them we can't get along without them how in the world could we protect the peace if we didn't have them? Let them form blocs and alliances and mutual assistance pacts and guarantees of neutrality. Let them draft notes and ultimatums and protests and accusations.

But before they vote on them before they give the order for all the little guys to start killing each other let the main guy rap his gavel on my case and point down at me and say here gentlemen is the only issue before this house and that is are you for this thing here or are you against it. And if they are against it why goddam them let them stand up like men and vote. And if they are for it let them be hanged and drawn and quartered and paraded through the streets in small chopped up little bits and thrown out into the fields where no clean animal will touch them and let their chunks rot there and may no green thing ever grow where they rot. Take me into your churches your great towering cathedrals that have to be rebuilt every fifty years because they are destroyed by war. Carry me in my glass box down the aisles where kings and priests and brides and children at their confirmation have gone so many times before to kiss a splinter of wood from a true cross on which was nailed the body of a man who was lucky enough to die. Set me high on your altars and call on god to look down upon his murderous little children his dearly beloved little children. Wave over me the incense I can't smell. Swill down the sacramental wine I can't taste. Drone out the prayers I can't hear. Go through the old holy gestures for which I have no legs and to arms. Chorus out the hallelujahs I can't sing. Bring them out loud and strong for me your hallelujahs all of them for me because I know the truth and you don't you fools. You fools you fools you fools ...

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He stiffened

The vibrations were coming toward him again. The man was returning with an answer. Great merciful god thank you here it is here it is my answer. Here is my triumph here is my return from the dead here is life vibrating against the floor singing in my bedsprings singing like all the angels in heaven.

A finger began to tap against his forehead.

W H A T  
Y O U  
A S K  
I S  
A G A I N S T  
R E G U L A T I O N S  
W H O  
A R E

YOU

The tapping went on against his forehead but he paid no more attention to it. Everything in his mind went suddenly blank hollow completely quiet. A moment of this and then he began to think about the message to make certain there was no mistake that it meant exactly what it said. And he knew it did.

He could almost hear the wail of pain that went up from his heart. It was a sharp terrible personal pain the kind of pain that comes only when someone to whom you have never done any harm turns on you and says goodbye goodbye forever without any reason for doing it. Without any reason at all.

He had done nothing to them. He wasn't to blame for the trouble he was causing yet they were drawing the curtain around him stuffing him back into the womb back into the grave saying to him goodbye don't bother us don't come back to life the dead should stay dead and we are done with you.

But why

He had hurt no one. He had tried to give them as little trouble as possible. He was a great care that was true but he hadn't intentionally become so. He wasn't a thief or a drunkard or a liar or a murderer. He was a man a guy no worse no better than anybody else. He was just a guy who'd had to go to war who'd been bad hurt and now was trying to get out from his prison to feel fresh cool air on his skin to sense the color and movement of people around him. That was all he wanted. And to him who had harmed nobody they were saying goodnight goodbye stay where you are don't give us any trouble you are beyond life you are beyond death you are even beyond hope you are gone you are finished forever goodnight and goodbye.

In one terrible moment he saw the whole thing. They wanted only to forget him. He was upon their conscience so they had abandoned him they had forsaken him. They were the only people in the world who could help him. They were his last court of appeal. He might rage and storm and howl against their verdict but it would do him no good. They had decided. Nothing could change them. He was completely at their mercy and they had no mercy. For him there was no hope. He might just as well come face to face with the truth Every moment of his life since he had awakened into the darkness and dumbness and terror every moment of it had been concentrated upon the time some day some year when he would break through to them. Now he had done it. He had broken through and they had refused him. Before even in his most terrible moments there had been a vague hope that kept him going. It had prevented him from going stark raving crazy it had shined like a glow in the distance toward which he never stopped moving. Now the glow was gone and there was nothing left. There was no reason for him to fool himself about it any longer. These people didn't want him. Darkness desertion loneliness silence horror unending horror-these were his life from now on without a single ray of hope to lighten his sufferings. They were his whole future. It was for them that his mother had him. Curse her curse the world curse the sunlight curse god curse every decent thing on earth. Goddamn them goddamn them and torture them as he was being tortured. God give them darkness and silence and dumbness and helplessness and

horror and fear the great towering terrible fear that was with him now the desolation and the loneliness that would be with him forever.

No.

No no no

He wouldn't let them do it.

It was impossible for one human being to do this to another. No one could be so cruel They didn't understand that was all he hadn't made it plain enough to them. He couldn't give up now he must go on and on until they understood because they were good people they were good kindly people and they needed only to understand.

He began to tap again.

He began to tap again and to tell them pleadingly haltingly humbly that please he wanted out. He wanted to feel air against him the fresh clean air outside a hospital. Please understand. He wanted the feel of people of his own loud bee and happy. There really wasn't any good reason except that. The thing about showing him in a case forget that it was just a way to raise money and make it easier on them. Only that. He was lonesome. That was all just lonesome. There were no more reasons he could give them. There was nothing he could do except to try to let them know that inside the skin that covered his body there was so much terror so much loneliness that it was only right they should permit him such a small thing as the freedom he could pay for.

As he tapped he felt the nurse's hand against his forehead stroking him soothing him. He thought to himself I wish I could see her face. It must be a beautiful face she has such beautiful hands. Then against the stump of his left arm he felt a sudden wet coolness. The man who had tapped his answer was applying an alcoholic swab. Oh god he thought I know what that means don't do it please don't. Then he felt the sharp deadly prick of the needle. They were giving him dope again.

Oh god he thought they won't even let me talk. They won't even listen to me any more. All they want is to make a madman out of me so that whenever I tap my messages to them they can say he's only crazy don't pay any attention to him poor fellow he's nuts. That's what they're trying to do god they're trying to drive me crazy and I've fought so hard I've been so strong that the only way they can do it is by giving me dope.

He felt himself sinking back back into the place where they wanted to thrust him. He felt the tingle of his own flesh and he began to see the vision. He saw the yellow sand and he saw the heat waves coming up from it. Above the heat waves he saw Christ in his flowing robes and his crown of thorns with the blood dripping from them. He saw Christ quivering in the desert heat coming up from Tucson. And far off in the distance he heard a woman's voice crying my son my little boy my son .

In sheer terrible desperation he shut out the voice he pushed the vision away. Not yet. Not yet. He wasn't through. He would talk to them he would keep on tapping. The muscles of his body were turning to water but he would keep on tapping. He would not let them lower the lid to his coffin. He would scream and claw and fight as any man should do when they are burying him alive. In his last moment of consciousness in his last moment of life he would still fight

he would still tap. He would keep on and on and on tapping all the while tapping when he was asleep tapping when he was doped tapping when he was in pain tapping forever. They might not answer him they might ignore him but at least they would never be able to forget that as long as he lived here was a man who was talking to them talking to them all the time.

His taps came slower and slower and the vision swam toward him and he pushed it away and it swam toward him again. The woman's voice faded in and out like something that is carried on the wind. But still he tapped.

He was tapping why? why? why?

Why didn't they want him? Why were they shutting the lid of the coffin against him? Why didn't they want him to speak? Why didn't they want him to be seen? Why didn't they want him to be free? It was five maybe six years now since he had been blown out of the world. The war must be over by now. No war could last that long killing so many people there weren't enough people to kill. If the war was over then all the dead had been buried and all the prisoners had been released. Why shouldn't he be released too? Why not unless they figured him as one of the dead and if that was true why didn't they kill him why didn't they put a stop to his suffering? Why should he be a prisoner? He had committed no crime. What right had they to keep him? What possible reason could they have to be so inhuman to him?

Why? why? why?

And then suddenly he saw. He had a vision of himself as a new kind of Christ as a man who carries within himself all the seeds of a new order of things. He was the new messiah of the battlefields saying to people as I am so shall you be. For he had seen the future he had tasted it and now he was living it. He had seen the airplanes flying in the sky he had seen the skies of the future filled with them black with them and now he saw the horror beneath. He saw a world of lovers forever parted of dreams never consummated of plans that never turned into reality. He saw a world of dead fathers and crippled brothers and crazy screaming sons. He saw a world of armless mothers clasping headless babies to their breasts trying to scream out their grief from throats that were cancerous with gas. He saw starved cities black and cold and motionless and the only things in this whole dead terrible world that made a move or a sound were the airplanes that blackened the sky and far off against the horizon the thunder of the big guns and the puffs that rose from barren tortured earth when their shells exploded. That was it he had it he understood it now he had told them his secret and in denying him they had told him theirs. He was the future he was a perfect picture of the future and they were afraid to let anyone see what the future was like. Already they were looking ahead they were figuring the future and somewhere in the future they saw war. To fight that war they would need men and if men saw the future they wouldn't fight. So they were masking the future they were keeping the future a soft quiet deadly secret. They knew that if all the little people all the little guys saw the future they would begin to ask questions. They would ask questions and they would find answers and they would say

to the guys who wanted them to fight they would say you lying thieving sons-of-bitches we won't fight we won't be dead we will live we are the world we are the future and we will not let you butcher us no matter what you say no matter what speeches you make no matter what slogans you write. Remember it well we we are the world we are what makes it go round we make bread and cloth and guns we are the hub of the wheel and the spokes and the wheel itself without us you would be hungry naked worms and we will not die. We are immortal we are the sources of life we are the lowly despicable ugly people we are the great wonderful beautiful people of the world and we are sick of it we are utterly weary we are done with it forever and ever because we are the living and we will not be destroyed.

If you make a war if there are guns to be aimed if there are bullets to be fired if there are men to be killed they will not be us. They will not be us the guys who grow wheat and turn it into food the guys who make clothes and paper and houses and tiles the guys who build dams and power plants and string the long moaning high tension wires the guys who crack crude oil down into a dozen different parts who make light globes and sewing machines and shovels and automobiles and airplanes and tanks and guns oh no it will not be us who die. It will be you.

It will be you-you who urge us on to battle you who incite us against ourselves you who would have one cobbler kill another cobbler you who would have one man who works kill another man who works you who would have one human being who wants only to live kill another human being who wants only to live. Remember this. Remember this well you people who plan for war. Remember this you patriots you fierce ones you spawners of hate you inventors of slogans. Remember this as you have never remembered anything else in your lives.

We are men of peace we are men who work and we want no quarrel. But if you destroy our peace if you take away our work if you try to range us one against the other we will know what to do. If you tell us to make the world safe for democracy we will take you seriously and by god and by Christ we will make it so. We will use the guns you force upon us we will use them to defend our very lives and the menace to our lives does not lie on the other side of a nomansland that was set apart without our consent it lies within our own boundaries here and now we have seen it and we know it.

Put the guns into our hands and we will use them. Give us the slogans and we will turn them into realities. Sing the battle hymns and we will take them up where you left off. Not one not ten not ten thousand not a million not ten millions not a hundred millions but a billion two billions of us all the people of the world we will have the slogans and we will have the hymns and we will have the guns and we will use them and we will live. Make no mistake of it we will live. We will be alive and we will walk and talk and eat and sing and laugh and feel and love and bear our children in tranquillity in security in decency in peace. You plan the wars you masters of men plan the wars and point the way and we will point the gun.

## Johnny Got His Gun Questions

Directions: Use support from the text to support your answers.

1. What kind of person is Johnny?
2. Explain Johnny's view on war using specific passages from the text to support your answer.
3. Explain the tone of the excerpt, how does it represent World War I?
4. What do you think happens to Johnny? Why do you think that?

### Extra Credit

Choose one passage from the reading and explain.

1. What the hell does liberty mean anyhow? It's just a word like house or table or any other word. Only it's a special kind of word. A guy says house and he can point to a house to prove it. But a guy says come on let's fight for liberty and he can't show you liberty. He can't prove the thing he's talking about so how in the hell can he be telling you to fight for it?
2. He was a dead man with a mind that could still think. He knew all the answers that the dead knew and couldn't think about. He could speak for the dead because he was one of them. He was the first of all the soldiers who had died since the beginning of time who still had a brain left to think with.