

Excerpt from **Kingdoms Fall – The Korniloff Affair** by Edward Parr

[The following excerpt involves the two protagonists of the novel, David Gresham and James Wilkins, both serving in the British Secret Intelligence Service, during a mission to Amiens during the First World War.]

To the north of Gommecourt, in a quiet sector of the British lines, lay the small village of Foncquevillers. Like most villages near the front lines, every building had been damaged or destroyed by the war. The elegant *Château de La Haye* was in ruins. Even the solid and stately church of *Notre Dame*, built in 1605, had been destroyed by German artillery in early 1915. The fields, pockmarked and muddy from repeated barrages, were now crisscrossed by barbed wire and trenches. The 37th Division, under the command of General Lord Edward Gleichen, was entrenched at the front lines there, and many of his men, mostly from the Midlands of England, were both relieved and regretted that they had been excluded from the great battle at Albert to the south. Gleichen, an experienced and ambitious General, maintained his headquarters with the British medical division at the *Château de Couin* five miles to the west, and it was there, on a hot and humid July day, in his sunny and comfortable library, that Wilkins and Gresham found him sulking.

“Thank you for meeting with us, General,” Wilkins said.

“Nice to see you again, James; how long has it been? Two years, at least, it must be; since before the war.”

“Yes, you’re right, it was at Lady Feodora’s art reception, I believe. How is your sister?” Wilkins asked.

“Very well, thank you, but there are regrettably few artistic commissions during times of war. She is rather bored.”

“Sure to be plenty of work after the war, though. Father sends his regards, of course.”

“How is Lord Bartlett?”

“Very well and very busy, thank you, as you must surely be yourself.”

“Well, well, quite the contrary; not busy at all. It’s dead quiet in this sector, and I can tell you it’s a deep disappointment to me and the men that we were not included in the attack, not even the attack on Gommecourt.”

“So I understand, Sir, and I am sorry to hear it. May I introduce to you my colleague, Captain David Gresham.”

“My pleasure, Captain,” said the General. “Please be seated, and tell me what I can do for you, James.”

“Thank you,” Wilkins said, as he and Gresham sat on the fine French chairs. “Well, General, I have heard from others of your deep disappointment at having been left out of the offensive to the south. I take it from what you have said that you wish to commit your men to battle?”

“Certainly, but General Haig and I haven’t always seen eye-to-eye, and I fear he has seen fit to brush me aside.”

“That is very unfortunate, yes,” Wilkins said. “As I indicated in my note, General, Captain Gresham and I are currently with the military intelligence office, and it came to our attention that your Division was in reserve in a relatively quiet sector of the front. We’d like to help you solve that ‘problem.’ To be blunt, we would like to borrow your men.”

“Borrow my men? Whatever for?” The General laughed with good humor.

“There is an extremely dangerous and sadistic enemy intelligence agent that we absolutely must capture. Our network of intelligence agents is being decimated, and our ability to gather information has been severely compromised. It’s not just that our men are being captured, General; those who are captured are also being severely interrogated, some have reportedly been mutilated, cut apart, and that has dissuaded others from assisting our side.”

“Outrageous! That is appalling, gentlemen! Have the Germans no sense of decency?”

“We’ve recently had a bit of luck and captured the agent’s accomplice, and with our persuasion he has arranged for us to have a *rendezvous* with the agent at a nearby farmhouse tomorrow morning.”

“So you will capture him there. Very good. I would be happy to loan you some soldiers to help you take him into custody,” the General said. Wilkins and Gresham had decided not to mention that the enemy agent was actually a woman.

“Well, there’s more to it than that, sir,” Wilkins continued. “You see, that farmhouse is three kilometers east of Foncquevillers – in *German* territory. So, in brief, we would like your men to break through the German lines long enough for us to go and capture the agent.”

Gleichen stared at them in shocked silence.

“Why, I believe you are quite serious, James,” the General said in amazement. “Break through the lines? I’ve received no such orders; there is no fighting in this sector. It is simply impossible.”

“You do indeed have general orders to cooperate with the intelligence office, General, and Captain Gresham and I are willing to lead the attack personally. We know just how to do it. It is a risky gambit, I admit, but there can be little doubt that the Germans are not expecting an attack this far north, especially with the fighting at Gommecourt now abated. And we do not think our entire attack will last more than two hours,” Wilkins said.

“Our plan is to punch a hole in the German lines with a creeping artillery barrage, then hold the trenches just long enough for two companies to reach the farmhouse,” Gresham continued.

“You have ‘saps’ that run up to within *thirty yards* of the German front lines. Two Brigades can hold open the gap in the lines while the two companies race to the farmhouse and back,” Wilkins added.

“We do not believe the farm will be hotly defended. And, most importantly, we can make it appear as though the Germans attacked you first,” Gresham concluded.

“Very clever,” the General said. “So you would deceive our superiors into thinking your little expedition is a ‘defensive’ action. And how do you know this

German agent you're seeking won't bolt to safety as soon as the shooting begins? Why don't we just bomb the farm house and kill everyone in it?"

"The farmhouse is geographically isolated," Wilkins explained, "so our artillery will be able to cut off any retreat with a box barrage. We expect that when the shrapnel begins to fall, everyone in the house will simply take cover and wait out the storm."

"And we must take this agent alive if it is possible," Gresham added. "We must be able to damage the enemy's intelligence network as fully as they have damaged ours."

"I understand," Gleichen said seriously, "but still" He stood and walked slowly to the table which held his bottles of liquor. "I've known your family a good, long time, James, and we've been very great friends." He paused and considered the matter, then turned back. "It *has* been too damned quiet up here." With an avaricious grin, he concluded: "I give you my permission, gentlemen. You may proceed with your attack."

It was a quiet, warm and overcast morning in Foncquevillers. The birds were singing cheerily, although the sound of the ongoing battle miles to the south, beyond the Albert-Bapaume Road, could still be heard faintly. "Stafford Avenue" was a narrow, winding communications trench that ran up to the British front lines just north of the village. It was overflowing with men of the 110th Infantry Brigade, all standing very quietly and at ease, holding their rifles and bayonets, grenades, and ammunition, and nothing else. At the head of the trench, standing in the front line with the light infantry, David Gresham smoked a Woodbine as he waited for the signal. From the firing step, peering over the top, he could see the quiet German lines about three hundred yards to the east.

James Wilkins stood in the same British trench, but he was one hundred yards to the north at the head of another communications trench known as "Rotten Row" (named after the fashionable track in Hyde Park). Both in the Row and around Wilkins there stood a long line of men from the 111th Infantry Brigade, also prepared for battle. The men, in fact, seemed unusually chipper. Wilkins joked and chatted with the men as he checked his wrist watch, and then he raised a small red flag and waved it at the men around him.

The soldiers immediately began to toss grenades casually over the top into No Man's Land, dozens of them. Soon the mud, wire, and debris in front of the trench erupted, showering the men harmlessly with dirt. As the mock "barrage" continued, Wilkins picked up the trench phone: "By god, we're being shelled by the Germans!" He yelled. "For pity's sake, return fire!" A moment later, the long range guns of the 37th Division artillery opened fire. The shrapnel shells of the long range guns screamed overhead and, instead of falling on the German lines, disappeared several kilometers to the east.

"Hold on, fellows. Wait for the show to begin," Wilkins called out. "You'll get your chance at last!"

After a minute, British high explosive shells also began to fall like a curtain on a two hundred meter wide section of No Man's Land in front of the German front lines and on the barbed wire before it.

"Come on now, follow me!" Wilkins called to the men, as he entered one of the saps that ran close up to the German lines.

"Aren't we walking straight into our own artillery fire, Sir?" A worried young infantryman asked.

"We must trust our bombardiers to take their best aim," Wilkins replied, "but the closer we get to the German lines, the less chance old Fritz will have to fire back at us. You'll see."

Gresham led his Brigade into the saps as well. The men could only proceed in double file, but when the dam broke, the men would pour out upon the Germans. At the end of each of the saps, the men could feel the ground around them shaking as the high explosives burst on the wires in front of the German lines, and then the shells began to creep back slowly until they were falling like a curtain directly onto the German first line trench itself. The surprised German soldiers ran for cover as the two British brigades waited and prayed that the artillerymen would keep their aim true. Gresham and Wilkins were silently counting each shell. When they reached two hundred, the barrage on the German trenches abruptly stopped.

The two officers burst from the head of the narrow saps followed by hundreds of men who immediately spread out into small groups and charged through No Man's Land at the German lines. Each group had designated wire cutters for where the barbed wires might remain intact, and the smoke and dust of the barrage obscured their approach. They rushed silently and quickly to get to the first German trench, knowing that once they had infiltrated the enemy's lines, the efficient German artillery would no longer be able to fire upon them. In a few places, the German soldiers regained their defensive positions quickly, well before Gresham's and Wilkins' men reached the front line, but still the enemy had few distinct targets in the silent smoke and dust upon which to fire. Some of the British attackers were forced to seek cover in shell holes, but far more reached the German outposts and cut viciously into the defenders, leaping down into the trenches, shooting the enemy even as they climbed out of their dugouts or ran to their posts. Using their rifles and grenades, Gresham and Wilkins led their men through the maze of trenches to silence the German machine guns.

"Where's my dynamite," Gresham yelled to the men behind him.

"Coming up behind me, Sir," said a small Corporal. Two very white-faced privates then ran up with rucksacks full of explosives.

"These are for the dugouts," Gresham said, as he distributed the sticks of dynamite to his troops. Soon the explosives and more grenades were being used to clear out each of the German dugouts and bunkers, and many of the survivors were shot as they tried to escape from the onrushing British advance. In the chaos of the sudden assault, few Germans attempted to surrender, but the few who did were collected in one deep bunker and placed under guard. Gresham and Wilkins then

ordered their men to file back into the German trenches towards the rear to clear out any final defenders.

They next quickly created two strong defensive lines, one to the north and one to south of the one hundred yard breach they had made in the middle of the German lines using the enemy's own machine guns and mortars and a few Lewis guns that had been brought up. The enemy, realizing that their defensive line was badly breached, scrambled to move their machine guns about to enfilade the British invaders. But the Tommys were no longer attacking outwards – they were keeping low in the best defensive positions they could find. As the British men kept their heads down, the Germans to the north and south were soon firing across the breach upon each other.

Wilkins and Gresham led their men deeper and deeper into the German defenses, soon reaching the second line and the reserve lines as more men from the two British Brigades poured into the trenches behind them to reinforce the two defensive lines.

"Alpha Company, gather round!" Wilkins shouted, gathering his light infantrymen. Once collected, the men charged with Wilkins from the reserve trenches up onto solid ground and into the fields beyond, startling companies of German soldiers who believed they were safely behind the front lines and wondered what all the firing was about. To the south, they could hear the roar of Gresham's "Beta" company as they charged into the German's forward artillery positions. Both light infantry companies advanced at a full run, firing their rifles only as needed to silence the artillery and clear the path before them.

Within minutes, they could see a small, heavily damaged farmhouse ahead. Wilkins approached from the north-west, Gresham from the south-west. All around and behind the house, shrapnel shells from the British artillery burst without ceasing – the box barrage from the 37th Division artillery. Anyone inside the house would be staying inside in supposed safety, but as the British light infantry came within range, a handful of German soldiers inside the farmhouse opened fire. In the muddy, smoke-filled fields, Gresham's and Wilkins' men crawled closer and closer, ignoring any risk posed by the falling shrapnel shells ahead of them. Suddenly a British shell mistakenly hit the house itself, and the roof was torn apart. The house caught fire.

"We've got to move now!" Gresham yelled to his men. Over the din of the shelling he stood and rushed to the side of the house followed by his men, while Wilkins and his Company continued their suppressing fire.

Wilkins led his men around toward the front of the house as the shooting from inside quickly intensified.

"Get down, Sir," a large, ploughman of a soldier yelled as he leapt up to pull Wilkins out of the line of fire. Suddenly the man twisted as a bullet hit his shoulder, spraying Wilkins's face with blood. The soldier fell with a grunt and dragged Wilkins down on top of him. Wilkins rolled off and quickly examined the man's shoulder which was drenched in blood.

"Oh s--t, damn it all," the soldier moaned. "I'm going to lose the arm, aren't I?" He asked Wilkins.

“No, no, absolutely not, Private. It’s not that bad, really,” Wilkins said to man encouragingly. “Cheer up – it’s sure to get you sent home to Blighty.”

“Damn Blighty. I’m not one of your damned Brits; I’m from Ontario.”

“Canada?” Wilkins asked. He looked down at the huge bloody mess that was once the man’s shoulder. Another Private pressed a wad of cotton bandages down onto the wound to staunch the flow of blood. “Well, I’m sure you’ll be just fine, anyway,” Wilkins said.

“Just doing my duty,” he replied with a slight sneer.

Gresham reached the side of the house, then the window. The roof was fully aflame, and the shooting from the house itself had petered out. He climbed to the window and saw the floor was littered with dead and injured men. A tall, elegant-looking woman lay among them, and Gresham recognized her at once. As he smashed the window and climbed over the sill into the burning house, the woman lurched up and fired a pistol directly at him. Gresham heard the bullet whistle past his head, and then he lunged at her, knocking her hand on the floorboards and forcing the pistol from her grip. She kicked and screamed and scrambled, but Gresham seized her tightly by the throat.

“I’ve got you, you bloody bitch,” he growled and yanked her up viciously from the floor by her neck. He brutally cast her out the window just as the burning roof began to collapse into the house. Then Gresham climbed out after her.

His men had already bound the woman tightly and one giant Sergeant hoisted her over his shoulder once Gresham made it safely out of the shattered window. Wilkins’ company led the way back to the German trenches, taking a route different from the one they had come and decimating the still astonished German troops in their path. Soon they were back in the German trenches where their northern and southern defensive lines continued to hold back the shocked German troops. Wilkins stopped to launch a signal flare, and as the incendiary climbed into the sky, the British artillery opened fire again, this time accurately placing their shells on the German positions to both the north and south of the British-held breach. Shrapnel fell on the German troops. The two British Brigades began to quickly retreat back toward No Man’s Land and into the safety of the saps even as the Germans to the north and south of the breach crouched down for cover. The German prisoners, who had been stripped of their weapons, were abandoned and the door to their bunker blocked with debris.

The British Brigades that had flowed into the German lines like a tidal wave now rapidly receded. Gresham was the last man out of the German trenches. He ignited another flare, and the British artillery switched to high explosive shells to cover the retreat. The German lines exploded, sending the German survivors deeper into their bunkers. The brutal pounding continued for ten minutes until the last of the British soldiers had retreated fully to their original outposts. Then the firing abruptly stopped. The fields were deathly silent and covered with smoke and dust. The raid at Foncquevillers was over exactly seventy-eight minutes after it had begun.

Gresham and Wilkins had issued orders that the enemy agent, the “*Fräulein Doktor*” whom they had risked so much to capture, be taken immediately to General Gleichen’s *Château*, but she never arrived. As Gresham’s men tied her, struggling and cursing, to a stretcher in the back of a medical lorry, two anonymous British officers quietly and quickly took command of the vehicle and drove her away. Gresham and Wilkins returned to Gleichen’s headquarters only to learn that the enemy agent was in the custody of un-named British intelligence agents. The General in a state of extreme mental disturbance. As the two officers entered the mansion tired, dirty, and spattered with blood, the General rushed out to meet them.

“Gentlemen, yes, yes, extraordinary! I give you my heartfelt congratulations; it was an amazing show. However, it seems we have, perhaps, stirred the pot a bit too much. I’ve just finished speaking to a party sent down by General Haig, and it was made clear to me that *heads will roll*.”

“You told them that your men were attacked first, as we planned, yes?” Wilkins asked.

“Yes, yes, of course, not that anyone would believe it, but I told them.”

“And the agent, she has been taken away, is that right?” Gresham asked anxiously.

“We have her somewhere, but I fear it will go worse for you than for her. Haig knows I didn’t dream up this scheme on my own.”