TWO PASSING STRANGERS

In the back of the deuce and a half, the mud-covered truck sat twelve members of Able Company of the Third Infantry Division. They are tired, dirty, hungry, and need a shower. One of the weary and dirty GIs was Stanley Dombrowski, a draftee from the south side of Chicago. This group returns from a ten-day skirmish with Charlie in a delta rice paddy. Stan is not only returning from the battle but is returning from his yearlong tour of duty in Nam. He had just survived the last of many such battles in the past year. Lying in leach-infested rice paddies, the only cover being the sword grass growing therein, and trying to take shelter from the Cong snipers in every tree whose sole purpose is to kill as many of the Yankees as possible—surviving the unrelenting ten days of rain and cloud cover that prevented the gunships from flying and providing the firepower needed to neutralize Cong’s forces and allow the squad to leave the premises of another insignificant battle. The sun's welcoming, and the helicopter gunships' arrival neutralized the Cong and allowed the fatigued dog faces to leave the battlefield and return to base camp. Compared to what the squad had been through, the hot and bumpy ride in the truck was considered just an inconvenience they must suffer to get back home.

Stan was looking forward to a shower and eating something other than the chicken ala king MREs he had survived on during the battle. MREs refer to “Meals Ready to Eat,” the replacement for the Second World War’s K rations, and can be eaten right out of the pouch. His return would also enable him to recover the letter he had written his mother and left at the base camp to be sent to her if he was killed in action. Looking back, he found it hard to comprehend that he had survived one year in this hellhole of a country.

As Stan dismounted from the truck and headed to the barracks, he passed the fresh troops assigned to relieve Able company on the front lines. As they passed, Stan stopped one of the fresh-faced troops to ask if he had a cigarette. The name stenciled on the individual’s blouse was Rodger Brown, who had been drafted shortly after graduation from college. Rodger reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of Camels, and offered one to Stan. While lighting it for him, he asked Stan, “What is it like up there?”

Stan stopped to think about what I should tell him: he would constantly be wet from either the rain or walking or lying in rice paddies with temperature in the nineties and humidity the same. What little sleep he will get will be under a tree wrapped in his poncho. He may lie next to his best friend, who has a bullet in his back and is crying out for a medic, or even worse, he is crying out for his mother, knowing his time in Nam is ending. Should you tell him of the villages he will enter and where he and his squad will assume all the women and children are members of Charlie’s family, you will burn their thatch houses down. You will immunize yourself from even caring about the dead women and children lying among the dead water buffalo. You will be constantly hungry and thirsty, and look forward to the quiet accompanying breaks between battles. Or do you tell him it is hard to describe and wish him luck?

Here are two individuals previously unknown to each other, going in different directions. One is headed back to the south side of Chicago, where he has just as good a chance of being killed by a gang banger as he was by a Charlie sniper. He will return to a civilization that will call him a baby killer and have a great chance of becoming an alcoholic, trying to cleanse his mind of his experience in Nam. He and the protesters in the street will question what the country has gained by spending one year of his life fighting for “his country.” Will the direction followed by Stan now be much better than the direction Rodger is about to embark on?

The other, Rodger, had left the corn fields of Nebraska to go to college to major in agronomy so he could return to the farm where he had spent his childhood, hoping to continue the family name. He is now preparing to enter a muddy truck with many others who question why they are doing so. Will taking a year out of their lives to destroy the farms and villages of people he does not know aid him in his return to the farm he hopes to continue to grow? How does he feel about being advised to write a letter to his family to leave with base camp to be sent to his family if he should be one of the many who do not return to the farm? How does he explain to his father that receiving this letter will spell the end to the family name continuing to run the farm? As an educated man, Rodger remembers it was Cicero who noted that, in peace, sons bury fathers; in war, fathers bury sons. Rodger can only hope the latter is not valid.

Thus, two strangers have met in a country foreign to both of them. They are just passing and are headed in different directions on a journey that may determine the future life of both Stan and Rodger. One to an unknown future on the streets of South Side Chicago and one to his unknown future in the rice paddies of Vietnam. It is hoped that in a year, Rodger will have the same chance encounter with a fresh-faced GI passing in the other direction, the one he once took. He will take the opportunity to bum a cigarette from him and wish him “good luck, and keep your head down.”

However, everything did not end well for either. Rodger died defending Hill 946, a meaningless piece of high ground immediately abandoned after a brief encounter with the Cong. Stanley was killed in a drive-by shooting while he sat on the stoop of his house, eating an ice cream cone with his six-year-old daughter.