

Jeff Loeb

Brisance

About 1985 or '86, a man came into my photography studio in Junction City, Kansas, wanting to have some pictures copied. They were snapshots of him and some other retirement-aged men at what was apparently a veterans' reunion. As it happened, he was a garrulous type, so when I inquired about the event, we struck up a conversation. His name was Stan Duch, and it turned out that he had been a longtime acquaintance of my father's; I guess he trusted me as a result because he proceeded to tell me a story about himself and how he happened to be at the reunion in question. He had gone into the Army, he told me, as a young man in World War II. After the war, he had stayed in for twenty-some years before retiring at nearby Fort Riley, and then worked with Civil Service there for another twenty, a so-called double-dipper, or retread, as we somewhat disparagingly referred to such dual military careerists in Junction City, which was full of them.

He had been involved in the Normandy Invasion, he told me, and had participated in some secret, pre-dawn, mock landings in Devon a few weeks before the actual operation was to take place. However, during this mock-up, some German U-boats somehow got among the landing craft and, in the ensuing confusion, managed to torpedo and sink several, including the one Duch was in. Hundreds of men drowned in the dark, icy Channel waters, Duch told me, and he was very nearly one of them, being saved only because rescuers located him in the dim light of the breaking dawn before he sank or froze.

The story should have ended there, but in some respects it had only just begun. Because of their embarrassment, as well as the secrecy surrounding D-Day, the Allies decided to cover up the entire fiasco. Survivors such as Duch were separated while in the hospital and instructed to say nothing to anyone about the episode. To add to their isolation, they weren't told who of their friends had survived and who hadn't. As soon as they recovered sufficiently to return to duty, they were then reassigned to different units, leaving most of them no way of contacting each other. Plus, to further confuse things, the names of those who died in this disaster (which, as I later found out from reading Paul Fussell's *Wartime*, was called Slapton Sands, after the beach the men were to have landed on) were merely added to the counts run up at Normandy a few weeks later, and their families notified accordingly.

After the war, the secrecy didn't end, according to Duch. Instead, the Allied governments continued to deny that the matter had even occurred. When he

tried to ask the Army for information about his friends, he was met with silence and even denied access to the names and addresses of their families; so apparently were all other inquirers. After a time he gave up and, as he told me, almost completely blocked the incident out of his memory. It was only through a Freedom of Information request made by another of the survivors forty years after the event that it finally came to public light. Soon thereafter, some of the survivors contacted others, like Duch, and eventually several of them managed to get together. In fact, he had just recently returned from that very reunion, he told me, hence the pictures to be copied.

Now, even though I was a veteran of both Vietnam and Watergate, and thus had a healthy respect for official deception, I was a little dubious at this point. Being around military and ex-military people for most of my life, I had grown up listening to war stories. In any given Junction City coffee shop, with any given group of old men, you could be sure that every one of them had served under Patton, every one was an ex-POW, and every one had been the very first American to cross the Remagen Bridge into Germany. Duch's story seemed no different, and I was prepared to listen and let him go his way, keeping my reservations politely private.

However, an unexpected thing happened at that point. Instead of concluding with some sentimental truism about the barbarity of World War II combat, Duch began saying over and over, "They wouldn't let us talk about it. They wouldn't let us talk about it." Suddenly, without warning, he broke down, hands covering his eyes and tears streaming between his fingers, his shoulders heaving with sobs. "They wouldn't let us talk about it," he said again and again, voice breaking with grief over events which had occurred almost half a century before. It was necessary to hold him in my arms, or he would have totally collapsed. Junction City, it should be noted, is a tough, working-class town. It's not a place that easily accommodates itself to public displays of emotion by males, so I was not particularly comfortable holding him this way. And I doubt that Duch, had he the opportunity to reflect, would have been any more pleased with the spectacle: an old man sobbing uncontrollably, in the arms of a younger man in a public place.

After a few minutes, however, he composed himself, we said goodbye, and, to my immense relief, he left. Within a short time, I more or less forgot the entire incident, and it appeared to me with decreasing frequency in the ensuing years only as a kind of slightly jangling but unconnected image of an old man crying. Even in the early nineties as I was studying and writing about Freud and his philosophical descendants while working on my dissertation, I failed to connect ideas like the return of the repressed with Duch and his delayed response to trauma. Like the literature of the Vietnam War that I was analyzing, I objectified these ideas to the point that they had no personal connection to my own history. And while at the time I felt that I had a certain sensitivity to this literature

as a result of my having served in Vietnam, in reality I now see that I was using my critic's stance as a means of distancing that experience—just as I had been doing in other ways, in fact, for years.

I spent much of 1968 all along the DMZ, at places like Khe Sanh, Con Thien, and Cua Viet, where hundreds of Marines died in a six-month period, and what I witnessed there as a twenty-year-old was the unthinkable violence that high-velocity rounds and high-explosive ordnance can do to the human body, and of course more death than I had ever thought to see. Later, I endured several moldering months in the hot, flat coastal lowlands south of Da Nang in a place called the Riviera, the very area, in fact, where Lewis Puller's legs were blown off on an operation I was on. It was a different kind of war than the one going on up north, with its artillery duels and savage firefights and unit casualty percentages regularly in the double digits; down south, it was endless rocket watches and frustrating, nerve-wracking patrols over sandy, mine-infested ground. For all that, by the nineties, all this might as well have happened to someone else. It's not like I didn't talk about Vietnam; I did, even with some of the people I'd been there with, whom I periodically saw. But I didn't remember *it*, what *it* had felt like, what *I* had felt like. If such things occurred at all, it was as a series of fleeting images or isolated memories of conversations, ushered into consciousness by some novel or memoir I was analyzing, but quickly shoved back down to fester in my unconscious.

I think it was *In the Lake of the Woods*, or more exactly Bruce Franklin's masterful analysis of it in *The Vietnam War and Other American Fantasies*, that finally brought me face to face with my war, not the one I had sentimentalized over the years but the one the one I had actually participated in; and with this traumatic return of the repressed came back my memories of Stan Duch as well, though as always with the psyche, it was indirect. In May of 2001, as I—embarked by now on a totally different career, that of high-school teacher—had my junior class reading O'Brien's novel about the long-term effects of Vietnam, the eerily parallel Bob Kerrey situation was unfolding concurrently. We not only interrogated the novel deeply—certainly much more so than the two previous times I'd taught it—but we also made some far-reaching cultural analyses of just how the Kerrey affair could have remained secret for so long and why, after thirty years, its revelation had such an enormous impact. Most of all, the students asked me questions, upsetting ones about my personal war, about how we had treated the Vietnamese, and I found I was not at all equipped to answer them, so distanced had I made that experience. The images that I attempted to employ seemed come from books, other people's memories, my own being gone or un conveyable. How could I tell my students how it felt to be scared and angry and frustrated all at once when the incidents that impelled such feelings were no longer accessible?

Fortunately or unfortunately—I don't know which—memory is like the fabled exotic flower that, no matter what light or temperature it's placed in, will only bloom at the behest of some unknown stimulus, and then only once every several years. At almost exactly the time I found myself unable to respond to my students, a curious set of images began appearing to me, apparently unbidden by anything that I could discern. They weren't supernatural in origin—that's not where this is going—but rather came from the deep places of my memory and imagination, spurred into life by the intensity of our discussions of *In the Lake of the Woods*, and in a sense, they were a monument to the capacity of the human psyche to resist the repression and self-deception that John Wade, the main character of the book, is so adept at. As the class examined the book during the two or so weeks we spent on it and the film (*Platoon*) that we watched, partly as a result of their questions of me but just as much because Franklin's analysis, I began more and more to see it as an allegory not only of the American experience in Vietnam but also my own. I wasn't at My Lai, of course—like John Wade has been—nor could anything I saw or did compare with the slaughter and mayhem that took place on that ignominious day in March of 1968. However, the country around the Riviera is very much like that of My Lai, and it's that part of my tour, when I was actually in the villages and among the people as an interpreter, that I think gave rise to the uninvited images I began seeing.

Suddenly and seemingly inexplicably, I began to experience in recurring fashion at odd times a certain brief scene, like a movie in my head (in fact, its secular origins are directly rooted in newsreels I watched as a ten-year-old member of the local police Boys' Gun Club, sitting in the basement of the Municipal Building waiting to fire a .22 at paper targets): It's from the Korean War, the beginning of the long second retreat to the Pusan Peninsula, after the preening, vainglorious General Douglas MacArthur, blatantly disobeying President Truman's order to stop his advance well short of the Yalu River, instead sent American troops deep into the hard-spine mountains of North Korea, seemingly headed for China, with winter fast approaching. And on top of this, in his arrogance, he split his forces, despite the fact that he knew that several hundred thousand Chinese troops were even then massing around the border. When the inevitable occurred, when the Chinese army indeed attacked and quickly enveloped the badly outnumbered American troops, a contingent of several thousand men, mostly Marines of the First Marine Division, my unit in Vietnam half a generation later, found themselves trapped at a place called the Chosin Reservoir, pronounced, as I understand it, roughly "shong-shin," but which the Marines, unable to wrap their tongues around the strange Korean syllables (and apparently, according to W.D. Ehrhart in the *Madness of it All*, using the Japanese spelling), instead pronounced "chosen," as if they were already anticipating the name that would soon emerge to be immortalized in their own folklore: the "frozen

Chosin." What followed is one of the most heartbreaking episodes in the history of an organization which, with a sort of perverse pride, as often as not measures its successes in terms of numbers of men lost. The temperatures began dropping, as a Siberian front moved in, reaching twenty-five degrees below zero with hard, blowing snow, and soon the Marines found themselves ice-locked in the high mountains miles from the nearest relief, nearly surrounded and badly outgunned, with only sporadic air support available to them. The fighting was savage; for nearly a week, waves of Chinese soldiers assaulted isolated Marine positions atop ice-bound, rocky hills, and bodies were piled upon frozen bodies. Finally, even MacArthur had to admit that a retreat was necessary, though nearly impossible in the blowing Siberian winter. The Marines set out, however, when the skies briefly cleared, men and vehicles, in single file down the one narrow, rutted road that was available, along what amounts to a seventy mile-long valley, receiving defilading fire from both flanks at times in a terrible retreat that saw some units take over fifty percent casualties, not including the many additional frostbite cases.

These are the images I began seeing in May of two years ago, the Marines' retreat, or at least a few seconds of it. In black and white I saw them—it's a fact that we remember the Korean War and wars before it in black and white, Vietnam and later in color because that's how they were captured on film for us. I could see the Marines clearly in my vision, slogging by and, one by one, briefly looking up at me, as if I were the newsreel camera. Tightly bundled in knee-length field jackets buttoned to the neck, wooden-stocked M-1's slung, beleaguered, bearded, exhausted, helmets jammed down over the dark scarves or bandages wrapped around their heads, and cloth wrapped around their hands and feet over their gloves and boots to ward off the intense cold, each of them looks briefly up at me with terrible, haunted eyes as he stumbles down the rutted road. Interspersed with the men, half-tracks and tanks move slowly down the mountain as well, skidding and braking. On them are the bodies, the dead and soon-to-be dead, no room for anyone else. Anyone who can walk does.

When these images first came flooding into my inner eye two years ago, they took me by surprise and totally. I was literally overcome; for no reason that I could discern, I was struck like Stan Duch had been fifteen years before, and indeed I suddenly remembered that occasion for the first time in years. I stood alone in my living room at home and shook with sobs, and had no idea why. Later, when I tried to recount the experience for Jane, my wife, the same thing happened, and I could no more explain it then than I could to myself earlier. It happened again and again in the coming months, coming on me for no apparent reason. I'd try to talk myself through it, describe the scene to myself in detail, thinking that a familiarization process might demystify the images, but nothing worked. Each time I'd begin focusing on those gaunt faces and those hollowed

eyes, I'd come apart. Where did these images emanate from? Why did they have such power over me? They weren't even my memories. I couldn't answer, only endure their unexpected coming.

The most recent episode occurred that spring. It was at a conference in Philadelphia for Independent School English teachers where I had gone with a colleague, Steve Salinger, to present a paper about our school's program. As fortune would have it, the keynote speaker was Bill Ehrhart, whom I'd met in New Orleans at the My Lai Conference several years before. After the presentations, the three of us repaired to a local establishment to talk. We not only discussed Vietnam, of course, but also Bill's work on resurrecting the forgotten texts of the Korean War. Later, as Steve and I had dinner, I guess as a result of the day's discussions (and, I willingly confess, because we'd been imbibing for several hours at that point and my defenses were down), I attempted to convey to him what had been occurring to me. I was just at the point of describing how the Marines were dressed to fend off the bitter cold when I broke down. Since we know each other well, it was less embarrassing than it might have been, and I was able effectively to mask my tears from those customers at the surrounding tables, but still it was a totally unexpected occurrence for both of us. Later, we dealt with it by simply not talking about it, the tried-and-true male method.

However, the next morning, impelled partly by my embarrassment, I finally set out to interrogate the images themselves, something I'd not done before. As I sat by myself for three hours on a nearly empty plane back from Philadelphia (we had run into some fellow Kansas Citians, and Steve conversed with them), I asked myself what in these pictures connected so deeply with my own experiences. What was it about them that could so utterly incapacitate me? I finally decided, as I sat there on that plane, deep in thought, that it's in those terrible eyes and what they're saying. It's the betrayal they're expressing—not the horrible deaths the men have seen, nor the terrible cries of the wounded that I know they've heard—but the betrayal they've experienced, and that I came to understand that I had experienced as well.

When I went to war, like the men in my waking nightmare, I was betrayed, I decided. However, where they were betrayed by their leader, MacArthur, and those commanders afraid to stand up to him, I'd been betrayed by my culture, and not in the way you might think—i.e., in a deterministic, Ron Kovic/Bill Ehrhart sort of way in which I was inexorably funneled into the military by unseen patriotic machinery. Nor am I talking about the vanity or stupidity of our commanders in Vietnam, although it would be difficult to match William Westmoreland on either count, and not even the official lies told, as we found out from the *Pentagon Papers*, by five presidents, or their minions, lies that caused and sustained the war itself. No, the betrayal I'm talking about occurred after the fact, the one Bruce Franklin talks about, when American culture finally had a chance to face squarely

its own sins, and instead created Rambo, who, of course, went back and won the Vietnam War, as we all know. When one president, Ronald Reagan, sentimentalized and then totally rewrote history, terming the war a “noble cause,” and another, George Bush, told us, first, that we should “forget Vietnam,” and later, after the Gulf War, that we had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” It’s this betrayal of the truth that O’Brien, of course, is allegorizing in *Lake of the Woods*.

What did all this have to do with me personally? And where did these nightmare visions come from? It’s in this, I think. Unlike John Wade, I had no My Lais in my background, no Pfc. Weatherby, no old man with his hoe spinning in the sunlight. But like John Wade, I spent the better part of a generation suppressing what I’d seen, and more importantly, felt. I shot at people; I may have hit some; certainly the artillery and air strikes I called in killed many. This is not what haunts me, trying to kill other soldiers. Rather, it was the small day-to-day cruelties that we—Americans, citizens of the City on a Hill—had, in our anger and frustration, systematically committed against the farmers and villagers of a backward country twelve thousand miles away. I was brought up to think things were a certain way, that we were a certain way, and instead I witnessed numerous and unendurable cruelties committed against innocent people by Marines, who in their anger and ignorance systematically beat and abused them, then destroyed their homes, all for the crime of trying to maintain a semblance of life in the most impossible of circumstances. And, worst of all, I lacked the courage to try to stop them. Something deep inside of me was outraged when, for instance, a corporal in a jeep I was riding in swerved on purpose and, laughing as he did it, put an old man on a bicycle through the girders of the I Corps Bridge in Da Nang. Or when I learned that the noises I had heard (but had not dared investigate) coming from a hootch in one of the villages in the Riviera were, in fact, the sounds of four Marines raping a woman, just before they killed and buried her. Or even when I stood by and watched some ignorant cracker of a grunt break the nose of an ARVN soldier just for the crime of putting his hand on the grunt’s arm as a gesture of affection. Yet, in the face of these violations of what I had been brought up to know was right, to borrow Jonathan Shay’s term, I, who attended Catholic school for twelve years, was an altar boy, class president, CYO president, co-captain of the football team, did nothing. When it counted, I hadn’t the courage of a Hugh Thompson confronting the murderer Calley, of Elias facing Barnes. I was a coward, and this is what the probing inquiries by the class I taught in the spring of 2001, and the *J’accuse* in the haunted eyes of my own personal objective correlative, those Marines from half a century ago, were bringing me finally face to face with.

I went underground beginning in the 1970’s; like John Wade, I adopted a protective coloration and hid myself and my feelings about the war and what I’d seen from everyone, especially myself. When I might have talked about it,

begun working out those feelings, I rather became ashamed, and then Rambo and Reagan and Bush sealed it for me, and I participated gratefully in their urgings to sentimentalize our true history. Vietnam, at least the Vietnam I'd experienced, ceased to exist for over twenty years, just as Slapton Sands had for Stan Duch, though for far different reasons. I became like Krebs of Hemingway's story "Soldiers Home": it was simply impossible for me to talk about the war in any meaningful way, and so, as the character Vinnie says of John Wade, I buried it deep, so deep that it took an intense reading of a book, and a harrowing set of images from another war to bring it back.

It's widely believed, I think, that since the accuracy of people's memories erodes with time so does the intensity. For instance, we're apt to say something like "Time heals all wounds" without questioning the saying's truth. And yet, a century ago, Freud suggested that the return of memories buried too deep or softened too much for the conscious mind to deal directly with them has a more powerful impact than the originals. In fact, I recall his using in one place the French word *brisançe*, which refers to a breakthrough of shattering force, to describe the effect of such a sudden recognition. I, for one, can certainly attest to the accuracy of this term, but I'd also like to give proper weight to the impetus for the return of the repressed. I might well have gone to my grave continuing to objectify my experience, reading and writing about the poets, novelists and memoirists of what Tobias Wolff has termed "the Lost War" without once understanding my own mind. Instead, thirty-five years after the fact, I had the enormous good fortune to teach, at an enormously propitious time, a wonderful group of students who, to paraphrase O'Brien, gave me back my lost life.

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