

BOOTS

Echoes of Vietnam

Pete Freas

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What a Piece of Work We Were

Frank's dead. Asked me if he could have my boots 'cause I
Was going to die. We sat and heard the briefing O
Tell us about the areas where we would go,
The enemy confronting each of us where we
Would be assigned, and expectations when we'd fly.
When he revealed my assignment would place me
Especially in danger's way, Frank plucked me for
My legacy. We laughed and wondered how the war
Might touch each one of us. I took his comment as
A wink of jealousy that I might get to see
Some action first, might be the first to terrorize
The Viet Cong, might get to kick some commie ass
Before the others from our Pensacola class
Of Navy fliers. What a piece of work we were,
We dozen arrogant young bulls. We eight new guys
And four more pilots from the fleet completed SERE
(Survival) and the Huey helicopter schools
Together. Now we sat and listened to the rules
Of flying combat here in Vietnam: don't fly
Too low; don't pick a fight with heavy guns; be sure
You've clearance to attack; it's suicide to try
A solo strike. We'd learned to fly; we understood
The rules; it now was time to send us out for blood.
Give us a shot at Charlie — let his mother and
His widow weep, for now was Charlie's time to die.

Refrain (I)

We wond'rous Seawolf warriors, we were so well
Prepared to give the communists a taste of Hell,
To drive them back and fill their nights with jagged fear
From helicopter guns and rockets brought to bear
Upon their little tails. Assassins, sappers, spooks
By night, they were but reds in black pajamas, gooks.
The Northern Viet Army, Viet Cong, VC,
The Victor Charlie -- they were just the enemy.
No matter they were women, men, and boys who bled
And hurt and laughed and dreamed — the bastards learned to dread
Our fearsome presence overhead. No matter they
Were people dying bloody, we were there to slay
Their sorry asses; popping Huey rotor blades
Presaged the end of their assault or ambush raids
And left it to the dead to care for those who fell.

Flying — Burning — Dying — Learning

I envied Frank, he favored by the gods, for he
Knew what he wanted out of life, while I was there
Just for the ride, to play at combat, play at war;
I thought that flying might be more adventuresome
Than wallowing for endless paper months at sea.
While Frank breezed through the Primary curriculum,
I stumbled when a trainer crashed at Sauffley Field
And killed the student pilot. I let my focus yield
To dangerous distraction: disconnected flight
Procedures swarmed about inside my head in some
Incomprehensible, macabre clutter quite
Confusing, even overwhelming. So I blew
The flight and had to go again; I flew
It better the second time around. A pair
Of pilots some months later took a fatal bite
Out of their lead in Tail Chase pursuit when their
Propeller sliced the other aircraft near in two.
The fated stared into the face of Death and knew
That there was no escape because the flight controls
And canopy release were cut. A ball of fire
Pronounced their end. We flew across their grave of coals
And flew again when a magnesium helo burned
A classmate whose instructor pulled him out and earned
A medal saving him. Survivors, Frank and I,
We won our wings and disregarded smoking holes.

Refrain (II)

We fledgling fliers learned — we learned our lessons well.
So planes got bent and bodies broken. But let me tell
You this: you can't allow anxiety to take
You down. So some poor slob has crashed and burned. Just rake
The dirt across his grave, make jokes of it, deny
that it might bother me, that I could also die
So easily. We blame him for his own demise;
Blame someone else, blame Fate, get drunk, and minimize
His death, dehumanize a friend and call him names.
Tomorrow we will fly and play our macho games
As every other day. So what if you screw up
And "auger in"? Well, I'll lift high the cruel cup
For you, disdain our reckless bond of men in flight.
What then if I should fall in bloody combat? Might
A few remain to raise a toast to us in Hell?

Arrogant Armor: Invincible — Invulnerable

I, self-proclaimed 'the Mangler', playing Snoopy on
A Sopwith Camel doghouse — "Eat your hearts out, boys,
For I'm on SCRAMBLE call tonight; I'll make some noise
And bloody Charlie's nose; and maybe next time you
Will get to fly and fight from midnight until dawn."
I, self-proclaimed invulner'ble: no bullets flew
Could ever find their way to me. He could not kill
Me easily, yet I could take him near at will:
While I was moving fast in *three* dimensions, he
Could only move at turtle speed on foot in *two*,
An easy prey to deadly fire from Frank and me.
Ol' Charlie knew there was no way to hide behind
A rock or tree because my rocket's blast would find
His tail and tear him up from twenty feet away;
There was no way he could survive, no way to flee
The savage storm my miniguns spewed out to flay
His flesh at sixty-seven steel-jacket rounds
A second. Even if he fired back, the Hounds
Of Vengeance, gunners in my door, would teach him why
You do not mess with Mangler lest you gotta pay
For such stupidity. Invincible was I —
What shield provided *Charlie's* ideology?
My combat flier's arrogance protected me
From what an armored pilot's seat at times could not —
Self-doubt, anxiety, guilt, grief, a tear in eye.

Refrain (III)

So people died. So flesh was ripped and bone was shattered.
We fought, unflinching, killed and died. And all that mattered
Was, in the end, the body count — who won or lost —
For if we won, it didn't matter what it cost
The local folk. If it's a game, and we keep score
By body count, then who gets ravaged in a war
Is no concern. No matter how the grieving wept,
As long as we diminished them, and if we kept
Our insulating distance, we could not be hurt.
So life and soul and love were torn from breast and heart;
Make it remote, make it a joke, make it a game,
Dehumanize the enemy, call him a name,
Blame him; don't let it get too close, don't let it touch --
Then we'd be safe, and later, still be safe from much
Long after memories and ashes have been scattered.

Blood Trails and Bandages

We laughed at Death, were agents serving Death, for we
Were warriors. He didn't have to pick and choose:
The enemy would sometimes win and sometimes lose;
But Death, in either case, would always have his way.
I can recall one evening the enemy
Prevailed. Beside a line of trees in ambush, lay
A single Viet Cong. I watched his hyphen string
Of graceful green machine gun fire reach up and bring
A passing warplane down a gentle arc to where
A mountain-top-spectacular fireworks display
Of burning fuel, exploding rockets left a pair
Of pilots' lives extinguished, Death's dark face a grin.
Another night indiff'rent Death was served again
When we pounced on a mortar flash and left behind
Strewn chunks of meat and splintered bone and bits of hair.
A morning boat-crew sweep to see what they could find
Revealed soiled bandage wraps and trails of blood
Where Charlie'd dragged away his comrades through the mud.
The mortar site destroyed, and half a dozen dead,
We marvelled someone managed to survive this kind
Of slaughter — never mind that mothers, widows shed
A flood of grief, for these were only enemy.
In war there is no glory, Be Or Not to Be,
In killingdying, facing Death, but only in
How well we killingdying face him head-to-head.

Refrain (IV)

We hollow, bloody souls had learned our lessons well,
Could step the dance, repeat the patter, and could tell
The jokes. We knew to keep our focus on the task
At hand, to keep the mission first. We learned to mask,
Assume a puffed up posture — we could not afford
To let distraction cloud our judgement, drive us toward
A dangerous decision that got someone dead
Who should not be. Our purpose was to hurt the reds
As badly as we could and pull the good guys out
When they were stuck or needed help. Concerns about
Mortality were out of place each night we flew
Into the dragon's lair and challenged him. We knew
If we remained remote, they could not hurt or scare
Or kill us, even after we'd killed them: we'd dare
To risk if none could penetrate our private shell.

Body Parts

A "thumbs up" at the engine gauges, "Ready aft . . .
We're clear to go," the only words we spoke as we
Departed with Lieutenant X in back, for he
Was going home, away from last night's fire fight
Without his head. Another time, another craft,
Another mother's son, an unforgiving plight:
The thrashing victim of a sniper's lucky round,
His leg shot off, two crewmen couldn't hold him down.
"Don't let me die! Don't let me die!" he pled.
No gods, we didn't *let* him die — he died despite
The little we could do. Halfway to help he'd bled
To death. We flew in silence, let the engine whine
And droning rotor blades express our grief and pain.
I circled low, the lead on deck for medevac,
Another deep black night when in the void ahead,
Not fifty yards away a pair of eyes, a face,
A muzzle flash, green tracers floating, chasing close
Across the darkness — motion, shouting, chaos, din —
Have we been hit and haven't even fired back?!!
No one is hurt, we're in the air, we're OK then.
Behind us with his AK 47, dead,
Sprawled in the field, at fifteen years was just a kid;
A sky-blue shoulder patch proclaimed his destiny:
"Born in the North * Die in the South" for Ho Chi Minh.

Refrain (V)

We say, "Thou shalt not kill." But kill we must to live.
We kill to feed, to clothe, to build, to heal, to give;
We kill to please the gods, for sport, just for the thrill;
We kill for love, for hate, for lust; we take a pill
To kill the pain and how it's there. With blade and bomb,
With chemicals and gun, with rope and stone and thumb
We kill each other and ourselves. To dominate
And have control we kill; we purge, exterminate
Eradicate and execute; we sanitize,
and ritualize, excuse, deny and euphemize;
We hide and soften how we kill to live. But war
Is kind, makes no apology for all its gore,
For savaging the population and the land;
It does not lie, lines up no victims in a pen
To kill. We warriors were glad to kill and live.

Epilog

Frank's dead; and I still have my boots. He didn't die
in Vietnam, and clearly I survived. We two
went back, and we survived again, we cowboys who
Would ride ungainly olive beasts into the night
To slay oppression's dogs with swordfire from the sky.
Unlike the hapless drafted grunt, we'd asked to fight —
No slightest reservation — we were volunteers;
And afterward we stayed around and made careers
Of Navy helo flying. No, he didn't fall
In battle — Charlie didn't bring him down. It might
Have been an aircraft crash killed Frank, a raging ball
Of fire; but no, just allergens and pressing heat
Shut down his breathing passages at home; what beat
My hero and my friend was asthma. Still, I've yet
To mourn for him. It was a year or more, in all,
Before I knew. The distant ceremony set
A year, and half a world remote, I wasn't there
To see his flag-draped coffin, wasn't there to hear
The haunting bugle's TAPS or share farewell salutes.
Too late, no flowers sent, I wasn't there to let
My wounded heart release its grief. Pain mutes
Itself with insulation such as I well knew;
And words . . . a poem is a sorry tribute to
A friend and shipmate. Frank, I raise to you my glass:
Farewell, my friend — we empty shells, what now of boots?

Pete Freas April - July 1997