

6. The War

The emergency room was alive with activity. Chris, Julie, Keli and the other nurses were hurriedly preparing for the barrage of arrivals that might not even come. But, if they did, they would be ready. Doctors were on the phones seeing how much blood was available and how fast they could get it. Chris was preparing extra trays of instruments and stacking plenty of clean linen in each receiving room. The interns and orderlies were busy transforming the waiting room into more receiving rooms with hospital screens and sheets.

Julie and Keli were making up linen for the stretchers. The air was charged with a sense of expectancy. Everyone was jittery and serious, no joking around tonight. There was something in the air and nearly everyone felt it.

Todd and Phil watched the streets with renewed interest as they came back from a dry run. Todd was at the wheel and Phil rested easily in the rider's seat. Todd was talking about the great looking blond he had met at this party Friday night, which was nothing new.

"Todd?" Phil interrupted. "I thought Julie was the love of your life."

“Hey, she is.”

“Then why the blond?”

“I’ll tell you, Phil,” he flipped his cigarette out the window. “Too much of a good thing is too much. Besides, I think she is getting serious and that’s the last thing in the world this man wants. So, I decided it was time to back off a bit.” He pointed at himself with his thumb.

“I see, and what do you plan to do about...” He saw Todd stick his head out the driver’s window. “What’s up?” Phil interrupted himself.

“Oh hell, Phil, we have a flat tire.” The unit shimmied to a stop next to the curb. “This is really strange,” Todd mused thoughtfully as he patted the steering wheel. “Have you ever known a Saturday night when you get a dry run or a flat tire, much less both at the same time in the same night. I’m telling you it’s spooky.”

Phil wasn’t superstitious but he had to admit that things were happening strangely. He lost the coin flip to see who would change the tire. So, he slid out and went to work on it. It was hot and muggy and didn’t take him long to work up a good sweat. “Okay, let’s go” Phil slapped the bottom of Todd’s shoe as he reclined in the seat with his feet out the window. Smoke ascended from the cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Okay,” he yawned and stretched.

They were just under way again when the announcement came. “Attention all units! Attention all units! All available units report to 6th and Hearty ...6th and Hearty ...code three ...time out 9:22 p.m.”

“Oh, no,” Todd gasped gripping the steering wheel with renewed determination.

“I’ll bet it’s going down.” Phil said aloud to himself.

“You know it is.” Todd flipped away the cigarette he had just lit and switched on the siren.

Phil made the call and informed the hospital that unit four was on the way.

The whole block looked like a Christmas tree all lit up with colored lights. There was a small baseball park with its lights on, and all the police and ambulance units had converged on it.

“Look at that,” Todd pointed excitedly.

This was the big rush Phil had become hooked on while in Nam. It was like a drug addiction for him and every time there was a serious run he got his fix, which was usually every night. Tonight though it felt like a chopper run in Nam. The hot sticky night air added the final ingredient. He knew the routine by heart. He loved it, but he also hated it just as much.

Policemen scrambled from their cars twenty or thirty strong and made a kind of police barricade, to confine the fight and keep curious onlookers out of the way. A police helicopter appeared over head with a huge bucket hanging underneath it.

Todd pulled the unit up close to a police car and they leaped out and ran to the back, taking out the stretcher. Then they lifted the floor storage compartment door and took out the extra stretcher they always carried. It was flimsy and collapsible but it worked in an emergency. They pushed through the crowd that was quickly gathering and came up to the police barricade.

“Hold it!” A uniformed officer stopped them.

“Ambulance,” Todd informed quickly.

“I know that, do you think I’m blind or something?” The officer growled. “You can’t just go rushing in there, you’ll get killed.” He nodded toward the fighting yelling crowd in the park.

Phil stared at the scene that sprawled itself before him. Young men, girls and boys were in a life and death struggle. Arms and legs flew in every direction. There were girls in tight jeans and blouses with knots tied in front and

young men in faded pants wearing tank top shirts. Some wore descriptive vests and jackets, but they all were spitting, kicking and yelling. Girls were biting, cursing and swinging each other around by the hair.

Some of them had weapons and were ripping and cutting viciously at a rival. Almost every young man and boy had a weapon and was using it to the best of his ability until struck down by somebody. This was not kid stuff, even though there were kids out there. They all seemed to be cursing and screaming, beating and stabbing in a maddening frenzy while others were bleeding, staggering, falling and dying.

There was no compassion, no holding back, seemingly no regret for what they were doing to each other. Like a vicious pack of wolves after prey, they tore and mutilated everyone in reaching distance. Knife blades flashed their bloody brilliance in the bright overhead lights as wounds gushed forth their life sustaining fluid. Chains cracked and popped as they found their mark, leaving a residue of blood and gnarled flesh.

Shattered remains of pop bottles bottoms crunched under foot while the remainder became a saw-toothed dagger in the hand of its wielder making vicious deep gashes. There were screams of triumph as the victims came tumbling down. There was muffled gunfire here and there, and the sickening thud of iron pipes and tools as they struck home. Blood bathed their cloths and colored the green grass as young men, boys and girls came staggering out of the main pack holding their bleeding wounds.

The noise of the battling mob bombarded Phil's ears like a recording in his mind that he wanted desperately to forget. It was like a replay of a hundred other battles he had seen, only the setting was different. The sights and sounds grew in his mind until finally he closed his eyes and stopped his ears with his hands. He felt a strange weaving

sensation, fear shot through him and he heard himself scream. Or was it someone else's scream?

"Hit the ground," the Sergeant yelled and Phil's eyes popped open. Sergeant Stevens' face loomed up before him and he blinked at him. "Get those sons-of-bitches in here."

The deafening roar of the helicopter sliced the hot heavy air. Sweat poured off Phil as he jumped from the chopper hovering a few feet from the ground. His feet sank three or four inches in the mud and it was hard to pull them out. Every step was like dragging a hundred-pound weight. He stumbled over a body and he didn't even look to see who it was. They were all the same, all young, all dying or dead.

"Medic! Medic!" The words echoed in his ears and shots could be heard only a few yards away. He half consciously, half unconsciously rolled the body onto the stretcher. Someone picked up the other end and they carried it to the waiting helicopter. Back they went for another and another in a hellish frenzy. He grabbed for the arm of a man lying face down in the mud to roll him onto the stretcher, but his hand found only a mushy bloody stump.

A shiver went through him as he caught the back of a shirt and rolled a man over onto the stretcher. His eyes widen and his breath was sucked out of him and he stood up quickly staring at the broken, twisted body of a soldier with no face. He trembled and felt his stomach contract. He was going to puke. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

"Come on," Todd slapped him on the back.

"Yes, Sir!" Phil said quickly, straining to see the face of the sergeant with a rifle.

"Todd slapped him across the chest. "Phil, come on! Phil looked slowly at Todd. He blinked at the sergeant and it was Todd. Suddenly, there was a huge splash of water as the helicopter deposited its load in the middle of the fight. The main body began to break up and run off down the

street as they fled the police dragnet. The war was over. It was gone as fast as it came, leaving a horrible lake of human suffering. "Come on," Todd yelled again over his shoulder pulling his stretcher out onto the field of battle.

Screaming wounded, bleeding and dying youth lay in agonizing pain all over the place. Some were staggering to their feet and others lay motionless in a pool of blood.

Phil shook his head to clear it and stumbled out onto the field behind Todd. He dragged his stretcher behind him and stopped beside a boy thrashing back and forth blood squirted out between his fingers as he held the wound in his stomach.

"Oh God," he cried. "Help me! Oh God!" Phil blinked at him. Where was his uniform? The soldier had no uniform. "Help me, mister, please help me!" The boy reached up a bloody hand and caught Phil's pant leg. He shook his head and looked again and the soldier was only a boy.

"Okay, son." Phil fought the horrors of his nightmare. Pulling the boy onto the stretcher, he covered him with a shock blanket.

"A-am I g-goin' a die, mister," he asked trembling.

"Not if I can help it," Phil assured him.

The emergency room was a mad house. Patients were all over the place, some standing while others were sitting. The seriously wounded spilled out of the trauma rooms and lay wherever there was a place. Everywhere you looked, there were a blur of activity. Phil caught a glimpse of Chris every little bit but she seemed to be everywhere at the same time. Somehow she and Doc seemed to keep things moving pretty smooth in spite of the unexpected difficulties that would arise.

All the rules were out the window now. They hauled as many as they could. Two stretchers and several that could sit up. Sheets and linen were soon discarded or became shock blankets. They had no time to fool around

trying to put them on the stretchers. They were just throwing the people on the bare stretchers and running with them.

Phil knelt beside a young boy who was still breathing. He was only about sixteen and had on jeans and a shirt with the sleeves torn out at the shoulders. Phil rolled him over to put him on the stretcher and his insides fell out of a long deep slit across his stomach. The slice ran from under his ribs to his hipbone on the other side. Blood gushed out along with water and gastric juices. The boy gasped and his chest fell still.

“Don’t die,” Phil muttered pushing his entrails back into his body. “Don’t die, kid!” He watched his chest intently, but it didn’t rise and fall anymore. “Don’t die,” Phil yelled. He gathered the boy’s shirt in both hands and shook him hard. “Don’t die, damn you! Don’t die!” His head flopped up and down lifelessly.

Phil finally stopped shaking him and stared at him. His lifeless body laughed at Phil’s futile attempt and taunted him mockingly. Then he shoved him hard and his body bounced against the ground. Phil knelt there a moment and then slowly wiped the blood from his hands on the loose tail of the boy’s shirt. Picking up a sheet, he draped it over him. He had no more time for the dead while the anguished cry of the living was still in his ear. It never gets any easier to see a person die, and it always leaves a sense of failure.

Phil’s arms and legs ached with weariness as he hurried to the unit with another life hanging in the balance. He dragged the stretcher behind him forcing himself to take one step after another. But there was a driving force within him. Something made him keep going. Maybe it was the cry of the wounded both here and in his mind, or maybe, it was the challenge itself. It might be just to satisfy a deep need within him, a need to do something, anything. He didn’t know what it was, but he could only obey its call.

“Hey, wait.” A voice came from out of the darkness beside the unit. Phil squinted to see who it was. A young man holding a large gaping hole in his thigh limped out of the shadows beside the unit into the light. “Got room for me, too?” He was wearing a black bandana around his right upper arm, holding the large profusely bleeding hole together with his clinched fist. He looked at the girl on the stretcher, she was awake but seemed to be detached from what was happening, shock he figured.

Phil looked around quickly, but there was no Mid-Heights ambulance in sight. “You’ll have to wait for a Mid-Heights ambulance, boy.”

“You goin’ a let me just bleed to death,” he asked humbly. He didn’t raise his voice or speak bitterly. There was no more fight left in him.

Phil looked at his grim expression. “Is the war over?” Phil flipped the ties of the black bandana with his fingers.

“It’s over, mister.” The young man didn’t hesitate. He tore at the bandanna until it came off and threw it to the ground.

“We’ll make room,” Phil nodded. He struggled to get the stretcher into the unit with his tired, aching arms. The young man caught hold of it with his free hand and helped shove it in.

Todd had disappeared and Phil wandered through the crowded emergency room looking for him. Julie was working by the waiting room window so he knew Todd wasn’t with her. He stopped an orderly named Chuck as he hurried past who knew both of them, but he hadn’t seen him.

Phil spotted Chris bandaging a guy’s head and made his way over to her. As he approached the guy caught her arm and pulled her against him saying something in a low voice.

“Turn loose!” She jerked away from him and he came up out of his chair.

“Why, you little fu...” The back of Phil’s hand silenced him.

“Shut up!” Phil glared at him defiantly. The guy wiped a trickle of blood from his lip with the back of his hand and glanced at the police officer coming in their direction. He looked back at Phil and sat back down humbly.

The officer stopped and watched them a minute holding his nightstick by his side. Phil looked around at him and nodded that everything was okay.

Phil turned to Chris, “Now what would you do without me?” His eyes sparkled even as tired as he was.

She smiled up at him wearily. “I just don’t know. You’re always around at the right time.” *Crusader Rabbit*, she thought. They looked at each other for a long moment.

“You look exhausted,” he spoke softly.

“I am,” she sighed and went back to bandaging the guy’s head. “Have they finally brought everyone in?”

“I don’t know. As soon as I find Todd we’ll go see.”

“He’s over there.” She nodded toward a row of chairs by the doors.

“Okay,” Phil acknowledged. “You going to make it all right?”

“Yes, I think so.” She gave him a weary smile and then became irritated at herself for being pleased that he was concerned.

“See you later.” His eyes followed the silhouette of her face. She just nodded.

Everyone was exhausted by now, nerves were frayed and patience stretched to the limits. Tempers were short and everyone seemed to be snappy with one another. No one really was mad though, because they all realized that it was the pressure and the strain.

New Stew

“Come on,” Phil nudged Todd. He was sitting with his head back against the wall, eyes closed.

“Where to?” he asked wearily opening his eyes to look up at Phil.

“We have to go back,” Phil told him. “Come on.”

“Oh, Phil, they’ve picked up everyone by now.” Todd flipped his hand at him. “We must have been out a dozen times, I’m exhausted.”

“I am, too, but we don’t know for sure there isn’t someone else out there,” Phil reasoned.

“Let one of the other units go see. We’ve done our share,” Todd argued.

“Are you coming or not?” Phil’s mind was made up.

“Oh, hell, yes! Why not?” Todd spit at him. It had been a long hot night. The air had been heavy and humid, hard to breathe. And to top it off, when Phil and Todd came out the door it was pouring down rain.

“Ah, Phil,” Todd grumbled. But, Phil had already dashed out into the warm rain. *What drives that man?* Todd thought. Sighing, he pulled his jacket up around his neck and followed him.

Phil drove the unit slowly up the street where the fight had dispersed as the gangs fled from before the police. The street was empty now except for the usual debris. The rain beat against the windshield and the wipers swished it away.

“I told you everyone was picked up,” Todd complained as he lit a cigarette. “But no,” the smoke rolled out with his words, “nothing would do but to come back out here to see for yourself.”

Phil didn’t reply. He just kept driving looking intently in every shadow and out of the way place. The park lights were turned off now and the field of battle was silent and still. Phil pulled the unit to a stop in the parking lot and sat looking at it through the rain.

“There is no one here,” Todd assured him slumping in the seat. The cigarette bounced up and down as he spoke.

Phil stared at the empty field. It was as though it had all been a bad dream, some freakish nightmare. Blood had been spilled there and American kids died there, but there was no signs, no memorial to them. This battlefield will not go down in history and tomorrow someone will come to this field of battle and once again it will become a field of play. Opening the door slowly, he blinked as the rain hit him in the face.

“What are you doing?” Todd frowned. Phil slid out onto the wet pavement unconscious of the rain beating down on him. “Where are you going?” Todd called after him but Phil didn’t hear.

He walked slowly out into the middle of the field and stood there watching the rain beat away a large puddle of blood. It was as though God was cleansing the ground of the violence and death that man had brought unwanted to it. If it were only that easy, if only violence and death could be just washed away. But as long as man lives, it will live, too, because violence and death are a very real part of man himself. It seemed to be a sad but unchanging fact. No memorial will be raised for those who died here, no one will remember. No one remembers those who died in Nam either. It was the forgotten war, a blight on the pages of history.