

A Soldiers Question

By David Ramos

How did I get into this mess? Thought I could be a hero, impress the girls back home with shiny medals. "This will be over in a month", they had said. That was four years ago and the war still raged on. My stomach rumbled reminding me that there was never enough to eat. My eyes burned from utter exhaustion and lack of sleep. What was once a clean neat combat uniform was reduced to rags, and I had not bathed for over a month. What would those pretty girls think of me now?

I had not seen an enemy soldier for over a week now, and had lost track of my unit on a moonless night three days ago. I wandered over the pock marked barren landscape thankful for the quiet respite from bloody battles and slaughter that had consumed my life for four years.

It was nothing like I imagined, this brutal carnage, talking to a friend one moment and seeing him reduced to just so many bits of quivering flesh the next, the results of stepping on a land mine. Taking the life of a fellow human being leaves a haunting impression that follows you to the grave and for what? So many young lives snuffed out like so much cannon fodder left on the field of battle. What a waste. What a god awful waste.

As the sun set I noticed the light of a campfire off in the distance. Making my way toward the fire I walked warily over the discarded skeletons of tanks and other burned out mangled pieces of artillery. My mind was consumed with thought of a hot meal and fresh water. I bent down to a crawl as the flames grew brighter making out the dim shadows cast by the fire. Enemy soldiers!

Turning to retreat I was met with the butt of a rifle to my left temple. Darkness embraced me and I wondered if I would ever see home again...

Slowly regaining consciousness, engulfed in semi-darkness, I was aware of a weight on my chest and a foul odor of rotting flesh assailed my nostrils. Rats! red eyes blazing in the dim light cast by the moon escaping from behind the clouds. Two of the largest rodents I had ever seen in my life were busily gnawing at an open wound on my chest. My screams were silent, stifled by the gag that covered my mouth. I felt a sharp pain in my left hand, to my horror a third animal was feeding on my exposed fingers. In a desperate attempt to arise I discovered that I was bound hand and foot. I managed to turn onto my side but the rats greedily hung on. In a desperate burst of energy I twisted my body over and the rats were caught underneath. I could feel them, claws furiously scratching, sharp teeth biting deep into flesh, trying to get away. After what seemed like an eternity, they were still. I lay there, totally exhausted, and mercifully passed out into oblivion once again...

Gradually opening my eyes I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. Every muscle in my body ached and the thirst was unimaginable. Someone was giving me water from their canteen. Regaining my senses I realized that I was on a truck surrounded by fellow soldiers. "Welcome back soldier". "How long have I been out?" "Been 'bout three days now. We picked you up outside an enemy camp shortly after the amnesty was signed." "Amnesty?" "That's right boy. The war is over. We goin' home!"...

Home. It seemed like a dream four years removed. I spent the next three months in a military hospital recovering from my physical wounds, but would I ever recover from the terrors that filled my nights with dread as I relived the horrors of war? I lost the pinky and ring finger on my

left hand and had several deep scars on my chest as a permanent reminder of my encounter with the rats. I got my shiny medals, a hero's homecoming parade, and benefits from the government for what turned out to be two weeks in a P.O.W. camp....

Thirty years have come and gone. I was lucky enough to marry one of those pretty girls who; like fine wine has gotten better with age. I'm on my way to McDonalds with my three grandsons in tow. Listening to the laughter and carefree play in the back of the car I wonder what the future holds for them. It is October and the trees are resplendent in their fall attire. I crack the window to let in the cool morning air. "Grandpa its cold", admonished one of the kids. "Ok we'll keep it closed for now". Taking a quick glance down at the speedometer I look at my hands on the steering wheel. On my right ring finger is a wedding band, casting off bright rays of light in the morning sun a symbol of a the peaceful harmony that has been mine for over three decades. Inevitably I also glance at my left hand, scarred and distorted. Oh God in Heaven! What hand will be dealt to my grandchildren and their children?