

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

Charles Hayes

It Don't Mean Nothing: A War Memoir

As the pop flare gradually falls to earth, hissing like an angry cat, surreal waves of green and yellow light-up the landscape beyond the perimeter. Sloshing down the trench under a monsoon rain, I enter the radio bunker and find a couple of waterlogged grunts, or infantrymen, wrapped in their ponchos. Feeling no pity, I watch their cowed expressions and shake my head.

"How come you guys aren't in position?"

Searching briefly for an excuse but finding none, one of them says, "Aw hell, give us a break corporal, there ain't nothing out there but maybe a rock ape or two. You ain't been here long enough to know."

Knowing that their tour of duty can be extended for disobeying orders, my reply is quick.

"I been here long enough to know that if you two don't get back to your positions you'll find out that you're not as short as you think you are."

Grudgingly picking up their gear, they give me a dirty look, and return to their post.

Keying the radio, I quietly report.

"Yankee one, yankee 3, sit-rep all secure, over."

"Three, one, roger, out," comes the reply.

Resuming my post, I duck below the edge of the trench and light a cigarette. The patrol should be on it's way back by now. Looking to where they will come through the gate in the concertina wire, I see the red glowing eyes of the sentry dog and wonder if it knows how close to death it is. Suddenly green streaks of light cut the darkness about 200 meters out. The following ack-ack-ack of an AK-47 quickly travels the short distance and tells me that there is enemy contact. Red tracers split the darkness from the opposite direction followed by the rapid burst of M-16 fire. Hollow thumps of grenade explosions mix with the booms of the 12 gauge double ought bush gun. All over the night becomes full of the sound and illumination of what seems like a hundred pop flares going off.

Marines straight from sleep hop to the bunker lines as a helicopter 'spooky' gunship arrives and mini-guns the enemy. Looking like one big red screen descending from the darkness, a curtain of lead sweeps their grid. All other fire ceases and an eerie quietness takes hold, broken only by the zipping sound of the mini guns. In awe of such firepower, I look down the trench line at the flare washed faces turned to the sky. It seems they are paying homage to Zeus or some other God practicing his art of war from the heavens.

The contact broken and its mission accomplished, the chopper leaves as dawn breaks so quickly it is like waking up from a dream. Colonel Blevins, the battalion CO, or commanding officer, is now on the line. I

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hear Tim, his radio operator, relaying orders for the patrol to break cover, reconnoiter, and come in.

All eyes are on the gate as the patrol appears, half carrying, half dragging two body laden ponchos. Dropping the bodies near a little bridge over the trench, they hold up while the Colonel approaches.

A small crowd begins to gather, mostly officers but a few enlisted as well. Many snap pictures as Tim and I stand together off to the side and eye the lumpy ponchos.

Pulling back the largest cover, the Colonel reveals a Vietnamese man dressed in khaki shorts, a black long sleeve shirt, and Ho Chi Minhs, or sandals made from rubber tires. His face is just a pair of cloudy dark eyes set in a ripped and bloody mass. A dark hole exists where one of his ears used to be.

Quickly scanning the members of the patrol, I wonder which one has the ear.

The rest of the body is not in much better shape. Pools of half clotted blood are starting to darken the yellow mud around the edges of the poncho. But for the clothes, what lies there could be the half finished job of a butcher suddenly called away from a slaughter.

Except for the occasional whirring sound of a camera advancing film, it is utterly quiet as the Colonel moves to the other smaller body and pulls back the poncho. A large conical hat covers the head with the rest of the body in remarkably better shape than the first. Wearing black silk pants, shirt, and the same kind of sandals, this Vietnamese appears to have been hit only in the upper torso.

Lifting the hat, the Colonel releases a long stream of black hair caught in the chin strap. Cascading down to frame the face of a lovely Vietnamese girl of perhaps sixteen, her eyes closed, the hair covers her bloody shirt. She seems only asleep.

Not a camera shutter is launched nor a word said. A scene which no mere camera can capture lies before us. It is something that only we can realize. Something that is and forever will be present to us youngsters of war. Always present even in its absence. For it is our girl friend, our sister or our buddy's sister, the dream girl we want to go home to, or the one that we hope to find when we get there. It is a piece of us that lies there dead. Without a word the Colonel quickly places the hat back over the girl's face and leaves. There is no weapon found.

Rooter, one of our corporals before he transferred to the Marine Air Wing at Chu Lai, literally drops in aboard a chopper for a quick visit. Deciding to have a little fun for old-time sake, we catch a USO show that is passing through. Almost always these shows consist of a bare bones plywood stage where a Korean band with at least a couple of pretty girls in short skirts perform, dancing and singing American songs. Laughter, macho jokes, and too much to drink are standard fare at these events. Rooter and I quickly squeeze into the little show for some fun and beer.

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Making inside the same hooch, or plywood and G.I. metal shack, that Rooter used to share with me, we sit around and rap about life down in Chu Lai. Rooter impatiently describes his new unit as the same ole same ole and suddenly asks, "Hayes, you want to get high?"

"What do you mean," I reply, "we just drank all that beer?"

He smiles and rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, but that was beer, I got some really fine Chu Lai weed. You ever try any weed?"

"Yeah, I tried it a couple of times, it doesn't do anything for me, can't see what all the hoop la is about."

Rooter eyes me skeptically.

"Yeah, where did you ever smoke any pot?"

"Back in the world, West Virginia," I say.

I am about to elaborate when he bursts out laughing.

"West Virginia! You mean you never smoked any Nam weed? You really are a cherry, Hayes. Come on, let's go outside and smoke a joint. Then you can tell me it doesn't do anything for you."

"Are you crazy," I exclaim. "You mean you're packing around marijuana?"

"Hey take it easy," Rooter replies. "You'd be surprised at the number of heads around here. It's cool. Come on, I'm going to show you what's happening."

Behind some refrigeration units near the hooch it is dark and quiet. At this time of night anybody not on the line or radio watch is usually asleep.

Rooter pulls up the bloused leg of his jungle trousers and takes a little cellophane package of pre-rolled joints out of his sock and fires one up. Inhaling deeply, he passes the joint to me.

"Take a big drag and hold it in," he says in a hushed voice.

I do as instructed. The pot seeds mixed in the joint sometimes explode in a small shower of sparks, lighting up the darkness around us. Back and forth we pass the joint until it is too short to smoke. Rooter eats what is left. Neither of us say anything for a while. We just sit on the ground and watch the night sky.

Finally Rooter asks, "Man, how you doing, good weed huh?"

"I don't feel a thing," I say, "just a little bloated from the beer."

"You're shitting me, Hayes," he exclaims.

Rooter goes back into his sock and produces another joint, lights it, and passes it directly to me.

Taking the joint, I pull a long drag and offer it back.

"Hell no, not for me," Rooter says. "I'm totally wasted. Wow, man, not getting off.....you smoke that one by yourself."

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"OK, but this shit don't affect me, I tell you."

After sitting there for a couple minutes, Rooter quietly looking around at the night, me puffing on that joint, holding it in and exhaling, a sudden rush hits me. Nothing like the change overtime that alcohol brings on. It is like one moment the world is one way and the next it is different in the extreme. Time takes on aspects that are foreign to me. Looking down, I see the half smoked joint dead in my hand. Lifting my eyes, I see Rooter staring at me with a big shit eating grin on his face. Reaching the joint toward him, I say in a voice that is dead serious but sounds ridiculous, "You can have this back now."

"Did you get your ass kicked, cherry," Rooter laughs. "Still don't affect you, huh?"

I now definitely know better than that.

"Lord have mercy, I am smashed. What the hell am I going to do. I can hardly move."

Laughing, Rooter stands, reaches down and grabs my upper arm to help me stand.

"Come on let's get you back inside the hooch, you look like you're ready for the rack."

Rooter gets me inside, sets me on the rack, says goodbye and leaves, never to be seen again. Just off into the night, or back to Chu Lai or some other unit. Not even carrying a weapon, just that ass kicking Chu Lai weed, like some vagabond who has quit the war and is now just touring the places he has been.

Having received a small box of cheeses from my mother for the holidays, I stretch that box, a little at a time, with my friends. This Christmas of 1968 and many of those that will follow will always be associated with this gaily packaged box of cheeses resting under my M-16 rifle. I take a picture of the little set up for my personal Christmas card.

I will give it to my stepkids many years later ... before they and their mother leave me, not having been together even a year.

There are places and times in people's lives that seem to take on a significance that one looking on might find odd. But for me, as meager and poor as it is in a war zone, this Christmas, along with the yuletide cheeses, will become my last Christmas with any meaning. At this point in my tour I am struggling to get along and remain a part of the World which I consider to be the USA. But my grip is not as tight as it once was. Now instead of an angel atop my Xmas center piece there is a rifle. Things, however slightly, have changed.

Time inside the wire is slow and that means time to fill the nagging empty feelings with the various activities that can be dreamed up. But step beyond the concertina and you are as full up of bone and blood as you can stand. Patrols and listening posts are out in the bush every night. Then there is the observation post beyond that. I have been on them all, humping the radio because the grunts have a hard time keeping anyone who

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can operate the radio, change batteries, and keep track of the different call-signs and frequencies for things such as med-evacs and fire support. Long hours spent in the COC or commanding officer's communications bunker assures that a marine from com section is up on all that stuff.

LPs or listening posts are the worst. At dark three guys with rifles, grenade launcher, radio, and a starlight scope go out a couple of hundred meters to a strategic place. Settling in, they try to see through the hazy scope what is going on around them and report in every hour. No digging in or any of that defensive stuff, just quietly hunkering down and trying to freeze in place for hours on end. The joke is you listen until you hear them coming and report it, hoping that they pass over you without knowing it. In reality a listening post is fodder, no more, no less. And if you are unlucky enough to be there when Victor Charlie comes you are unlikely to survive any fight from such an exposed position. But it will eliminate the element of surprise. Everybody hates listening posts and knows that they are throwaway jobs with a posthumous purple heart as their only reward.

Once I thought I heard someone creeping through the bush toward us and my heart pounded so hard that I had to listen between beats. Peering in the direction of the sound for a couple of slow minutes, I finally discovered that it was just an insect moving among the weeds a few feet from my ear.

I am probably the senior corporal in the whole company and have been denied promotion once....maybe for saying that I did not intend to stay aboard when my hitch was up. But after a few awards for doing a good show with the things that the military throws up for morale or busy work, I am informed that I have made sergeant. I will receive my promotion the next day.

The com section lieutenant, an ex-school teacher from San Diego, forms us up and makes sure that I am presentable. The company commander, an older grey haired mustang, or an officer that rises from the lower ranks, comes out of the company hooch, says a few words, and asks me to step forward. Walking up close, he squarely faces me.

"Corporal Hayes, you have earned this promotion and I am pleased to give it to you. I know that you will not stay in the Marine Corps but I hope that you will use this promotion to inspire you to achieve success in your civilian life wherever you go. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir."

I take the warrant, shake the Captain's hand, and honorably present a salute, which he sincerely returns. Like another click of the clock, I suppose, it is done.

Looking tired and sad the captain tells the company 1st Sergeant to dismiss us and goes back into the hooch. While I treat the whole thing respectfully, I know that the only reason I am promoted is because it would be an embarrassment for me to remain a corporal. The old captain is not, nor ever was, part of my problem. He is old and near the bottom of the back side. I trust him to not try and gung ho his way to greater things at another's expense. Just like me, he is simply trying to get through Vietnam and back to the world. I saw it written on his face and heard it in his

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words, and for that I am thankful. Other than that the whole thing means nothing nor, more importantly, does it change anything.

During lulls in the war things get so boring that almost any excitement is welcome. It is also a good time to get into Da Nang and the giant military PX or post exchange to buy some hard liquor. Tim and I do just that by hopping a convoy into the crowded city and jumping off just on the far side of the local shanty town near the PX. As we cut across the squalor of the makeshift village, betel nut chewing women squat in front of their tiny shacks of junked military material, stirring a pot of who knows what.

The pungent smell of nuoc mam, or fermented fish sauce, is so thick that it tells me I am unquestionably foreign. Vietnamese peasants, chased from their homes in the countryside, mostly by the US military, see us and our M-16s coming. However fake, they present friendliness, smiling up at us with blackened teeth as we pass. Looking at each other after we pass, the women frown and spit long streams of black juice into the dust by their fires.

There are no men but plenty of kids, not even waist high, crowd around us begging and trying to reach into our pockets on one side while just as many try to tug our watches off from the other side. Some of them hold up small marijuana packets for sale, \$1.00 mpc, or military payment currency. Others, in broken English, hawk their sisters who are waiting among the shanties, hoping that their little pimps will bring some money home for rice. Most are starving. Once healthy people who proudly owned and farmed their own land, they are relegated to lives of abject poverty, their land now part of an American free fire zone.

Hurriedly, we get through this result of our presence and past the guarded gate into the PX. After buying a fifth of Jack Daniels and a couple of cartons of cigarettes we pass through all the cheap electronics and jewelry. To say that passing through war, starving people, and abject poverty, to clutch a fancy bottle of whiskey is surreal would be an understatement. Like during the tragedies, times of hurt, and disappointment, the mantra of the war plays in my mind with such scurrility as well.

“Fuck it, it don’t mean nothing.”

Going back out to the street, we catch another convoy going back. Reaching the road to hill 821, we jump off and catch a six by, or large troop truck, the rest of the way. We do pretty good, in and out and still time for evening chow. Knowing that there will be plenty of night rations later if we get hungry, we skip it. Instead we seclude ourselves in the hooch, crack the Jack Daniels and preceded to get wasted, eventually crashing late in the evening.

I am on R&R, or rest and relaxation, for six days in Sydney, Australia. Wandering the streets with my head somewhere in the sky, I am puzzled by a crowd gathered near a large TV on the sidewalk. Walking up to the back of the crowd, I stand beside an older man with thinning hair and try to see what is going on. No one is speaking. All are glued to the TV. Looking between them, I see a fuzzy image of some kind of space man climbing down a ladder and gingerly stepping to a dusty surface. A murmur

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goes through the crowd and the older man turns to me and says, "I never thought it would ever happen. Isn't that remarkable?"

Not knowing what he means, I simply reply, "I don't know. It depends on what your talking about. What's this all about?"

Recognizing my different speech, he looks at me incredulously.

"You really don't know? Where are you from anyway?"

Feeling sort of alien, maybe a little spacey as well, I reply.

"Vietnam."

"You are an American?" he says.

"Yeah, I'm getting a break from the war."

Smiling, I guess because the Aussies have boys in Vietnam too, he says,

"Your country just put a man on the moon."

As he turns back to the TV I say, "Oh yeah, they said they were going to do it."

Beginning to walk away, I am called back by the same gentleman.

"Hey, you should watch this, your country is making history."

Pausing to be polite, I half turn and smile. But there are no words for me to be nice. Feeling like I have somehow failed an important test, I turn my back and walk on.

In the Nam my days are winding down. With a couple of weeks left until my rotation date, I am a bit surprised when I suddenly received orders to rotate back to the States. Hallelujah my time has come ... just in time. It takes a couple of days to check out of the battalion and return my weapon and other gear. During this time I am able to have conversations with some of the others on a different level. There is a sadness in our exchanges, sadness that they are being left behind, that we all can't go. But they have been living the life of survival long enough to appreciate that right then, at least one of them is going to make it out. However none of that sadness can overcome the relief I feel when, orders in hand, I jump into the jeep and ride away to stage for my return to the world.

Much like it was on Okinawa where I staged to come in country, I wait for two days to learn that I am not going to fly back to the U.S. I am going back to the world on a fucking ship as part of a Marine Regimental troop withdrawal. Part of Nixon's political stunt, pretending a troop withdrawal when in fact all the marines on the float are rotating and being replaced anyway. At least I am going to get the fuck out of here, regardless of the means, and that is what I hold on to.

I and 1800 other marines are crammed aboard a troop transport, and another 200 are put on its flag ship, a flat top helicopter carrier. Pushing off from Deep Water Pier in Da Nang Harbor I feel like I am born again.

Sailing past the mountains along the South China Sea under a moonlit sky is far different from nights under a sky of whining rockets. If you hear

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them, you wonder who gets it. If you don't, you get it.

At sea the night is quiet, cool, and smells of salt with a peacefulness that comes from the knowledge that it is over.

Laying over in Okinawa for two days to take on water and food, we are not allowed to leave the ship. It will take 22 days to reach the California coast. And that is going all out, except when we skirt a typhoon. Even on the outskirts we pitch and roll so bad that I must wrap my feet in the chains that hang my tier just to doze. It is easy to lose someone and not even know it during such weather. Many career marines completely disappear during this part of the float.

As the ships dock and tie up, I have no idea of where I am. But it is sunny, warm, and almost November. So I must be somewhere in Southern California. Coming across the Pacific I went from hot to cold and now back to warm.

Compared to the small Marine Band and the few USO girls on the pier hosting tables of donuts and lemonade, we are a salty looking bunch. Yelling down to the girls, I have them throw some of the donuts up. I and others along the rail snatch and wolf them down. The little band in their ragged red uniforms, looking like castoffs picked to welcome castoffs, puff and beat out a couple of marches.

The whole thing reminds me of a Norman Rockwell poster with its characters somehow coming to life and gathering on the pier for a photo shoot. What could any of them possibly know about the place that the people aboard this big boat are coming from. Had they an inkling of that truth, they surely would not be here dressed in their Baby Janes and floral dresses, serving lemonade and donuts. To me it is just another surreal example of Americana that never makes it inside the loop of what really is.

We are taken to Camp Pendleton where I came from a little over a year and a different lifetime ago. Long haired and bare headed, standing in my first formation back in the world, I hear an announcement that anyone with less than 6 months remaining on their active duty time will be discharged as soon as the paperwork can be done. With less than 5 months of active duty left, I figure it is the sweetest sounding thing that I have heard since it all began more than 2 years and 7 months ago. For the next nine days I wander around in an almost dream like state.

Finally, all in one day, I process through hours of paperwork dressed in my winter green uniform and sign the DD-214 that honorably releases me from active duty in the United States Marine Corps. With a silent thank you to the Gods mixed with the sorrow that at least one of my friends didn't make it, I squeeze into a limousine full of other discharged marines and exit Camp Pendleton for the last time. There is not the slightest urge to look back.

Having plenty of war booty in my fat wallet, I ride up to LAX and buy a first class ticket to D.C. to see my mother. While I was away she moved from West Virginia to a Maryland suburb of D.C. for a better teaching job.

With little fanfare I show Mom that I am still alive, return to the airport

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and catch the next hop to the Appalachians of Southern West Virginia. During the hour long flight I gaze down at the rolling landscape of forested hills. For some reason they always seem to make me sad with their isolable landscape half hidden in wispy fog. This time is no different, only more so. These age old hills are impervious to the goings on outside their domain. They have not a hint of the momentous events that crisscross the globe, nor what I have been through the past year. Yet this is where it all began for me. Being alive is all that I can bring back to their intractable presence. Amidst such loss and guilt, that just doesn't seem fair.