

*“I crouched in the hallway around the corner from the kitchen and listened as long as I dared.”*

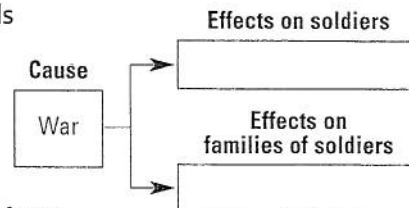
## Marine Corps Issue

Short Story by DAVID McLEAN

### Connect to Your Life

**War’s Aftermath** The impact of war often extends far beyond the battlefield. In this story, the lingering effects of the Vietnam War on one U.S. soldier are dramatically portrayed. From books, movies, newspapers, magazines, and perhaps personal experience, you probably already have impressions about the aftermath of war.

How do you think war affects those who fight—and relatives who stay at home? In a small group, brainstorm a list of the effects of war on returning soldiers and their families. Then record your list in a diagram like the one shown.



### Build Background

**A Cruel Struggle** The war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam lasted from 1957 to 1975, though U.S. troops fought in it (alongside South Vietnamese troops) only from 1965 to 1973. This war is particularly notable for being the first one in which the United States ever failed in its mission—in this case, to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. The effects of this war were devastating for many soldiers and their families. The fighting took the lives of about 58,000 Americans and left another 365,000 wounded. Many U.S. servicemen, especially the wounded and the hundreds who had been held prisoner by the North Vietnamese, returned from the war with both physical and psychological scars.

#### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

agitated	devoid	intrigue
animosity	disjunction	trepidation
demeanor	grotesque	vulnerability
deprivation		



**LaserLinks: Background for Reading**  
Historical Connection  
Art Gallery

### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS FLASHBACK** A **flashback** is an account of a conversation, an episode, or an event that happened before the beginning of a story. In “Marine Corps Issue,” the narrator’s memory flashes back to several different experiences in his childhood, all involving his father:

*My father used to keep three wooden locker boxes stacked in the tool shed behind our garage.*

As you read, pay attention to when each event in the story actually takes place.

#### ACTIVE READING RECOGNIZING CAUSE AND EFFECT

Sometimes two events are related as cause and effect—that is, one event actually brings about the other. The first event in time is the **cause**; the second event is the **effect**. For example, in this story, the father, a Vietnam veteran, has disabled hands (a cause). This condition forces him to retire from the Marines (an effect). His son is puzzled by the lingering effects of the war on his father because he does not understand what caused them.

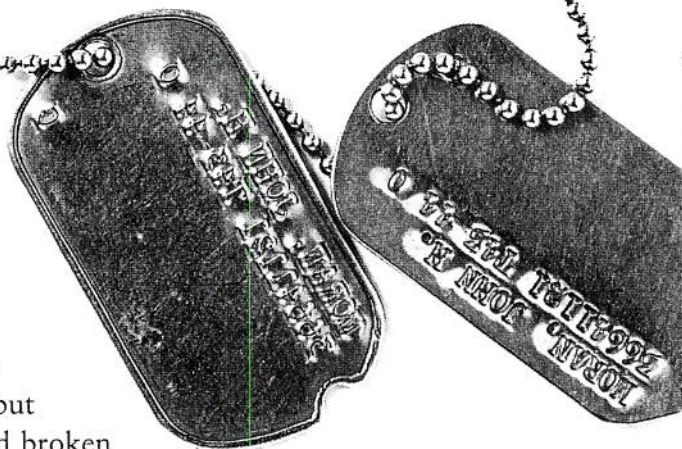
**READER’S NOTEBOOK** As you read this story, jot down the effects that the war seems to have on the narrator’s father. Also note the effect that the war has on the family.



# MARINE CORPS ISSUE

David McLean

**M**y father used to keep three wooden locker boxes stacked in the tool shed behind our garage. This was at our house in southern Illinois, where I grew up. The boxes, big heavy chests with an iron handle on each end, were fatigue green but had splintered in places. Chips of paint and wood had broken off during the miles of travel, and a shiny splayed pine showed underneath. Each box was padlocked with an oily bronze lock, the keys to which my father kept on his key ring, along with his house keys and car keys. I knew that because I saw him open the top box once, when a friend of his came to visit. My father lifted the lid of the top chest and then a tray within and pulled out an album or



a yearbook of some kind, something to do with the war. The visitor was an old Marine Corps buddy, still active and in uniform. They laughed over photographs and drank whiskey, a whole bottle. I crouched in the hallway around the corner from the kitchen and listened as long as I dared. I don't remember much of the talk, names and places I had never heard of, but I do recall the man's calling my father "gunny,"<sup>1</sup> and commenting on his hands. My father had damaged hands. "Look at your hands, gunny—look at them!" And I think they cried, or maybe it was just drunken giggles. I don't know. That was the only time I ever saw my father drink. That was 1974. I was ten years old.

My original name was Charles Michael, and for the first ten months of my life, my mother tells me, I was called Charlie. I had no father then—that is, he had never seen me. But when he returned from Vietnam the first time, in early 1965, within a week he began the legal proceedings to change my name. Soon after, I was Jonathan Allen; I still am. I learned all this from my mother when I was twenty and needed my birth certificate for a passport application. My father was three months dead then, when my mother explained to me about Charlie<sup>2</sup> and how I had been renamed for a dead corporal from a small town in Georgia.

I see my father most often in two ways: playing handball or, years later, sitting on the edge of our elevated garden, black ashes from a distant fire falling lightly like snow around him. As I said, my father had damaged hands—a degenerative arthritis,<sup>3</sup> we were told. They were large, leprous<sup>4</sup> hands, thick with scar tissue and slightly curled. He could neither make a fist nor straighten them completely. Normally they hung limp at his sides or were stashed in his pockets. To grip things he had to use a lot of

wrist movement, giving him a grotesque bird-on-a-perch appearance. He rarely touched anyone with them, though he did hit me once, a well-deserved blow I know now and knew even then in the vague way of an innocent.

**M**y older brother, Joe, and I would watch him from the walkway above and behind the handball courts while our mother waited outside. I was six years old but can still see him clearly, playing alone, as always. He wears olive-green shorts, plain white canvas shoes and long white socks, a gray sweatshirt, the neck ripped loose down the front, and a fatigue-green headband wrapped tightly around his bony forehead. Black thinning hair dipped in gray rises up like tufts of crabgrass around the headband. He wears dirty white leather gloves. He swings at the hard black ball forcefully, as though he held paddles of thick oak. I hear the amplified slap of his hand and then a huge explosion booming through the court as the ball ricochets back. He runs after it, catches up to it, and slaps it again, driving it powerfully into the corner. His tall, thin figure jerks across the court and off the wall, his slaps alternating with the hollow explosions, his shoes squeaking, his

1. **gunny**: a nickname for a gunnery sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps.

2. **Charlie**: a slang term for the Vietcong—Communist-trained South Vietnamese soldiers against whom the United States fought.

3. **degenerative arthritis**: a condition in which the cartilage in joints breaks down, so that bones rub together painfully.

4. **leprous**: having an appearance like that caused by the disease leprosy.

controlled breaths bursting out of him as he tries, it seems to me, to break the ball or maybe rid himself of it forever.

But it always returns, somehow, even dribbling, to the center of the court. Exhausted, he sits against the wall, breathing heavily, his court gone suddenly quiet, though the booming echoes from nearby courts can still be heard. He watches the ball bounce off its final wall and then slowly roll to a stop. I watch it with him, until it again becomes an inert black ball on the wooden floor.

I said that my father had hit me once; it was at our second meeting. The first had been on that six-month home leave when he changed my name. I remember nothing of that, of course. I do remember his second return home, though, when I was five years old. To my new consciousness, Daddy was simply a figure in a photograph, a steely, strong-looking man in dress blues.<sup>5</sup> I remember the disjunction I felt upon seeing him for the first time, how I had trouble believing that this man was the same man as in the photograph. He was thin and gaunt and silent, with deeper eyes and a higher forehead than I had expected to see. He looked at me strangely. He hadn't seen me grow up. I could have been any child, an adopted son, were it not for my resemblance to him.

What I learned shortly after that first real meeting was the necessity of being a noisy child. Noise alerted him to my presence and prevented his being surprised and reacting on instinct. I began to knock on the walls or shuffle my feet or sing to myself as I walked through the house.

I discovered this survival technique one Saturday morning shortly after his return. I had awakened early and had rolled off the lower bunk, my blanket under my arms, a sleepy animal child going to look for his mother. I walked down the hall and into the living room, where my father sat reading. He had not heard

me come in. I wanted to play a game. I crept around an end table near his chair, suppressing a giggle, and watched him for a minute. I looked at the back of his head, smelled his sharp after-shave smell, stared freely, for the first time, at his gnarled left hand holding the book in that rolled-wrist way, and then I leaped out from the table and shouted *Boo!*

I saw a white flash—I was airborne, backwards, on my shoulders and over my head. I landed hard on my face and knees, bleeding from the nose and mouth. I looked up and saw him crouched and rigid, eyes on fire, palms flat, fingers as stiff as he could make them. ✱

Then he melted, right there before me, his body slumping down like warm wax, and he began shouting, and crying, “Diane! come and get this child away from me!” He wouldn’t look at me. His hands were in his pockets. He walked out of the house and into the back yard. I didn’t see him again until breakfast the following morning. My mother arrived and swooped me into her arms. Only then did I begin to cry.

My mother’s life intrigues me. Her strength, well hidden when I was younger, becomes obvious upon reflection. I spend a lot of time reading about the Marine Corps and Vietnam; it is a way of knowing my father. And yet I often find my mother in the books. I cannot read of Khe Sanh or Da Nang<sup>6</sup> without imagining my mother at home with two children under the age of seven and a husband across the world fighting in a war, what I think of as a stupid war at that. She has never spoken about that time, not even about the four continuous years of my father’s absence, when,

5. **dress blues**: the dress uniform of the Marine Corps.

6. **Khe Sanh** (kā sǎn') . . . **Da Nang** (dǎ nǎng'): South Vietnamese towns near the North Vietnamese border—sites of U.S. military bases during the Vietnam War.



*The Mighty Hand* (1885), Auguste Rodin. Bronze, 18" × 11 1/2" × 7 1/2", collection of the First National Bank of Chicago.

my grandmother told me, she would spend at least two hours every night weeping alone, the children already asleep, and when she could hardly sleep herself. Even after my father's return tension and distance continued for some time. Our family was different from others. I can best describe it as being composed of opposing camps—not camps at war with each other but survival camps: my mother and I in one, my father and Joe in the other. We had no open animosity toward each other, only distance.

My father was in the Marine Corps for seventeen years before beginning his second career in the offices of the Stone City Steel Mill. He was a decorated soldier, a career man forced to retire disabled because of his hands. He had been a drill instructor, a fact that always widens the eyes of those I tell. I can see them reassessing me as soon as I say it—Marine Corps drill instructor—and they look at me in a shifted way that is hard to define. A pity, perhaps, sometimes a fear. I do have a temper comparable to my father's, which usually shows itself in short, explosive bursts of expletives that roll out of my mouth naturally, as if I were a polyglot<sup>7</sup> switching tongues. The violence is verbal only, though I can still see my father, if I make the effort, at my brother's throat. Joe has been caught smoking in the garage a second time. He is fourteen and has been warned. He is pinned to the wall of the garage by my father's crooked paw, his feet dangling, toes groping for solid ground as though he will fall upward and off the earth if he can't find a grip. His eyes are wide and swollen with tears. My father's voice is a slow burn, his nostrils wide. He finishes speaking, drops Joe onto the concrete floor, and strides quickly away.

7. polyglot: a person who speaks or writes many languages.

WORDS  
TO KNOW  
**animosity** (ăn'ə-mōs'ī-tē) *n.* a feeling of strong dislike or hatred

Despite my father's years of service, our house was devoid of memorabilia.<sup>8</sup> A visitor would have no idea about my father's military career were it not evident in his walk and demeanor. Civilians might miss even these clues. Our house was not a family museum like other houses. We had few family photographs; the decor consisted chiefly of landscape paintings and small ceramic collectibles, dolls and Norman Rockwell scenes and wooden elephants from around the world.



At sixteen I saw the movie *Apocalypse Now*.<sup>9</sup> I had no interest in Vietnam then; I knew nothing of it. The film left me enthralled and fascinated, even a little horrified in an abstract way. I came home agitated but still had not made any connection. The epiphany<sup>10</sup> came when I walked in the front door. My father was sitting quietly in his recliner, sipping coffee and watching the Cardinals play the Reds on television. My mother sat on the couch crocheting under a lamp, humming a hymn to herself, our Labrador, Casey, resting on the floor at her feet. I stared at them for a long twenty seconds before my father snapped the spell. "Hey, Johnny," he said, "come in here and watch the game. Redbirds are up five to three in the seventh."

"Yeah?" I moved into the room and turned to face the television.

"What'd you go see, hon?" my mother asked.

"What?"

"What movie'd you see?"

I lied. I quickly named some comedy that was showing in the same complex. "It was awful," I added, to cut off the questioning.

I saw the movie again a few days later, and I saw it anew. My father was in there somewhere, dug into a bunker, behind a wall of foliage, there

amid the ragged poor and the dripping trees and the sounds of gunfire and explosions. And when I returned home from the movie that night, he was reading a John Le Carré novel, sipping coffee, the silky voice of Jack Buck in the background describing the Cardinals game in Atlanta. The evening was hot and dry. It would be a hard summer of drought in southern Illinois.

The next day I walked to the library and borrowed three books about the Vietnam War. My summer project would be to learn about the war and my father's place there. Under a hot midmorning sun I skimmed the thinnest of the three on the way home, anxious, as though poised to turn the knob of a mysterious door. At home I hid two of the books in my safest place, above the loose tiles of the lowered ceiling in my bedroom, and took the third book and my copy of *The Pickwick Papers*<sup>11</sup> into the back yard.

We had a large yard behind the house, enclosed by a fence of pointed wooden slats five feet high. Against the back fence stood a terraced flower garden, built long before by a previous owner. It ran the length of the fence and was fronted by a red brick wall about two feet high. The three levels were separated by stacked railroad ties. My parents loved the garden and would labor all summer to keep it lush. Even that summer of drought, as the grass was browning under a merciless sun, my parents kept the garden well watered. From April to September we had cut flowers on the dinner table every night.

8. **memorabilia**: objects valued for their connection with important events; souvenirs.

9. *Apocalypse Now*: a 1979 film about the Vietnam War in which battles are dramatically re-created.

10. **epiphany**: a sudden insight into the meaning of something.

11. *The Pickwick Papers*: a classic 19th-century novel by Charles Dickens.

I kept a private place in the upper left corner of the garden. It was known to everyone; if I was nowhere to be found, my family would always check to see if I was there reading. Before watering, my parents would always shout a warning lest I be rained on. Although known, it was still quiet and just isolated enough. I would lie down on the ground behind a thick

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DON'T ASK HIM  
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AGAIN.**

wall of day lilies, my back against the fence, and read or think while staring up at the sky.

That is where I learned about the Vietnam War. I lay on my side and read for at least three hours every day, softly repeating the names of places and operations, marking pages with thin weeds. If called or found, I would rise from the flowers with *The Pickwick Papers* in hand, leaving the history book in a plastic bag among the day lilies, to be collected later. In the evenings, while listening to baseball games, I transferred notes from the weed-marked pages into a notebook that I kept hidden in my sock-and-underwear drawer.

Within two weeks I had finished those first three books. Upon completion of the third I emerged from the day lilies feeling expert. My knowledge of the war—dates, places, names—had zoomed up from zero. I was ready to ask my mother some questions. I approached her one afternoon before my father had returned from work. She was peeling potatoes over the kitchen sink when I padded in nervously. “Mom?”

“Yes, Johnny?”

“Mom, where was Dad stationed in Vietnam?” My throat was dry. I had never before uttered the word to my parents. My mother stopped working and turned to face me, potato peeler held upright in her hand. She looked puzzled.

“I don’t remember, Johnny. Lord, that was over ten years ago. I don’t remember those funny foreign names. He was stationed in more than one place anyway. Why?”

I felt ashamed, flushed. “Just curious. We learned a little about it at school, and I was just curious. That’s all.”

“I wish I could tell you, but I don’t remember. You know me. I have trouble remembering what I did last week.” She laughed an unhumorous laugh.

“Should I ask Dad?”

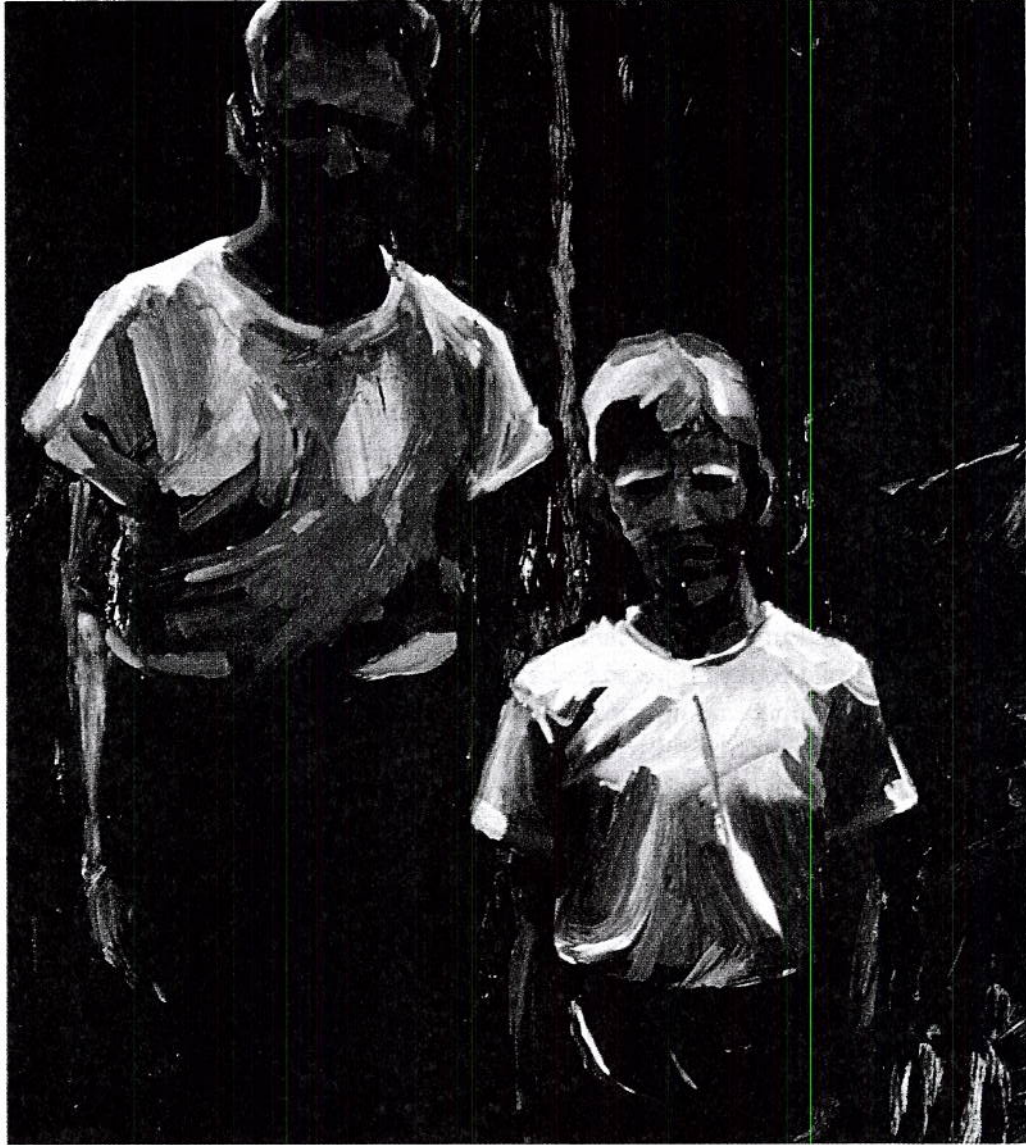
She suddenly looked very tired and thoughtful. “Oh, Johnny, please don’t,” she whispered. “Don’t bring it up with him. It took him so long to forget all of that. Don’t ask him to start remembering again.” Then she looked directly at me, and I could see that she was pleading with me, and I thought that she was going to cry. But she turned back to the sink and ran her hands and a potato under the tap. She began working again.

“Okay, Momma. I won’t. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, honey. You’ve a right to be curious.”

The next day I was with Joe. We were returning from the shopping mall in Fairview





*Art and Artie* (1989), Connie Hayes. Oil on paper, 27" × 27", collection of the artist. Copyright © Connie Hayes.

Heights, twenty miles away. We were in the old pickup truck he used on construction jobs, trying to cool ourselves with wide-open windows, though even the rushing air was warm and uncomfortable. Joe was eighteen then and worked nearly every day. I was enjoying the trip all the more because he allowed himself so few days off.

We were speeding down an empty two-lane road through the farmland south of Stone City. It was sickening to see. The corn, usually head high

by the end of June, was barely up to my waist. The ground was cracked and broken in places. Some farmers had recently given up. You could see by the dry brown stalks, standing packed closely together, that they had stopped watering.

"Look at it," Joe said, shaking his head and poking his thumb out the window. He had to shout to be heard over the sound of rushing air. "I've never seen anything like this before. Even Grandma says it's the worst she's seen." I nodded and looked around at the dying fields.

“What’d you buy?” he shouted, pointing at my bag. I pulled out *Great Expectations*<sup>12</sup> and showed it to him. He gave it only half a look and a nod. Then he shouted, “What’s the other?” pointing again at the bag. I hesitated but pulled out *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr.<sup>13</sup> Joe grabbed it and began reading the back cover, completely ignoring the road. We began to drift across the center line into the oncoming lane. I reached over and gave the wheel a slight pull to the right. Joe looked up and grinned. He continued reading, now flicking his eyes up every few seconds.

“Vietnam?” he shouted. “What’d you buy this for?” I shrugged. Joe rolled up his window and motioned for me to do the same. The cab was suddenly very quiet. I looked over and watched a red-winged blackbird light upon a fence post. Joe nearly whispered, “What’d you buy this for?”

“Just curious. I’ve been reading some history of the war.”

“Does Dad know?”

“No.”

“Mom?”

“Only a little. Not about my reading.” Joe looked down the road. We were already baking in the closed, quiet cabin.

“Just watch out. Keep it to yourself.” He threw the book into my lap.

“What do you remember about the war?”

“Not much. I remember Dad coming home, hands all screwed up. Quiet, but I hadn’t seen him in so long that I don’t remember him being different or anything. Maybe quieter. I don’t know. I was only seven. And I remember the POW-MIA sticker.<sup>14</sup> Never understood that until I was in high school. We had a bumper sticker on the old green Impala. Remember?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s all I remember, really. I never took too much interest. I figured he’d tell us if he wanted to.”

“Weren’t you ever curious?”

“No, not too much. It seemed all bad and ancient history. Water under the bridge and all that. I got to roll this window down!”

I considered asking Joe what he thought about my plan but didn’t. I had decided after talking to my mother that I was going to get into the locker boxes, though I had yet to figure out how. My father was in the garden nearly every day after work and saw the boxes while getting tools or the hose. Obviously, I needed the keys.



I examined the boxes the next morning. They were stacked in a corner next to a small worktable. Coffee cans full of paintbrushes and nails and loose nuts and bolts stood on top of them. As far as I knew, they hadn’t been opened in six years. Spider webs were constructed with a confident permanence between the sides of the boxes and the shed walls. I gave a cursory tug at the three locks, each of which had been scratched with a number.

The locks were the common hardware-store variety that always come with two keys. I began searching for the extras in the drawers in the tool shed. In the days that followed, I rummaged through boxes and cleaned the attic over the garage. I carefully went through my father’s dresser, with no luck. I did find one loose key at the bottom of a toolbox and raced out to the

12. *Great Expectations*: another classic novel by Charles Dickens.

13. *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr: a book consisting of impressions of the Vietnam War by an on-the-scene reporter—considered by many to be the best account of the war.

14. POW-MIA sticker: a bumper sticker directing public attention to the U.S. servicemen who were prisoners of war (POW’s) or missing in action (MIA) in Vietnam and whose deaths were unaccounted for at the time.

shed to try it, but it wouldn't even slide into the core of the locks. I would have to take the risky route for the operation. The useless old key would help.

I spent three scorching days in the garden reading *Dispatches* and an oral history of the war while I looked for the courage necessary to put the plan into effect. The plan was simple, but I wasn't certain it was safe. I would switch the old key I'd found for one from the key ring, rummage a box and switch the key for a second the following day, and then switch the one after that, for a three-day operation.

The next morning I rose as early as my father, much to his and my mother's surprise. My mother was in the kitchen scrambling eggs, and my father was in the shower, as I'd hoped. I slipped into their bedroom and with nervous, fumbling fingers forced the key numbered one off the key ring, replacing it with my found key. The key ring was tight, and I slipped in my haste, gouging my index finger in doing so. I left the bedroom with my slightly bleeding finger in my mouth, jamming it into my pocket as I passed my mother in the kitchen.

Later, quietly, with an archaeologist's caution, I moved the coffee cans from the top box and set them on the worktable. I then slipped in the key and flicked open the lock. Despite the heat, I felt a shiver through my back and shoulders, my body reminding me that I was crossing some line of knowledge, transgressing some boundary of my father's. My hands shook and I held my breath as I lifted the lid.

The first thing I saw was a yellowed newspaper clipping: the death of James Dean,<sup>15</sup> carefully cut to keep the date intact. I read the whole article with interest. I knew nothing of his death. Then I saw my mother's high school diploma, class of 1955. Stacks of old photographs. Family snapshots, black and white with wavy white borders. I found my old

report cards from early grade school and all of my brother's report cards up to the sixth grade. I found a baked-clay saucer with a tiny handprint pressed into it and "Johnny 1968" scratched on the back. It was all interesting but not my reason for the risk, so I lifted out the tray full of family memorabilia and set it to one side.

Underneath I found uniforms. Dress blues neatly pressed and folded. A shoeshine kit. A drill instructor's Smokey the Bear hat. Little plastic bags full of Marine Corps emblem pins like the one on the hat. A tan uniform. And the yearbook my father had pulled out six years before for his visitor. It was a thin platoon book dated 1964, San Diego. I flipped slowly through the black-and-white photos, looking for pictures of my father. The photos were mostly head shots of similar-looking boys in dress blues and white hats. I found action shots of boot training, of the mess hall, of track-and-field competitions. I saw my father here and there, leading a parade, demonstrating a hand-to-hand hold. He was still youthful and very muscular, stern-looking but not weary. The picture of him in his dress blues was the same I'd learned to call Daddy before I'd met him. His hands looked normal in the photographs, the vulnerability gone, his arms strong and well shaped, like solid tree limbs. Upon looking through again, I noticed small notations next to a few of the photos: "KIA,"<sup>16</sup> followed by a date. I was looking at dead men. I didn't know it then, but I would go back years later and find a picture of my namesake, Jonathan Allen Whitney, of Hinesville, Georgia, in that book.

But that was all, and it amounted to little. I replaced the tray and closed the lid, reconstructing the tool shed as well as I could.

15. **James Dean:** young American movie star who died in an automobile accident in 1955, at the age of 24.

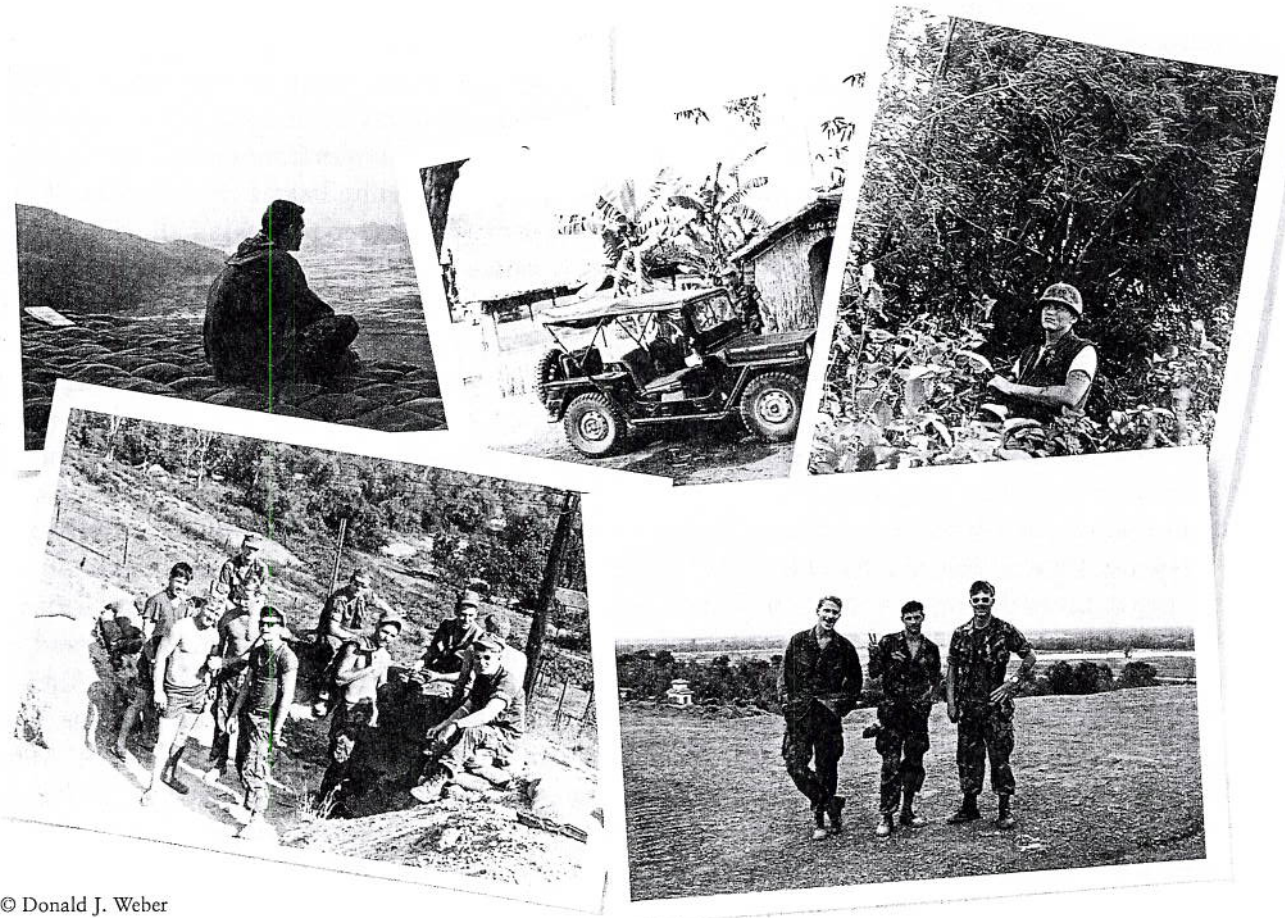
16. **KIA:** military shorthand for *killed in action*.

That night at dinner I waited for the explosion, the accusation, my father holding up the key ring, his tight voice burning through me. I saw it all, but it never came. Later, in my room, I sorted through what I'd seen and made notes in my journal. I hadn't learned much, except that my mother loved James Dean and was a curator<sup>17</sup> of her young sons' lives. As for my

father, I'd found little new except the images of a younger, stronger man.

I opened the second box with less trepidation, half expecting to see my mother's junior-prom dress folded neatly inside, a dry corsage still pinned to the front. Instead, I found the memorabilia that probably should have been hanging on the walls inside the house.

17. **curator:** one who manages or has care over something, often a museum or library.



© Donald J. Weber

**I**n the top tray were three wooden plaques commemorating different things my father had done, all before the war. They were homely little plaques given to him by platoons or friends. His dog tags<sup>18</sup> lay wrapped in a green handkerchief underneath the plaques, “Joseph D Bowen” pressed into the thin aluminum. The tags read “Methodist,” which surprised me, since he never went to church. I found a pile of old letters written by my mother which had been mailed to an address in San Francisco. I couldn’t bring myself to read them. I did, however, find three letters dated shortly after my birthday and opened them. One contained the expected photograph, the usual hideous newborn, with the words “Hi, Daddy! Love, Charlie” written on the back. There was another photo, of my mother with Joe and me. Joe was two, and I was just weeks old. The picture was taken at my grandmother’s house and dated June 30, 1964.

Beneath the tray I found more uniforms. Khakis this time, combat-style fatigues with “Bowen” stenciled onto them. There was also a pair of worn black boots, a canteen, two thick belts, and a cigar box full of uniform ribbons and their matching medals. Vietnam service, the crossed rifles for marksmanship, and others. There was an unexpected find: a Purple Heart.<sup>19</sup> He’d been wounded. I wondered where. His hands, perhaps, or the fairly large scar on his left thigh—a childhood farming accident, he’d told us. I was staring at the medal, trying to open my imagination, when I heard the back door of the house swing out and bang against the siding. I threw the medal back into the box, and the box into the locker, and hurriedly shoved

everything else inside. I pushed on the lock as the footsteps left the patio, and heaved the first box back on top. I was arranging the coffee cans when Joe walked in. “Hey, what are you doing?” he said. I was sweating but felt a twitching relief that it was only Joe.

“Looking for a nut. I need one for my bicycle.” I dumped one can over and began sifting through the dirty nuts and bolts. Joe walked around me, glanced down at the wall, and began sifting through the pile with me. “I need one for the seat,” I told him. He quickly handed me a nut.

“That’ll do it,” he said and then added, “Hear what happened?”  
“What?”

“Some old farmer set his fields on fire this morning. Acres and acres are burning.”

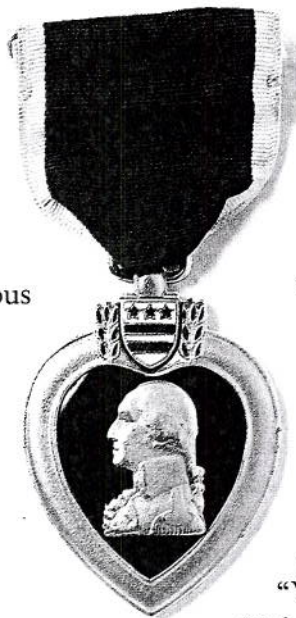
“Where?”

“Just east of town, off one-eleven. You can see smoke from the front yard. I thought we could drive out and see it.”

“Why’d he do it?”

“I don’t know. Just mad, probably. Wasn’t doing him any good, dying there in front of him.”

It wasn’t much to see, really. The flames weren’t huge, just crawling slowly across the field of dry stalks, crackling softly. Large glowing leaves swirled into the sky and became flocks of black birds in erratic flight. A few other people had pulled over to watch from the highway before a patrolman came slowly by and moved them along. Joe asked him if the fire department would put it out, and he said no,



18. dog tags: metal identification tags worn on a neck chain by members of the armed forces.

19. Purple Heart: a U.S. military decoration showing George Washington in profile, awarded to personnel who have been wounded in action.

that it was no real danger, though the farmer would be fined or something. He said it would burn itself out in a day or so. We saw a man near the farmhouse, about a hundred yards from the road. He was old, wearing a red baseball cap, sitting on a tractor watching the wall of black smoke rise from the field. “Probably him,” Joe said.



hat night my father came home with two tickets to a Cardinals game against the Mets. “Box seats,” he said, dropping them onto the table. He was as excited as we ever saw him, shining eyes and a slight smile, nothing showy or too expressive. “Let’s go, Johnny.”

From the car I watched the thin sheet of black smoke rising harmlessly like a veil on the horizon, not the ominous black plume that comes from a single house burning. I told my father about Joe and me driving out to see the fire and about the old man on the tractor. My father just shook his head. We were driving by his office at the steel mill, a different kind of fire and smoke shooting from the stacks. “Poor old man” was all he said.

I kept looking at the keys hanging from the steering column, expecting a wave of recognition to light up his face any second. I couldn’t imagine how he would react, though I considered anger to be the best guess. What I was doing was wrong; I knew that and felt bad about it, especially since he was in such a good mood. His face was relaxed and peaceful, and he was smiling. He’d fought in a war; he’d been wounded in some unknown place; his hands gripped the steering wheel like arthritic talons; his friends had been killed, and his sons had grown without him. I imagined him weathering bitter nights; he was driving us to a baseball game, sliding easily

through traffic. I kept glancing at his profile, the thinning hair touched with gray, the deep circles under his eyes, the rounded nose—my nose. We were crossing the Mississippi River on the Poplar Street Bridge. The Arch was a bright filament in the afternoon sun. The river was remarkably low, looking as though you could simply wade across the once unswimmable, strong-currented distance. I considered telling my father everything right then. I was consumed by guilt, tapping my fingers on my leg. “What happened to your finger?” he asked.

“Nothing. Caught it on a nail in the tool shed. I was looking for a key to my old bike lock.” I’d had that excuse saved for two days. I couldn’t look at him. I watched people in the streets. He began talking baseball. It had always been the bridge between us. There had always been the gap and one bridge, a love of the game.

The game that night was exciting, a pitchers’ duel with outstanding defensive plays. We had never sat together in box seats before, and we marveled at seeing everything so close up, how quickly the game really moves. We talked baseball all night. I kept score; I marked every pitch on the card, like a memory. The game went into extra innings. I didn’t want it to end. I knew even then that this was the first time I had ever felt really close to my father. We shared a soul that night, and then, in the bottom of the twelfth, the game ended suddenly with one swing by Ted Simmons, a crack, and a long home run disappearing over the left-field wall. We drove home happy, though quiet from fatigue.

Strangely, he passed our exit and continued around town to the east. “You missed our exit,” I said.

“I didn’t miss it” was all he said. He was pensive. I was puzzled, but only for a few minutes. We turned onto Route 111 and headed south on the dark highway. Suddenly the land to our left was a glowing pile of embers. We

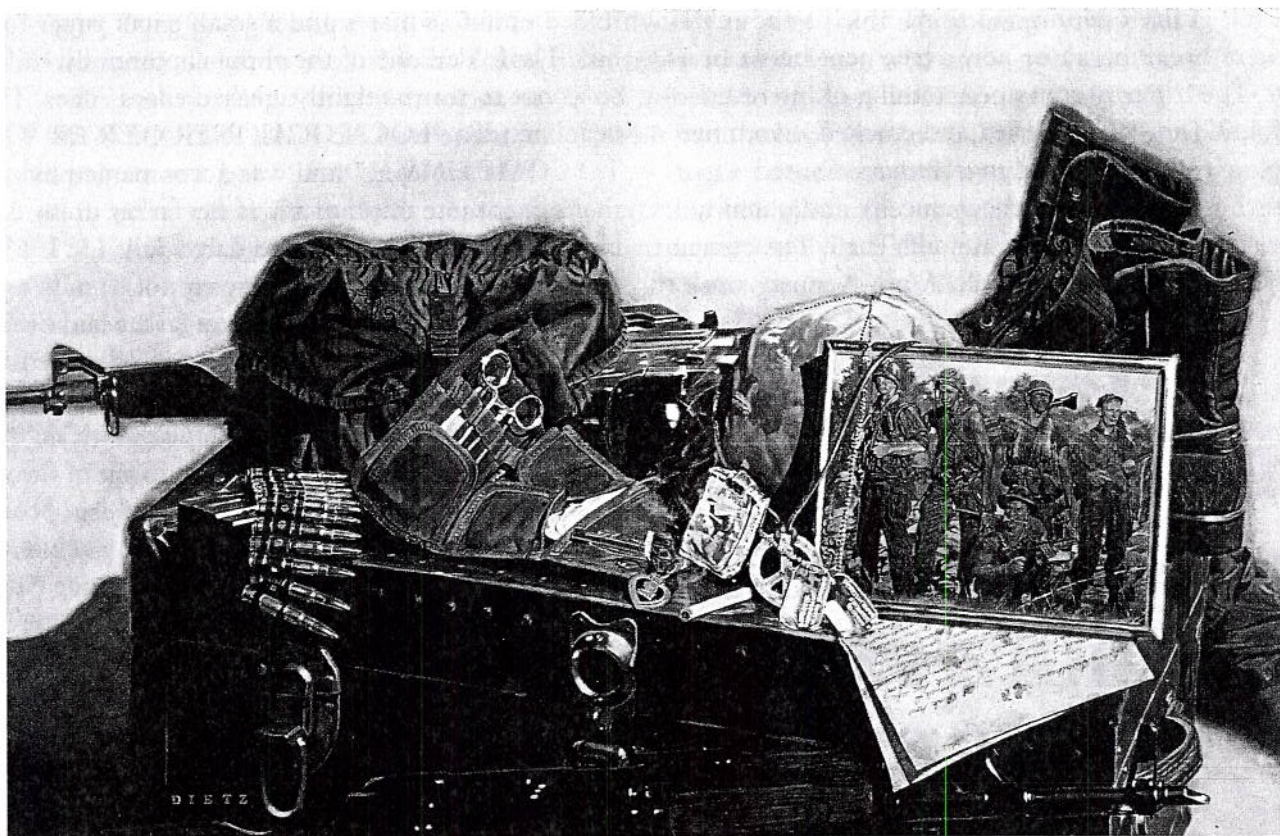


Illustration by Jim Dietz.

could see little smoke, but the field was alive with orange fires, flickering and rising like fireflies. My father clicked on his hazard lights and pulled onto the shoulder. He stepped out of the car and walked across the still road, with me trailing behind. The unseen smoke was too thick. I coughed and my eyes burned. "I just wanted to see it," he said quietly, and we stood in silence watching for ten minutes before driving home.

I didn't notice the ashes falling until after I'd changed the second key for the third. I was walking back through the kitchen when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a leaf fall against the window screen, break into pieces, and then disappear. I looked up and out the window. The wind had shifted in the night, and the ashes from

the corn field were swirling above like elm leaves in autumn, some falling gently to earth like a light November flurry, except that the flakes were black. In the back yard I held out my hand to catch one, and it disintegrated in my grasp. The temperature was already over ninety degrees. It was a wonderful and hellish sight. Ashes blew across the patio and collected in the corner against the house.

After my father left for work, I went into the garden to read. Ashes drifted down, breaking between the pages of my book and landing in the day lilies and roses along the fence. I felt strangely uninterested in the third box. The previous night had left me content with my knowledge of my father's past. A new understanding had come to our relationship.

I felt guilty opening the third box, as though I were breaking some new agreement between us.

The top tray contained nothing of interest. I found shoe polish, dried and cracked, two more plaques, socks, two dungaree hats. I sifted through these things mechanically and quickly, wanting to be done with it all. The compartment beneath was only half full. A musty smell rose

**I WAS A  
LITTLE AFRAID  
TO GO FURTHER,  
BUT I PICKED  
UP THE SMALL  
PAPERBOARD  
BOX, FELT IT  
RATTLE, AND  
OPENED IT.**

out of the box. It came from the clothing—an old khaki uniform tattered and worn, filthy but neatly folded—that lay on top of the items inside. Also within sight was an old pair of combat boots, unpolished and ragged. They, too, smelled musty. I lifted out the uniform and found a small box made of dried palm fronds. It was poorly woven around narrow sticks with an ill-fitting lid on top. Inside it were yellow newspaper clippings

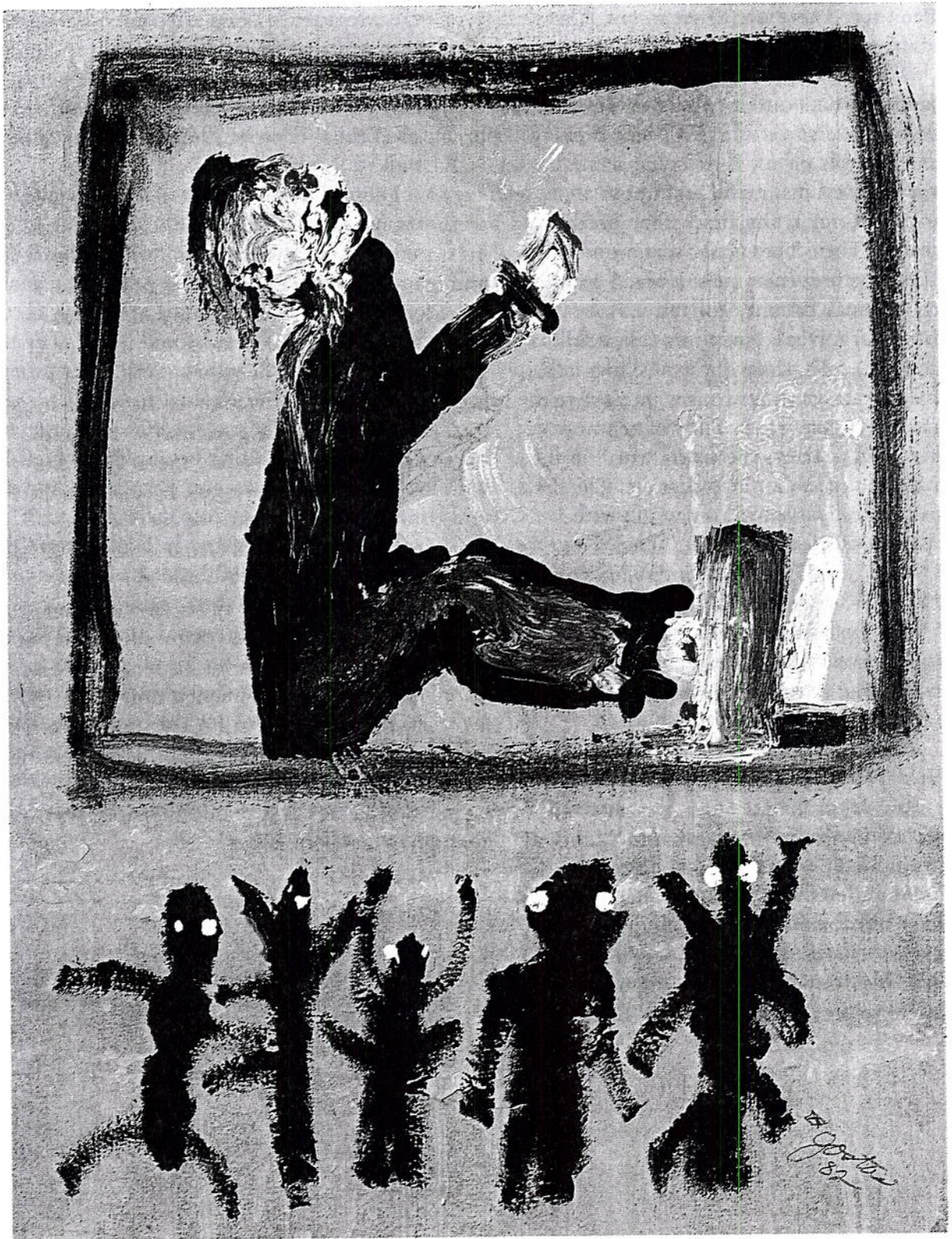
folded up into squares and a small paper ring box. I unfolded one of the clippings carefully, so as not to tear its tightly creased edges. The headline read “LOCAL PRISONER OF WAR TO COME HOME,” and was accompanied by that same photograph of my father in his dress blues. The clipping was dated July 13, 1969. I read the article slowly, trying not to miss any details. It explained that my father had been a prisoner for just over three years, that he was to be released July 30, and that he would be returning to the base in San Diego within days. He was being held in a prison camp in the North, just above the DMZ,<sup>20</sup> and had been captured while on patrol near Khe Sanh in 1966. It gave details about the family in Stone City.

I set the clipping aside and quickly unfolded the others. They all told the same story. One was from the Stone City paper, dated the day of his release. I read them all twice, almost incomprehendingly, before carefully folding them and returning them to the homemade box. I was a little afraid to go further, but I picked up the small paperboard box, felt it rattle, and opened it. Inside were teeth, all molars, yellowed and with black spots in places. I picked one up. On closer inspection the black blemishes became legible: painted on the side of the molar in tiny letters was “N.V. 3.3.66.” I picked up a second. It read “N.V. 5.12.66.” All six of them had dates, three from March third, one each from three other days. I was breathing through my nose in a deep, mechanical way, sweating heavily in the hot late morning. I put the teeth back in the box and set the box aside. I was shaking and didn’t want to

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20. DMZ: military shorthand for *demilitarized zone*—a term used to describe a buffer area between opposing armies, in which military forces and operations are prohibited.





*Solitary Confinement: Insects Witness My Agony* (1982), Theodore Gostas.  
Collection of the U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C.

continue. There was more to see, a few letters, some folders, a small book.

The book was a paperback, a Marine Corps field manual bound with a manila cover. It was titled *Escape and Torture*. I began flicking through the pages. There were some small, meaningless diagrams, a dull text about techniques for escaping from some generalized prison camp. Then there was a section on Vietnamese torture techniques. I began reading the clinical, distant descriptions of various forms of torture. Naked men in small, cold concrete cells, sleep deprivation, swelling legs, tied hands, beatings. A few pages into the text the notations began. They were written in black ink, always the single word “this” in the margin next to an underlined passage. The first, as I recall, described something with the feet. Then beating on the legs, “this.” Then the hands. “This” was bamboo splinters under the nails. “This” was a beating of the knuckles. “This” was being strung up by the wrists. I felt my stomach go hollow and my comprehension numb as I stared at that awkward, childlike scrawl in the margin of each page.

I didn’t hear my father walk into the tool shed. He appeared suddenly, as though he’d sprung from the ground. I felt a presence and turned to see him standing there in the doorway of the shed, holding his key ring in his right hand and my useless bronze key in his left. I have never seen such confusion on a man’s face. He was startlingly angry, I could see, his body stiff, his nostrils flared, his breathing heavy, his jaw muscles rolling beneath his skin. But his

eyes were weary, even desperate. We stared at each other while he decided what to do. I didn’t move. I said nothing, only watching him. His eyes welled, and bright molten tears ran down his cheeks. Then he dropped the single key and walked away.

I rose and walked out of the dark shed into the hot sun and falling ashes. He was sitting on the edge of the garden with his head down and his eyes closed as if in prayer, his hands lying loose and unattached in his lap. He then moved them to his sides and began clawing at the dry dirt in the garden until he had dug two holes and half buried each hand under the loose dirt. He sat as still as a memorial statue, and I realized that I didn’t belong there. I left him with his head down and eyes closed and walked into the house. I see him there every day.

In the four years that he lived beyond that moment he told me a little about the war. It was a topic I could never raise. On occasion, if we were alone, he would begin talking about some aspect of the war or of his service. These were heavily guarded moments, slow monologues as he groped for the correct words to tell me. It is another way I remember him, speaking the things that he knew he wasn’t capable of saying. This is how I love him the most, this great man. *Semper Fi*.<sup>21</sup> ♦

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21. *Semper Fi* (sēm’pər fī’): a shortened version of *Semper Fidelis* (Latin for “Always Faithful”), the Marine Corps motto.

## ON WRITING “MARINE CORPS ISSUE”

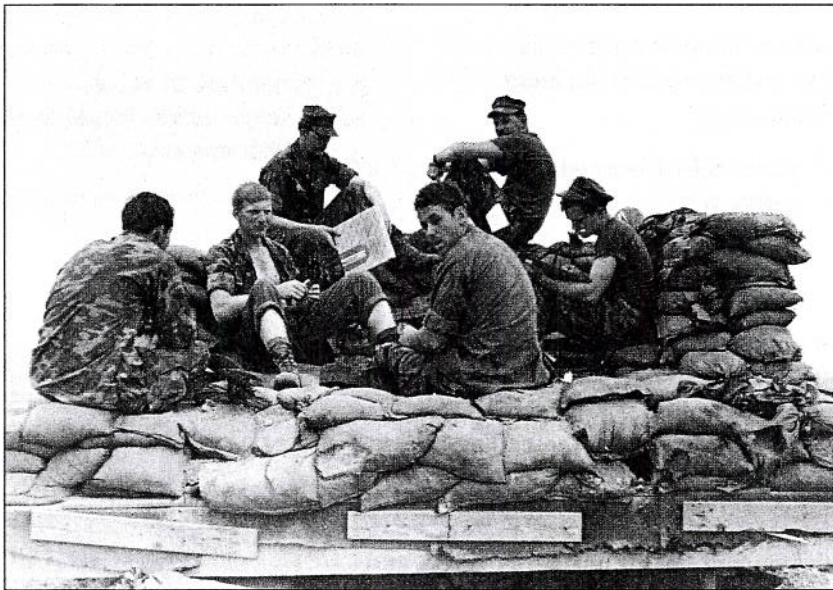
David McLean

The origin of “Marine Corps Issue” is in the book mentioned at the end of the story. My father was a Marine. While I was growing up, this field manual, *Escape and Torture*, was sitting on a dusty bookshelf. Unlike the house in the story, our house contained a lot of Marine Corps memorabilia on display. I had always been interested in my father’s career, but only after I had moved away did I think it strange to have had this kind of book on my shelves as a teenager. I grew up very near the Vietnam War—my father had been there twice and afterwards, from 1969 to 1972, was a drill

instructor training men for the war. My brothers and sisters and I used to watch him parade his recruits as each platoon graduated, never realizing that they were young men on their way to war. So, despite this nearness to the war, I was completely unaware of it. I knew nothing about it until I was in college.

These elements—a war, a book, a father, and a son—caused me to think of a story. I thought of what a son might learn about his father if he found *Escape and Torture* locked away in a box. The idea began there. The rest of the story grew from that little picture

of a boy secretly reading the book. The story was difficult to write at first, getting the voice and the details right, but at one point—the scene with the two brothers driving in the truck—something magical happened and the story began to tell itself, as though I had reached the top of a hill and could coast down the other side. These little moments of magic are what keep writers at their desks.



U.S. Soldiers serving in Vietnam met with little support upon their return home.  
© Donald J. Weber

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

At the end of the story, what were your thoughts about the character of the father?

### Comprehension Check

- What is the father's attitude about his war experiences?
- How does the boy try to find out more about his father's past?
- What does he learn?

## Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING RECOGNIZING CAUSE AND EFFECT** Look back at the **cause-effect** relationships you jotted in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. How would you sum up the effects of the Vietnam War on this family?

3. How does the secret that Johnny learns about his father help explain the way his father has behaved?

THINK ABOUT

- the **cause** of his father's injuries
- the **effects** of his father's experience as a prisoner of war

4. Why do you think the father has kept his war experience a secret from his sons?

5. Does Johnny have a right to know everything about his father's war experience—and to use any method to learn about it? Explain your reasoning.

6. Do you think Johnny is better off for having learned the truth about his father? Explain why or why not.

## Extend Interpretations

7. **Critic's Corner** Peter Lum and Michael Little, members of our student advisory board, had different reactions to the way the story ended. Peter was disappointed that the story "did not have a very happy ending." Michael, however, felt the ending "had a nice touch." What do you think about the ending? Support your opinion.

8. **Comparing Texts** How does the Literary Link on page 635 add to your understanding of the story? Explain your answer.

9. **Connect to Life** In general, do you think it is better to talk about a terrible experience or to remain silent about it, as the father in this story mostly does? Explain.

## Literary Analysis

**FLASHBACK** Not all stories are told in strict chronological order. A writer may use **flashback**—an account of a conversation, an episode, or an event that happened before the beginning of a story. At the beginning of "Marine Corps Issue," the **narrator** is a grown man. He tells the story in a series of flashbacks to different times in his life.

**Cooperative Learning Activity** Go back through the story, identify the flashbacks, and discuss with your classmates why you think the author chose to tell his story in this way.

**REVIEW SUSPENSE** The gradual unfolding of the story through flashbacks helps build **suspense**, the excitement or tension that readers feel as they become involved in a story and eager to know the outcome. What places in the story do you think are suspenseful? Discuss these places with your classmates.