

No Victory Parades

by Murray Polner

Steve Harper

He had noticed the hand-painted posters in the windows of the stores along the street. "Akron Rally In Support of Our Boys." It had also been on the radio and in the local papers. He knew where he stood and political rallies were hardly his style, but that evening he found himself drifting toward the meeting.

The hall was draped in patriotic colors, the streamers running across the ceiling and tied onto the rafters. A local politician had hired four pretty girls, all dressed in colonial clothing, to hand out leaflets and pins and greet the guests. Down front, children from

the Saint Aloysius School Drum and Bugle Corps were playing. A woman of 60, constantly smiling and wearing a red, white, and blue sash on her dress, swept down the aisle and pinned an "Honor America" button on the flap of his field jacket. Then a stillness. The audience rose. The children of the band struck up the national anthem.

Steve Harper, 20, a recent husband, a veteran of 11 months' fighting in the war, had been back home for almost six months when he went to the rally. Sitting there, on a wooden folding chair, he remembered the last time he had been with a similar group, in Vietnam, on Christmas Eve, 1967.

"We had this chaplain, a Protestant. I never cared for him and a lot of the guys shared this feelin' with me. He was always smiling and happy-like. And drinkin'. I never liked those kinds. They're like frauds. You

Murray Polner teaches history at Suffolk Community College, Long Island. This article is excerpted from his book, No Victory Parades, to be published this spring by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. The names of the three veterans have been changed.

couldn't ever talk to him or even believe what he was preachin'. You know?

"We were outside Pleiku, my first Christmas in the war. Outdoor services. Christmas Eve. It meant a lot to me. And him, the chaplain, always defilin' religion with the way he carried on. And we're sittin' on these chairs, not on the ground, and he comes out to a little table with the Bible in his hands. We were sittin' and quiet. He opened the book and put it down on the table. He looked down and then up at the sky and then back at us—I swear I'll never forget it—and then he became very still. Nobody said a word. And then, then, he began cryin' and weepin'. And suddenly, on that special Christmas night, every one of us started cryin' too. All of us, in that wild place, on that night, sittin' there, cryin'."

A woman was on the rostrum. She wore a bouquet of orchids, her voice small, but strong. Steve leaned forward. "Yes," spoke the woman, "it is

true, my Thomas died in Vietnam. But it is not true that his death was meaningless to everyone but his father and me. Yes, he was a number in the Pentagon, but aren't we all numbers in social security, bankbooks, credit cards? My son was a part of the Silent Majority."

She looked up from her prepared speech. She had tears in her eyes, obvious tears. "My Tommy wasn't a loud voice or a flag waver. He was a good boy, a handsome average American boy who became a man, and had to die in this way. But let me tell you this from the bottom of my heart, a mother's heart, a mother who has just buried her only son: I know Tommy's death was worthwhile. I know his death will always have meaning."

"She's right," said Steve. And he got up to leave the hall. "My mother would've said the same thing."

Harry O'Connor

"The thing I remember most was the sense of being forgotten and deserted. We left from San Diego. It was a Sunday afternoon and we were all in fatigues, our heads shaven. On the dock alongside the ship stood an Army band playing 'When the Caissons Go Rolling Along,' and the Marine hymn because we had some of them aboard. It really was a chintzy touch. And then, down below, on the water, floated a large sloop, maybe 35 or 45 feet. A guy was on deck, holding a bottle of whiskey, and next to him were three babes in bikinis. I wanted to fall down and weep. Here was this dude waving at us, sailing around on a sunny afternoon, free. And where were we? Where was I? On a troop ship, my ass headed for Vietnam."

It was early October, 1966, and Harry O'Connor, a recent graduate of Officer Candidate School, was about to lead an infantry platoon for six months on sweep and destroy missions in the Mekong Delta; afterward

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he would serve an additional 12 months as a Public Information Officer.

Harry has a brother, Paul, five years his senior. Paul served briefly in the Coast Guard and is now a mail carrier for the Post Office. Harry says that Paul is an exact replica of his father, but more tautly drawn. "Paul and I get along pretty well although we're opposites, especially politically now. Oh, he's goodhearted to his nephews—our two sisters' kids—and he let me borrow his car from time to time. But he's obsessed with neatness, he's very meticulous, and his taste is very conventional. By contrast, I'm very sloppy, always was. I've got books and magazines all over the place. I've got trinkets to bring a little bit of cheer and life to my room. This upsets Paul.

"Most of all, now that I'm home, my talk about Vietnam upsets him. He tries to ignore my arguments and concentrates instead on Yuppies and hippies and 'niggers' and Jews and communists and things like that. When he started to talk about voting for George Wallace, the gulf between us became even wider."

Harry came home in May, 1967, after 18 months in Vietnam. A few neighbors and relatives asked him how it had been, but Harry couldn't answer; he would stammer or reply lamely, "Oh, it was all right." It was impossible for him to talk with anyone who had not been there, or if they had, had not been in combat. It was a brotherhood of blood, even though the cause offered not a single idea he would care to give his life for. Outsiders were pariahs and he didn't want them peering in, asking questions, watching as if the brotherhood were naked and exposed. Say nothing to them, he kept reminding himself, the better to shield those with whom he shared hell.

"I have," Harry says, "a picture of myself in green jungle fatigues, walking through some kind of a mad life-and-death hallucination. One night I

was going past the colonel's tent. He was holding a meeting, and I remember thinking: if you've got any guts, O'Connor, you'd rush inside, denounce the war, and get them to understand what they're doing. How could anybody who didn't fight in Vietnam understand how I could think that, and me a first lieutenant?

"I was pathetic. In the Army there's always something to hope for. I hoped I'd get into OCS. I hoped I'd graduate. Then I hoped I'd get shipped to Germany or Korea. I hoped I'd get a safe job far from fire fights. I hoped I'd get wounded and be dusted off for good. I hoped I'd merely live through Vietnam and get home in one piece.

"So, should I have run into the colonel's tent and busted up their session? It would've meant the loss of my bars, and maybe even the stockade. Yeah, I kept my mouth shut, so I could one day get an early release to go back to college, and so I could get a pass to Saigon someday—all for being a good boy."

Meanwhile, the enlisted men in his platoon were mute. At the beginning Harry thought it was stupidity, or that he was with a company of slow learners. But he talked quietly with his men, spent considerable time with the wounded and the draftees, and discovered that they were simply numb, empty, filled with despair. They were facing the angel of death and they wanted to live. That and nothing else mattered. Nothing else.

"It was Christmas Day, 1966; we were in Long Binh, and it was about 100 degrees. I had everyone put on flak jackets, as we were going out on a mission. Everybody was sweating heavily and we were all so tired, especially from the damned heat. As we walked on I expected something to happen but nothing did. Still, one of the men, a PFC, was trembling from start to finish of the patrol. Nobody laughed at him. Nobody dared. It was 'there but for the grace of God go I.'

It was his last combat mission before going home, and he was in terror.

"Other than that, outward reactions among my men were invisible. To outsiders, they were mostly phlegmatic, stupid-looking even; down deep, it was quite another thing. Finally, things got too much for some of the guys; several tried deliberately to get wounded. I saw one man casually stand up in a fire fight and get it through the head. Another stood up, too, and only got it in the leg and the arm. He was sent to a hospital in Japan and everybody thought he was the luckiest guy in the world because he was safe and free again.

"Why they were willing to take such risks is open to question, but it seems to be only by men who went through combat in Vietnam. The rest have no right to any opinion at all. As for me, I think it was that quality of hope, the hope that you'd be hurt not too badly, but badly enough to get out of that place. To get away from the jungle rot and the heat, always the heat. It's really a remarkable experience sleeping for the first time in the rain, knowing that if you live you'll be doing that for a whole year. Over and over again, I kept asking myself, what am I doing here? I was never, I think, afraid. I just felt abandoned. Living conditions were unbearable. Nobody slept enough or cared anymore. I also felt guilty. Many times I had to send men out to certain death. They were kids like myself. I once sent two kids, both about 19, from someplace in the South, out to clear a minefield in the jungle. We suspected Charley had been there and had booby-trapped the terrain. It had to be cleared—orders. I had my other men to consider; at least that's what I was told. Nobody explained why. Just so it was cleared. We later found those two kids in a hundred pieces, blown apart by mines."

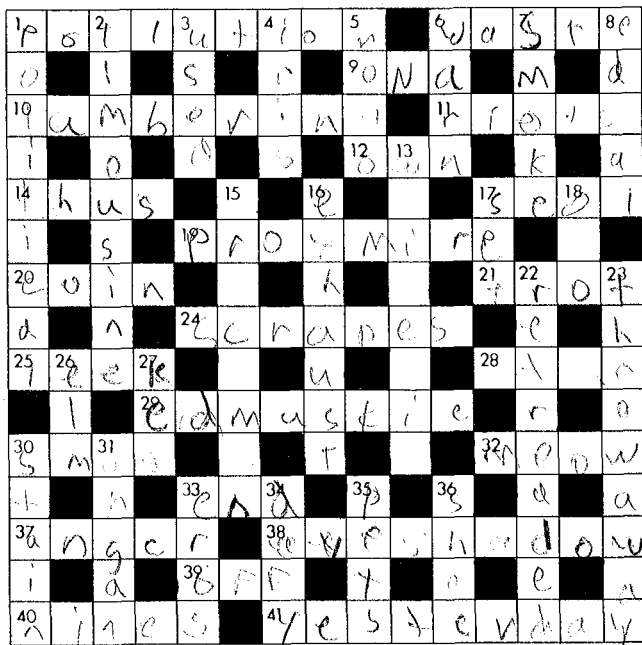
In the late spring of 1967, Harry was finally reprieved. He had been wounded. "We were in a bad fire fight, had been ambushed by NVA

regulars and hit hard. I remember lying on someone's teeth and a jaw that had been blown off. We were all pinned down for hours in the woods, ants crawling all around and over me. One of my men, next to me, had been wounded in every part of his body; every time someone touched him to comfort him he would shriek. We radioed for a medivac helicopter, but when one did come it was shot down. So myself and another guy had to walk and drag him down the jungle path, infested by North Vietnamese and crossfire, a kind of Hollywood stunt; we pulled him out, not really knowing what the hell was going on, and him screaming with pain the whole time. Somehow I lost my shirt and gear, including my weapon. The guy with me was killed, and I kept dragging that poor kid out down the path, not even noticing that his yelling had stopped and he would be dead by the time I arrived, wherever the hell I was going. I remember nothing more but I was told that I was found later back in the jungle, with no shirt on and holding a .45, firing it at the trees until my first sergeant brought me back to safety. I'm also told that two hours later, the fight still on, I grabbed a rifle and walked right into the crossfire without a helmet on or even a shirt. This time I got hit, mostly in the upper arm and my left leg. All I remember is being in a helicopter and looking down and seeing leeches crawling around my arm. I must have fainted."

Before leaving Vietnam, Harry O'Connor made a promise to himself. While being mortared, he swore that if he lived, "if I get back to the world," he would never again allow himself to act in disregard of his conscience. Life, he decided, was too valuable and too ephemeral. His first post-service job was as a part-time mail clerk at Filene's. He refused to tell anyone he was a veteran, but when some other clerk made a remark defending the war he punched him and was punched

The Political Puzzle

by John Barclay



Across

1. On the land, in the sea, and in the air today, sadly. (9)
6. Work up a sweat for 1 Across. (5)
9. A Noel opal for former agency. (3)
10. Slow wooden way to get around. (9)
11. May happen if blacks must say "sir" to whites. (5)
12. To possess now. (3)
14. Best way to shut the door. (4)
17. In close, almost a walrus. (4)
19. Famous roper, Mix, from Mid-West. (8)
20. I see no reason for money. (4)
21. Fox follower. (4)
24. The spafers are sometimes too tight. (7)

25. It's enough to make you keel over backwards. (4)
28. Kind of board or chamber. (4)
29. He used mike to be heard about 1 Across. (2, 6)
30. Gimshoe without hue is upset by city problem. (4)
32. Plaintive cry in meadow without publicity. (4)
33. This may be tight or open, even dead. (3)
37. The range rearranged stays hot. (5)
38. Beauty aid we say he owed. (3, 6)
39. After kick and before hand. (3)
40. Indians, Braves, or Reds. (5)
41. He, too wise, rested a time ago. (9)

Down

1. This is a puzzle for pill at CIO. (9)
2. Fancy car almost keeps mousy in line. (9)
3. Employed abused to no degree. (4)
4. She lives in highrise, apt. 2567. (4)
5. This goon says it's all off. (2, 2)
6. Tell ex-rat warrant is coming. (4)
7. Screen doesn't help reduce 1 Across. (5)
8. An old car from Leeds. (5)
13. How January golfer in Duluth explains second shot? (5, 3)
15. Treasury Agents swallow torture instrument to get RR workers. (8)
16. Will he tax us dry? (7)
17. Established, secreted, but no creed. (3)
18. Farm vehicle is passe, especially in the middle. (3)
22. These tires will scrap heaps deter, dear. (9)
23. Convenient container for one but not for the greater number. (5, 4)
26. Mel looks good by the street. (3)
27. Sure fire way to eliminate beer can problem. (3)
30. It's an ugly blemish. (5)
31. Play rag on this. (5)
33. Love comes up angry. (4)
34. "I xxxxxx historians, heroes, lawyers, priests to put a fact without some leaven of a lie." Byron, Don Juan Canto XI. (4)
35. Step up for your animal friends. (4)
36. Fits around the hose. (4)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 3.

in return. He was fired immediately.

Once more he lived at home, sharing his old room with Paul. Little had changed. His father still watched TV, read the newspapers, and spent a part of each day at St. Ann's. Paul, though, had changed. He was more furious than ever at students, at black people, at doves, and at things that defied his analytical powers. At first Harry tried to talk quietly with his brother, tried to tell him what he had seen and done. And always their voices would start to rise; they'd argue, and one or the other would storm out of the house. Their father would say nothing, refusing to come between his sons and take sides.

Paul argued that life was good and quiet before the war: "Why can't people support their government and their President? Hasn't America been good to all of us?" he asked his brother. "Especially those of us whose parents came over from the old country? We have a right to life; communists and their stooges don't respect life. If we didn't go into Vietnam, they'd have slaughtered millions of Catholics."

"He'll never see it," Harry explained. "He's obsessed with that disease—the other version of the 'gook syndrome,' anticommunism. He's not religious; he doesn't give a crap really about Vietnamese Catholics. Why hell, if they tried to buy the house next door to him he'd scream about 'niggers.' But he hangs onto the flag and hates people who never did him any harm, and supports a policy that nearly killed his own brother, and may someday kill his sisters' boys. The only one who hurts him is his own government, the very one he wants to suck up to."

Harry reached out to the one relative he hoped might understand, his dead mother's youngest sister, only 15 years older than he, a librarian in Portland. "We spent a Saturday together soon after I got back; I like my aunt, she's more like an older sister. Because she lived so far away we never really

saw too much of her, but that Saturday I thought I was really making headway at last with one of my family. For the first time. So before I left I said to her, 'Mary Ellen, one thing bothers me. Here we've talked all day and you say so little when I mention Vietnam. The thing that bugs me, Mary Ellen, is that you're not taking the time to find out.' She looked very sad. 'Harry,' she answered, 'I just can't think about it. And besides, even if I agreed with your views, and I don't say I do, what could I do about it anyway?' 'You could,' I said, 'speak to your friends, send letters, and things like that.' 'Harry, you're acting silly,' she said, and kissed me good-by. 'Besides, what would my friends think?' I never went to see her again after that."

Fred Schoenwald

Fred was born in Germany and brought to this country in 1947, when he was two years old. He grew up in the Elmhurst section of Queens, New York City, in a German neighborhood where his father and mother owned a small delicatessen. As their only child Fred spent almost all his time in the store, either in the front, where he relieved his parents and waited on customers, or in the rear, where the family lived in four rooms.

Fred Schoenwald saw more sustained, intense fighting than any other veteran I interviewed. He was a combat medic in a reconnaissance platoon and had taken part in several of the bigger sweeps: Addleboro, Gadsden, and Junction City I and II. Before entering the Army, he had spent two years in a New York City community college and soon after became a draftsman in an electronics firm. In the time since he has been home he has followed his mother's advice: he never speaks of the war or his service, repeating to all, "It simply never happened; I never want to hear of it again."

He was invited to join a local VFW branch but tore up the letter. Another time, a fellow veteran, a former classmate, mistook his silence for opposition to the war and asked him to join in a peace parade in New York City. Fred never spoke to his college friend again. He insists that he be allowed to go his own way, to forget what had to be done.

"I was always nervous," Fred confessed to me. "In fact, I can't remember not being afraid. For one thing, a combat medic doesn't know what's happening. Especially at night, everybody screaming or moaning and calling out, 'Medic, medic.' I always saw myself dying, my legs blown off, my brains splattered all about, shivering in shock, and talking madly. This is what I *saw* in reality. I used to tell myself that anyone wanting to send 18 and 19-year-olds to fight ought to try it on himself or his own sons. But that was crazy talk, and I soon stopped myself.

"Killing everywhere. The VC killed village chiefs and ARVNs right under our noses. They shot down our dust-off helicopters. We killed them too. The Vietnamese people were afraid of everybody—the ARVN, the VC, of anybody who upset their lives. We weren't any better either. We'd go tromping through their grounds. We'd get orders to leave the people alone, not to harm them or their property, but so what? I saw Americans bothering the people all the time. We'd ask for their identification cards, start a fire fight, and accidentally kill a son or a mother. In all the hamlets and villages I visited as a medic, giving the people pills and injections and things like that, everywhere I saw hate in their eyes, telling me we should get out, leave them alone, and not give them any more trouble. At the beginning of my tour I thought it funny that the first Vietnamese words I learned were 'Beat it,' 'Get out of here,' and 'Your identification card?' Only after I left the country did I understand why.

"I met this girl in a village store.

Her father owned the place. She was about 17 or 18, sort of pretty, and very shy. I guess she was the only Vietnamese I ever got close to. By then I spoke a little of their language and I found she was studying English and math. I said I could help her and kinda started to hang around the place when I was free, or was there for taking care of the villagers. Everybody in my platoon thought we were getting laid, but I never put a hand on her. I helped her in both subjects and twice we took a short walk to the end of the village. She was afraid of me at the beginning but later she got over it, and I started to look forward to being with her. She was delicate and her voice would rise and fall like the sing-song of their language. Once, the last time, I brought her a flower; it made me forget.

"We were up North by then, and soon we were back on daily patrol. One day we were on this patrol, it was rainy, and suddenly we were caught in an ambush. Our guys returned the fire. We hit them hard and then called in the gunships for support. It was great—I mean, I was very happy to receive that kind of help.

"Then, maybe 30 minutes after, the firing stopped and we moved out to look for the wounded and to take a body count. Up ahead, I saw a mound and a grove of trees. I walked over, carefully. There were a bunch of bodies around—all VC, and all women. They looked like peasants and all had weapons on them. One of them was my little girl friend, now dead, bullets through her chest and head. She had an automatic near her. I was shocked. She was a VC. Who the hell *were* our friends? Who were our enemies? I never felt more confused than that moment. But I think at that very instant I also felt this: she tried to kill me and my buddies, and it was good she was dead. Real good.

"As I said, I only mull these things over when I have nothing to do. I never made any close friends in the

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**RACIAL
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ON AMERICAN
FOREIGN POLICY**

Edited by George W. Shepherd

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Army and I don't spend any time with any vets now, so there's no one to reminisce with. Do the pieces fall in place now? Hardly. Before I went to war, I just never thought about politics. Me and the guys in our experimental brigade were a little curious about Vietnam, but it wasn't real to us. I always liked to play soldier; what American boy doesn't. I was in the Boy Scouts, I was in the school marching band, and 'Our country, right or wrong' was something that was taught me in a hundred different ways. I still believe it, despite everything. Only what happened was so different from what I really expected. I accepted the draft because that was what was expected of me—I never knew anyone who avoided the draft. My father's store has an American flag decal on its door. It's all very natural with us.

"What wasn't natural was the way it was when I got home. You couldn't tell me a war was going on by looking at the people. I went to a large shopping center in Valley Stream for a stereo. It was a Saturday afternoon and everybody and his brother seemed to be there—thousands of cars, money, people busy with their lives. Why the hell were guys getting hurt? Why didn't these people care? But in Vietnam, in that village store with the girl, such thoughts were unnatural for me, and I tried to get them out of my mind. Besides, I suppose we fought in Vietnam just for the right of these people to have the freedom to rush around that shopping center. Anyway, my parents and I survived by following along, trying as best as we could to live our lives.

"Yet I can't put it together. I hate to see any kid get sent to Vietnam, particularly if he's going to be a rifleman or a medic. If I'm asked, I can't honestly say 'I did good.' I can't say I'd ever want to go back there—or anywhere—to stop communism.' I can't say that at all. All that I think I did was take care of a lot of people when they needed me. No more." ■

The Burn Ward

by Ronald J. Glasser

Edwards picked up the stethoscope from his desk. "Look," he said, "You can say what you want about the Army and its problems, but I learned this much from going home: the Army treats you better dead than alive. I know," he added quickly to keep the captain from talking. "I know, it was my fault. I shouldn't have got involved with taking the body back. But I did."

"It's coming," the corpsman said, stepping away from the window.

Edwards stuffed the stethoscope into his back pocket. "OK. Tell the ward master. Better fill the whirlpools. I'll be down at the landing pad." He pushed open the double doors to the burn unit.

The huge overhead lights were off, leaving only the night lights to flicker feebly across the shiny, tiled floor. He walked quietly down the center aisle of the ward, his footsteps echoing

lightly ahead of him. The beds lining the wall were barely visible, the patients no more than lumps against the frames. From the far end of the ward came the faint mechanical hissing of a respirator. He stopped a moment near one of the steel-arched Stryker frames to listen. The machine's slow regular rhythm was almost soothing. How many times he'd heard it before. Someone had once said he'd signed more death certificates than any other doctor in Japan. Probably right, he thought, continuing on his way. At Kishine, the respirator was the sound of death, not life; in all his time there, he could not think of one patient who had got off the thing.

"Hi, Doc."

"Oh, Crowley," Edwards said, coming to a halt near the little cubicle at the back of the ward. "Sorry, I didn't see you in the dark."

The side curtain had been partially pulled. Stretched out on the bed, barely lit by the dials of the respirator, was a shadowy form.

"How's he doing, Sergeant," Edwards asked the ward master who was standing at attention by the

Ronald J. Glasser was a major in the U. S. Army Medical Corps, 1968-1970. He now practices medicine in Minneapolis. This article is excerpted from his book, 365 Days, to be published this summer by George Braziller. The story is true, but the names and dates have been changed.