

# Ghosts and Glory

## MEDITATIONS ON JAMES WEBB'S *FIELDS OF FIRE*

When I first sat down, I thought I was going to write a paper on a novel. But as I started writing, all I could think about was myself. For like many great works of art, the book triggered feeling, emotions and memories that had been buried in my own consciousness for years and long forgotten. So rather than review a novel, I am here to tell you about the some of the images and memories that James Webb's Viet Nam war novel, *Fields of Fire*, illuminated in my past life—like a trip flare going off in the middle of the night. I found that many of Webb's imagined characters were real, and many of the real characters in my life were actually imagined. As you'll soon discover, my existence is based upon the death of someone I never knew. The characters in the book also exist because someone has died. Dead soldiers are replaced by those who are mentally dead. The fear of death numbs the soul. The fear of life numbs the heart. Not until I read this brilliant novel did I fully comprehend the battles I have been fighting, not because of the Vietnam War but because of the scars left behind by another fierce enemy, alcoholism. Both of my parents were and are alcoholics. Life in an alcoholic family is like living in the "Arizona Valley" of Webb's book. Life becomes a series of survival tactics. Your soul dies. Your desire to live is controlled by something outside yourself and your rage becomes more a part of you than happiness. And with every step you take, you constantly scan the tree line for signs of the enemy.

I grew up with the Vietnam War. It was on television, in the movies, music and in my life. Vietnam was the first televised war. Every night the network news would show, in detail, the horrors of war. For years, America witnessed bodies sprawled onto stretchers, rushed to an awaiting helicopter. I remember the bandages. They looked as if they had been through the war, too. Soaked with blood, loosely fitted. There was no time for precision. Saving a life meant cutting corners. Just before sign off, the news broadcast would end with the body count for the day. Black silhouettes of faceless soldiers were placed in a neat row over the anchor's shoulder. Each silhouette represented the number of men killed or injured. I think the habit of turning off the television during dinner came from the War. Dead and mangled bodies tend to spoil one's appetite. Each day the count rose, as did my father's anxiety. My half-brother Larry was drafted, and like a good southern boy, he didn't complain. I never knew Larry. I had only met him in old, torn photographs, but he was my brother, my father's first born and first son. I was the fourth born and second son. And, because I was much younger, I had a lot of catching up to do. My father was a widower early in life. In just a few minutes, fire had changed his life forever. I wasn't there that cool North Carolina morning, but somehow I can see the tiny country home

engulfed in flames. I can see my father run frantically into the house to save his family. I see him running, frantic, fighting his way through the flames. I see him fight until the moment when one knows defeat is near. The time when body and mind surrender. The children had been saved, but their mother lay quietly as the flames surround her body.

Like a battle on an unnamed hill, the fire had won. My father's life would never be the same. Addictions would consume his every waking moment. I never really thought about it, but had my half brother and sisters' mother survived, I may never have been born. My existence was determined by the death of someone I never knew under circumstances I would never understand. After the fire, my father dropped the children at their grandmother's house and drove off, never to return. While I don't understand why he did many things, I can honestly tell you I understand why he left them. After the fire, my father waged his own war and battled his own addictions. Whether his alcoholism was inherited as some medical experts suggest, or whether it was a product of that fiery night, I don't know. And, he won't say. Talk of that night turns my father's skin gray. You can see the reflection of the flames in his eyes. Alcohol keeps the ghosts buried, at least for awhile. My mother fought the same addiction. However, I know the reasons for her torture. Each night, she would watch the man she loved drink himself into forgetfulness. It became too much to bear. To say that I lived in a dysfunctional family would be kind. Alcohol, like heroin, consumes the individual and the family. Eight-year-old children are forced to make parental decisions. There's no time for child's play; there are alcoholics to care for. Most of the time my parents were too drunk to crawl to bed, so my little sister would put a blanket over them. And, when the morning arrived, nothing was mentioned. Every morning was a lesson in denial. While I never endured the hardships of poverty, and I was not physically beaten, there were many times I wish I were poor and battered. Instead, I was the child of an alcoholic father and mother.

Alcoholic families don't endure, they simply exist. Getting through each day seems to be the only goal. Like the soldiers in the field, children in alcoholic families watch each small detail for the sign of trouble. One wrong move and the enemy wins. In essence, from the time I was old enough to realize the effects of alcoholism, I walked the trail, stepping cautiously, wanting not to trip the wire. I still refer to my parents as "Those People" and I haven't seen nor spoken to them for 15 years. I honestly do not know if they are physically dead or alive. To me, they have always been dead. There was one time when my parents weren't drunk. I knew something was wrong. My mother and father didn't touch a drop of alcohol for days. Both were stone cold sober. A typical ration for these addicts was a bottle a day. I watched the same half-empty bottle for days. It just sat there in the secret hiding place in the china cabinet, collecting dust, just wanting to be touched. I knew trouble was near. My father was usually predictable. Every day he would come home from work and begin drinking. By dinnertime, he was incoherently drunk. If he became angry and yelled, he was only making a point. If he was silent, he was really angry. Silence in our family was unpredictable enemy. There was a lot of silence in our house that week. Sobriety and

silence meant something was wrong. Even when my father was blind drunk, he never missed a day of work. Ironically, for my father to miss work, be sober, and be silent was frightening. I still remember every detail of that week. All the frantic telephone calls, the whispers, the missed days of work. The absolute silence.

Years later I discovered my half-brother was missing in action. As children we were shielded from the messes of war. My grandmother finally told me the story days before I was inducted into the Army. My half-brother had been on patrol in Vietnam. His squad had just received a new leader, a ninety-day wonder, straight from OCS. New officers are called ninety-day wonders because officer's school is only three months long, less than a semester of college. Three months is all the time the Army had to recruit and train new leaders. Not many college-educated young adults wanted to go to Vietnam. My grandmother continued the story as I watched intently. We were eating lunch at her favorite diner. I had waited years to hear this story. For years I wondered what was so important. What would keep my parents sober for over a week? While on patrol, my brother's squad took fire from an enemy hole just off their trail. Several men were hit. During the mayhem, the Lieutenant ordered the men back and into the bush. For six days, my brother and what was left of his squad navigated through enemy lines, trying to find their way back to base camp. Six days behind enemy lines, with only one day's supply of rations. After spending a sleepless night on the run, my brother discovered the "ninety day wonder" read the wrong map. It took four hours to calm the Lieutenant and four days to find home. My brother saved the lives of his squad members, his friends. In war, decisions should be made by the most experienced, not the highest rank, by soldiers, not politicians. After she told the story, I remember getting an uneasy, sinking feeling. In many ways, my grandmother had told me the worst news of my life. Surviving in an alcoholic family wasn't enough torture. Now, I had to live up to the expectations of a brother I had never met, a bona fide war hero.

I volunteered for the Army in 1973. Although I wanted to go to Vietnam, the recruiter encouraged me to stay in school and at least get my high school diploma. The Army needed educated warriors. Thanks to my knowledge of weapons, and my experience gathered through years of deer hunting, I could hit any target at a thousand yards. Soon after graduation, I prepared mentally and physically for the transformation into the Army. I remember that my father would not talk to me for weeks before the bus trip to the Oakland induction center. In many ways, I was relieved. Then, on the final day, he gave me the best advice he would muster: something about keeping my head down. Once again, he was sober. Something was wrong. The war wasn't over yet. (Saigon didn't fall until later that year.) Going into combat was a real possibility, but I was ready. Ready to fight the VC and ready to dilute the image of my war-hero half-brother.

I purposely signed with the elite fighting brigade of the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The Tropical Lightning. Everything about the unit was distinctive, even our patch: a red pineapple leaf with a gold border emblazoned with a gold lightning bolt. The