

THOMAS BONNER, JR.

Front Lines

The heat lifted from the grass and wrapped around me like a wet blanket. The rich, dank smell of the Mississippi hung in the air. Clouds floated slowly in from the Gulf like cotton balls. The lizards seemed to be panting for oxygen on the branches of the bush as they waited with their mouths open for an errant insect. It was summer at Jackson Barracks on the edge of New Orleans. I stood behind the hurricane fence, the iron grid woven together and hanging from pipes, but not a breeze moving through it. The grass was on the other side. Below my dirty knees miniature soldiers and armored forces were involved in a major battle. It was only ten in the morning and the sweat, worse than perspiration, dripped down my shirtless torso, as the “granny beads” formed about my neck. The battle in the cleared dirt had raged for several days. Despite my army having moved across the small root from the camphor tree, the enemy maintained a strong position in the field. Two of their tanks, however, were lying on their dusty sides. My army had survived the mine field of berries planted along the front of the root. My favorite Patton tank had emerged unscathed among the fallen enemy soldiers and my infantry were rushing in behind it when suddenly my mother’s voice rang out calling me to come into the kitchen for fruit juice. Despite the heat everyone and everything except me froze in place as I walked across the battlefield to the stairs leading to the kitchen door. I was an obedient soldier.

When I returned, the battle resumed in earnest. My B-26 made a strike on another tank, and after two strafing runs, it was lying on its side. My half track soon broke through at a second location along the root. Things were going well despite having lost some men to pebbles from the mortars. When one fell face down in front of me, I thought of John Leighton's lead West Point cadets lined up on his chest of drawers and his mother's carefully folded American flag. He had failed to extricate himself from a disabled P-51. Black aircraft-identification models still hung by threads from the sky blue ceiling of the screened porch outside his room. When John came home on leave, we would crowd into his room asking for stories of flight, of valor. John always piloted my B-26, the bomber he should have been flying because he was too big for a fighter.

The noon siren sounded as my father walked along the edge of the battlefield toward the kitchen door for lunch. His khaki shirt with only a few of his decorations had wet spots. His headquarters was only a few minute walk away, but it was hot. He looked at the plastic and metal vehicles and figures. He asked if I had weeded the garden. I had not. My explanation of much going on below the camphor tree was unconvincing, and I promised to have the weeding done by the time he returned home in the evening. It was obvious that there would have to be a cessation of hostilities, at least temporarily.

Everything grew here. Beyond the thick bluegrass barrier—almost like the hedgerows of WWII films—the rose bushes and azaleas grew well in the often damp, dark soil. They were under attack by a myriad of weeds fighting for the water as the cat's paw climbed them in an effort to strangle their growth. I first untangled the vine and pulled it from the branches on the rose bushes, not always avoiding the thorns. My hands bled. The azaleas became unencumbered more easily, but the occasional tiger-like caterpillars had to be avoided. As I worked, the thunder flies withdrew to other bushes. Finally, I removed the crabgrass and thistle below and then packed the debris. I fell into bed that night but rose early with several bandaged fingers to return to action.

The pause in the conflict had been a long one, at least for a ten year old when time had different dimensions than it did for adults. In the morning combat resumed before breakfast. An enemy unit had attacked my half track and its accompanying infantry successfully and had begun a flanking movement that moved along the exposed root. The advance stopped while I had breakfast. When I returned the July sun had risen higher, and the roar of a convoy filled the air. Beyond the dry dirt of the battlefield, farther than the lowest branch on the camphor tree, a huge tank was leading other machines across the blades of St. Augustine grass. These were

the lawn mowers with their Black drivers. The lead mower turned in my direction while the others rumbled past going to the houses and fields toward the river.

The mower with seated driver headed straight in my direction and then began sweeps across the yard. Its driver wore a dark green campaign hat, its brim bent and its crown battered. He wore an old khaki, long sleeved shirt with an epaulet missing and a pair of torn khaki pants. A red bandanna circled his neck. Bruises marked his low boots. His face seemed sculpted, with a high forehead, a large flat nose, cheeks like low hills, thick lips that seemed not to end, and a chin full of stubble. His skin with browns, reds, and blacks showed brightly in the sweat pouring down it on to his already wet shoulders and chest. His brown-green eyes sat in pools of white with curved red lines. He gripped the handles of the machine on which he was seated with large hands. They had dry looking white and gray areas as if they had been scraped. His knuckles bulged like a row of Brazil nuts. When he came closer, he lifted a hand to wave: his palm was as white as mine. I stood behind the hurricane fence looking at him attack the sharp blades of grass, and I waved back. It was Brent. He had been here since WWI, but his stories went back much further than that war. He said he felt that he had been here before. When he told me this, I asked, "Before what?" He just smiled and said nothing.

The summers were always hot and wet. The soil away from the levees seemed porous, and areas dropped below others. And then there were the fire ants on their mounds rising above the sharp green blades, almost like the pill boxes in the pictures from *Life* magazine. Brent steered his mower through these small ravines with the whirring blades sometimes simply cutting the air. As he approached the first fortification of fire ants, he brought the mower to a halt, dismounted, picked up a can of chemicals, walked toward the earthworks, and poured the mixture on the unsuspecting ants. Afterwards, he continued cutting, until he spotted another mound. This time, as he walked across the freshly mowed grass to the uncut area where the mound sat brown and placid in the sun, he began to jump and shout. He had inadvertently cut across a small mound of ants. They poured from their broken tunnels and in frenzy attacked his boot. The red ants had climbed above his boot and had begun to inflict their stings. He dropped the can of chemicals and took the red bandanna from his neck. Pulling his pants leg up, he began wiping the angry defenders from his leg and boot. Then he poured the chemicals on his intended target and on the one he had not previously observed. Before remounting the mower, he applied a cream to the bites and took a long drink from the canteen hanging on an old canvas pistol belt across the handles of the machine. Soon he continued his assaults on the ever growing grass and ever present threats of the ants.

Beyond the grass cutter, I could see through the waves of heat the old sally gate of the original post with the enlisted barracks behind it. The Buffalo Soldiers on their horses trooped by heading for the stables near the marsh. The horses were sweating as they had been on a long patrol through the city a few miles above the post. Although the Confederates had surrendered, hostility sometimes boiled up. The men looked tired, and I could hear the leather equipment rubbing and stretching along with the sounds of the hooves. Their white commander ordered them to dismount and the horses led by their riders disappeared silently into the heat.

Brent continued cutting the grass, stopping periodically to address the mounds with the fire ants. The mower was huge and loud—voracious in its appetite for grass. Brent's shirt was wet all the way to his web belt with the discolored brass buckle. Across the street Lieutenant James' wife pushed a stroller with their little girl toward her neighbor's home. Her cotton sun dress was still crisp despite its being mid afternoon. The sounds of the engine reminded me of aircraft passing low to the ground, and I went back to the battle scene, holding the B-26 that now was acting as if it were a Heinkel bomber supporting the German break through the lines. Suddenly, the enemy armor swept left toward the fence. I moved my men and vehicles back behind the dusty root and saw Brent through the wire squares bearing down on the back part of the lawn. He was wiping his face and controlling the mower with one arm. His khakis were wet through and through, and I felt almost as tired as he probably was when from the heat waves emerged a long line of Seminole Indians in layers of color followed by a small group of black men. In front and behind there were mounted troopers escorting them toward the docks to the ship that would take them to Fort Gibson in Indian territory. They all disappeared quickly when my mother appeared walking from the house with a glass of iced tea for Brent. The glass was one of the large jelly ones that she kept separately for the hired help. He thanked her and then drank it in a single swallow. She then saw me looking through the fence and called me to come in for iced tea. The advance on the battlefield came to a halt. Sometimes it was difficult playing both sides.

When I returned to the fighting, the sun had fallen into the trees as the shadows seemed almost like camouflage. Brent was finishing the last strip of grass along the trench-like ditch that carried run-off from the rain to the river. The German advance pushed my forces back toward the fence. I moved one of their tanks across the root. I knelt over the advancing soldiers and my sweat fell on them as I began to move my men back. In the summer I rarely wore a shirt and today was no different. My khaki shorts had smudges and wet spots, and my knees looked like the soil

below them. When I looked back to try to rally my forces into a counterattack, I saw Brent through the iron grid. He had left his mower and was walking toward the fence. That was my signal. I moved two tanks and a squad of lead soldiers forward and destroyed the lead enemy tank with a mud bomb from the B-26. Looking at Brent with his hat pulled down over his eyes coming toward me felt as if the reserve was filling the gap.

Suddenly, he was standing over me along the fence, and he was laughing as he always did when he was around us boys, and yet he was fierce as he stood there with one of his big hands on his hip and the other holding the glass mother had taken to him. His eyes were watery, his two gold teeth flashing. The battle paused. He reached over the fence and handed me the empty glass. He said that he remembered playing when he was a boy and that he had often crossed the Barracks wall to play ball with the officers' boys. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out a cellophane wrapped hard peppermint. With his fingers wrapped around it, he passed it through the iron grid to me and said, "Be good, boy." I thanked him—we were supposed to be polite at all times, especially with Negroes. It was easy with him. I wondered why I didn't know his whole name.

I put the candy in my pocket for later and resumed the battle. I watched the receding crown of Brent's hat looking like a turret as his mower moved toward the street. Its engine was so loud that I imagined my tanks turning back the enemy forces sounding just like that. The smell of oil mixed with that of the river and freshly cut grass. I rubbed my eyes and for a moment felt and saw things I didn't understand.

THOMAS BONNER, JR., Professor Emeritus at Xavier University of Louisiana, twice served as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Air Force Academy. Having books and articles on Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, and other American writers, he has also written fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction for literary magazines and anthologies. He edited *Xavier Review* and its press for over 20 years.