

"In the Company of Patriots"

Virginia Brackett

*When I wear the clothing of the dead,
they see glimpses of light again.*

—Maureen Hurley
"Sixth of August," The Hermit Kingdom: Poems of the Korean War (1995)

I never knew my father, a man devoted to military service and killed by a sniper in Korea when I was eight months old. When I decided years later to find a way to know him, I began searching for those with whom he shared a relationship even more intimate than that shared with family: the military men he trained and lived with, accompanied and led through numbing drills and terrifying battle. Their assessment, even at this distance decades long, might be revealed in something other than the golden aura that seems today to hover over all who die in military service. Newspaper articles and personal correspondence to my mother often described my father as a "hero." One might expect that label would be applied to a soldier who had been missing in action, a prisoner of war, and, finally, killed by a sniper, fighting when America's position of world leadership was clear and accepted.

Yet, I bear a cautious cynicism regarding the label "hero." As with many reductive terms, it has been overused and misapplied. Our culture loves labels and larger-than-life human depiction. It also craves compartmentalization. That craving represents denial of reality and stymies the very result that we seek, which is an understanding of motivations behind our actions, heroic and not. Multiple sources labeled my father as not only a hero, but also a soldier's soldier, the finest man several of my mother's correspondents had known. The realist in me longed for the smallest hint of negativity in their judgement. The cardboard cutout I

visualized badly needed dimension, an edge, a realistic approach to the development of his character. How could I know my father without some hint of his weaknesses, the character wants we may seek to conceal, yet may best reveal us?

But then, what if in my pursuit of others who might offer some heretofore unknown insight into my father, the family learned things we did not want to know? Should I open our familiar and comforting mythology to rupture?

Yet another question loomed large. As I learned more about my father's dedication to the military, would I better accept an ideology that contradicts my own? I don't understand war, other than on the simplest level of comprehending the meaning of terms such as power, control, killing and terrorism. In an early attempt to gain insight, I talked to my husband about his Vietnam service. A lefty peacenik from way back, he openly states he would have "dodged" the draft had he found the opportunity. However, he surprises me by explaining that even so, he values his military time. He served six months in-country as a medic and doesn't deny the waste, privateering, and brutality. But he also emphasizes the unique immediacy and resultant bonding between servicemen as positive aspects of a regrettable situation. That thought reminds me of a Studs Terkel interview in his book, *The Good War*. One interviewee stated, "The reason you storm the beaches is not patriotism or bravery . . . It's that sense of not wanting to fail your buddies. There's . . . a special sense of kinship."

My father felt that kinship strongly enough to "re-up," to re-enlist after fulfilling his initial military obligation. It's one of many terms in the special military language I'm learning, as I consider my father's choices. As an English instructor, I appreciate that lack of common language challenges communication and understanding. I experienced that challenge as I began formal research for this book. I mistakenly e-mailed an organization representing the 17th

Artillery, rather than the 17th Infantry, of which my father was a part. I received a gentle response:

If no one has directed you yet, I suggest this site for your search:

www.17thinfantry.com/korea.asp

i got your message from our site, 17th ARTILLERY which is not the same as 17th INFANTRY.

Good luck, Doug

Thank you, Doug.

I remind myself that true communication may also be challenged by lack of common experience. I observe this in the classroom, where international students enrich interaction for me as well as for students born in the U.S. Early in my career, I chose a text book that emphasized American pop culture and its effect on marketing. My first assignment instructed students to write about packaging in the common supermarket and their experience in selecting items to buy. As one Kenyan student explained, "In Africa we rarely or never think of packaging as we buy things in the market and they are not packaged. With this [assignment], we can't participate in any discussion." I tried to visualize myself, like this student, in a foreign environment, such as that my father experienced in Korea. I can't truly visualize the physical landscape, but I can imagine his frustration and, more specifically, his fear. Fear always relates to things unknown, just as familiarity generally brings some sense of comfort and diminishes threat. The army structure and personnel offered my father that familiarity and that language of

which I lack understanding. My saving grace is that one needn't completely understand in order to learn. And learning eventually leads to understanding.

I began this journey armed mainly with knowledge about my father that grew from family comments and my often over-active imagination. I assume such power of invention may have led me in some cases to simply make up what I wanted to believe about my absent father, as it had in other circumstances. I once wrote a detailed description of my first dog, a cocker spaniel mix named Junior. My story came complete with the image of my opening the front door on my sixth birthday to find my cousin holding a black puppy, a large red bow around its neck. Years later as I related this story to my mother, her forehead wrinkled. "I remember the dog," she told me, "but I don't think it was a birthday present." In a phone call to indignantly elicit support from my sister, I asked what details she remembered regarding my acquisition of Junior. "I remember the dog," she said, "but I don't remember a red bow. Was he a birthday gift?"

Puzzled and slightly insulted by their responses, I resolved to mentally catalogue additional details that filled that memory. They included distinct sensory recollections of that puppy, complete with smell and touch. Junior would come in from the brisk outside air smelling elemental and salty, like blood or perspiration. He did not just wag his tail, which my uncle had not docked to the familiar cocker stub, but instead employed it to produce a full-body wag fest. My memory featured his pink tongue's warm wetness everywhere at once, as I took him from my cousin's arms—up my nostril, sweeping across an eyelid, flicking an earlobe and an elbow. I later shared with my students that in that specific instance of the birthday-present dog, I preferred my own rich story to the family's sketchy details. So, I kept it. However, as I prepared these years later to ask questions regarding my father, I wondered whether I stood emotionally

equipped to watch a far more important mythology dissolve, whether I could accept the sharper and perhaps less pleasant image that might emerge.

The choice of narrative form continues to provoke yet another question. How might I frame this journey so that it interests others? Some readers might label it a self-indulgent intellectual exercise, a pretentious attempt to hijack my father's life and shape it to my will. I find painful that others could judge my study soulless; but how to imbue it with a soul? More importantly, how could I lend this narrative what now seemed an elusive air of truth?

That question of truth accompanied me during all of my mundane daily activities, a persistent hum at the subconscious level. While putting in time on our elliptical rider, I often listen to National Public Radio. One day I realized that what drew me to NPR are its many voices and their varied concepts of truth. Commentators on proverbial "human interest" shows introduce common topics, then allow everyday people to tell their stories. As if by magic, what remains as a general topic quite ordinary, becomes in the specific framing through storytelling, extraordinary, even mystical. One U.S. east coast woman received a challenging charge: to collect human hair for an art project taking shape a world away in China. At first repelled at the thought of having to "handle" hair from unknown origins, she set about gathering ounces that soon equaled pounds of curls, top knots, dreadlocks, and split ends, all to become in the hands of another, art. It was that promise that moved her, the dream that cast-offs from our bodies might shape art to move our souls. The Chinese artist combined hair gathered from around the world in a braid many feet long, dyed multiple colors in its final appealing rendering. He wanted to suggest unity in its blending of millions of strands, an observation of what we all share as players in the drama labeled the human condition.

The artist contributed the fewest words to the report, while the reporter shaped the largest number. The observations of the worker, the at-first-repelled woman, swept away in the end by the shape her efforts took, added to the report color and passion and verve. Each narrator perceived the project differently, but each proved necessary to the story. Like those participating in that initiative, in my own project I would need to examine the so-called "facts" from many perspectives. As I would discover, some of those perspectives did not agree. One man who served with my father cautioned me not to trust the report of another. He wrote that he had "discovered that his recollection of Korea and mine were 180 degrees apart." For me the distance between now and then would not be measured by a narrative straight line, but rather represented in narrative waves that ebbed, flowed, and at times crashed against one another. My job was not to interrogate contrasting truths that I could never resolve, but rather to listen, read, and hopefully find a pattern from which I could draw some sense of my father's life.

I have begun multiple conversations, interacting with multiple points of view, in the first stages of my investigation. They arise from a colleague also writing of war and its participants; with letters from vets who served in my father's World War II Battalion (one as a prisoner shared the Stalag made infamous by Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse Five*); with vets from my father's Korean War Regiment (one will tell me he was among the last to speak with my father); with the Korean War vet and his son who founded and staff the local Center for the Study of the Korean War; with a librarian from the University of Chicago about the politician, author and member of Eisenhower's cabinet, Robert E. Merriam, with whom my father corresponded. I also hold one-way conversations with silent sources, including yellowed wartime newspaper clippings; a 1951 radio broadcast from Boston by Cedric Foster who read on air a letter from my mother about my father's death; with the stack of my mother's personal wartime correspondence with friends

and family; with the stack of her formal wartime correspondence from governors, senators, college presidents, a secretary of war, Commanding General Van Fleet and the faceless U.S. Government; with a book of poetry written by Korean War veterans. Will I discover the truth about war and my father from these many narratives? I do not know.

The slightest remark adds knowledge. When I asked my father's childhood friend in Galesburg, Illinois, why my father wanted to join the military, he shrugged. "All I know is that as long as I can remember, we called him 'Sarge' when we were kids. No one in his family was in the military. Service was just something he always wanted." This related fact – a boy nicknamed Sarge—lacked the element of motivation for my father's actions I hoped to find. But it also relieved me of the burden of seeking an answer that likely remains unavailable.

The aspect of this search that leaves me most humbled and grateful is my interaction with veterans, those who knew my father and those who did not. A troublesome aspect of that connection is the fact that we lose them daily. In the Jan-Feb-Mar issue of *The Cub of the Golden Lion*, published for decades by and for the veterans of my father's 106th Infantry Division, the Adjutant asked, in light of its dwindling membership, "Should the 106th Association be retired or continue for life?" Only ten percent of the present membership can attend reunions, and finding members willing to serve on the board becomes increasingly difficult. The Association's Second Vice President had to enter the hospital, the adjutant explained, and when released, entered a nursing home for recovery. Fortunately, the Vice President returned home, but many will never return from such institutions. This specific incident remains a more general portent of the future. We will all too soon be without this resource. Too few of those in succeeding generations understand until they spend time with the WWII veterans how that war defined many of those men's lives, especially in the case of the enlisted men. Thankfully, many

projects for remembrance of this remarkable group, along with the veterans of the Korean War, are in process.

Through my correspondence, a veteran directed me to one such project. This website focuses on Korean War veterans, a less-celebrated group than those of WWII. At his urging, I visited a link to that site, staring in amazement at what I discovered:

Korean War Project Casualty Entry For:

CPT EDMUND C R—

Hostile, Died (KIA)

I clicked on a “further remembrances” link and stared with a mixture of anxiety, delight and disbelief. A man named John C. had posted the following remarks:

Captain R. commanded Co A, 17th Infantry, Seventh Division from approximately September 1950 until his death. . . He was an excellent commander. I do not recall any time when he played the martinet role, lost his temper or expressed anything but the most even-handed leadership. On the morning of his death, he and his driver [drove] north on the mountain road from our position in Tanyang Pass to investigate possible guerrilla activity. He had put me in charge . . . during his absence. Full story of [his] death is in my article, entitled, His Last Command, which was published in the January 1995 edition of ARMY Magazine (AUSA).

An article? Published about my father? The message was posted in 2004. Not only did an article exist, but also an individual who had served with my father, an individual so strongly affected by the events of that service that he wrote an article about it 45 years later.

I pause in my excitement to reflect upon the devotion of these men to one another. I am both dumbfounded and intrigued by memories that refuse to shake themselves from heart and mind. The following day I read in "Repository," a poem by James E. Magner, of just such a memory. The speaker notes that a ". . . college quarterback / named Adam / died / in the Korean War . . ." and then records his wonder in discovering that Adam's alma mater has no record of this life. The speaker also wonders at the power of his heart and mind, the power of certain memory. He echoes his fallen comrade's surname, as if to assure himself of that comrade's existence.

"Vanesca!"

(Do I spell his name correctly?)

"Vanesca!"

(I say it again, so someone will remember.)

"Vanesca!"

(What is this repository that keeps the names,

The souls of men!)

He asks the question that I had put to the universe, a question represented now by one lieutenant who somehow carried my father's face and words with him, surely a burden, likely a privilege. What is the source of power of this repository?

I open a small cedar chest containing objects from my father's military service. I lift each and discover one resembling a giant guitar pick. The smooth curvature contains distinctive surface swirls; it resembles an Arkansas agate, a rock with colorful stripes that blend into swirls. I collected more than a few during my fifth-grade geology craze. I turn it over several times, study the pattern, and then set it aside. My hand next closes around an ancient pair of goggles, the

fabric frame enclosing two of the giant guitar picks. I realize suddenly that they are lenses. I won't know until later in my investigation that my father drove a tank, and these are likely what he wore. Once he peered through these same lenses, with a clear view of his objective. I hold them to my eyes, the swirls of decomposed material clouding my view. They serve as a metaphor – I can never adopt his point of view to understand his life and choices.

I locate a report by the General Board, US Forces, European Theater about the WWII use of tanks post-war. It states, in part, "So close was the tank battalion integrated with the combat echelons of the division to which it was attached, the narrative of operations of them is usually that of the division . . ." Of most interest is a statement describing the importance of the Combat Team:

In modern warfare the combat team has become the keystone of all successful operations. The complexity of new weapons and the limitations of each gives a complete interdependence of them on others to attain efficiency. Nothing is more helpless than a lone tank without artillery or infantry support. Its inherent blindness, its weight and size make it the natural target of all enemy fires. If friendly artillery is not coordinated, a hidden group of anti-tank guns will soon get it, or if there is no infantry near, as soon as the tank slows down it becomes easy pray [sic] to an enemy infantryman with an anti-tank rocket gun.

These statements particularly apply to groups of military who become entirely dependent upon one another in war. Perhaps the strength my father found in this web of interdependency was one factor that provoked his return to the military after completing WWII service.

As I look at my face in the mirror for traces of my mother, I suspect my father is also there. Because I was eight months old when he died—only two months old when he deployed

to Korea—I have no memories of him. I’ve seen photographs and know his face, but no photographs exist of him with me. He mentioned me in a letter from Korea; at least I think he did, writing what seemed to be a response to Mother’s description of my smile:

1 September 1950

My Dearest,

I received two letters from you today one of them with the swell pictures . . . You are sure right when you say she is cute. She sure has the big grin hasn’t she. Sure wish I could see her.

In addition to the tank goggles, I find a baby cup, its battered silver shape reflecting my enthusiasm for banging it while in my highchair, engraved with my name and “The Officers & Ladies 25th FA BN.” I pull out the horse tooth my father dipped from his German POW camp soup; it remained a perennial favorite during my grade school show-and-tell days. I find his war medals, insignia and various war patches, the Golden Lion of the 106th Division and the Buffalo of the 17th Infantry Regiment Association decorating many. The flag that draped his coffin before burial in 1951, his remains finally returned from Korea for burial, is on display in my living room. These are my physical connections to my father. My siblings may hold family photographs in their hands; photos of myself with him I hold in my imagination.

I remain in preparation. I collect facts supportive of my journey, as if packing a suitcase for a long trip. The packing represents an important ritual of physical, mental and emotional organization, the contents selected carefully from many possible items. Those items are sanitized, folded in neat thirds, compartmentalized, counted and inventoried, a cheerful attempt to control the future, a confident plan to meet and champion whatever awaits. Blues, blacks and browns are matched; soaps, gels and powders placed in containers; new items packed to replace

exhausted resources. When the trip is completed, containers will be empty, perhaps discarded; shirts once attentively folded, rumped and smashed; soiled items stuffed into a bag; and regrets logged over items forgotten and left behind. I decide to not invest much time contemplating the possible appearance of my suitcase upon completion of my journey. Should I bring home things I did not necessarily want and discard things I treasure along the way, so be it. I will not be the same person that began the journey, and that matters greatly.

I return to the September 1st letter. In its conclusion I read of both his fear and confidence:

We just got in from another big maneuver, . . .and for once it didn't rain. . . The boys are working pretty well and I think we will do well. . . . I'm a little bit worried about being able to do the job but I feel better about it than I did. I was mighty scared at first but with the training we have had I have gained quite a bit of confidence.

I pause to consider his final phrase. I know that he helped give his "boys" confidence, but who helped him? As I study his face in a photo, I see nothing suggesting a warrior. All I can see, in truth, is a reflection of my brother's face. More than one person who served with my father has written of his soft voice. That description doesn't suggest the speaker of the next words:

If people in the US could only see how hard [the men] are working. They are a pretty rough lot . . . but they will make good soldiers. . . . We are killers and are going to get an opportunity very soon to do a lot of just that. That just isn't part of my makeup but then if its them or you I guess you get used to it.

So he did not feel himself an instinctive killer. This statement seems odd coming from a man who willingly served in the infantry, had been captured in the previous war, had managed a

fairly challenging escape from imprisonment and received a decoration from General Patton's aide while on the tarmac, boarding a plane home. But then, he had been part of an entire battalion captured during the Battle of the Bulge, an untried group, placed supposedly out of harm's way. A German General had other ideas and swept across their exact position, taking my father and many others prisoners of war. I suspect he felt like the speaker in William Wantling's poem, who explains,

We found a certain inner logic to
our violence
A game in which each player and
his mate
understood all rules ("Korea 1953")

Just as suddenly as my father's tone altered to consider his duty to kill, it shifted again, lightening. He describes the Koreans that accompanied him and a sergeant of whom he was obviously quite fond:

You would get a kick out of my two Korean bodyguards. they [sic] stick to me like glue. Pretty sharp boys . . . My 1st Sgt left today to get made a warrant officer. . . He is a dandy. He really has got the company jumping when he says jump. Guess that is all for now. Will write more the 1st chance I get.

All my love

"Guess that is all for now." How strange to detach one's self in such a manner. I recently heard a physician who served in Iraq describe the last two weeks before a recruit is deployed as

a time during which he must distance himself from everything. Otherwise, he won't be able to separate emotionally, as well as physically, from his present life to begin a new one in a strange place. Earlier in this letter, my father has told my mother she needn't send him "sports clippings," as "We get good sport news in the Stars and Stripes which we see every day." He mentions he has told her this before. His practical attitude annoys me, for the sake of my mother, in the States on her own with three children, looking for words of assurance. His remark seems even colder in light of the fact that he had mentioned early on, "You were wondering about no letters for awhile. You have received some by now I'm sure. However by the time you read this I think you will know that from now on letters will be few and far between." Still, he writes, almost dismissively to my understanding, "Guess that is all for now."

I strike metaphorical pay dirt a few months into my investigation when the author of the note placed on the Korean War Project internet site in remembrance of my father writes to me. He read of my search in a notice posted on another website and in a corresponding publication. He questioned whether I were indeed Captain R.'s daughter. I quickly respond, supplying various details about my father in order to confirm. Within 24 hours, I receive his second note, and I can hardly digest what I read. Because I'm famished at this point for real details, my eyes race across his message.

11-25-06 4:05PM

In several cases in the past I have responded to requests such as yours only to be disappointed when I heard nothing further from the 'searcher'. Therefore, your quick and appreciative response was more than welcome.

Now that we are in contact, I have much to share with you. During the first six months or so of the Korean War I served under your father; he commanded

Company A, 17th Infantry, Seventh Division. and I had the 1st Platoon of Company A. We were short an Executive Officer and, as the ranking first lieutenant, Captain R. turned the company over to me on that fateful day, 3 January 1951.

He tells me about the 1995 article, and I again marvel that his words had existed out there in print for more than 10 years without my knowledge. Within months of beginning my odyssey, I have located a guide, a turnkey to help unlock my mystery. I look forward anxiously to receiving a copy of the article, which he has promised to mail. A few days later, I hear through e-mail from another correspondent who mentions Major C.:

Subject: about your dad

Date: Thu, 30 Nov 2006 20:05:07 -0500

I was there at the same time as you father, unfortunately i had just returned from the hospital in Japan the day that he died. Maj. John T. C. may be able to give you some information, he served under your father as a 1st Lt in the 1st plt. of A co. John had wrote about your dad in 1995, It was called His Last Command. I have a copy of his text if you would like to have it..

J. N.

I tell him that I am in contact with Major C. who has agreed to mail me a copy of his article; I'm more than anxious to receive it. Within moments, this correspondent responds, his e-mail bearing an attachment that is the article; he had scanned it some time ago for his own records. I devour it again and again, crying at its inevitable conclusion. And again I feel the press of time, the weight of the impending passing of these voices of war. I do correspond with

another veteran mentioned in the email, receiving twice most gracious replies and offers to help. A short time later, he passed away.

As I repeatedly take in the major's story of my father's final hours, I again marvel over the clarity of memories decades old. I am especially captivated by the final order my father sent to the then-lieutenant, frightened by his own admission, left in charge of the company when my father had departed to investigate gunfire. "Come in Strength." The one survivor from my father's small investigative party passed those words on to Lt. C. after staggering into camp. Presumably, these were my father's final words.

I practice the phrase aloud, first as a whisper, and then with more confidence. I speculate on its meaning, the words likely familiar to the military ear, but mysterious to me. I imagine that phrase to mean that one should bring all one has to the fight or challenge, to spare no effort. I also imagine the effort that speaking such words required, as my father lay dying, understanding the gravity of the situation, and understanding that he would never see his family again. I wonder whether for the slightest moment he might have tried to imagine his wife receiving the news, tried to imagine her life without him, tried to understand why fate determined that he would die here and now after having survived WWII and prison camp, after having tried unsuccessfully to re-adjust to civilian life, after momentarily deciding to re-join the military. These things I can never know. I can only take his command to heart and begin my journey.

Virginia Brackett is a Professor Emeritus of English. She is a member of the Kansas City Veterans Writing Team, helping to organize and lead free writing workshops for veterans. Brackett's 15 books have been cited by the New York Public Library; the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association; Tristate Books of Note; the American Library Association, Amelia Bloomer Project; and *Booklist* (Editor's Choice, Reference Sources, 2008). She has published dozens of articles and stories for children and adults, and her electronic books include *Angela and the Gray Mare* (children) and *Girl Murders*, a time-travel mystery, both available at amazon.com. This essay is a version of the first chapter of her memoir, *In the Company of Patriots*, forthcoming by Sunbury Press (ISBN: 978-1-62006-344-6, release date: September 2019, \$19.95).