

PARADE REST

by Bob Bowersox

He stood at parade rest on the edge of the porch, crisply, properly, by the book: feet apart, hands folded behind the buttocks, shoulders back, head up. He was motionless, like a statue, eyes front, his nose mere inches from the curtain of rat wire he'd installed from gutter to railing the day he'd moved in. Unsightly, but a comfort.

It had been four decades since he'd worn a uniform, but he had one of sorts, seldom straying from the starched, olive, oxford cloth shirt buttoned to the neck, fitted blue jeans with a sharp pleat front and back, black lace-up boots. And the duty cap – the same one he'd worn that morning in '67 at Khe Sanh, and everyday thereafter, with the same slight cock to the left, same dip to the eye. Attitude, but regulation.

He'd risen at four. It was automatic now, he didn't need an alarm. His eyes just opened, his mind turned on. He'd sat on the edge of the bed a few minutes, taking stock of himself and the room, like he was looking to find something altered in it. Like that day might be different from all other days. He breathed in slowly, pulling the molecules of air deeply into himself as if doing so would somehow connect him more to everything around him. That was the hope, anyway, but when it became apparent that he would remain separate another day, he simply accepted it and stood, stretched, and moved into his calisthenics – one hundred pushups, four hundred situps, a precision execution of a TaeKwonDo *kata*. A shower, a shave, a cup of strong black coffee with the first Lucky Strike of the day, and he was out on the porch by five, in a formation of one, standing at the ready.

He watched the sky come grey, then crimson on the eastern horizon beyond the far side of the park in front of his house. Though he couldn't see the ocean from where he stood, he knew what dawn looked like as it rose from the water. So as the sky went through its gradient, his mind's eye saw the fireball of the sun rise over the lip of the liquid earth, slow, methodical, like a countdown.

It didn't matter where he stood – this side of the earth or the other. Key West or Khe Sanh. It would look the same here now as it did there forty-three years ago. He didn't have to see it. It was as clear and sharp and present in his mind as it would be if he were looking right at it. Like it all was. Everything from that moment, that morning, on. Clear, sharp, real, physical: the light in the sky, the heat in the air, the coppery smell of blood in the nostrils, the fear on the skin.

He felt it even now, though he'd lost the certainty of how much of it was in the moment and how much was in the mind. That line blurred long ago. He just accepted it as the way things were now. Didn't matter memory or present moment. It was just as real to the nervous system, just as real to the soul.

He squinted, gazing steadily at the flag pole in the center of the park, the muscles in his cheeks flexing as he ground his now-toothless gums against one another with building tension. This

was always the hardest time – that time between dawn and when the park ranger walked to the pole and sent the flag into the sky, its red and white stripes so vivid against the sky's bright new blue. Hard to stand there. Hard to wait. Only sheer force of will kept him there. That and honoring the promise.

He'd made it under his breath, actually; not openly, not even mouthing the words. It had just formed in his mind as he tried to restart his breathing and listened to his heart pound in his ears, as his mind tried to recalibrate after the assault of the explosive concussions, as his eyes tried to make sense of the carnage that now lay strewn around him. One instant they'd all been standing with him that morning, his mates in formation, and the next, he stood alone amidst the disarray of the bodies and parts of his fellows and the gaping holes torn in the earth by the NVA mortars, the only vertical thing left in the space save the flag pole in front of him. His eyes had moved in that moment from the bent and broken wire-rim glasses hanging crookedly on the burning branch of a nearby bush, sliding slowly up the pole to the flag, still rippling in the breeze above the blood-soaked compound, still standing with him as a testament of some kind, and the words had just come.

The next morning he'd stood on that same piece of earth, watching the flag go up, and repeated the promise. And the morning after that, and the one after that, and every one since. Forty-three years, two hundred and ten days. And now, today.

The ranger finally appeared, walked across the lawn to the flagpole, hooked the flag to the lines and began sending it up the pole.

Across the street, he snapped to attention behind the rat wire, ramrod straight, hand and arm in salute, his fingers just brushing the corner of the duty cap, his eyes riveted to the flag in ascension. The only moving things were his lips as the whisper crossed them.

“You will not be forgotten.”