

HURT TO HEAL

by Kevin Grant

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It all began with "The Saving of Private Ryan". At least that's the way it felt. My brother and son, who had both seen the movie, were discussing a scene in deliberately vague terms for we were all to see it together. Suddenly the pool, surrounded by eucalypts in the Australian capital, disappeared. Vision, sound and sensation hidden for twenty years took over my senses, not as a memory, but as if I lived that moment in the present again...

The heat of the Zimbabwean sun stings the skin of my bare arms and legs. The grey Kalahari dust coats the already faded denim of my camouflage, cakes my parched throat and dulls the glossy chocolate skin of the torso I hold. Even the sky is a pale and washed-out blue. But over my hands to the elbows and through dressing after dressing is the garish, obscene red of arterial blood. I feel nothing. I move with uncharacteristic speed, accuracy and forethought as I fight with all my skill to save this unarmed victim, to vainly reverse the tides of war.

The emotion I held in check then, burst out unbidden: the grief of precious life wasted; the helplessness of my best being inadequate; and the rage that howled "Why?" and "Stop it!" Sobs, fermented for decades, shook my body. Andrew and Duncan stopped mid-sentence, wide-eyed at the unprecedented sight. The conspiracy of silence that insensibly locked in my emotion remained unbroken as I dived for the deep end to cover my tears and embarrassment.

At least I had some warning of what would happen when the lights went down in the movie theatre. Instinctively, I knew I must recognise that my impassivity and outbursts of anger were not foibles of my character, but emotional wounds. To heal those wounds I must face the pain of my past. The movie was the scalpel to release my pent up emotion but I must endure the anguish that lay in ambush in my memory without anaesthetic. I must hurt to heal. I watched the familiar tension on the faces of the men in the landing-craft, their endless checking of equipment, their forced casualness...

It is cool in the half-light of an African dawn, but still the fear-sweat oozes down my cheeks. My fingers tremble slightly on the trigger guard of the rifle as my heart races. Is the magazine is seated properly? Is the safety catch off? Sight down the barrel to the phosphorescent dot on the sights – check my arc of fire. Did I put a tracer round every fifth bullet? The same checks I'd made fifty or a hundred times that night, just to make sure everything was right, everything would work. A twig cracks in the dimness. I see nothing. My sweat freezes...

The tension reached a crescendo as the landing-craft grated on the shore. The landing-plate dropped. The bullets scythed in, harvesting agony, death and fear...

Rifle ready to fire, I trudge warily through fields of harvested maize stalks. In extended line we advance on a huddle of darkly-thatched mud huts and surrounded by a wall of thorny branches. A figure breaks from behind the wall. The crack of bullets overhead! I dive for what little cover the maize field can give. Men shout. The trench mortar coughs out a ranging shot, decorating the green unharvested fields beyond the village with a flame-flecked cloud of destruction. Skirmish! I'm up and running. Run straight ahead - out of Chris' fire arc. Fire straight - so my bullets stay clear of Steve as his fleet feet carry him ahead of us. But he staggers, then somersaults as his momentum carries him on when his feet will not...

Omaha Beach. The sand was filled with whipcrack and whine of bullets, the screams of men and the silence of bodies. The medic crouched over a groaning patient only to have a stream of bullets perforate it, stilling its writhing...

I dive to my knees at Steve's side as the bullets rip the air in both directions. His breath gurgles in his throat. His eyes are huge, white and pleading. There is a neat round hole in the front of his camouflage denims. Months of training take over. I feel for the carotid pulse even as I haul him onto his side in the coma position. The movement brutally twists the gurgle into a shriek. The ground where he had lain is bright with blood, rapidly dulling as the earth absorbs it, leaving only pink gobbets of lung tissue, shreds of grey-blue intestine and a smear of yellow, half-digested faeces. There is a hole the size of my palm in his back. I tear open the wound dressing and slap the orange pad into the hole. It stays orange for only seconds before the red soaks through and dribbles over my fingers. I feel for the next dressing with my free hand. The lieutenant calls "Leave him!"

The machine-gun in the bunker holds them pinned. Using his men strategically, the lieutenant gets a flame-thrower behind the bunker. The gun-slit glows red, there are brief screams and the shooting stops...

The fire fight has ended. We carefully sweep through the village. Finger on the trigger, I scan the thousand hiding places for a person with a rifle aimed at me. Kill or be killed. Adrenaline pounds in my head, turning time into slow motion, whispers into shouts. Motion on the left! I swing the barrel round my finger already squeezing the trigger... but it's only a dog slinking away into the bush. A body sprawls in the door of a hut – blue jeans, brown T-shirt, curved magazines strapped to its chest. Don't move it – there may be a booby trap. But it may be feigning death to attack after we pass. Chris makes sure with a bullet in the forehead.

The patrol was sent out after Pte. Ryan. The war suddenly moved slowly. They rested in a chapel. The lieutenant mulled over his orders that had sent men to their deaths and mused that maybe those deaths had prevented others...

Steve is dead when I return, still in the coma position. But now there is no gurgling and his eyes stare fixedly at the earth that guzzled his lifeblood. Maybe I could have saved him. But maybe someone else is alive because I filled the gap in the line and watched his back. Maybe Chris is refilling his magazines and trying not to look at the blood clots standing high behind

Steve's back, turning as black and shiny as the flies that land on them, because I let Steve die.

The patrol came under fire. One member died in pain and fear. The sweep that followed flushed a German who surrendered, pleading for his life. With the death of their friend and battle-mate fresh in their ears and hearts, the patrol was split between those wanting to kill the prisoner in revenge and those wanting to leave him alive. I pleaded for the life of the prisoner, not for his sake, but for the sake of the humanity of his would-be executioners.

I stand in the NCO's mess on my way home. I'm clean, my uniform washed and boots polished, for the first time in six weeks. I stand with a man I knew in school – a good man... then. Now he wears a green beret bearing a silver bugle and swagger so pronounced I see it even as he stands, leaning on the bar.

"We had a shooting competition," he boasts, beaming in pride, "to see how many we could kill with one bullet. I shot a pregnant woman. My shot went through her and the child on her back. So I won! Three with one bullet, see? The woman, her child and the one in her womb..."

Other green berets applaud. I feel ill.

The film drew to a close. The now aged Pte Ryan asked, "Have I lived a good life?" He has to make do with his wife's puzzled answer, "Of course you are a good man."

I stand at the edge of a pit, rifle reversed, head bowed. The pit is lined in green plastic grass – a futile pretence at life in the midst of death. The chaplain drones. He's buried men too many times to let himself care for this one. A woman sobs gently behind me. I retrieve the beret and belt from the coffin. It sinks into the pit and I salute. I proffer the pathetic garments to the weeping woman. She takes them as if they are precious, but they are not even his – Steve's were left torn and bloody in the bush. She looks into my eyes, thanks me, and smiles bravely, though her lip quivers.

The question cut me then, echoing in the emptiness of her eyes, though I refused to answer. It haunts me still, as the flashbacks hurt to heal, "Why did I live when these good men died?"

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