

Events at War

... ever say a word about their experiences. But my daddy came back really changed, I mean like he left a child in a man's body, but came back completely a man. Mamma told me stories about before he went, how he'd get into fights over nothing, and if he ever started drinking he kept at it until he passed out or got arrested. She told me story about him getting picked up for threatening the man at the men's store. Daddy thought the man had looked down on him, that was all, but he would always go off the handle like that. She told me that in those days he never actually hit her, but when he was drunk or mad he would occasionally push her around and get up in her face screaming. I couldn't believe her, because I never had seen anything like that.

Mamma and Daddy talked late into one Saturday night – I could hear the voices but not the words – and Sunday Daddy told me we were going over to Lake County to do some fishing. I had only ever been fishing with my friends, and only at Mr. Ackabee's stocked pond. We got in the truck and drove for about a half hour, neither of us saying much of anything, until he pulled up at a place where there was room to park without being seen from the road, and we got out our poles.

The lake was shallow, and all around the rim there were cypress knobs poking up from the water and plenty of shade. Daddy pulled two boards out of the truck and I carried his tackle box, and we worked our way out to some cypress knobs that were further out in the lake. We fixed up some seats with the boards balanced on the cypress knees, baited our hooks, and sat for a while.

Finally I had to ask, "Why are we fishing?"

"Hoping to catch some fish," Daddy said.

"You know what I mean."

"Yep," he said, blowing out a breath. "Yep, I do."

I was used to long silent waits with him, and after a few minutes, he started talking. In all the time he was talking, I kept my mouth shut for fear anything I said would make him change his mind about letting me in on this.

"Your mamma says you didn't believe her about what I was like before I went overseas, and she was pretty insistent I had to explain myself to you. I know, you haven't heard anything about it. That's because most of what I could say isn't very pretty, and most of us who went over there just want to be back home, and never to think about it again.

"Your mamma is telling the truth about how I used to be. I'm not proud of it, but I own up to it. I always felt the same then as I do now about your mamma, but I had what I guess you would call more than one mind on those days. I like to think that now I mostly only ever have just one mind – lot easier to keep track, anyways.

"I don't want to talk about all the ugly stuff I saw over there. I just want to tell you about one single day – a long day for sure – that if you think on it for a while might explain why I didn't have to become no Christian to have my whole world turned around. I won't talk about the generals or the politicians, or recite a bunch of history that got us there, but one day I was laid out in a big shell crater with a fellow from the 7th. We were among the last survivors on either side, but a guy from the other side was in another crater less than 200 yards away. Every time we tried to steal a look over the rim, he's open fire again. We were out of water and only had less than a magazine of ammo apiece. The entire brigade had gone – I found out later they were called back "by mistake." For at least a mile around, probably a lot more, it was just the three of us.

"I don't mind telling you, I was petrified. We couldn't leave with the other fellow keeping such a sharp eye out, and he seemed to have plenty of ammo. All I could think of was 'What happens when his buddies get back? What will they do to us?' We had heard some pretty horrible stories, so I was thinking we would die in a hail of bullets, or be tortured in some very bad ways.

“By the time the two of us in my crater started talking, the other guy seemed not to be worried at all. I almost screamed at him all the things going through my mind, but he hardly reacted at all, smiling just a tiny bit, like you might see the barber smiling when he’s listening to customers gossip. After I ran down some, he rolled onto his back and settled a little lower into the crater. Not me – I was hovering as close to the rim as I dared, in case the guy over there decided to make a rush.”

“‘You would think,’ my companion said, ‘based on how we were raised, that the man in that crater over there would be thinking of ways to get out of here alive.’ I nodded a slow one, and he went on, ‘But you and I know that these people will die before they slink away. They’ve committed to killing us, and the only thing that will stop them is a bullet.’

“‘I told him that was part of why we were so screwed. We couldn’t get away from him, and he didn’t want to get away from us.

“‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘but the good news is that there is absolutely nothing you or I can do right now to make any difference in how this finally turns out.’ Again, I told him this was the problem.

“‘I don’t think of it that way,’ he said. ‘I think the first problem is the fix we are in. Not having anything we can do is a separate issue altogether. I don’t know anything we can do from over here that is going to make that fellow stop trying to kill us. So I can either do nothing and worry myself into a frenzy about that, or I can just do nothing. Same result either way.’

“‘On the other question, I don’t know any way we can get away from here or make ourselves invincible or invisible. So I can either worry myself into a frenzy about that, or I can just do nothing. Same result either way.’

“‘Not saying it’s not a raw deal, not saying I’m praying for a miracle, not saying I’m a shameless optimist. Just saying that worrying on either front is wasted unhappy thoughts. Something good might happen, something bad probably will, but we aren’t changing the probabilities by anything we do or think.’

“‘It took me a minute before I was able to give his idea and real thought, but after going over and over it I slunk down and laid next to him on my back. I told him, ‘I’m going to hope he doesn’t decide to come racing over here with a full magazine and catch us just laying here doing nothing.’

“‘Nothing wrong with hoping,’ he said. ‘Not that we aren’t in a bad way, but there is something that gets to me a lot more than the two of us being pinned down. Remember I said that fellow isn’t going to stop until a bullet does it? Does that seem even a tiny bit natural to you?’

“‘Natural? I don’t know. They say the Chinese don’t think about death the same way we do.’

“‘I disagree, in a way. I think the Chinese are humans, and humans left to themselves will try to survive. But we’ve built a world where we can warp our young men’s minds into charging straight into the jaws of death and for what? For their country. Or some idea, like freedom, democracy, communism, religions. Things that are not at all natural to humans. Things you have to be taught.’

“‘I’m afraid of this. You and I and our PVA buddy over there will live out the day or we won’t. But we – our leaders and their followers – will keep on poisoning our young people’s minds so we can throw them into battles for oil, or platinum, or deep harbors, or anything else we prefer to steal than to earn.’

“‘I won’t bore you with the rest of it. He just kept me talking and thinking, tucked down where bullets couldn’t reach us until it started getting dark. Then he said, ‘Our boy’s pretty quiet over there.’ He rummaged around and found a rock about the size of a grapefruit and slowly raised it to the rim of the crater. Nothing happened, so he took his helmet and did the same thing. Still nothing. Finally he actually raised his head up enough to see. And still nothing happened.

“‘Let’s do this. Not smarter than lying low, but no dumber either. I’ll crawl that way, and you crawl that way. Keep the best cover you can. Let’s see what he’s up to.’

“‘We crept over, every minute expecting to catch a bullet an instant before hearing the rifle crack, but we reached the edge of his crater together. We both peered over the edge and saw him lying in a pool of

blood. He had been shot sometime earlier and was bleeding out the whole time he had us pinned down. My companion got to his feet and swept the horizon for 360 degrees, then I did the same.

“‘The poor bastard,’ he muttered. ‘Poor bastard.’

“‘Screw him,’ I said. ‘He kept us pinned in that mudhole for an entire day, never knowing if we would live to the next minute. So screw him.’

“My companion looked at me for almost a whole minute. You feel at times like that a minute lasts all day. Finally he said, ‘He deserved to marry a sweetheart, have babies, die old in the arms of a family. Not some bombed out waste, knowing death was leaking in while his blood was leaking out. So I say, poor bastard.’

“Next morning the place was swarmed by our own infantry. I wasn’t injured so they put me back on the lines. I saw plenty worse days, got a lot closer to dying, but that one day, and a man whose name tape was too smeared in blood to be readable, stayed in my mind. It was a long, long time.”

Daddy looked at his bobber floating on the lake kind of grinned at me. “That’s all. I promised your mama I’d tell you something about the war, and I did. Early yet – shall we keep at this, or drop in at Hubie’s Fish Store on the way home?”