

A Walk in the Woods with a Distant War

By Jack Estes, The Oregonian
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Last night, when the moon was gone and the neighborhood quiet, I grabbed my coat and walked down the hill toward Wilderness Park. With me was my squad of young soldiers, dead and wounded still living in my memory- The air was wet and cool as they followed me down the block, gliding under streetlights and sliding past parked cars. At the bottom of the hill we turned silently into the thick, dark woods. As a Marine in Vietnam, I hated moonless nights in the jungle. It was impossible to see. My imagination would soar, I could hear my heart beat and feel the adrenaline surge as we dug in on the side of a mountain. Trees became shadows and shadows moved and the wind was the enemy brushing through the broad leaf. Back then my squad leader, Gurny, was in the hole next to me. Buddy and Tiny and a kid nicknamed Pig Pen were invisible down the line.

After all these years I now long for moonless nights. I like walking with my squad as we edge deeper into darkness. These are gentle woods, I know, but jungle memories still hang in the chilled evening air. I can feel my brothers, frozen in time, and imagine our younger days as we fought in the mountains near Khe Sanh or the rice paddies and villages near Da Nang. I remember their names and faces and the cruel, violent last moments of their lives: Gurny shot in the throat, Tiny hit by a rocket, taking Pig Pen with him. Buddy was different. He was psychologically wounded, and it took 20 years for him to die, from a drug overdose in Boston. I walked softly along the well-used path and tried to recall how my rifle felt, the heaviness of my pack and what it was like to be so powerful. Tiny was huge and carried the machine gun easily, cradled in his arms like a child. Pig Pen followed, him weighted down with extra ammo and a love for Tiny only soldiers know. My squad is my youth, and some died in my arms, like Gurny. I recall him just as clearly as my wife's sweet lips and the touch of her skin. I can tell you the color of his hair and the look in his eyes as his life faded. I've told my wife all the stories and written all the stories, and she's listened and pulled me close when the war was too real. I don't want my squad injured anymore. I want them standing strong, rifles ready. That comforts me.

I moved slowly through the park up a slight hill to a ridge I know, where the ground is flat and even. A deer rushed by, breaking my reverie, reminding me of something long lost. It was harder going down the hill, now that I'm almost 60. I moved slowly, catching on to branches, bracing for a fall.

Then I thought about another war, which our soldiers still fight in a country full of sand and suicide. They have been coming home for years in silver boxes draped with flags, surrounded by stiff salutes. Or they stagger back to family, arms and legs missing and faces burned away. At breakfast I read about another Oregon boy who died in Iraq. He was handsome and bright, but he's living inside some other soldier now. Perhaps someday that soldier, too, will be saved by a woman's touch. It's my autumn ache, when leaves turn and the gold and red maples are shedding. Last night when the moon disappeared, I walked in the woods with my squad, closing in on another Veterans Day.