Can You Hear War Dying

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HAND gripped Doug's shoulder. He threw it off. Then a crack exploded. And all turned to blue ice peace—with endless time, slowly floating by. He sank into a softness.

The hand returned to his shoulder, gently shaking, emphasizing words dropping in from another world. "Honey! Honey, wake up! Please!"

"Huh. What is it?"

"You are dreaming again." Her eyes showed a deep concern.

"Oh. It's just the malaria. I'm all wet."

"But you were talking, saying something about—..

"There was no dream! Just the fever again, I tell you!" He could feel the pain he had caused, even through the darkness. "Sher, I'm sorry."

"I just wanted to help," she whispered. Tears were forming quickly.

"I know. Don't worry now. It's all right." He held her a little closer. "Let's go back to sleep. We'll talk in the morning." Soon her breathing became heavy.

Doug stared into the blackness, thinking of a time three years earlier, when as a buck sergeant he was stationed overseas with the fifth battalion of the First Marine Division. Haughtily the face appeared in his mind. That familiar face with a thousand-and-one freckles, topped by the curly red hair, and the laugh ready to break out. "Damn you, Ned," his lips moved, forming each mute word. Then he asked for help, in silence. "Take him away Lord. I want to rest. Just this once let me sleep—without the dream. I just don't feel like it. And I can't run anymore. Are you running with me Jesus?" But sleep didn't come. And Doug remained awake, trapped by his thoughts.
He remembered the night in the bunker when Ned was his assistant, and he had sergeant-of-the-guard. They talked about several personal things that night, more than a sergeant and a lance-corporal normally talked over together. Talking was so easy then, sitting in the abandoned French bunker with the field phone ringing several times each hour when the perimeter guards checked in. It was a quiet, humid night. And, as usual, nothing happened. Ned had a problem that night, which he finally brought out; though he was reluctant to talk about it. He hadn't written home in several weeks, for no real reason. He was just young and time had slipped away. A letter had come from his mother that day. And she wrote about his father, saying that she didn't know if she should write this letter or not, but she was going to anyway. Doug could remember Ned telling him about it as if it had just happened the night before.

“Well, it's like this, Sarge. Dad and me. We always been pretty close. You know. We could talk together easy. And. Uh. You sure you want to hear about this, Sarge! I mean, you don’t have to listen to all this if you don’t want to.”

“No. I’d like to hear about it. Maybe I can help you.”

“Yeah. Maybe you can. Anyway, Mom wrote that Dad’s been feeling bad lately. Not sick. But upset, about me. You see, I was in college for a year before I came into the service. But I quit because of money problems. Well, now Dad blames himself for not making enough money to put me through college, like some fathers do. And he thinks it's his fault I'm over here. I don’t suppose my not writing helped much.”

“I don’t suppose it did.”

“But, God! Dad couldn’t be more wrong. I sure don’t blame him! I wouldn’t have him change, or be a different father for anything in the world. Heck, I'm here because of the way he brought me up. For him. Because I love my Dad, and I want him to be proud of me.”

“Maybe you should write and tell him just what you said to me. Have you ever thought of that?”

“Sure. I suppose I could. But do you think he would understand?”
“You could call home from the Mars station while we’re in Da Nang. You said you could always talk well together.”

“Say, that’s a great idea, Sarge!”

From that time on guard duty together they had been good friends. Something he should have known better than to let happen. Ned volunteered each time Doug drew a patrol assignment, and during company operations he was Doug’s first fire-team leader. He was a good man too, Doug remembered. He would have been promoted to corporal if he hadn’t been with that crazy bunch who got drunk on Tiger beer that the villagers furnished, after the men had handed out all that candy and clothes at Christmas time. The candy and clothes were an idea that sort of snowballed after Ned had written home, asking his mother to send some things for a special family he knew. He always liked those kids. Thought they were cuter than any he had ever seen. His mother spread the word among her friends, and before long packages arrived every day, full of things for the kids in the village. Doug smiled to himself. Being drunk wouldn’t have been so bad. But when they stole that farmer’s pig, then tried to sneak him past the sentry so they could roast him for Christmas dinner, it was just too much.

He remembered Ned telling him, “Boy, Sarge, that damn pig could sure squeal.”

Doug almost chuckled to himself. The way he finally heard it, they had the pig tied upside down to a stick. And they were all singing Christmas carols as they marched practically right down the middle of the road past the sentry. The poor sentry didn’t know how to report it. “A bunch of guys got a pig out here, Sir. Yes Sir, a pig. I don’t know where they got it. Yes Sir.”

But Doug’s smile faded as thoughts about operation State formed in his mind. Ned was getting short, with only a month left to go. And he was becoming extra careful again, completing the cycle that begins when a man arrives. At first one is nervous, ducking constantly for about a month. Then he realizes that he has a whole year to spend here, and there’s no use spending it hiding every other minute. So he becomes more courageous, taking chances he had never dreamed of before. But, when there is only a few weeks left of his tour,
the soldier becomes careful again,ducking often and taking no chances what-so-ever. Ned was no different. He had a girl back home and he wanted to get there in one piece—and soon.

The three grass huts loomed into Doug's mind. They were familiar to him by now, just as the depression near the trail was, where they had dived when a sniper round came close to them. The round must have come from one of the huts. And there was nothing but an open space all around them. Doug called the C. O. over the radio to coordinate his position with the other squads, and to find out what was the best thing to do. The conversation was brief.

"Where's the M-79 man," Doug asked, looking around. "Ned, where the hell are you?"

"Over here Sarge." His voice rang out from a near-by ditch.

"Put some rounds into those huts, and get all three quick."

"But Sarg. We don't know who might be in there," Ned replied.

"Just do it Ned! For Christ sake! You want me to run up and ask if any bad guys are in there."

"O.K." But his voice was unsure and weak.

Doug could still hear the hollow pop each grenade made as it left the launcher. Ned was fast and accurate with the 79. One of the best. The rounds landed rapidly, one after another, with dull, thudding echoes. The squad spread out and made their way to the huts, leap frog style. But there were no more shots taken at them. And the silence hung in the air, leaving only the unmerciful buzzing of the flies.

Corporal Logan reached the second hut first. "God." He stood frozen in the entry way. Doug hurried over and looked in. There, against one side of the hut, were the bodies of three young children. Soon, Ned stood beside him, only for a moment, before he staggered to the bushes, and was sick.

Doug refused to think anymore about it. He had gone over it a thousand times before. As he fell back to sleep he wondered what he would tell Ned's father, Mr. Mischke, when he would finally be able to find him. His last letter from Ned's mother said her husband was here, in Iowa, look-
ing for a new job. She didn’t say why he left the city. Ned had held a high regard for his father. It was only right that he should hear the whole story about his son. Sleep mercifully ended his conscious thoughts. And the dream began again.

“You gotta come quick Sarge. Ned is acting real strange. There may be trouble!” Pfc. Bell was nervous when he burst into the tent. He was visibly shaking.

The two of them walked rapidly. “What’s been going on, Bell?” The question showed his fear of the unknown.


The men were all around him, speaking at once, when he reached the single lone tent. The noise grew. Then there was dead silence as he stepped inside.

Inside it was illuminated by an unnatural glow from a single bare light bulb. It was like a negative. Exposed. And at the opposite end stood Ned. He had a revolver in his hand. And his eyes were very large.

“Sarge.’ You know I got guts. Don’t you Sarge?” The voice seemed to filter slowly from the opposite end of a tunnel.

“Ned. Give me the gun. We’ll talk. O.K.?” His hand stretched far out in front of him, and he moved forward.

“No! Stay there Sarge.” The gun pointed at him. Its barrel grown to the size of a dark well hole. “I can face this alone Sarge. I make my own decisions. I run my own life. You hear me Sarge? The military doesn’t own me!”

“Ned. We can talk this out.” His voice was not strong.

“Your war stinks Sarge. And I stink now too. Listen to the silence Sarge.” Moments passed. He didn’t move. A wind struck the tent. Then was gone. A dog howled. “Can you hear war dying Sarge? Do you hear the scavengers coming?”
“Let me help you Ned. I can, you know. I’m your friend.”

“You know I got guts Sarge. Don’t you?”

“Yes, Ned. I know you do.”

“I can take a chance too. Just like the chances we gave. Right Sarge?” He opened the revolver quickly, placed in a single round, closed it, and spun the chamber. But Doug could see that the hammer was down, so the bullet stopped, just before the barrel chamber.

“One chance in six Sarge. Better odds than we gave. I’m not afraid.”

“Ned. Wait! Mother of God!” He tried to run. But his feet were heavy, very heavy. And he moved barely at all. Something held him back. Gently. Like a soft web. He fought to break through.

“You’ll never know Sarge.” Ned placed the revolver to his temple. Pulled the trigger. And the gun fired.

Everything changed to slow motion as he rose into the air several inches. His eyes opened wide. And his arms floated upward. Then he crumpled slowly to the ground. Like a child’s doll. And all turned to blue ice peace.

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**The Lesson**

_by Rick Naymark_

Mathematics, Sr.

Someday
The number of men killed in Viet-Nam
Or of square miles of vegetation made brown by defoliation
Or the name of the lieutenant who massacred a village
Of people
Will just be test questions
Passed in passing over a cold breakfast egg
By two students
and
nothing
more.