

## Children's War

Directly behind the house where my family rented an upstairs flat in the mid 1950's was an open area between the buildings and the railroad tracks that seemed huge when I was a boy. In the field among piles of dirt, tall grass survived the constant running feet of the neighborhood kids. The dirt was left over from some unknown construction project. The kids were no doubt left over from short love affairs followed by interminably long marriages.

Our favorite pastime in those years was War. Not the card game, but the outdoor activity where we pretended to kill each other with fake weapons. The boys no one liked were forced to play enemy infantrymen, but some gladly chose the role, possibly to vent their anger on anything most of us considered good. The kids playing American soldiers were either the usual sheep or A-type personalities who grabbed the roles usually taken by actors like John Wayne.

The imaginary foe on our back field was the Japanese, the militarized people who killed our fathers and uncles before being vaporized in a nuclear holocaust. Since war themes must be instinctual for boys, I suppose the bad guys could have been visitors from Uranus for all we cared.

Some of us would grow up to be skilled warriors, ferocious hirelings of old men who decided which nation was our enemy. Other kids possessed a simple untrained belligerence. Because they were always fighting, many would never get through high school. They would punch and kick their way into jail before they graduated or were drafted. One became a wife killer.

My friend Bobby Nisynski and I were the same size at age ten, neither the biggest or smallest kids on the block. Bobby always jumped right into the fray and elbowed his way to the front. I admired his aggression, but knew

it wasn't in my nature. Instead, I'd follow him with cheers.

I always hung back in any war game, allowing it to reach its usual conclusion, a fist fight over who was in charge. In that sense, it was exactly like real war.

I remember having a terrible chest cold in the fall of fourth grade. The doctor ordered me to stay in bed for three miserable days. Lying near an open window on a warm October Saturday, I smelled the fall leaves baking in the sun while I listened to the kids playing in the field. Bobby's shouts and laughter stood out among the other voices. I missed being with my friend. On that day I could not go where Bobby went. Years later I realized I could never go where Bobby went. He was a fighter. I was not.

The more aggressive boys were first to grab all the good roles ... sergeants and Captains and even Colonels. I never remember anyone wanting to be a PFC. The boys preferred to carry fake guns and shot anything that moved. They'd pretend to run out of bullets as an excuse to hit friend and foe alike with their weapons. My favorite activities were thinking and talking, so I wasn't very good on a kids' battlefield. I might have made an excellent military tactician, if anyone had asked for a battle plan. Or a terrific make-believe JAG, had one of the pint-sized Captains requested a military lawyer. Or a United Nations Special Representative, since I was known to speak up whenever I discovered anything amiss on the battlefield.

"You can't win this skirmish," I announced to an older kid who shouted made-up Japanese words while he chased Bobby around and tried to beat him up. Bobby wore his late uncle's World War II helmet and carried a garden shovel with the handle pointed forward. It was supposed to be a machine gun.

"Why not?" spat back the 12 year old, who said he was Colonel Satchmo Hiyakawa of the Imperial Japanese Army

."Well, first of all," I said, " 'Satchmo' is not a real Japanese name, and second, you're beating up John Wayne and he can't lose a battle."

"I'm John Wayne," Bobby shouted from under his helmet. "I'm John Wayne!"

"Well, excuse me all to hell and back," said Satchmo. He grabbed the shovel from Bobby, swung it up in the air and brought it down hard on the boy's helmet.

We took Captain John Wayne Nisynski to his mother, blood streaming down from somewhere up in his helmet, accompanied by a copious flow of tears and bad language. She laid her boy out on the kitchen table, pulled the battle-worn helmet off and discovered a wound that wasn't too serious.

"Your father will kill you for wearing that helmet," she told him while she wiped the blood from it with a dish towel. "You shouldn't have taken it." Had she heard the tremendous clang when the shovel hit, she would have thought otherwise.

I was impressed with her use of the kitchen table as an operating table. My mother would have worried about ruining the place mats.

While Mrs. Nisynski worked on her son's head, now neatly resting in a copper-bottom fry pan to contain the blood, we boys passed verbal status messages along to the mob of kids beginning to congregate on the back stairs. The entire neighborhood always showed up for blood.

Behind me, little Jimmy Talerico piped up.

"Mrs. Nisynski, is Bobby gonna live?"

"Till his father gets home," she said, laughing. "After that there's no guarantee."

I told no one, but the violence unsettled me, and not just because it fell upon my friend. I'd never witnessed someone harm another with a weapon. Using a hard object to inflict damage was so much more brutal than just getting angry and slapping your brother. I found it difficult to accept we were capable of such an awful act. Fifteen years later Satchmo would express the same feeling to the judge after he killed his wife.

When we grew up, I attended the local college and Bobbie worked at the Chrysler plant until another war started. At twenty years old he became the neighborhood champion when he went off to combat, drafted, but nonetheless a hero. Friends shouted good bye and waved as he left on the train early that bright and crisp autumn morning. Cheers followed in his wake from everyone but his mother. On a cold and wet afternoon the following spring, we stood silent in grief when he came home from the killing ground in a casket.

Invited back to the house for coffee after the funeral Mass, I fumbled my sympathies to Mrs. Nisynski. She sat sniffing and wiping her eyes

at the kitchen table where she had bandaged her son's head a decade before.

I wanted to be comforting. I wanted to say he had been a brave soldier, but I couldn't make myself utter words that would honor such a senseless slaughter of my friend and all the other youths who were being killed. Not when I stayed home. I could manage only to say, "I'm sorry." I stared at her hands while I spoke, because I was afraid her eyes would tell me she wished it had been me.

I wanted with all my heart to have been a UN Special Representative on the battle field, somehow able to prevent the Viet Cong from ripping open Bobby's chest with forty-three rounds from a Chinese made sub machine gun. But I was just a college sophomore who had never been out of the state and was thankful I'd never been to war. When someone else came in the kitchen to see how Mrs. Nisynski was faring, I sneaked away. I walked through the short hallway and out on the second floor back porch. Beneath me, closer than I remembered, the field Bobby and I played in sat empty and wet in the rain. At the far end of the field the railroad tracks glistened through the fog like two bright arrows pointing nowhere.

"You're better off staying here," Bobby told me the night before he left when we'd found our way to the bottom of a few pitchers of beer. "You'd just get yourself killed over there."

"Don't you go and get yourself killed, Bobby," I said.

He laughed. "Not me. I'm John Wayne."

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*This story is dedicated to my friends, Martin and Susan, who taught me so much when we volunteered together at Family of Woodstock in the Catskill Mountains.*

## The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

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