

A Man From Mississippi

Harry Monninger

I saw him one day shortly after I had joined Company A, 162 Infantry. He was a tall, lean, rough-looking individual, who had not lost and never would lose the appearance of a dirt farmer. Well over six feet tall, he reminded me of the classical picture of the rugged, keen-eyed frontiersman leaning upon his trusty flintlock and looking into the wilderness for signs of game or hostile Indians.

James Webb was from the state of Mississippi. He possessed few of the characteristics of the average southern man. To him life had been a constant struggle, and there was little time for resentment or petty differences. As a farmer, there was the constant struggle with nature to make enough money to supply the bare necessities of life. His large, rough hands had held a hoe for many hours, and his face was lined with wrinkles and baked by the sun's rays..

Webb was one of the old-timers in the company, being one of the charter members. He had started the long trip from New Guinea, Biak, and ultimately the Phillipine Islands. Now, in the early part of 1945, four of the original members remained. Webb was one of the four.

I think Webb liked me because I was so utterly confused, bewildered, and scared. I was assigned to his squad, and he showed me all the gentleness that could be shown to a boy barely past his eighteenth birthday. We shared the same fox-hole, ate the same food, and talked about home and our plans after the war. He showed me pictures of his wife and boy, and pride showed in his blue eyes when he talked about his plans for the boy's future. He was going to send the boy to law school.

Webb possessed a keen sense of humor. There was a standard joke in our platoon that he didn't know how tall he was until he was drafted, because he had been standing in the mud all his life and had never seen his feet. At these accusations he would smile and say that it was true that Mississippi was the worst state in the Union, that its people were the dumbest, but that he would gladly trade the entire South Pacific, the Phillipine Islands, and quite often he would throw in the rest of the forty-seven states, for just one handful of good old Mississippi mud. The longer I knew him, the more certain I was that he meant it.

Webb possessed little formal education. He could read

and write, but that was about all. He never felt any degree of inferiority, nor did he hide this fact. He had gone only as far as the sixth grade, explaining that his family had not been financially able to spare him from the farm work. But he was a student of the Bible. Whenever a discussion relating to religion arose, he was the authority upon the subject. He would quote from the scripture, and do it simply, and with profound humility. I told him he should have been a preacher, for I could see him standing in the pulpit of a backwoods church, the fire and brimstone resounding from his words as he spoke to men that knew and respected him.

Webb was the bravest man I have ever known. One day when our company was caught in a crossfire and at the mercy of the Jap gunners, he calmly assembed a dismantled machine gun and drove off the attackers. For this he won a silver star, after the company commander convinced him that he really deserved it. His opinion was that he was merely doing something to help his buddies.

Webb possessed no great vocabulary, and what he did to his English grammar should not happen to any language. While not an habitual user of profanity, he could, when the occasion arose, distinguish himself quite aptly. A Jap mortar fell close to him one day and knocked him sprawling into a muddy hole. He was not hurt, but when he arose from the hole, splattered with mud, the tirade began. With great efficiency, he traced the maternal heritage of the Japanese Army, the Navy, and the people in particular, back to their earliest origin. He was in the process of retracing his steps when more mortars began to fall, and for the next few minutes he was content to crouch in a hole and let his temper simmer. I told him that he had made the Japs mad, and should have kept his mouth shut. He looked at me like a defeated gladiator who had failed to defend his honor and said nothing.

Webb died in the same manner that he had lived, simply, and without fanfare. A burst of machine gun fire caught him one day and he was dead before his tall frame sank to the muddy earth. But I will remember him as a great man. His greatness lay in his simplicity, his humor, and his fondness for his fellow man. This is not an epitaph to him, for his epitaph is written upon the hearts of those who served with him and loved him. I shall always remember his words as he looked upon the dead bodies of enemy and comrade alike, "I don't see why men can't fight wars with sticks."