

THE GAME

Bonnie Britton

"War is a game of cards," went the words to a song he had once sung, the young soldier recalled as a drop of cold rain slithered down his neck.

Athletic, good looking, always on the Dean's list, Mike Miller had surprised everyone by leaving college at the end of his sophomore year to join the Marines. But he liked to do the unexpected and reasoned that the college would still be there when his service was finished.

His decision shocked many of his buddies who deemed the Vietnamese conflict an "unfashionable" war. They knew his sentiments and tried to respect him for his stand just as he had quietly tried to convert them to his point of view. And, meeting a determined resistance, had acknowledged their right to peacefully oppose the conflict.

It was almost Christmas in this land without fat Santas in every big department store and people "dashing through the snow in one horse open sleighs."

There were a few Santas, but they all looked anemic and spent their time in the Saigon's marketplace and in the scattered department stores still standing. It made Mike a little homesick to see them, slanted eyes, and all, until the day one of them pulled a hand grenade out from under his suit and threw it in a South Vietnamese official's car.

But now, as he stood in the light drizzle waiting for his mail, the words to the song suddenly explained themselves. No matter who was playing, the deck was always stacked. This whole business of war was a game, and the stakes were unusually high.

In his mind he could see the bodies of enemy dead piled high in stacks like poker chips. Just a week ago he had been on patrol when . . .

"Okay Miller, you and Jarvis position yourselves on the other side of those huts and if you see anything move, shoot. This is a known Cong village, and the people freely cooperate with the enemy," his sergeant yelled above the sound of whirling helicopter blades.

So Mike and Steve Jarvis, a guy he's eaten with, slept with and shared the miseries of war with for the last three months made their way through the tangled vines and bushes to the opposite side of the village.

Three women were in a little clearing by a stream, washing clothes on the flat rocks when the two soldiers approached. They looked harmless enough, but it was usually the harmless looking things in this land that killed you.

Mike yelled for them to raise their hands above their heads, but they continued their washing. The soldiers moved in a little closer, all the time watching for an ambush when the women suddenly pulled machineguns from the baskets of wash at their sides. Mike hit the ground after firing a few shots in rapid succession.

Jarvis hadn't gotten to the ground quickly enough and he clutched his side where a bullet had ripped into him. With one hand he pulled out a grenade, pulled himself up on one knee and lobbed the weapon.

There was a jarring explosion and bits and pieces of people and clothing came flying through the air. Mike crawled over to Jarvis and tried to stop the bleeding but it was too late to do anything but promise to write to the boy's parents.

Boy. That's all he was, a boy of eighteen. Mike had felt so much older at twenty, almost like a protector to this kid just out of high school. Jarvis had been an All-City pitcher on a baseball team. Is that what Mike could write?

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis, I'm a friend of Steve's and I just wanted to tell you what a great pitcher your son was. Those Charlies never even saw that fast ball of his coming."

Tomorrow they'll take all his things out of the tent, his baseball cap, the letters from his girlfriend, the cookies his mother was always sending. And then somebody else would be there, somebody with a new face, a new name and personality. It wouldn't be long before he went away like all the others Mike had seen leave in their canvas bags with the dogtags hanging out.

God, he was tired of looking at a man and thinking "You're a nice guy, but I hope it's you and not me the next time."

Funny, how the mud reminded him of his last football game. He loved to play football and might have made the varsity in his junior year.

It was homecoming and Sandi was sitting next to him, the wind blowing her long hair in his face. The air was chilly and it rained all night, turning the field into a colossal pig sty.

Some of the players had fallen down in the soft squishy stuff, but they bounced back up and tried a new play. Here in Vietnam the guys fell too, and if the bullets didn't kill them, the mud, with its chocolate-brown soft-gloved hands smothered the life out of a man, not like the friendly mud of the football field.

He wondered what Sandi was doing now. Maybe she was standing in the hallway of her home on the other side of the world reading his letter. He tried to keep them light, away from the gruesome details of the war. He joked about the food and lodgings and planned his leave to be with her.

"I'll hock my Volkswagen and join you in Hawaii," she'd written in her last letter.

A flash of lightning brought him back to reality. It was hard to lift his feet to move up in line because the mud kept trying to pull him down, like quicksand.

Although his letters home to his parents, Sandi, the guys back at school were informal and light in tone, he wasn't forgetting what was really happening. Every night after every patrol he would carefully fill his journal with the day's experiences.

All the things he had seen, all the horrors, had to be recorded, put down in a book so that men would read and see the truth, the reality, and not the brandished, shining swords of conquering heroes. He wanted to make men sick, literally sick of the world they had created and were helping to destroy.

Through his words others would see the faceless children mutilated beyond belief, the dead mothers clutching starving babies, the women and the fifteen and sixteen year old children the Viet Cong were using to fight their dirty war.

He knew others had tried and failed, but that's what life is all about, he thought, challenges and failures, and once in a while a conquest. He wanted to conquer.

Maybe he would fail, but at least he would try.

"Mead, Thomas; Miller, Michael," the mail clerk said, bringing Mike back to the mud and the rain and the soldiers around him.

He stood there in the downpour and the chapters of his book began to fall into place, like a master plan for saving the world—for saving his unborn sons from the agonies of another war.

And the cloudburst swelled the brown sea, with lightning and

thunder now piercing the heavy wet air, and finally he heard his name called the second time. Three envelopes were shoved into his hands.

There was a blue one that he lifted to his nose. Sandi, just the way she smelled when he'd kissed her last.

The white envelope was his no-nonsense mother and his firm but loving father, probably giving him the latest rundown on all the relatives. He wondered if his sister had produced a niece or a nephew for him yet.

The third envelope was orange and the familiar scrawl told him it was Jeff Walker, his former roommate. A real nut of a guy who wore his hair long and didn't think too much of the war. When he wasn't in class, he was usually out on a march or working for one of a hundred causes.

Mike hurried back to his tent to escape the damp when the lightning and thunder descended. But it was manmade lightning and the whole camp seemed to explode.

Mike Miller fell and the unopened letters flew into the mud of the war.

The medic who helped lift Mike onto the stretcher noticed the letters and stuffed them into his pocket.

For the next few hours men were brought into the makeshift hospital, some dead, others crying for help, and it was late that night before he returned to his tent.

He fell onto his cot, but something sharp jabbed him in the side. It was an envelope, and he pulled the letters from his pocket.

After a moment of hesitation he opened them, knowing that the man who had dropped them would not care. When he was finished he was glad that the young soldier had dropped them unopened.

At least Mike wouldn't know that Sandi was tired of waiting, that she had found someone else to share her loneliness. She was sorry of course, and she hoped he wouldn't be hurt too much. She still hoped they could be friends when he returned. Dear John, Dear John, Dear John.

And yes, his mother said, Jill had a baby boy, and she's so proud of you that his middle name will be Michael. Your father even bought a little Marine suit for him. Of course he's a little young yet, but. . .

"Mike—it must be rough man, you lazy bum, nothing to do but wait around for some action," the orange letter began.

"Exams are really tough. I just barely squeaked by on a Calc



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test yesterday. If I don't buckle down pretty soon, I may be forced to join you.

There was another demonstration on campus last week. Things got a little hot and some of the guys got carted off to jail. You'd think we were criminals or something, the way the cops treated us.

The way you just up and left, it still bothers me. But I guess it's your life. . ."

And the young soldier lay in a canvas bag, not knowing, not caring that his friends were safe at home, that his dreams to open the eyes of the world were dead with him in the mud.

REFLECTIONS

Teresa Zodorozny

Motions of the soul stir in the old man's mind—

Tokens of years past are buried in his dreams.

Sleep is a hint of tomorrow.

His tired eyes gaze at the world renewed.

He watches his once stately body wrinkle and show the signs
of his fading dignity.

Nobody knows his name, and no one cares.

He is laughed at by youth, and misunderstood by his
children.

Solitary.

Abandoned by the world, lost in a vacuum of time

He waits.