

## The Return

On a large simple seacraft moving through heavy rain across a turbulent ocean, I sailed with fellow soldiers on one of hundreds of boats destined for a beach where an enemy waited. Most of us were frightened into numbness, unless seasickness had overtaken our stomachs. Many groaned in pain, some vomited off the side of the boat or on themselves as we rocked for several hours toward landing. Fortunate to be strong-gutted, I was one of the numb ones, sat stiffly, looking at the faces of my comrades, some who I knew quite well from training together and living in the same quarters, the rest just faces blended into a single young man on his way to an unknown fate.

One new face in the collective blur sat to my right and we talked briefly. He was nineteen, from a small town. His parents were school teachers and he was studying to be a master carpenter before he was drafted. His only sibling, and older sister, was in college studying to be a nurse. Blond, blue-eyed, with more freckles on his face than I'd ever seen on one human -- my thought being he had more of them than stars in our galaxy -- he had a smidgen of stubble on his face and a small pimple on his left cheek. He looked soft all over. His name patch read Willmons. Sick to his stomach, occasionally he grew pale, put his head between his knees, came back up and moaned, breathed in deeply the thick and salty air.

As we caught first sight of the shore, some began to yell: Time to go! We are God's chosen! The enemy must die! Others began to look back at the waters we'd just crossed. But most sat silently, weapons in hand, thinking their own thoughts or mouthing prayers.

The noise began: first blaring horns in the distance, then whizzing sounds, then bombs exploding in the water around us. With still some distance to go, we saw another boat ahead of us hit by a shell, and bodies catapulted into the air. Some men began jumping off their boats too soon and swam forward; a few turned and swam backwards or sideways to avoid the inevitable shore; four or five already floated in a seafoam of death.

As I readied to climb overboard, a soldier a few feet in front stood and screamed, Charge! lifted his rifle, fired, and cut down a boy jumping from a boat ahead. Some others near wrestled the lunatic's rifle away and threw him overboard.

And then the right side of our boat was skimmed by a fireball. I heard screams blend with bomb and bullet sound. Most of us humped out to the left, then trudged best we could through the knee high waves. Many fell before they reached dry land, many fell on the wet sand, while the rest of just kept going, hoping against the bullets.

Willmons was to my right as we moved onto drier ground. We began to run with better footing, but then I heard a wail -- and I knew he'd been ripped down. I slowed my stride, defied my training and looked back to him. Sprawled with his chin in the sand, his blue eyes staring forward, waves approaching him from behind, he yelled out: Mama!

and I knew he belonged to the ocean now. I turned and sprinted forward, eventually becoming one of the lucky to reach safety in the wooded area.

In the months ahead, I would fight on, witnessing many boys die -- screaming in pain or whispering to the heavens or crying for their mothers. I somehow succeeded to block all of this out in my daily calculations and processes to persist in the dream for survival, to survive in the worst of dreams.

After the war, when I returned home on a clear summer night, my mother was the first to meet me on our front porch. She embraced me, but before I could once more appreciate such comfort and care, deathnoise moments my mind had stowed away during the past months began to shoot like meteors across the black expanse beneath my tightly clenched eyelids. And when me mom's hands rubbed against my back, when she murmured: I love you, my baby, I slowly opened my eyes, looked upward and saw nothing but freckles.