



Brothers in Arms

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We Few, We Happy Few, We Band of Brothers (*Shakespeare, Henry V, 4.3.60*)

Nature played a trick, not an unusual one, on the parents of two brothers born and raised in the east-side Cascade foothills of Central Oregon. When the younger one came along they recognized it soon enough, but school days underscored it. Tony was a good deal slower than Clark. He was more carefree, Clark less easy going and more ambitious. The brothers attended a two room country school that began each day as most did with a pledge of allegiance, hand-over-heart, facing the stars and stripes. They were indistinguishable in rituals like that. Sibling quarrels were minimal between them.

In anything concerning books and school subjects, however, the resemblance ended. In math and English, Clark from early on guided his brother when he could, though much of the time even he couldn't get through to him. One or another lesson would seem to be taking root only in a few days to disappear, landing Tony back on square one. Clark learned patience in dealing with him and forgave the rebellious outbreaks that he could see came from frustration. Tony didn't like being slow to learn. No one did. Being slow was an irritating burden, but with Clark's daily help he bore it reasonably well. Their parents had adjusted within Tony's first two or three years and showed no favoritism. "Eat your veggies" went equally for both.

With its dozen and a half students, the country school was too small to have organized sports, but it did field a softball team that put boys and girls together—on a traveling team no less. They played two games away each year and two at home. They practiced and played work-up every seasonable recess on a clumpy grass outfield with a rough dirt infield. The teachers in charge at the competing schools didn't have to remind their players that the game they were playing was the slow pitch kind. No one from either school could wind up and wing in an underhand fast ball. The pitchers lobbed the ball in, and the batters, those who were able, blooped it back out again. Tony's disability showed even in that simple game as it did in the classroom. He could remember to run the bases counter clockwise, but on defense the proper sequences evaded him. His teacher-coach stationed him out in right field beyond the reach of most grounders and fly balls. He seldom had a chance to throw to the wrong base.

He could be heard humming to himself and be seen looking around, scuffing the ground and not paying attention. Clark, who had a glove, was the shortstop and became exceptional at the position. When anyone thought to keep a score sheet with more on it than runs scored, he batted over .500. In his most productive season Tony managed only around .180. When he did get a hit he hopped up and down at first base out of pure joy. Even opponents not familiar with his team quickly caught on and made a point of talking to him and asking him simple questions

Tony's backwardness in the classroom foretold what anyone could have predicted. His teachers there and later saw that they would have to pass him along whether or not he could tell a pronoun from an adverb or say why 6^6 wasn't 36. The Civil War, what Madame Curie discovered, why 10^4 was so very different from 10^8 plus much else from A to Z, zipped on by and lodged in others. From the grammar school Pledge of Allegiance and other reminders of which country was his he absorbed and retained a strong sense of civic duty and a dab of politics guided mainly by his father and a little by Clark. Once he became old enough he voted, knowing he was supposed to, focusing on one or two matters he remembered something about. In doing so he was susceptible to the slogans of those running for office, but in that he wasn't alone. Slogans were easier to understand than differential equations. He was willing to take advice from his parents and Clark, but once he had voted he tuned out again until next time.

In due course Clark made his way to Harvard and moved on from there to a Rhodes scholarship, for several years rarely seeing his brother. He absorbed facts, figures, and ideas as if they were water and he a sponge. After the Rhodes he applied for and received an apprentice position with NASA. His spouse had promise comparable to his, and together they started two infants on their way to becoming bright, perky children. Meanwhile Tony married a plain, dull woman named Alice and never had children.

The brothers went in their different directions geographically, too, Clark with his wife to Houston and a start in the space program, Tony no farther than the next valley over where he



took up farming. He wasn't at all bad with machinery and at simpler skilled jobs, at carpentry, and household plumbing. With help from his father he acquired enough acreage to keep him and Alice busy and self supporting. He borrowed machinery from his father, who taught him everything he needed to know about planting, growing, harvesting, herding, milking, the care of ailing animals, and what to spray on what. As a matter of course, implements and machines broke down, but he did the routine repairs without returning anything out of commission to his father. He was fine with wrenches, axes, and hammers.

In driving tractors to and fro between his and his parents' farm Tony sang the tunes of the day at the top of his voice. People walking or biking past could hear him going happily at his work, competing with the sound of a tractor engine. He remembered most of the words of several popular songs and though a little flat kept on key. In and around the barnyard he became a close friend of a saddle horse named Red and took good care of a small herd of ten Guernseys that gave enough milk to fill the cans he set out for the Farmers' Cooperative truck. Both the setting out and the collecting were timed, but he had no trouble with that. Keeping a schedule came easily enough.

It looked for awhile that the brothers' paths had diverged permanently and would cross only on an occasional Christmas at the home place. That was an illusion, however, a happy one compared to what actually happened. The policy nationwide in the military draft during their eligible years was to select by age from the top down. As a consequence the local board called Clark's name first, the war of the moment being the one in Vietnam. It made no difference to the draft board or the powers behind it that such a war went counter to Eisenhower's sage advice never to get involved in an Asian conflict. Clark himself doubted the wisdom of it and needn't have gone. His occupation, perceived in Washington and at NASA to make him more valuable at work than in the military, would have exempted him. He need only have made a point of that and had his supervisors write letters.

Though some of those involved in the war decision seemed to him to be in over their heads, the draft board said *go*, and so he went. He hadn't completed his university ROTC training and entered as a private. Those who determined his assignments took due notice of his accomplishments, however, and through diligence and on-the-job training he was soon moving up in rank and taking on responsibilities not usually assigned to someone of his rank. His wife and kids commiserated with the rest of the clan by mail and over the phone at his being summoned. When Tony, too, was called up and managed to pass the standard army tests if barely, both were badly missed. No one could do anything about that. It was a foregone conclusion that they were headed to SE Asia.

As a family chronicle incidental, one followup of significance came of that frustration over the war and the brothers'

refusal to keep out of it. Twenty years on, Clark's son became a conscientious objector. Fortunate for him he did, too, because two later administrations also sent troops to distant parts of the planet on doubtful missions. As nearly as Clark's son could tell the logic of what would have been his war, this one in the Middle East, was that the terrorist planes that flew into the towers in NYC had Saudi pilots trained in Afghanistan and so attack Iraq. In the Vietnam affair Clark hadn't wanted to be called a draft dodger, and several of his friends were serving. Like them his sense of duty went more to family and country than to lifeless abstractions like justice and humanity. When Tony's name came up he too did as ordered. As a scratch farmer he wasn't exempt, though a couple of physical ailments might have served as well as the mental handicap had he missed another answer or two on the standard exam. With him too it wouldn't have made any difference. He would have gone anyway. Thus a few months apart they took their basic training at Fort Ord in California and shipped out of Oakland.

The most meaningful chapter of the brothers' story wasn't their coming from the same family and country school, their contrasting records, or their subsequent lives and in Clark's case his son's. It was that assignment abroad. It didn't change their differences but gave them an unforeseeable twist. Clark rose in non commissioned rank and landed in a unit that dispatched helicopters on intelligence-gathering missions. Information returned first through him, and he then reported to the officer in charge. That gave him some influence over American troop movements, that, too, unusual for someone with not much rank or time in grade. As to Tony, along with his fellow privates he found himself uncomfortably close to Charlie. He served with troops of mixed race, thanks to basic training not the first of Asian and African descent he had gotten to know. He enjoyed palming around with them, and they too adjusted to his tardiness in some things.

The same war, the same goals, the same army for the brothers? Not really. Tony undertook his assignments reluctantly but obediently as always, and the main one was simple: get an enemy in your sights and squeeze the trigger. Watch what your buddies are doing and do the same. Twice in the field he was close to targets on the move across treeless patches. On both occasions he and his platoon were positioned in jungle cover looking out over shoulder-high growth. In neither case could he be sure of the results when he fired. The targets were there for only a second or two, but his reflexes and his aim were well drilled. On the firing range in basic training he had been in or near the bulls eye nearly every time and had earned a sharpshooter badge. Because he so seldom missed, he had good reason to think he hadn't on those occasions, and but for the beauty of his rifle's wood stock he would have put notches in it. At that distance hitting or missing affected him no more than getting his yearly buck in deer season. Indeed, this war thing sometimes felt to him much like fall elk hunts in eastern Oregon. They required travel, quiet

stalking, concealment, and firing when the chance arose. He wasn't particularly affected by the difference between that prey and a camouflaged, stooped over, running shape. Both were moving targets.

Clark's interpretation of the information coming in from reconnaissance missions sometimes caused Tony and his comrades to be shifted in position, not directly through orders from Clark but through channels. He was never particularly aware of Tony's unit, though by regimental number he knew which one it was. As was likely given the heavy growth and enemy maneuvers that were concealed and disguised with decoys, a moment came when the intelligence wasn't decisive. Along with others in his unit, Clark made a mistake. It was possible though by no means certain that as a consequence Tony lost his left forearm. That could have come from misdirected friendly fire or even from a stiff wind that at the wrong moment had dropped a tree branch on a land mine, though that sounded to Clark like a muddled rumor covering up a friendly mortar fire mistake. All anyone could say for sure was that something exploded almost underfoot, killing a fellow trooper and severely wounding Tony, his legs as well as his left arm. Whether nature or human nature was behind that made no difference. Tony had cried out in terror and in pain.

Clark didn't hear that cry himself, but from an eye-witness account he had no trouble imagining it, and it hurt as nothing in his life had up to then. It was almost as if he personally had ripped his brother's arm off and torn up his legs. Branches did fall from trees, mortars and artillery from one's own side did strike where they shouldn't, the enemy had able troops, too, and intelligence couldn't always be right. None of those factors helped a particle. He had played a role in putting Tony in that place at that time. He had always looked out for him and helped him over rough patches. This time he hadn't. That was made all the worse by their mother having written not long before, "look out for your brother. You know how he is." Yes, of course he knew how Tony was, but he and the others did as the intelligence had advised.

From a distance Clark saw Tony off at the improvised field where the wounded were loaded onto helicopters and

flown to Saigon where they often paused for additional treatment before those who were disabled were sent home. He managed to be on hand for Tony's flight back to the states. The recuperation he could see would take months and the adjustments a lifetime. "I see you caught one, buddy," was the best he could manage. They had always communicated as much by looks as by words. He turned his head away to hide tears welling up. Not once since the beginning of their school years had either brother seen the other cry. They nonetheless parted close to tears.

Tony was puzzled by the explosion, the amputation, the doctors and nurses, the flight.

None of that was familiar. He didn't really know what had happened. Something powerful had struck him, and he went blank. When he came to the legs were heavily bandaged and in pain and the lower arm was gone. Except for the feeling in his hand. That lingered a few days. In a drowsy state he would feel it and then return to waking reality, crushed to find once again that no arm or hand was there. Nothing he had ever learned told him what to do about that. He was too confused to feel sorry for himself or to blame anyone. He was depressed and alone. His fellow wounded didn't see him as a special case as his comrades in arms had. No one took notice of him except those who treated his wounds.

Deep inside, each brother now bore an indelible scar. They didn't need to say anything about that and never would. Each knowing what the other was feeling. came instinctively, and all people had hurt in common. Everything living learned what *that* was. When Tony had more time to think about it he had no trouble seeing that hurt does sometimes come without warning, capriciously, illogically, out of the blue as his had. In previous days in their part of the world, some legend preserved by native Americans would have made up a story about that, having a piece of a star break loose and fall on someone, thus a missing toe on this fellow and that one's blind eye. He understood how little any of that mattered. Clark was left wondering what he could say to their parents and to Alice. That was the next question, and he had no one to help answer it. When it came to things of that kind, he wasn't one bit better off than his brother.

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