

Left for Dead

by Jeffrey Miller

First, there was the explosion, then the air filled with whining hot metal and pulverized earth. The next thing Bobby knew, he was lying face down in the paddy thrashing his arms around, trying to free himself from a watery, mucky death. He spat out fetid paddy water and frantically gulped down humid air. In the sweltering afternoon heat, it felt like he was breathing hot water.

Bobby slowly raised his head above the emerald green stalks of rice and looked up and down the paddy for any sign of the men who had been crossing it with him, when the shell exploded. Movement out of the corner of his eye sent him face down in the muck again. Beneath his muddied and wet shirt, his heart pounded in his chest.

The height of the rice stalks just barely concealed his body; if any of the enemy had pursued them and had a sweeping view of the terraced paddy, they could easily see him and—

Klein. He heard Klein moaning, gasping and gurgling for the same hot, wet air. It had to be a chest wound, but there was no way he could check, not if a sniper or more had a bead on this paddy and either one of them.

Bobby kept his head down and retched when he smelled the putrid, cool earth. Night soil. He remembered someone tell the men not long after they landed at Pusan that Korean farmers fertilized their fields with human shit. He breathed in through his mouth but it was too late; his nose was already full of the smell and he felt like vomiting.

He retraced the morning in his mind—it had been hours since the enemy had broken through the line. He had been running ammo with Klein; the next thing they knew, the North Koreans hit them hard.

Klein's moaning increased; he tried to speak through his gurgled last breaths, crying for help; crying for his mother.

Dear God, please make him stop. He'll give away our position. Klein, please be quiet. Klein, please for the love of God stop making so much noise.

He was certain that Klein's moaning was loud enough to carry across the paddy and to whoever waited for the slightest movement, to put a bullet in both of them.

Please God, make him stop. He prayed for Klein to shut up, but Klein kept on crying and moaning. *Klein, listen to me, you've got to be quiet. You'll give away our position. You're going to get us both killed.*

Then Bobby, who was already screaming inside his head for Klein to be quiet, took a different approach and prayed for a quick end to his suffering.

If you are going to take him Lord, take him now and spare my life. No sense in taking both our lives today.

Bobby couldn't control the screaming inside his mind and its force against his cranium. He imagined the enemy taking careful aim, zeroing in on the paddy and Klein and himself. He squeezed his eyes shut and felt the blood surge to his head and waited; waited for whoever held that weapon to pull the trigger and end it all for him face down in a putrid rice paddy, breathing in this shitty soil.

Our Father who art in Heaven.

He could see the sniper wiping away the sweat from his grimy brow and waiting for the right moment. Bobby waited for the squeeze of the trigger; the click and the muzzle blast that would rip his head clean off. *Hallowed be thy name.* If he screamed as loud as he could, would it drown out the crack of the carbine?

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

Bobby opened his eyes slowly and focused on a dragonfly that landed on his outstretched arm and watched it fly away. He listened carefully but didn't hear Klein anymore. The moaning and crying stopped. The only sound he heard was the gentle swaying of the rice stalks around him. Klein had already drawn his last breath.

Better him than me.

He knew as soon as that thought entered his mind that it was a terrible thing to think. He hardly knew Klein, but that didn't excuse him for even thinking of that—a comrade in arms, dead just yards away.

Forgive me, Klein.

Bobby craned his neck ever so slightly and gazed up at the angry sun beating down on him. Judging by the position of the sun in the sky, it was late afternoon. His throat was parched and his tongue swollen. It had been hours since he last had water. There was no way he could reach his canteen without having to twist his body and become a target himself.

He had to get out of this paddy. Through the stalks of rice that swayed in the warm, muggy breeze he could see an earthen dike about thirty, maybe forty yards ahead of him and beyond that a grassy knoll shaded by a cluster of poplar trees. If he was going to do this, he was going to have to do it right, and fast.

In one quick move, he bolted up, sprinted across the paddy, and scrambled up the earthen bank and down the other side. Behind the dike, he sucked in the hot, wet air in short gasps and listened. The only sound was his breathing and the wind blowing through the leaves of the poplar trees. If there had been an enemy sniper, he would have been dead already.

Bobby hurriedly ripped the canteen loose from his web belt and held it to his mouth—there was maybe a capful or two of water left, just enough to moisten his parched mouth and thirst.

He crawled back up the earthen dike and peered over the edge. From here, he had a good view of the road that overlooked the Naktong. He scanned the road again. There was no sign of the enemy or the other men from his platoon who had been with Klein and him.

I am going to die here and I don't know where.

Shit, the only town he knew was Pusan and that was where they'd landed a few days ago. In the distance, behind him and to the south, he heard gunfire and the chatter of a machine gun. He also had a good view of the crater left by whatever shell the North Koreans

fired at them and Klein's lifeless body, which as it turned out, had only been a few yards away from Bobby. He suddenly was overcome with a wave of guilt and nausea because he prayed for Klein's death.

Maybe I could have saved him or tried to make him comfortable. I'm sorry Klein. Please forgive me.

He gazed at Klein's body in the sweltering, shimmering heat. He couldn't just leave Klein out there all alone. It was bad enough that he prayed for him to die. The enemy was probably long gone by now. What should he do with the body? The least he could do was drag it out of the paddy.

He looked up and down the road. There was no movement. The afternoon sun glared down on the steamy paddy as a stiff, hot breeze blew over the knoll. He scanned the paddies and fields in the distance as far as he could see in the glare, but could see nothing.

What would you do Klein, if it were me out there instead of you? Would you have left me out there to roast and rot in the sun?

Then he panicked for a third time: his weapon was still out there. Why hadn't he remembered to bring it? In his mind, he could hear his training instructor yelling at him for being so stupid. Now, he had no choice. He would have to go back out there in the paddy, the same way he escaped to bring Klein out of it and retrieve his carbine.

Bobby made another sweep of the paddy before he climbed down the earthen dike and followed his trail of flattened rice stalks, across the same putrid, night soil saturated earth to Klein's body. He hadn't prepared himself mentally for how he would react once he had seen Klein's body—some shrapnel caught him in the throat and he died with his eyes open.

Then he noticed Klein's canteen. He frantically pulled it off his web belt and unscrewed the top. Empty.

Dammit, Klein, didn't you listen to the first sergeant? We were all told to ration our water.

Bobby tossed aside the canteen.

Okay, Klein, let's get you out of here.

He looked down at Klein's body one more time. That's when he noticed the bullet hole a few inches above his heart.

Jesus Christ.

In the time it took him to stand up and look across the paddy, he panicked for the final time that day when he saw the glint of metal and the afternoon explode in a flash of bright light.

