

# THE GRAVES WE DUG

By Tom Dowling

A personal pilgrimage from revulsion at the ugliness of war, through resignation, to muted pride in a sorrowful mission successfully discharged.



At last my buddy's son was back from Vietnam, and I stood looking at the casket resting over the open grave that would soon take his body forever. As the rifle volleys shattered the afternoon stillness and "Taps" mournfully filled the air, my eyes followed the national cemetery's long straight lines of military headstones.

I remembered how it was more than 45 years ago when that war was supposed to have been fought and won to ensure that my buddy and I and all the others would never have a son killed in a future war.

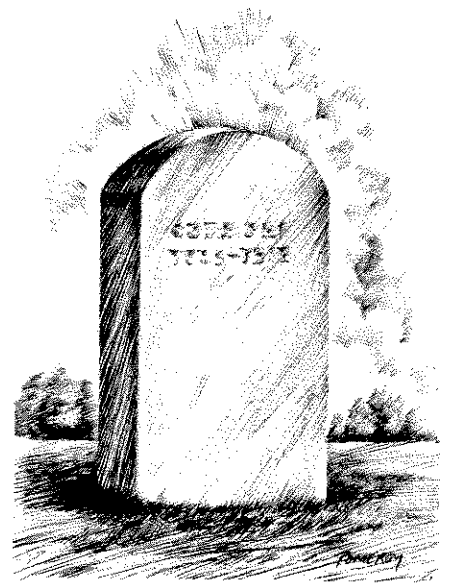
I recalled the grave markers neatly lined up throughout France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, Germany and so many places where so many sons were slipped into mattress covers and lowered into graves from which most would never be removed and shipped home.

We who buried so many of them thought

it was the worst job anyone could have been given. It cracked some of us, darkened the spirits of others and numbed the rest. To see the body of a young man your own age perhaps at your feet, to remove his dogtags, register him and assign a grave; to go through his wallet and choose things to be sent home, look at the pictures he kept close to him right to the end, the letters that were a source of hope for him—these were indeed bitter tasks in vile days.

Even when the carnage was finally over and the cemeteries were cleaned up and beautified, I could not in leaving look back and be proud that we had done our job well and be satisfied that the graves were as handsome as graves could be. All I could think during the action and during the finish was *Why?*

Now, standing there at the grave of my friend's son, I am glad for the first time that



his mother is dead. If she were here at our side, I would be able to read the same question in her tearful eyes: *Why?*

Having seen thousands of dead and finding each as pitiable as the next, I did not think that I could ever feel such great pangs of remorse and anger as I now do, looking down at the box that holds my pal's 21-year-old son.

The things this makes me remember... During World War II, after the company



had been formed and all of us—mostly draftees—had been assigned to it, we knew nothing except it was called a G. R. company. In the barracks, possible meanings of G. R. were kicked around. I remember that my friend came up with the most appealing guess of the lot: *Guerrilla Raiders!* It brought a lot of chuckles and yet hope to many. There were other guesses, but on the next day in company formation, we got the true meaning from our gangling commanding officer, a rather sickly looking man who would inspire none of us with confidence in him as he stood before us leaning on one foot and then the other.

After introducing each of the platoon leaders and noncommissioned officers, he said, "Men, I'm sure you're all wondering about this company and what the initials stand for, so brace yourselves. The G means Graves, and the R stands for Registration. Break all that down and you have Graves Registration, and it means your job in this war, once we eventually move on and finally get squared away overseas—either in Europe or in the South Pacific—will be building cemeteries and burying the dead."

You could hear the sucking in of breaths and the gasps of disbelief and feel a sudden numbness. After being curtly dismissed, we staggered back to the barracks, and it was not long before the explosion took place. One by one, the men began to express their revulsion at what they had heard.

"This is what I got drafted for?" one guy said. "To dig graves?"

One of the NCOs broke in. "We'll have work parties for the grave digging. You guys won't do that. You'll be in charge."

"Big deal! Big goddamn deal, Sergeant!"

"I ain't going," another yelled. "I came to fight, not bury. If there's any burying to be done, let somebody else do it. I came to fight!"

This was a night to remember. Nobody slept much. It would take a long time for the shock to wear off. Even after months of training, it would not wear off completely. My own feelings were a sense of letdown mixed with a natural aversion. It was a job that had to be done in war; it was certainly no disgrace, but it was something you always thought about being done by someone else.

Nobody looked forward to the day when we would be doing the job we were trained for, but it came a few weeks after D-Day, the Normandy invasion. We found ourselves approaching the beaches for the first time. Resistance was light as we stared ahead, still wondering what lay in store for us in France.

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TOM DOWLING, a World War II veteran, is a free-lance writer living in California.

Shortly before we landed, we spotted our first corpse. He was floating on top of the water, face down, just to the right of the landing barge. Somebody yelled and several hands pointed. I had seen it for some time before the others, I think, a bobbing object drifting further and further from the shores where it had lost its life, and we were getting closer and closer to that same shore.

He had been there, I told myself. And now he is dead and going back. We are alive and going in.

The eyes of everyone in my barge turned to the body. Under their helmets, the eyes seemed frightened and disgusted as they watched the body with its arms bobbing gently in unison with the legs, big torso acting like a cork, legs and arms dangling like strings from the four corners. I was glad the face was down under the water. As if it were a magnet, the body drew the attention of all of us until it was finally out of sight behind us.

Only Coogan did not look at it. He was a big man, strong of body and sensitive out of proportion, it seemed. He kept his eyes straight ahead, focused on the beach.

"Christ!" A voice cut the stillness. "What a sight! The poor bastard! Floating like that!"



Over to the left I could hear someone throwing up, and it was not from seasickness. We were over that now. This was revulsion. All the training in the world could not stand up to the real thing.

"Get used to it," someone said sharply. "We'll be seeing lots more of that before long."

"Shut up!" someone else demanded.

From up front, the lieutenant's voice called out, "Everyone calm down. Hear that? Calm down!"

I looked at him. He was young, just a few years older than I was. His lips were white

in a pale face, and perspiration rolled down his cheeks. Back in training, he had had a pretty loud voice. He had been a rah-rah man right from the start—tough as nails . . . in training—but now, he seemed ready to do exactly what someone had predicted months before.

"When the chips are down," it had been said, "five gets you ten that the lieutenant can't take it. Big mouth, that's all. There's millions of his kind all around the world. Talk, but no real stuff! Any takers?"

Nobody took the bet, however. Most believed that he would be just as tough now as then. What the heck, he could lick every man in the company without getting winded. Now, as I looked at him, there was a totally different look on that tough face . . . a look of compassion for the man in the water.

The beaches were up close now. This was Omaha Beach, and just a few short days before, some of the toughest fighting ever had taken place right here. Good God, how did anyone ever get through it alive?

The ramp of the landing barge dropped open wide onto the sand, and suddenly we were not moving any longer. The lieutenant yelled, and we jumped out of the barge right behind him. Railroad rails stuck up out of the water, wire was strung in depths that seemed impossible to cross, but somehow the GIs who first hit the beaches a few days ago had managed it; for us, it was easy now. They had cleared the way.

"Lord, how did they ever get up that cliff?" the man next to me wondered, as we ran toward a towering wall.

"Ask him," someone replied.

We followed the direction of his point. Something was crouched beside what was now a well-trod path up the hill. The lieutenant had already reached it and was staring down, a scowl on his face. A very young soldier lay dead there. He looked like he should have been in high school trying out for the team, not lying dead there.

The lieutenant turned and faced us. As one, we stopped moving forward and stared at him. As one man rather than a number, the lonely company of guys who wanted no part of it knew this was what we had been sent here for, what we had been trained for, to make a place for the dead.

When we reached the top of the cliff, our first chance to rest came, but the lieutenant grabbed our attention. "Every day, new troops pour into here, land on the beach, and move up. We've got to get these bodies out of their sight. They'll see enough as they move forward, God help them."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Take over, Sergeant."

It was really the first time I had looked at

our three striper. His face was tight-lipped and angry.

"Follow me!" he yelled.

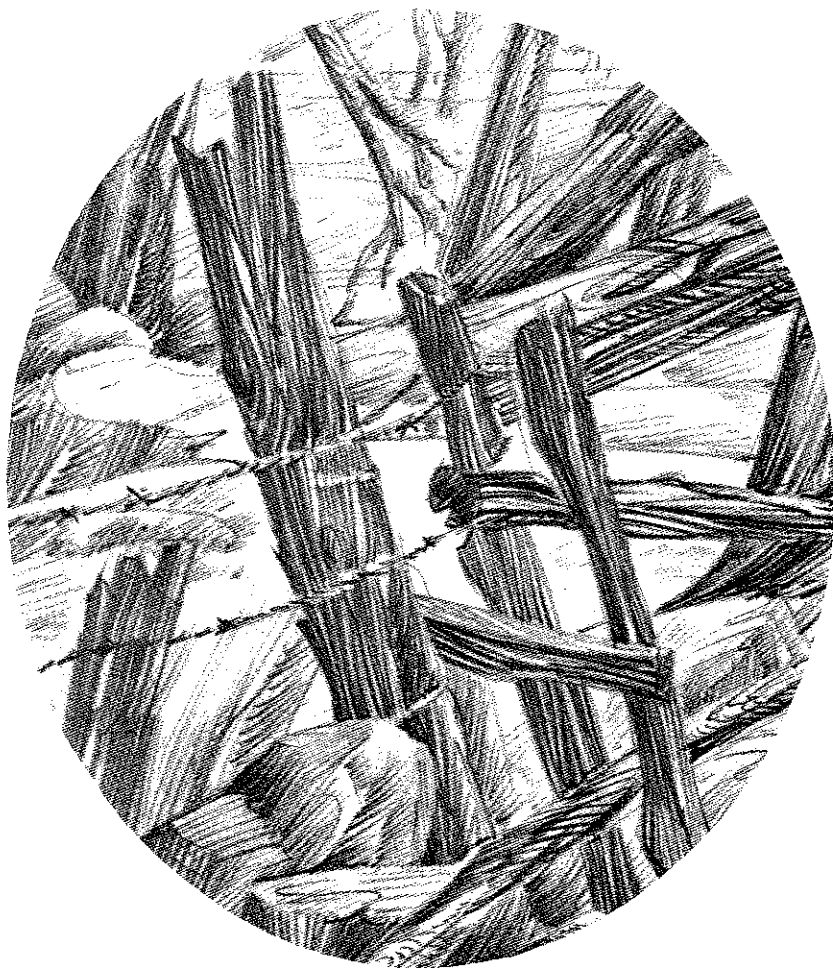
We followed . . . right into a row of dead. They had been laid there by troops, and over a very slight rise we could see the beginnings of a cemetery. The G. R. outfit before us, those poor dogfaces who had come in with the fighting troops, had done the beginnings. The holes were dug and filled in ragged lines. When they had to move out, they left the cleaning up to us, and they left what turned out to be almost one hundred bodies within 200 yards of the area.

We picked them up, began our burial details and vomited our insides out at times.

It was the faces of these dead GIs. It was their faces that hurt the most. Some stared wide-eyed; others had died in the middle of a scream, and their mouths hung open. Others had no face at all.

After a while, I heard a noise breaking the heavy silence hanging around me as I went about recording. To my left, Coogan was doing his job, but from deep inside him someplace came low guttural groans as from a man in pain. He was a man in pain, as we all were.

Eventually, as the days dragged on, our loathing for our job increased, but it was not the sight of dead and torn bodies that bothered us most anymore. It was that there had to be any dead at all.



It was horrifying to think of how life could be snuffed out on foreign soil, far from home. It was the thinking about the possessions we stuffed into bags. It was seeing them and knowing that even as we lowered young bodies into graves, there were people at home who did not yet know they were dead. Only we knew; only we gagged from the stench and the horror of seeing young guys who would never again play ball, chase girls, kiss their mothers and wives or girl friends.

So the war went for us. Not many of us were killed, but we died in different ways. The work was nightmarish, and it ate at our hearts. The smell was at times almost unbearable. We stuffed our noses with cotton and wore cloth across our faces.

There were times when I, in sorting possessions to be sent home to next of kin, had to read bits of letters the dead man carried about. Words of a loved one leapt off the pages and brought forth emotions that I had difficulty dealing with.

During the first two months, none of us did very much talking. We seemed to be robots doing a job we never could quite understand. As time passed, we finally started to see each other again and speak to one an-

other. Under it all, there was an odd sense of pride building up. When we looked at the lines of markers in one cemetery after another as we moved up following the action, we knew that if we were not doing this job we would be letting down every soul back home. We did not have to like it, but it had to be done, so we made up our minds to do it right.

And we did.

After a while, when the day's work was done, we would sit in groups in our area some hundred yards or so from the cemeteries, hearing the noises of battle just a short way ahead, and we began to unfreeze. Sometimes, when I wrote home, I could barely hide the words that had been gathering inside me.

The realization came one moonlit night, and strangely enough, to a handful of us as we stood looking at the lines of crosses and stars of David. We knew that there was a kind of pride within us now, something we could never have expected would ever come about. Although we never spoke, each knew what the other was thinking. Then, before long, every man in the group was standing, watching and understanding for maybe the first time.

From the gathering, the lieutenant stepped into the moonlight. He held his helmet at his side. His face was seemingly aged by many years. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head. As if on cue, the rest of us quietly slid down also. Not a word was spoken, but I was saying my first prayer for the dead who were buried there and for all of us who needed each other's prayers. After we arose, not one of us said anything about what had been going through his head in that moment. Nothing had to be said. We all knew that we were thinking the same thing, praying the same prayer . . . even those of us who had perhaps never before really prayed for anything . . .

Now here I am again, looking at the long rows of headstones in a cemetery thousands of miles from the ones our company built in Europe. At my feet is another marker, this one with the name of my buddy's son on it.

He was 21 when he died in Vietnam, the same age that we were when we saw that first body floating on the waters off Omaha Beach. I keep thinking about how sure I was in those terrible days that we were doing something that might just be helping to keep our sons . . . yet unborn . . . from being slaughtered in another war.