

Tom Sheehan

Oh, the Wounds He Wore, Death his Neighbor

(Jimmy the Meterman)

Small-eyed, small-eared, a mole perched like an ace of spades on one eyelid, a mastoid-depressed void behind one of those ears, pale of complexion, shoulders it seemed worn down by weights almost too ponderous for life, Jimmy Griffith was the essence of obscurity as he leaned on the bar of the Vets Club. All members knew Jimmy by name and by sight, but few had ever heard him say much more than a good morning or a goodnight, or "I'll have my second beer now, Al," or "Brownie," if Brownie Latefox was on duty. This was the two-a-day ritual at the end of walking his route about town, measuring water consumption, reading the meters down in fieldstone cellars or the utility rooms of newer bungalows. Read the meters, jot the numbers, cheat a bit for a friendly face, or go a step further, like disconnecting a meter for six months at a time, not a soul at the water department or in the confines of Town Hall ever the wiser. Nobody knew how happy Jimmy was to have the job, nobody in God's creation. Or why.

Slab Glasko, dues paid up for eternity, overt proof that all of life's complexities merge mostly in personalities difficult to up-grade, did not like Jimmy Griffith for some reason unknown to the other members of the Vets Club. A big, boisterous guy with shoulders of a long-time lobsterman, mouthy, often insolent to visitors or strangers, Slab found Jimmy a suitable target for what always ailed his own person; too much silence about, too little noise, some part of life threatening to skip past him. "Goddam, let's have some music here. Perk the sleepy chickens. Wake up, world! Get off'n that effin' perch, boy! Life is here."

Slab's eyes seemed overactive below his dark brows, the forehead broad as an ax face, his ears, on close examination, a bit broad even for that prominent brow. He bodily ached for noise, for center stage or spotlight's glow, all essentially accountable, and agreeable to him, in one man's life. As he would say whenever queried on motive or outlook, "Life is noisy and you damn well better make some noise while you're on this side of the grass." That philosophy was always an opener for his wartime exploits to be expanded into the conversation, subtle as crutches or an aluminum walker. "I tell you this, when this old boy was in Paris with the *Third Armored*, everybody in town knew Slab Glasko was around. Turned that town on its goddamn righteous Frenchie ear, I did. I'll bet a few Glasko genes are still afloat over there." Whatever container he grasped at hand would be emptied, dramatically, acute as punctuation. And then, with such pronouncements in place or echoing, his hugely knotted, salt-forged fist would slam on the bar loud as a keg falling off a trucker's tailgate, the vibrations mobilizing to the end of the countertop.

People often said Jimmy Griffith could tell what kind of activity, dependent on water, took place in a house. Probably could write a book or two, some of them said; who showered often and who didn't, who pooled or who didn't, why some lawns were much greener than others. For forty years he had been on the same job, since he had come out of the final noise in Europe in 1945 a tired Dogface. Meek-looking upon sight, a loner, un-

married it promised forever, Jimmy was often seen in season fishing with a fly line at the back waters of the Saugus River on Saturday mornings, waders stretched to his crotch. Other off days or holidays he'd be that bent over figure digging for clams on the tidal marsh flats near the end of Bris-tow Street or mornings after storms scrounging for beached quahogs on the littered sands where the Atlantic dumped the mosaic of its own debris. Content to be alone Jimmy was, not a talker, and never a mixer. At no time did he ever spout any brand of politics left or right, or deliver any personal exploits of his younger days, but hung gray and stuck in neutral gear and almost out of sight in just about every situation, mostly accepted for what he was, Jimmy the Meterman, a numbers reader, of small account.

Slab would keep up his pageantry. "You were in the friggin' army, Jimmy? That really amazes me. In my army? In my very own army? In Europe against the Heinies, the invincible Heinies? The Panzers. Germany's best, along the hedgerows? You a cook or what? You ever get in the combat zone where the real war was, down between those bushes?" The dark green Heineken bottle emptied itself down his throat. A few of the old members, stilled forever, were prompted to turn away, the ones who sought their own special silence with applejack or schnapps or a cutting ale, who left Gold Beach or Omaha Beach or the Anzio beachhead where they had found it, back in Europe, or Kwajalein out on the wide-blue. Brownie, slow to anger, yet with wild gray hair at odds with décor, cheeks like some brought-back Mescalero warrior, moving resolutely behind the bar, a sense of timing working his frame, said to Jimmy, "Ready for your second, Jim?" He'd have him out of here before Slab could get going, turning for the home stretch; three more beers and Slab'd be on fire for the night.

Jimmy didn't answer. Slab slammed the bar right beside him, thunderous as a sledgehammer. "Ain't talking again tonight, Jimbo? Jeezus, man, you give me a big puzzle. I keep trying to figure what the hell you did in The Big Two. You're like one a them culls crawls off into the corner of the tank watching the world go by. You gotta do some jivin', Jimmy." He turned and smiled at a few *Third Armored* cohorts idling on stools, real Slab fans that would appreciate his turn of a phrase. *Jivin' Jimmy* made him laugh out loud. "The world is full a culls, Jimmy. You gotta make distance, make time." He noticed Brownie standing at the end of the bar, staring openly at him, those high cheekbones shining with their particular dark varnish, the eyes dark as muzzles in the brush. Sliding down the bar to his pals at the bar, Slab muttered a loud aside, "Shit quiet again tonight, boys. Shit quiet." He would not look back at Brownie Latefox, once *the* very top soldier in the entire *Big Red One*.

Jimmy finished his second beer and slid off the stool. With a deft pat on Brownie's hand, he headed for the door, leaving a whole nightlong conversation packed into the solitary gesture. Brownie said, "See you at the parade, Jimmy." Waving a hand over his sloped shoulders, Jimmy slipped into the late evening that swallowed him up wholly and immediately. The small town of Saugus, accepting night and all that came with it, waited on him in the gathering darkness.

Slab muttered an unintelligible remark making his pals laugh unnaturally loud. Brownie, thinking they'd laugh at a cough, pulled five empties

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

off the bar and wiped down that section of the bar top. Staring at the door Jimmy Griffith had passed through, he saw a few stars twinkling atop the parking lot out on the slow horizon, on the vast plain of night. The unforgotten war had been out there on that plain, small features of it leaping back at him even now, close to half a century later. A faded picture of Jimmy Griffith in army fatigues, somewhat fictional, possibly wry in its presentation, twisted in the back of his head, but he could not place Jimmy in an activity where those worn fatigues were common. The fished-for moment did not materialize, hard as he tried.



Memorial Day burst over the center of town, and the parade units bunched and lined up and headed out on the march, drums and bugles at a blaring cadence, twirlers prancing, pride dancing, and the crowd in exhilarating echo. A cool breeze walked in the air and sought company with hosts of balloons and winged and propeller-fixed toys and noisemakers of every sort and color. Young boys on bicycles, numerous as water bugs on Lily Pond, flitted through the crowd and along the parade route. The air was continuously brittle with trumpets and bugles and the ruffle of drums at a Monday morning's tattoo.

Slab Glasko, ill-fitted in an old Class A army uniform, buttons of his blouse at full strain, stood in the front line of the veterans group, chest out and shoulders back. Martial and galvanic music throbbed in his veins and the thrill of it forced him to stare into eyes along the march, challenging, seeking acceptance, demanding honor. There were non-veterans he knew who would not look up at him, and he found those in the ranks of watchers he was positive would never look him in the eye. The small pain at his hip did not bother him for one second. I was through a helluva lot more than this, he thought, thinking of his whole run through Europe, counting his scores. Long-known banker Ellis Milwood, standing smartly suited and elegant at one intersection, kept his gaze locked down at the pavement. Screw you, pal, Slab muttered, you couldn't know for one minute what it was like. His shoulders, squared to another degree, put him at another level. The crowd must love this, he said to himself, puffing his chest anew. He wished he could scream out the old cadence count alive and beating in his veins, the drumbeat of it in the back of his head. It was the way he nightly dreamed of convoys slashing across Europe, the *Third Armored*'s lance, him out front, parting the Wehrmacht like Moses at the Red Sea.

Then, in one quick glance through the crowd, he caught Jimmy Griffith at the entrance to the cemetery. Jimmy's eyes looked red, recently-wiped red, teary-eyed red. Slab fixed both eyes on Jimmy Griffith who slowly turned, found Slab's eyes, stared back. Cast in concrete came the stare. This was new for Slab, this move of the quiet man. Those reddened eyes did not waver for one second, and Slab noticed a set of the chin he had not seen before.

There was a small break in the parade's tempo. Slab could feel those eyes of near-mute Jimmy on him, and he swore every man, woman and child on the parade route could see it, could measure it. An icy chill at his neck said this wouldn't do. He walked over to Jimmy, put his arm over his shoulder in a feigned show of comradeship and whispered, "If you got

something to say to me, pal, spit it out like a man." That was telling him, cull of culs, flower on the wall. No way he come through Europe.

No sooner had Slab uttered the admonition to Jimmy than he felt Brownie Latefox at his side. Three up and three down for chevrons in his prime, almost immortal in the ranks, Brownie put his hand on Slab's shoulder. "Can I listen in or is this some more private shit going on?" Slab about-faced back to the march unit.

Brownie looked closely at Jimmy. "What's the matter, Jim? You look like hell run over you."

"I was down there for a while earlier," Jimmy said, nodding toward Riverside Cemetery. "I got a couple of special buddies down there." Brownie could feel leverage in the air. "And there's another one they never found," Jimmy offered, the final comment of his essay.

A few hours later, at the bar, Slab carrying on about how great the day was, how much the whole town paid honor to those who marched in the parade in their old uniforms, Jimmy Griffith started on his fourth beer, precarious and unsure.

"This is our day, baby." Slab waved a Heineken bottle in the air. "You hear the applause and shouting when we went by? Great day in the friggin' morning, wasn't it? Our day, baby, our day, for all the shit we went through. For all the hard times, for all the shit and shinola and rat ass sergeants and green-ass second louies we had to listen to and take crap from and pick up after. Today, this it it! This is our day, baby." The Heineken spilled all over his ill-fitting uniform. His *Third Armored* pals laughed and slapped him on the back.

His fourth beer gone, the glass empty but standing as a totem, Jimmy Griffith spun on his stool. At the end of the bar, four frothing Budweisers in his hands, Brownie Latefox snapped to attention.

As if changing his mind, or his approach to the matter, Jimmy leaned back on the bar, rested his elbows on it, only slightly less obscure than usual, but only for the moment. The small eyes, now bred of trouble, were hard as marbles, the concrete still in his chin. "You know what you are, Polack?" His voice was different, cutting for the first time ever. "You are one big loudmouth. You're all asshole. You have been ever since the first word you ever said in here. Why don't you smarten up and realize this day isn't for us, not for us who came back. It's for the guys who didn't come back. Like a couple of my pals down there in Riverside counting up on forty years or so. Don't go waving the flag on me, pal, or stuffing your friggin' ribbons in my face. It don't work here." He drank off his last swig right from the bottle, placed it on the counter, spun on his heels and walked out before Slab, mouth ajar, could say a word.

When Slab found his voice, telling his pals, "That little peckerhead probably never fired a shot in his life," Brownie was standing at the end of the bar, his arms folded across his chest, nodding assent to some internal thought. The next evening he went to his nephew and asked a favor. Two whole months later, the club quiet for the most part, no words at all exchanged between Jimmy and Slab, Brownie's nephew came into the club and handed him a piece of paper.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

"This guy knew Jimmy in Europe, Brownie. He was evacuated and spent almost three years in a hospital. Says Jimmy was up for a medal and big time. Here's his phone number out in New Mexico. He was company clerk until he was hit and shipped home. Says Jimmy was kind of quiet but exploded a couple of times. You ought to talk to him." He handed Brownie a copy of the American Legion magazine. "I started with this. You can see it in there. A couple of guys wrote back who remembered Jimmy being in their outfit. This Alcindo was one of them. He's your best bet."

•

"This is Brownie Latefox calling, from Massachusetts. My nephew gave me your phone number. I was top-kick of the Big Red One, just for name-dropping. I'm interested in Jimmy Griffith, a pal of mine. I'd like to clear some things up about him."

"Kind of a loner, he was, Sarge. Pleased to meet you, by the way. Never said much, Jimmy, but popped a couple of times. I typed up his citation the platoon louie had written."

"Citation? Why didn't we ever hear about it?" Brownie was suddenly aware of a string of snafus he had been involved in where paperwork went off the board for one reason or another.

"Jeez, Sarge," Alcindo said, "when I was bailed out of there I thought I was on my last breath. It was a long haul. Still catches me sometimes, but better than a lot of guys had it."

"What was it?" Brownie said, as if nothing Alcindo could say would be unknown to him.

"Mortar, they told me, right beside the orderly room."

"That's a messy lot. The paperwork get processed?"

"Don't know that either, Sarge, but I know the old man didn't like Jimmy a whole lot."

"What do you mean?"

"Stuck it to him a few times when Jimmy didn't do a thing to deserve it. Just was quiet all the time, not the old man's type. He liked the bluster, the PR kind of guy. He lives out in San Marcos right now. Saw his name a few times in the Legion mag. Still a gunner of sorts, big time. I never did like him. Not for what he did to Jimmy, that was small peanuts, but the way he generally was, mostly asshole if you know the type. I've met a dozen of him since then. You kind of remember them, not that they're supposed to be memorable." He chuckled. "We hadda have 'em. Made the world go round."

Brownie said, "He probably ditched it. I've seen it done. Let the war lose it. I'd love to have a copy of it, but that's too much to expect. Remember who the louie was?"

"Never made it back, Sarge. Took a round right off the helmet. But it may not be a total loss."

"What do you mean?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

"Well, long after I got home, a train came into town one day and the stationmaster calls me and there's a duffel bag on it and it's mine. The Army sent it to me. It's been sitting in the back shed for years. I wore a few of the shirts one time, but there's some papers there I've hardly ever looked over. Might have something in there. I know I had an extra copy of the citation. I'll look for you."

Brownie gave him his phone number. "Anything comes up, any kind of a reference, give me a call, okay."

"You got it, Sarge. Say hello to Jimmy for me. Tell him I still remember him, even if he was mostly quiet."

•

"Mr. George Croughmartin, please." Brownie had dialed the San Marcos phone number." He was alone in the club, the bar not yet opened, and the air vaguely stale and cut with a drift of ammonia, shadows sitting in corners like lepers.

"This is he." The voice was strong, level, and authoritative. "Who is calling?"

"We've never met, sir, but I was top soldier in the First Division, Big Red One, Europe, 1944, 1945."

"Well, sergeant, this is a pleasant surprise, old comrades in arms. What can I do for you?" Brownie detected roundness in the voice, a voice without edges. He'd already constructed a face.

"It's going back a long way, sir, but do you remember a citation or commendation written up for a Private James Griffith in one of your platoons, November 1944?"

"Is this one of those make-up calls, telling us we did not do our jobs as officers? I sort of resent that, sergeant." Now there was a distinct edge to the voice. Brownie could feel it right through the phone. Immediately he knew he was accurate on the facial structure. It was like television.

"Do you remember, sir? It's kind of important."

"That is a long time ago, sergeant. Memories fade, lose their luster, go out like the tide but never come back. I really do not recall the situation. This Griffith must have been not quite memorable, as I see it."

"Well, I was hoping you would remember, sir, because I've been in contact with the company clerk, Alcindo Requerto. He was wounded, evacuated, but remembers it fully and is pretty sure he has a copy of the citation come his way in a duffel bag the army shipped home for him long after hostilities were over. Says he probably kept it for a specific reason, but I don't have any knowledge of that reason." Insinuation was a tool in itself; use it as leverage "I expect a call from him shortly. We are going to make amends for a grave oversight, for whatever reason it happened."

"This Griffith, was he a quiet loner, not much of a soldier? A person of small stature. I might remember him at that."

"The citation, sir. It was apparently never processed."

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

"The rigors of war, Sergeant, and the inevitable losses in every corridor." Now, thought Brownie, listen to that shit. He's going back on himself.

"One way or another, sir, we're going to get Jimmy Griffith his due. Any recollection of the incident at all?"

"Might have had something to do with him retrieving some wounded personnel. Yes, and going back someplace and getting a couple of radios and the weapons left behind. Those were cataclysmic days, sergeant, as you well know. Something just fell by the wayside."

I bet, thought Brownie. "You have any personal records could shed some light on this, sir? It's long overdue."

"I will undertake a search, sergeant, you can be assured. Perhaps this company clerk, this Alcindo, might come up with something. Does he think or does he know he has some reference?" The edge in the voice was like an open book exam, no questions unanswered in it. Don't get caught out in the open, it said. Cover your ass, it said. No bad press, it said. Go with the flow, it said.



Brownie pinned a copy of the faded but original recommendation on the wall of the club, at one end of the bar. Alcindo Requerto had found a copy in the duffel bag in his back shed. Croughmartin had been pushed into remedial action. Jimmy hadn't gotten his medal yet, but it was in the works. Slab didn't say much any more, pulling into a minor shell, then stopped coming by the club altogether.

Jimmy moved on to three or four beers a night, the club now quiet, solitude and peace there generally for the asking, and one day, in April 1990, the trout working their silver and blue magic in the Saugus River way up behind the Cedar Glen Golf Course, a groundskeeper spotted the body of a man face down in the water. Jimmy Griffith, PFC with eventual Silver Star, the real quiet man, fly fisherman, meterman, had left this life, perhaps long after he might have left it.

Brownie Latefox had one of the members make two oak frames, one for the faded document, and one for the real thing when it came along. The second one hung on the wall empty, for over a year, before the official citation was inserted.

On 27 November 1944 Private James P. Griffith made three trips through a ravine that was under a relentless hail of enemy fire to rescue three seriously wounded comrades, working tirelessly for three hours to save the lives of the three men. Private Griffith also returned with a radio and three weapons the men had been using when wounded. Again the very next day Private Griffith left his covered position to cross terrain open and without cover in the face of heavy enemy fire to administer first aid to a comrade. Determining that the wounded man could not be moved without a litter, and realizing that the company was about to make a withdrawal, he remained with the wounded man, despite the withering enemy fire, for over ten hours until the company objective was captured. The gallantry and intense devotion to his fellow soldiers displayed by Private Griffith exemplify the finest traditions of the American soldier.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

The original commendation was signed by 1st Lt. Royce Abnodder, Inf., Company C, 414th Infantry, United States Army (to which Alcindo Requer-to had appended *KIA 17 December 1944 RIP*).

Every time Brownie Latefox turned on the tap he thought about Jimmy Griffith. He could see the small eyes, the mole on one eyelid, could see him twist an empty and hear him say, softly, so as to disturb nobody else, "I'll have the next one, Brownie." Slab Glasko never entered his mind.