

DAVID FROST

As Sheep To War

A memoir

Amid the dust and flies of the yards Dad and I herded the nervous sheep up the race and into the shed. This was a mob of two toothies that were kept isolated in the small house paddock – they were *the killers* - wethers earmarked for our table. The sun was falling toward the horizon, as was my final year of school within the security of home and family farm.

A pair of crows circled overhead gliding on the thermal eddies of heat and dust. They sheered off and crouched in a large wattle tree gazing down at us like vultures from their eyrie. Their beady eyes mirrored their expectations of the feast to come as if they knew it was the fortnightly animal sacrifice that would provide us all with protein for a week.

In the holding pen the mob backed into the security of the darkest corner averting their gentle eyes. Their leader gazed at me with a frightened but obstinate stare, stamping his hooves. I lunged, tossing the nearest wether onto his haunches. With a strong grip I dragged him by his front legs out onto the boards. I could feel his soon-to-be stilled heart pumping fearfully against my arms and chest.

Dad stood gazing out the window across the dry and parched landscape while dressing the sharp edges of the curved and intimidating butcher's knife along his personal sharpening stone. My brothers and I were never allowed to touch his customised tools.

“Drag him over here so we can get this over with”, he mumbled in his offhand way. This job was a part of life on the farm from which he took neither pleasure nor pain.

I placed the terrified but silent sheep in front of Dad who with one practised movement locked the bewildered animal between his strong knees and pulled its head back baring its defenceless throat. With a slow and deliberate motion Dad plunged the razor-sharp knife into the back of the oesophagus drawing it away from his body and severing the blood vessels and aorta in one swift and skilful action. He wrenched the still struggling animal's head to one side allowing the life blood to gush fountain-like away

and down through the gratings where the gore was fought over by the snarling pack of opportunistic sheepdogs.

The now lifeless animal was hoisted clear of the floor and swiftly disembowelled. The earthy smell emanating from the intestines filled the shed as the guts plopped out and flowed onto the floor enshrouded in their own steam.

“Quick boy put his guts in the bag and take ’em out into the ferns and feed those noisy bloody crows. Mind you keep the dogs shut in, don’t want ’em getting hydatids.” Dragging my blood spattered boots across the dark stained pine floor, I obeyed my father.

The murder of crows had multiplied. Word must have got around that their food supply was about to improve. Pandemonium erupted as they croaked their harsh caws and swooped like belligerent hyenas on the pile of steaming intestines. The guts were shredded by strong beaks and quickly gulped down. Only traces of blood and shit remained.

On my reluctant return to the shed I could see how Dad had placed the sheep: heart and lungs to one side, liver, kidneys and head to the other side of the clean old bed sheet that had once kept the monsters away from me at night.

“The dogs will enjoy his pump and lights and mum will make us sheep’s head soup tonight. You and your brothers can ’ave lamb’s fry and onions for your breakfast tomorra.” We placed the carcass into the meat bag and hoisted it into the cool air under the big tank stand.

“Should be a cool enough night so the meat’ll set by morning so’s I can cut up our half and whack it in the fridge. The Westies will be over in the arvo to collect their half.”

As I sat in the shade with my back against the corrugated iron wall I reflected upon the cycle of life as it affected my family, our neighbours, and our dogs and yes the crows. Nothing was to be spared including the life of an innocent but bred-to-be-slaughtered animal. This was not an enjoyable day on the farm, but it was a necessary one.

Hundreds of sailors and Marines in various stages of inebriation were returning to their ships from a night of liberty in Olongopo City. The legendary red dust had clung to their faces and white and khaki uniforms. They shuffled along dragging their feet through the security gates that contained a labyrinth of grey ships and buildings that was the US 7th Fleet Base, Subic Bay, Philippines. Michael Caine, the actor, had once called Olongopo “the most sinful city in the world”. A claim no doubt supported by the hundreds of sailors and Marines that nightly went on shore leave there prior to returning to the war that rumbled and festered just over the way.

I contemplated the boredom of my duty, Senior NCO of the Australian Navy Shore Patrol contingent from HMAS Hobart. The reflective heat rose from the tarmac and shimmered around the gates of the US Navy’s Naval Police Office and holding cells. I crushed out the remnants of my cigarette and watched the US Marines on duty at the security gates. They stood at ease, resplendent in dress uniform: white cap, medals, Royal Blue trousers with their distinctive blood stripes. They herded their countrymen through with stiff military clockwork movements, their white gloved hands directing the men toward their moored ships or liberty boats that would ferry them to their respective ships

anchored in the bay. This movement of men reminded me of herding sheep into the yards and their final destination, the wood fired oven of our farm kitchen. For these men their journey would return them to the furnace called Vietnam.

I had been reminded most of our returning men where the Hobart was berthed. In the main they were a happy mob as they grinned their stale beery breath into my face. They were good humoured although many were extremely drunk. They knew their mess mates would get them safely home.

When I returned to the Naval Police Office for a coffee I observed the US Navy and Marine Enlisted Men swaggering around the office bragging about the length and capability of their custom made eighteen-inch batons whilst at the same time resting their right hands provocatively on their holstered side arms. These were the full time Naval Police, or hard hats, drawn from, of what seemed to me, loud mouthed toughs of Navy & Marine volunteers. Their reputations were of hit first and talk later.

I sat in a corner pondering the differences of our two militaries whilst both our countries continued to share involvement in the Vietnam War. This was 1968 and our tour on the Gun Line was drawing to its inevitable close. As I lounged against the wall I pictured the golden glow of the sunrise on the old coat hanger when we would sail up Sydney Harbour with the warmth of the Australian sun on our backs. I reflected on the few beers “up the Cross” and the next day boarding the train at Central then back to the farm for some much needed R&R. I felt the change couldn’t come soon enough. No more the circling storm clouds of war over the Gulf of Tonkin for me – at least not until next time. The hard hats continued to pace.

Feeling warm and relaxed I headed outside to observe the final throes of liberty. I watched the leftovers of the night’s celebrators as they staggered through the gates. Most were unaware that they were under the watchful eye of the “dress blue” uniformed Marines on the gates and the hard hats that had sauntered out to witness the closure of the night’s revelry.

The final mob of sheep was heading up the race.

The majority of stragglers were khaki clad Marines from USS Princeton – a troop carrier that five days prior had lifted off the remnants of their battalion from just below the DMZ. The battalion had taken heavy losses – it was the TET Offensive and the North Vietnam Army regulars were on the march into the South. Battle wearied warriors, minds jangling from personal horrors and bolstered by the local San Miguel beer, created a toxic mix.

A small dishevelled Marine crabbed his way to the gate only to be confronted by a tall Marine in dress blue shouting “Pull yourself together, you should be ashamed of yourself, don’t you know you are in the Marine Corps”.

“Get fucked you piss ant, I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire”, came the shattered response.

The war of words escalated into two opposing minds; one who felt the power, beauty and inbuilt pride of the Corps as he strutted peacock-like in his dress uniform – the other suffering battle fatigue and the realisation that life in the Marines was not as he had imagined during his time in the San Diego boot camp. Loss and anger marked his face. “You’re just like those instructors back in boot camp strutting around, except they at least had done some hard time – not like you, you non-combatant bloodsucker. You

stand in front of me, me,” he shouted thumping his chest, “full of your own piss and importance whilst the rest of us grunts put our fucked-up lives on the line every day. I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire – on second thoughts I will.”

With that he dragged his penis from his grimy khaki pants and urinated on the blue pants leg of the sentry – darkening the blood stripe.

“Get this man and lock the fucker up,” screamed the sentry as he attempted to wipe away his anger and embarrassment with his white gloved hand.

The watching hard hats raced forward, encircled the recalcitrant sheep and herded him across the tarmac into the confines of the Naval Police Office. Their batons drilled into the captured Marine’s back as he was forced by the pack up to the high desk where the Senior NCO sat, long baton across his knees.

“Bring that man forward”, he barked, conveying all the power of his position. This was his stage and he was the star.

Two of the NCO’s khaki-clad subordinates prodded the captive towards the high desk and then released him. The detainee staggered forward only maintaining his balance by placing his hands on the desk for support.

“Get your hands off my desk, you southern shit”, roared the overseeing Petty Officer, bringing down his baton in a knuckle shattering crash across the captive’s fingers. The dogs rushed in yelling abuse and raining blows with their batons across his back. He was upended by two Marines and speared, head-first, onto the concrete floor.

I stood back, transfixed in this dark little outpost of the USA, as the hard hats meted out their particular version of “Justice and the American Way” on the prostrate form of their captive Marine. I wanted to cover my eyes and my ears against the sight and sound of batons being landed with practised precision about the poor bastard’s lower back.

“Thwack, Thwack”, they screamed in time with their blows, “this’ll teach you – you little shit, you can’t disrespect your fellow Marines, or your uniform, and get away with it.” Gasping like slaving dogs going in for the kill on a defenceless sheep, the hard hats kept at him. The Senior NCO watched from his eyrie. Finally they dragged the unconscious and bloodied Marine into the holding cell, switched off the lights, turned and locked the door behind them. High fives all round.

The overpowering smell of excrement, blood and vomit crept from under the cell door like an echo from my past life on the farm. A dark cloud fell across the room. I staggered outside seeking fresh air and understanding – but there was to be no understanding.

As I sat back in the moonlight against the still warm concrete wall I reflected upon the horrors I had just witnessed. If they could do this to a fellow Marine, what would they do to the enemy?