

New Nonfiction from Charles Stromme: “The Army Profoundly Regrets”

1972

I was back from a year of flying helicopters in Vietnam. The Army gave me a make-work job at Ft. Riley, Kansas, a base over-crowded with dejected Vietnam returnees. I hated it there, where they said, “Custer told us not to change a thing until he gets back.”

I was angry and disillusioned and clueless. A major called out to me in a hallway. “Captain, you’re going to be the notification officer next month.” He was an old major, a mustang combat vet in his last duty station. He wasn’t a bad guy and we had been working in the same battalion for several months without incident. But he hated me for being an aviator. I hated him for not being one.

“You’ll be on call for a month. When a new killed-in-action (KIA) report comes in you’ll visit the family with the chaplain and you’ll give the official first notice.”

I couldn’t bear the thought of inflicting that kind of pain on the good family of a good soldier. I was raw from the war. I didn’t want to live the back end of events that I had witnessed in Vietnam. My emotions scared me and brought back ugly memories. “No sir,” I said, “I won’t do that.”

He looked surprised. Likely no young captain had ever told him that he wouldn’t obey an order. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Do you understand that this is not a discussion, it’s an order?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I understand. But I won’t do that

job.”

“I can take this to the battalion CO if you want.” That was a profoundly underwhelming threat. I didn’t care, period, and I wasn’t going to do it. He brought out the heavy artillery: “I can court-martial you for this.”

“Yes sir, I know. You’ll do what you have to do but that won’t change my decision. I will not, under any circumstances, be the notification officer.”

I had unintentionally created a real problem for the major. He could, indeed, take this to the CO. He could certainly bring court-martial charges against me, charges against which there could be no defense. If he did, though, it would also bring to light his inability to control an officer under his command.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he said. In the Army that means “I’m going to give you some time to consider the error of your ways before I decide on your punishment.”

We did talk again a few days later, but there was nothing for me to reconsider. My mind was made up. I wouldn’t carry out his order. I understood that I would be punished and I would accept whatever punishment he and the CO deemed appropriate. It would surely be a court-martial, I thought.

But he surprised me by asking, “Can we reach a compromise?”

I was suspicious. Compromise is not the Army way. “What kind of compromise?”

“We need a presentation officer for the rest of the month. There are no presentations scheduled. If you’ll take the job, I’ll forget about this problem.”

A presentation officer is not quite as bad as being a notification officer. The presentation officer visits the family of a KIA soldier after they have already been given the news. He delivers whatever medals and awards the soldier had

earned and expresses the regrets and condolences of the Army.

There were only a few days left in the month and the major, after all, had said there was nothing scheduled. It looked like I might skate on this yet. "OK, sir," I said, "you've got a deal."



Tracer round trajectories, Vietnam war. (U.S. Air Force photo)

The next day an order came down. I was to make a presentation in three days to a family in southwest Kansas. My first thought was to refuse that order too, but I had made a deal. I was honor-bound to carry out my part of it.

The newly-grieving family deserved more than the Army offered in the way of condolences and they deserved someone better than me. They deserved someone who knew exactly what to do. I was terrified.

I picked up the meager package of medals and awards that the KIA soldier had coming and the orders and citations that go with them. I would travel to wherever the family asked me to be, in this case to their home town in southwest Kansas, in time for the funeral. I would make an awards presentation.

It's easier to describe than to do. No one tells you what to say. They just give you the medals, some dry military orders and a grieving family. You're supposed to honor and comfort them, even if you're only a dumb-kid captain like I was, with no experience in this sort of thing and no idea how to do what so obviously needed to be done.

It took most of a day to drive to the small farming town. Before I checked in at the local motel I drove out to find the family home where I was supposed to be in the morning. It was way, way out of town, a very large farm on flat wheat land that stretched forever. I went back to town, put on some civvies, ate and turned in for the night.

I set a 4 AM wake-up time, common for me in those days. I had worn my Army greens on the way down, with ribbon bars, wings and service patches – First Division on my left shoulder, First Cavalry on my right. Today I would wear my dress blues, complete with full medal display. Even on a modestly decorated soldier like me, that uniform looked impressive. I loved the silver pilot's wings that symbolized the one great achievement of my life. I had paid dearly for them. Shave, instant motel coffee, re-spit shine my best low quarters (shoes, to the rest of the world) to a mirror finish and I was ready, or so I thought.

I drove out to the farm again. It was just past dawn but already a crowd of family, neighbors and friends was gathering. I parked in an out-of-the-way spot. Several men detached themselves from the main group and walked over. "Are you Captain Stromme?" one asked.

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“We saw you drive by last night. Why didn’t you come in? We thought you would spend the night.”

Spend the night? That wasn’t something I had imagined.

“Well, come on in. We’re just starting breakfast. The newspaper editor will be a little bit late and we don’t want to start before he gets here.” The editor was a long-time family friend. People don’t really come and go in small Kansas farming communities; they come and stay. The families had been close for generations. It wouldn’t do for the paper not to cover the ceremony.

People came to meet me and shake my hand. Some asked about my patches and medals and wings, congratulating me for things they imagined I had done and making small talk, getting to know me.

The young soldier had been named Donald. I met his grieving parents right away. His mother shyly welcomed me, then went back to work in the kitchen with the other ladies. The father’s welcome was a little warmer. What I didn’t understand was that the fuss everyone was making over me wasn’t about me at all. No, it was because I was a stand-in for their Donald. This was the welcome home that he would never have.

I sat with the father and some other men at a table reserved for the men-folk, a long, worn, heavy plank-topped table that could easily have been 100 years old. The women had their own tables; I caught several of them peeking over at me. They were normal in this world. I was the misplaced oddity.

Their men were normal, too. Most were brawny and muscled from a lifetime of hard work and heavy food, red-faced, calloused hands. Along with their wives they were straight out of Grant Wood’s painting *American Gothic*.

The coffee and breakfast were hot and good and I began to learn a few names. The father said, "So you were in the Infantry, too, like Donald?"

I nodded, swallowing. "Yes, sir. I was in the Infantry but I flew Huey helicopters. I didn't do any ground combat duty at all." And with apologies to my Infantry brothers, I still thank God for that. Most aviators do.

"Do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

"Well, sir, I'll do my best."

They asked me some ordinary questions. Where was I from, what did I do at Ft. Riley, what was Vietnam like?

What was Vietnam like? I still don't know, even though I had been there for 366 days minus an R&R in Hawaii. I had flown its skies at very low levels, walked in a couple of its cities, spoken to a few of its people. But that wasn't what they wanted to know. What they really wanted to know was "What is war like?" and "Why did Donald have to die?"

Then his father, cut from the same rough cloth as his neighbors, asked me, "What do you know about claymore mines?"

I was surprised by the question. I happened to know something about claymores, but it isn't a subject to be discussed lightly at breakfast. They are God-awful weapons, small, curved plastic packages of death on little steel legs. They explode violently when triggered, spraying 700 deadly steel balls in a broad arc. They have "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY" in raised letters on the front to remind GIs which way to point them when they're setting them out. I had been trained with them but I had never deployed one for real. It's not something that aviators often do.

I told them a little bit about claymores, though I didn't tell them all of that.

The father nodded. "Donald was killed by a claymore mine."

The room was silent, everyone looking at me and expecting... something. I was appalled, unable to say anything meaningful. What could I say? Not for the first time I lamely expressed my condolences.

"His coffin got here yesterday," the father said. I had already seen it, on its bier in the front room. "It was sealed, you know, but we got it open."

I thought, you opened your son's sealed coffin? They are sealed for very good reasons.

Grimly, he said, "It took us a while, but we finally got it open. He looked pretty good. We just took a peek from the shoulders up."

Donald had been cut in two by the claymore. They didn't see the bottom half. The people who prepare KIA bodies had apparently done a good job with his remains and his father wanted us to believe he'd seen what he hoped to see, the handsome young boy he had loved. But his eyes were full of stunned grief, and I wasn't sure even he could believe what he said.

He smiled a sad half-smile. "How 'bout I show you his room?"

I thought, "Please, God, let this be over."

The family had a huge basement. This was tornado country and most people had them. This one was finished in grand farm style. We entered Donald's basement bedroom. It was the room I would have slept in had I spent the previous night. Donald had left for Vietnam only a few weeks before. His room was fresh, clean, the bed made for him, or maybe for me. I imagined I could still smell a boy's scent.

He had earned a full-ride agriculture scholarship to Kansas State University, the leading aggie school in the region. K-

State is located in Manhattan, Kansas, not far from where I lived. Shortly before admission he had decided to enlist in the Army. You know, before it was too late to see any action.

They showed me his yearbooks, his sports pictures, prom pictures of Donald and his girlfriend. She wasn't there yet. They brought down his Future Farmers of America awards, his 4H projects and certificates, his award buckles, his letter sweater. All for me to see, to bear witness that Donald had lived, that Donald was a person worth remembering. What I saw was a freckle-faced boy, a parent's dream, and I thought of a father's cruel last view of his son.

The minister arrived. The editor was late and we waited for him as though we were waiting for royalty. When he finally arrived he took me aside, asking "Did they tell you we opened the casket? God, it was awful."

Then we gathered in the front room with Donald's casket. This wasn't the funeral. That would come later in the day in the family church, with sermon and music, then the burial. I would not attend. This was the farewell, though. This was coming over to visit Donald like they always had, to say good-bye in much the same way they had said good-bye to him a few weeks before. Some friends and family spoke, then it was my turn.

The Army does little enough for its men and women but one thing it does well is train them to be soldiers. I was, am, a product of that training. It, and luck, had kept me alive when nothing else could have. Unfortunately, no one had taken the time to train me to be a presentation officer. Where was the Army Training Manual for this situation? What did it say?

When the father introduced me, I panicked. I was at a complete loss for words. I had only a few things to work with: the few minor medals themselves, the dry orders that accompanied them and whatever I could think of to say on the spot. I had thought of some words while driving down the day before. I

even rehearsed them a couple of times in my motel room. I don't know if they were appropriate because I couldn't remember any of them.

I began, speaking directly to Donald's father but loud enough for the room: "The Army profoundly regrets the loss of your son." Where did that come from? What did it mean and why did I say it?

I spoke of the American commitment in Vietnam, the one in whose name their son and friend had died. I read the medal commendations, then shared what I knew about each of them. I was wearing nearly all of Donald's medals and more myself and I spoke of the comradeship in arms signified by those medals, pointing out his and my own in turn.

Finally I ran out of things to say. Almost. My ad hoc performance needed an ending but what do you say in those circumstances, to those people gathered there?

I handed Donald's father the small group of medals with their accompanying orders. The words I chose were "Sir, on behalf of your son's comrades in the United States Army, I salute you." Then I raised my hand and saluted, a smart Infantry officer salute or so I imagined, one that would impress the women and children.

Since I had made all this up, the father had no idea what, if anything, he was supposed to do. A silent awkward moment passed, then he stood and slowly raised his hand, callused and scarred from a lifetime of farming, and returned my salute as though we had practiced yesterday.

The minister spoke again, then we prayed for Donald, for all soldiers, for America, for ourselves. I made my excuses and left, not looking forward to the long drive home. The day had drained me, saddened me, used me up.

I wanted a drink, but that was no surprise. Alcoholics usually

do. I wanted to make love to my wife. Not out of lust or love. I owned some of both, certainly, but neither was in play now. No, I wanted her because I wanted to feel that I was human and alive, cleansed and renewed by the act and not in pieces in a stainless steel box forever in the ground. I didn't know how else to find that comfort. Mostly, I wanted to be held and loved, to be told that everything was going to be all right, that I would be OK. The Army doesn't tell you how to ask for that, either.

That 1972 day is long gone. Back then I thought I could see my entire life stretching out predictably before me. A career of some sort (the FBI, I thought), a home with 2.5 children, grand-kids eventually, strength and joy mixed with occasional sadness, and at the end the personal satisfaction of a life well lived. Nothing lay ahead for Donald. Everything lay ahead for me.