

JOLTED AWAKE

A picture was taken of a naked girl, just nine years old, fleeing down a road, her clothes burned off, clad only in fear and charred skin, crying, in panic and pain ...

So many pictures ... we lived a war on TV, on the pages of Life magazine ...

It was all a test, I guess, ordered to see which of us cared enough to say “hell no” - they found out - not enough, to avoid her agony ...

I don't recall what made me say “no more” that day ... the heat, the stink - a week of sweat on unbathed skin and rotting wet clothes ... being asked to kill ... no, told ...

I knew a guy from New York state, a would-be plumber drafted off the streets ... laying in wait ... a machine gunner. An ambush planned, him ordered to kill a crippled old man ... and he said, after squeezing off the rounds, what's a kid from Binghamton doing here, staining this ground ... it still messes with his head.

I got that it was my job to do as I was told, like my father, my uncle and cousins before ... but I guess I was made of weaker stuff. I mean, how I could fly, 8000 miles from home, to make someone die ... someone I didn't know ... to make all their loved ones cry ... so I said - to myself - one night “hell no ...”.

Next day, I said it aloud, frightened by the sound of my own words. They either didn't care or hear ... told me to say it again. I choked back my fear, fought back a tear, and said, “no more” ... The silence roared in my head, then “NO WHAT, soldier!” I couldn't speak ... “NO WHAT!” was bellowed again ... then, all red-faced and grim, he ordered me down, until I came to my senses again.

Riveted in fear, I couldn't move ... I did nothing, just stood - frozen, face-to-face with a hostile-eyed agent of an all-powerful state, determined in a mind-numbing randomness, that I was to create more photo ops ... make more kids flee, naked, on fire, down death's road ... all for freedom's sake.

A moment passed, an eternity. I could barely breathe, just enough to say, “No more,” more firmly now, certain that this was what life was all about ... the choices we make.

My headstone: Born,1946 – Jolted awake 1969.