

Barbara Barnard

Boots on the Ground

He sat at a table in the hallway of your high school, every day. His name was Kevin (or John or Tom, or her name was Jennifer). You were 17, getting ready to graduate in your home town of Fresno (or Freeport or North Platte, Birmingham or Fargo). Or, you were struggling to pay the bills and find child care, and your employer (McDonalds, or WalMart or Starbucks) did not pay enough to feed little Susie or to take little Salim to the doctor with his recurring ear infections.

Kevin slapped you on the back, greeted you like a man and a buddy, gave you the high five. You had long talks sometimes about life, about girls, about parents, about what it is to be a man. (Or, Jennifer talked boyfriends with you, kids, the salary, the benefits, the educational opportunities.)

You signed your name a few weeks before graduation (or when you got laid off at your job), dreaming of the bright future and the comradeship, the pride of accomplishment soon

to be enjoyed in your career in the Army (or Navy, Air Force or Marines). You dreamed of the Christmas (or Kwanzaa, Ramadan or Hanukkah) gifts your mom could buy for Ricky or Chung-Hee (or Susie, Azeriah, or John) this year, even though you would not be there to see their bright eyes when they unwrapped them. You thought of ear infections tended to, of prescription drug coverage, of affordable housing.

Your country needed you, he said, and his eyes beamed with pride as you signed on the line. You were inducted in June and headed to boot camp at Fort Benning (or Great Lakes, Lackland or Parris Island) for your 9 weeks (or 8 weeks or 12 weeks) of training to be a soldier (or sailor, airman or marine).

You learned the seven core values (and teamwork, discipline, and close combat). You practiced rappelling, marching and marksmanship (or swimming drills, chin ups, use of antipersonnel fragmentation mines, or conditioning through M9 Weapons Live Fire).

You became proficient with the hand grenade, the M136, and the M249 (or the M16 and the 12 gauge, or martial arts and bayonet training, detaching the bayonet knife for effective hand-to-hand engagement and elimination of the enemy). You call Kevin (or John, Tom or Jennifer) but he doesn't pick up the call as he always did before. You call again, puzzled, and leave a

message telling him of your triumphs, of new friendships forged through shared challenges, of your orders you just received to ship out. Maybe the message got lost, so you call and leave another. Kevin never, ever calls back.

It's August 2007 (or March 2009, December 1968, or June 1970), and you ship out for Basra (or Bagram, Khe sahn or the South China Sea). Your mother cries and holds you too long; your dad (if you have a dad) grips your hand and says "Go get-um, son. Make us proud." (or "Son, it's not too late; I'll drive you to Canada. Tonight; we'll go to Canada tonight," or "They're lying to you, Son. It's not like they say. Son, don't make the same mistake I did," or "Honey, I know I said all those things about serving our country, but I meant for your brother to go, not you. Not my little girl!"). Or, your mother shifts the baby to her other hip while your toddler clings to you, "Mommy, Mommy. Don't go, Mommy!" Your heart is pounding against the inside of your olive (or tan cammy or olive cammy or navy blue) uniform.

You mount the plank (I mean, gangway) to your destroyer, the USS Gregory DD 747 (or the ramp of the C17 Globemaster transport plane, or the steps of the Boeing 747). You turn back and wave. When shipping

out for a war zone, even on
commercial airliners, families
are allowed to come to the
loading gate. Don't look back.
You look back; your daughter's
face is slick and twisted with tears.
Her grandmother rocks her to and
fro, as she once rocked you. Marines
don't cry.

In the end (or middle) of this
true story, your boots hit the ground
at Camp Lejeune or Fort Dix, Okinawa
or Subic Bay or Pearl Harbor. But
you're only on one week's leave for
R&R. Now that you're away from the
exploding ordnance (the deadly boredom,
the deadly booby traps, the dead buddy
that was talking to you just the moment
before he was hit), you don't know how
you can go back and you don't know
how you can go back and you'd do
anything not to go back. Anything.
Anything.

Or, your boots hit the ground
at Lejeune or Fort Dix, or you make
your way down the gangway disembarking
in San Diego, balancing your sea bag
on one twitching shoulder, your hearing
shot; you were a gunner's mate, so that is
to be expected. Or, you turn or you
think you're turning, on your side—no,
the impact turned you, you're lying on your
side now; the shell hit only a few feet from
where you rested against the tracks of the
APC catching a smoke at dusk. There had
been incoming the day before but none so
far today. You blink and blink through a
haze of red; no, it's gray now, gray; your boot,
your boots on the ground nearby, one
tilted toward you, a shaft of bone, red

meat; you try to reach for it, your foot
is still in it. My foot, my foot; your last
thought of digging your toes in the river
mud, fishing on that favorite creek bank
near the spot where the rocks were jumbled
and the water trilled around them, purling
so pretty, and you dropped your line near
the rocks where the flathead catfish like
to rest. Home, home, home, Alabama,
your fishing spot where the willow limbs
draped languidly down around you, shading,
protecting. A shade-ful, ease-ful, summer day,
catfish biting. As your brother says “Give me
two more a them worms,” they close your eyelids
over your thoughtful brown eyes that look just
like your mother’s, as folks always said, and
they zip up the body bag.