

'CLASSIC AND TIMELESS'
The New York Times

Ron Kovic was a natural athlete, a shy teenager who dreamed of girls, loved baseball, God, John Wayne, John F. Kennedy and, above all, his country. A boy who yearned to be an American hero and who couldn't wait to enlist in the Marines and be shipped off to Vietnam to fight.

But Ron Kovic did not come marching back a hero. He came back in a wheelchair, a man with strong reservations about the conduct of the war and a growing determination to voice those reservations.

This is a deeply moving and graphic account of Vietnam and its aftermath for one young man who went to war to fight for the American Dream and then came home to fight for it again.

'Extraordinarily effective... Kovic's unabashed expression of feelings becomes a form of bravery'
Newsweek

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 A KIMAN HO, ANILAN MONTANA FILM "BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY" NINA SIEMWICK RAYMOND, BLANK
 JENN LEONE FRANK WHALEY (C) WILLENHARE *JIM WILLIAMS *GEOFF BRUNO ARBO *JIMMY ROBERT RICHARDSON *RON KOVIC
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BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

RON KOVIC

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**BORN ON
 THE
 FOURTH
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**THE MOST POWERFUL
 AND PERSONAL TESTAMENT OF ONE
 MAN'S VIETNAM**

**NOW A MAJOR FILM FROM
 UNIVERSAL PICTURES**

The blood is still rolling off my flak jacket from the hole in my shoulder and there are bullets cracking into the sand all around me. I keep trying to move my legs but I cannot feel them. I try to breathe but it is difficult. I have to get out of this place, make it out of here somehow. Someone shouts from my left now, screaming for me to get up. Again and again he screams, but I am trapped in the sand.

Oh get me out of here, get me out of here, please someone help me! Oh help me, please help me. Oh God oh Jesus! 'Is there a corpsman?' I cry. 'Can you get a corpsman?'

There is a loud crack and I hear the guy begin to sob. 'They've shot my fucking finger off! Let's go, sarge! Let's get outta here!'

'I can't move,' I gasp. 'I can't move my legs! I can't feel anything!'

I watch him go running back to the tree line.

'Sarge, are you all right?' Someone else is calling to me now and I try to turn around. Again there is the sudden crack of a bullet and a boy's voice crying. 'Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus Christ!' I hear his body fall in back of me.

I think he must be dead but I feel nothing for him, I just want to live. I feel nothing.

And now I hear another man coming up from behind, trying to save me. 'Get outta here!' I scream. 'Get the fuck outta here!'

A tall black man with long skinny arms and enormous hands picks me up and throws me over his shoulder as

bullets begin cracking over our heads like strings of firecrackers. Again and again they crack as the sky swirls around us like a cyclone. 'Motherfuckers motherfuckers!' he screams. And the rounds keep cracking and the sky and the sun on my face and my body all gone, all twisted up dangling like a puppet's, diving again and again into the sand, up and down, rolling and cursing, gasping for breath. 'Goddamn goddamn motherfuckers!'

And finally I am dragged into a hole in the sand with the bottom of my body that can no longer feel, twisted and bent underneath me. The black man runs from the hole without ever saying a thing. I never see his face. I will never know who he is. He is gone. And others now are in the hole helping me. They are bandaging my wounds. There is fear in their faces.

'It's all right,' I say to them. 'Everything is fine.'

Someone has just saved my life. My rifle is gone and I don't feel like finding it or picking it up ever again. The only thing I can think of, the only thing that crosses my mind, is living. There seems to be nothing in the world more important than that.

Hundreds of rounds begin to crash in now. I stare up at the sky because I cannot move. Above the hole men are running around in every direction. I see their legs and frightened faces. They are screaming and dragging the wounded past me. Again and again the rounds crash in. They seem to be coming in closer and closer. A tall man jumps in, hugging me to the earth.

'Oh God!' he is crying. 'Oh God please help us!'

The attack is lifted. They are carrying me out of the hole now - two, three, four men - quickly they are strapping me to a stretcher. My legs dangle off the sides until they realize I cannot control them. 'I can't move them,' I say, almost in a whisper. 'I can't move them.' I'm still carefully sucking the air, trying to calm myself, trying not to get excited, not to panic. I want to live. I keep telling myself. Take it slow now, as they strap my

legs to the stretcher and carry my wounded body into an Amtrac packed with other wounded men. The steel trapdoor of the Amtrac slowly closes as we begin to move to the northern bank and back across the river to the battalion area.

Men are screaming all around me. 'Oh God get me out of here!' 'Please help!' they scream. Oh Jesus, like little children now, not like marines, not like the posters, not like that day in the high school, this is for real. 'Mother!' screams a man without a face. 'Oh I don't want to die!' screams a young boy cupping his intestines with his hands. 'Oh please, oh no, oh God, oh help! Mother!' he screams again.

We are moving slowly through the water, the Amtrac rocking back and forth. We cannot be brave anymore, there is no reason. It means nothing now. We hold on to ourselves, to things around us, to memories, to thoughts, to dreams. I breathe slowly, desperately trying to stay awake.

The steel trapdoor is opening. I see faces. Corpsmen, I think. Others, curious, looking in at us. Air, fresh, I feel, I smell. They are carrying me out now. Over wounded bodies, past wounded screams. I'm in a helicopter now lifting above the battalion area. I'm leaving the war. I'm going to live. I am still breathing. I keep thinking over and over, I'm going to live and get out of here.

They are shoving tubes and needles in my arms. Now we are being packed into planes. I begin to believe more and more as I watch the other wounded packed around me on shelves that I am going to live.

I still fight desperately to stay awake. I am in an ambulance now rushing to some place. There is a man without any legs screaming in pain, moaning like a little baby. He is bleeding terribly from the stumps that were once his legs, thrashing his arms wildly about his chest, in a semiconscious daze. It is almost too much for me to watch.

I cannot take much more of this. I must be knocked out soon, before I lose my mind. I've seen too much today, I think. But I hold on, sucking the air. I shout then curse for him to be quiet. 'My wound is much worse than yours!' I scream. 'You're lucky,' I shout, staring him in the eyes. 'I can feel nothing from my chest down. You at least still have part of your legs. Shut up!' I scream again. 'Shut the fuck up, you god-damned baby!' He keeps thrashing his arms wildly above his head and kicking his bleeding stumps toward the roof of the ambulance.

The journey seems to take a very long time, but soon we are at the place where the wounded are sent. I feel a tremendous exhilaration inside me. I have made it this far. I have actually made it this far without giving up and now I am in a hospital where they will operate on me and find out why I cannot feel anything from my chest down anymore. I know I am going to make it now. I am going to make it not because of any god, or any religion, but because I want to make it. I want to live. And I leave the screaming man without legs and am brought to a room that is very bright.

'What's your name?' the voice shouts.

'Wh-wh-what?' I say.

'What's your name?' the voice says again.

'K-K-Kovic,' I say.

'No!' says the voice. 'I want your name, rank, and service number. Your date of birth, the name of your father and mother.'

'Kovic. Sergeant. Two-oh-three-oh-two-six-one, uh, when are you going to...'

'Date of birth!' the voice shouts.

'July fourth, nineteen forty-six. I was born on the Fourth of July. I can't feel...'

'What religion are you?'

'Catholic,' I say.

'What outfit did you come from?'

'What's going on? When are you going to operate?' I say.

'The doctors will operate,' he says. 'Don't worry,' he says confidently. 'They are very busy and there are many wounded but they will take care of you soon.'

He continues to stand almost at attention in front of me with a long clipboard in his hand, jotting down all the information he can. I cannot understand why they are taking so long to operate. There is something very wrong with me, I think, and they must operate as quickly as possible. The man with the clipboard walks out of the room. He will send the priest in soon.

I lie in the room alone staring at the walls, still sucking the air, determined to live more than ever now.

The priest seems to appear suddenly above my head. With his fingers he is gently touching my forehead, rubbing it slowly and softly. 'How are you,' he says.

'I'm fine, Father.' His face is very tired but it is not frightened. He is almost at ease, as if what he is doing he has done many times before.

'I have come to give you the Last Rites, my son.'

'I'm ready, Father,' I say.

And he prays, rubbing oils on my face and placing the crucifix to my lips. 'I will pray for you,' he says.

'When will they operate?' I say to the priest.

'I do not know,' he says. 'The doctors are very busy. There are many wounded. There is not much time for anything here but trying to live. So you must try to live my son, and I will pray for you.'

Soon after that I am taken to a long room where there are many doctors and nurses. They move quickly around me. They are acting very competent. 'You will be fine,' says one nurse calmly.

'Breathe deeply into the mask,' the doctor says.

'Are you going to operate?' I ask.

'Yes. Now breathe deeply into the mask.' As the darkness of the mask slowly covers my face I pray with all my being that I will live through this operation and see the light of day once again. I want to live so much. And even before I go to sleep with the blackness still

swirling around my head and the numbness of sleep, I begin to fight as I have never fought before in my life.

I awake to the screams of other men around me. I have made it. I think that maybe the wound is my punishment for killing the corporal and the children. That now everything is okay and the score is evened up. And now I am packed in this place with the others who have been wounded like myself, strapped onto a strange circular bed. I feel tubes going into my nose and hear the clanking, pumping sound of a machine. I still cannot feel any of my body but I know I am alive. I feel a terrible pain in my chest. My body is so cold. It has never been this weak. It feels so tired and out of touch, so lost and in pain. I can still barely breathe. I look around me, at people moving in shadows of numbness. There is the man who had been in the ambulance with me, screaming louder than ever, kicking his bloody stumps in the air, crying for his mother, crying for his morphine.

Directly across from me there is a Korean who has not even been in the war at all. The nurse says he was going to buy a newspaper when he stepped on a booby trap and it blew off both his legs and his arm. And all that is left now is this slab of meat swinging one arm crazily in the air, moaning like an animal gasping for its last bit of life, knowing that death is rushing toward him. The Korean is screaming like a madman at the top of his lungs. I cannot wait for the shots of morphine. Oh, the morphine feels so good. It makes everything dark and quiet. I can rest. I can leave this madness. I can dream of my back yard once again.

When I wake they are screaming still and the lights are on and the clock, the clock on the wall, I can hear it ticking to the sound of their screams. I can hear the dead being carted out and the new wounded being brought in to the beds all around me. I have to get out of this place.

'Can I call you by your first name?' I say to the nurse.

'No. My name is Lieutenant Wiecker.'

'Please, can I . . .'

'No,' she says. 'It's against regulations.'

I'm sleeping now. The lights are flashing. The black pilot is next to me. He says nothing. He stares at the ceiling all day long. He does nothing but that. But something is happening now, something is going wrong over there. The nurse is shouting for the machine, and the corpsman is crawling on the black man's chest, he has his knees on his chest and he's pounding it with his fists again and again.

'His heart has stopped!' screams the nurse.

Pounding, pounding, he's pounding his fist into his chest. 'Get the machine!' screams the corpsman.

The nurse is pulling the machine across the hangar floor as quickly as she can now. They are trying to put curtains around the whole thing, but the curtains keep slipping and falling down. Everyone, all the wounded who can still see and think, now watch what is happening to the pilot, and it is happening right next to me. The doctor hands the corpsman a syringe, they are laughing as the corpsman drives the syringe into the pilot's chest like a knife. They are talking about the Green Bay Packers and the corpsman is driving his fist into the black man's chest again and again until the black pilot's body begins to bloat up, until it doesn't look like a body at all anymore. His face is all puffy like a balloon and saliva rolls slowly from the sides of his mouth. He keeps staring at the ceiling and saying nothing. 'The machine! The machine!' screams the doctor, now climbing on top of the bed, taking the corpsman's place. 'Turn on the machine!' screams the doctor.

He grabs a long suction cup that is attached to the machine and places it carefully against the black man's chest. The black man's body jumps up from the bed almost arcing into the air from each bolt of electricity, jolting and arcing, bloating up more and more.

'I'll bet on the Packers,' says the corpsman.

'Green Bay doesn't have a chance,' the doctor says, laughing.

The nurse is smiling now, making fun of both the doctor and the corpsman. 'I don't understand football,' she says.

They are pulling the sheet over the head of the black man and strapping him onto the gurney. He is taken out of the ward.

The Korean civilian is still screaming and there is a baby now at the end of the ward. The nurse says it has been napalmed by our own jets. I cannot see the baby but it screams all the time like the Korean and the young man without any legs I had met in the ambulance.

I can hear a radio. It is the Armed Forces radio. The corpsman is telling the baby to shut the hell up and there is a young kid with half his head blown away. They have brought him in and put him where the black pilot has just died, right next to me. He has thick bandages wrapped all around his head till I can hardly see his face at all. He is like a vegetable - a nineteen-year-old vegetable, thrashing his arms back and forth, babbling and pissing in his clean white sheets.

'Quit pissin' in your sheets!' screams the corpsman. But the nineteen-year-old kid who doesn't have any brains anymore makes the corpsman very angry. He just keeps pissing in the sheets and crying like a little baby.

There is a Green Beret sergeant calling for his mother. Every night now I hear him. He has spinal meningitis. He will be dead before this evening is over.

The Korean civilian does not moan anymore. He does not wave his one arm and two fingers above his head. He is dead and they have taken him away too.

There is a nun who comes through the ward now with apples for the wounded and rosary beads. She is very pleasant and smiles at all of the wounded. The corpsman is reading a comicbook, still cursing at the baby. The baby is screaming and the Armed Forces radio is

saying that troops will be home soon. The kid with the bloody stumps is getting a morphine shot.

There is a general walking down the aisles now, going to each bed. He's marching down the aisles, marching and facing each wounded man in his bed. A skinny private with a Polaroid camera follows directly behind him. The general is dressed in an immaculate uniform with shiny shoes. 'Good afternoon, marine,' the general says. 'In the name of the President of the United States and the United States Marine Corps, I am proud to present you with the Purple Heart, and a picture,' the general says. Just then the skinny man with the Polaroid camera jumps up, flashing a picture of the wounded man. 'And a picture to send to your folks.'

He comes up to my bed and says exactly the same thing he has said to all the rest. The skinny man jumps up, snapping a picture of the general handing the Purple Heart to me. 'And here,' says the general, 'here is a picture to send home to your folks.' The general makes a sharp left face. He is marching to the bed next to me where the nineteen-year-old kid is still pissing in his pants, babbling like a little baby.

'In the names of the President of the United States,' the general says. The kid is screaming now almost tearing the bandages off his head, exposing the parts of his brain that are still left. '... I present you with the Purple Heart. And here,' the general says, handing the medal to the nineteen-year-old vegetable, the skinny guy jumping up and snapping a picture, 'here is a picture ...' the general says, looking at the picture the skinny guy has just pulled out of the camera. The kid is still pissing in his white sheets. '... And here is a picture to send home ...' The general does not finish what he is saying. He stares at the nineteen-year-old for what seems a long time. He hands the picture back to his photographer and as sharply as before marches to the next bed.

'Good afternoon, marine,' he says.

The kid is still pissing in his clean white sheets when the general walks out of the room.

I am in this place for seven days and seven nights. I write notes on scraps of paper telling myself over and over that I will make it out of here, that I am going to live. I am squeezing rubber balls with my hands to try to get strong again. I write letters home to Mom and Dad. I dictate them to a woman named Lucy who is with the USO. I am telling Mom and Dad that I am hurt pretty bad but I have done it for America and that it is worth it. I tell them not to worry. I will be home soon.

The day I am supposed to leave has come. I am strapped in a long frame and taken from the place of the wounded. I am moved from hangar to hangar, then finally put on a plane, and I leave Vietnam forever.

2

The bus turned off a side street and onto the parkway, then into Queens where the hospital was. For the first time on the whole trip everyone was laughing and joking. He felt himself begin to wake up out of the nightmare. This whole area was home to him - the streets, the parkway, he knew them like the back of his hand. The air was fresh and cold and the bus rocked back and forth. 'This bus sucks!' yelled a kid. 'Can't you guys do any better than this? I want my mother, I want my mother.'

The pain twisted into his back, but he laughed with the rest of them - the warriors, the wounded, entering the gates of St Albans Naval Hospital. The guard waved them in and the bus stopped. He was the last of the men to be taken off the bus. They had to carry him off. He got the impression that he was quite an oddity in his steel frame, crammed inside it like a flattened pancake.

They put him on the neuro ward. It was sterile and quiet. I'm with the vegetables again, he thought. It took a long while to get hold of a nurse. He told her that if they didn't get the top of the frame off his back he would start screaming. They took it off him and moved him back downstairs to another ward. This was a ward for men with open wounds. They put him there because of his heel, which had been all smashed by the first bullet, the back of it blown completely out.

He was now in Ward I-C with fifty other men who had all been recently wounded in the war - twenty-year-old blind men and amputees, men without intestines,