

Southern Grace



Frederick Foote

I wanted out of the South in the worst way. I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1934 to good, God-fearing and hard-working parents. They provided for their children as best they could and better than most colored folks could do in that time and place. When I was seventeen, I jumped up and joined the Army just to get out of the South. That did not work out too well. I got stationed at Fort Benning, deep down in Georgia. I'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire. I was deeper in the South with white Southern officers, who were as bad as plantation overseers.

When I finally got shipped out, I just traded my swampy South for hilly South Korea. I was an infantry man in the Eighth Army under General Ridgeway. A week or two into it I got captured up around Pusan with a young Chinese GI. We thought we was dead for sure.

There was this North Korean officer we called Flat Face. He was as stout as a brick, cotton-mouth mean and just as deadly. An interrogator. Some of us came back from interrogation in some sad shape. Them boys walked in and had to be carried out.

Others never came back at all.

When my turn came, I pissed on myself when they came for me. Flat Face just sat me down and talked about jazz, wanted to know about Miles and Stan Kenton, wanted to talk about Oscar Peterson. That was all. He sent me back in the same shape I came in.

That night around midnight, he came and pulled me and the Chinese GI out of our lean-to and walked us past the barbed wire and out of camp. We knew he was going to kill us. We both prayed as hard as we could. It was so damn cold that I was afraid I would freeze to death before he shot us. We must have walked miles through snow covered hills that frozen night.

He stopped us. He told us our lines were about four hundred yards over the low hill directly in front of us. We froze. We didn't know what to do. We didn't understand what was going on. He kicked us ~~each~~ in the ass and boy, we flew over that hill.

I never understood why he let us go. I think about it a lot lately. I wonder what happened to Flat Face. I hope he made it through the War. I hope he got to listen to some good jazz.