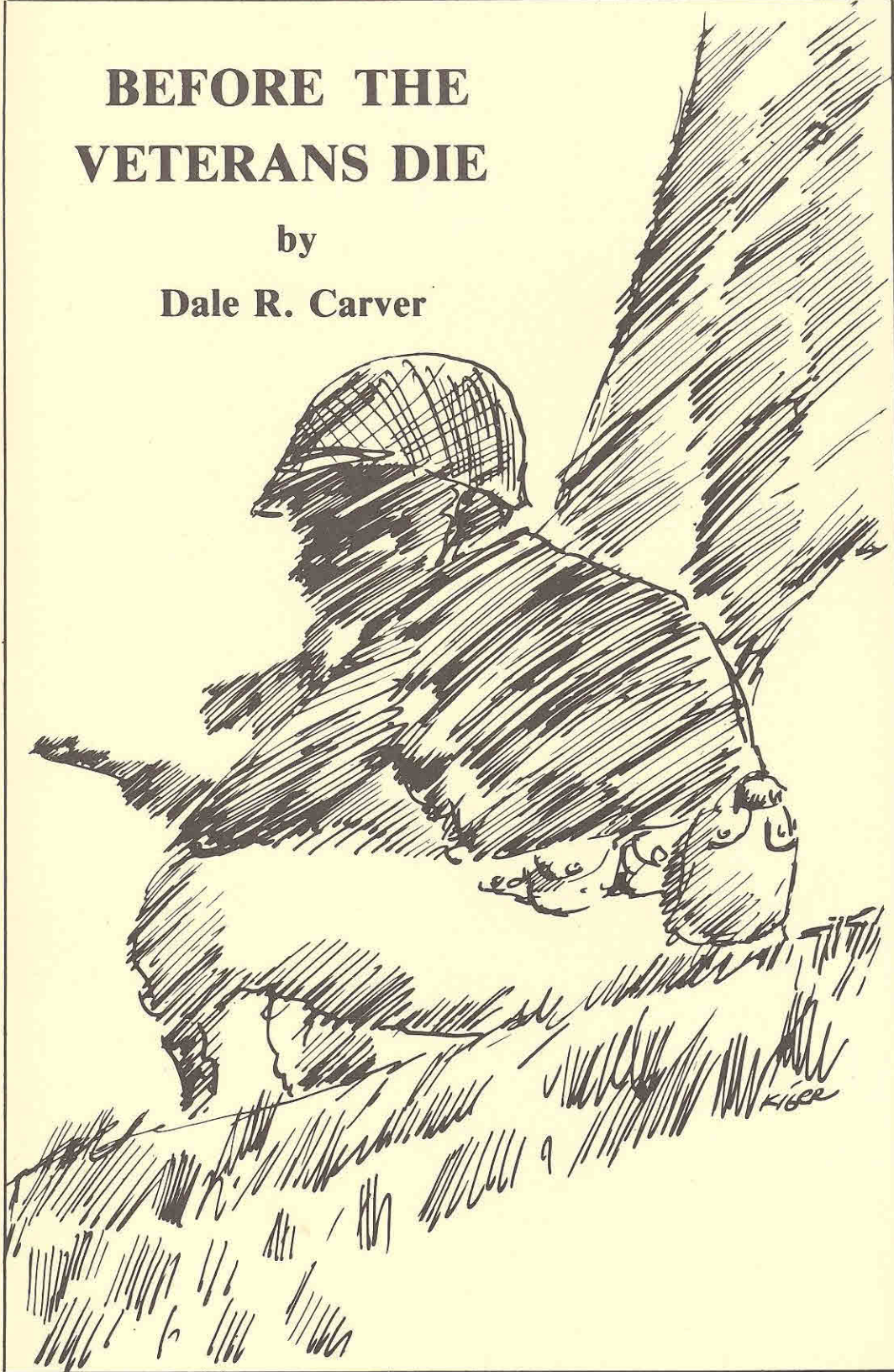


# BEFORE THE VETERANS DIE

by

Dale R. Carver



For Master Sgt. James D West  
with best wishes  
Dale Carver

**BEFORE  
THE  
VETERANS  
DIE**

**by**

**Dale R. Carver**

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Dale R. Carver

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## Foreword

These are true poems in the sense that they restructure experience to surprise us with discoveries of self or the very nature of experience. The poet, Dale Carver, has chosen to write about a war forty years ago and to tell of it from the point of view of a combat infantryman, but neither time nor the limitation of our own experience bars the essential and — at times — universal meaning the poems convey. Like Henry Fleming, another fictional character in a great war more than a century ago, Carver's foot-soldier reveals the complex of conflicting feelings in which men of war live: currents of hope and despair, selfishness and unbridled selfhood, and — above all — the observance of rituals of survival which represent, in the last analysis, the foot-soldier's last and best hope.

Carver's talents are essentially those of a lyric poet. Some of his most compelling poems ("The Young Lieutenants," "The Veteran," "The 'Strategic' Withdrawal," "The Poet," "Maroon Mud and Dog-Tags," "A Shell Fragment," and "The Good Soldier") stab us with brief and illuminating insight — as jolting as lightning bolts. These poems and others in Carver's collection demand respectful attention. They carry the authority of truth.

Darwin H. Shrell  
April 9, 1985

Professor of English,  
Emeritus, Louisiana  
State University

# **Dedication**

**To the men who served in the 424th Infantry, both the living  
and the dead.**

# **A SONG FOR THE INFANTRY**

**“Into the wild blue yonder”  
the Air Force proudly sings.  
“From the Halls of Montezuma”  
the Marine Hymn stoutly rings.**

**At the break of day, the Navy  
sings of setting sail.  
The lumbering Field Artillery  
“Hits the dusty trail”.**

**Scores of divisions of Infantry,  
an immense heroic throng,  
hundreds of thousands of them died,  
and they died without a song.**

**We will make for them a verse;  
we will sing for them a song;  
feeble though our tongues may be,  
our hearts cannot be wrong.**

-----

**We're the Minute Men of Concord;  
we set our country free.  
We are founders of a nation,  
the mighty Infantry.**

**We served with Grant at Vicksburg;  
for Lee we wept and died.  
In blue and grey formations  
we fought and marched with pride.**

And when the world tottered  
we crossed the troubled deep —  
no sunset on the crosses  
that mark our brothers' sleep.

Stalwart comrades have we  
in the Field Artillery,  
cannons behind the rifles  
of the fighting Infantry.

Marines are fearless fighters,  
but their ranks are few and small —  
in time of all-out warfare,  
for the Infantry, the call.

Afar the Air Force ranges  
in shining ships, well manned,  
but the foe was never vanquished  
till we occupied the land.

We're the Minute Men of Concord.  
We'll keep our country free.  
We are proud of our tradition —  
the fighting Infantry.

## THE YOUNG LIEUTENANTS

Where are the young lieutenants  
who sailed across the sea?

Where are the proud young men  
who went across with me?

Some are home, now older,  
some sleep beyond the sea—  
and all are so much humbler  
than ever they thought they'd be.



## **THE VETERAN**

**Five days off Le Havre we lay,  
afar the sea-washed sand;  
men paced the slimy decks each day  
and longed for feet on land.**

**He walked the crowded deck alone  
and viewed the land with dread.  
He lived the hours, one by one —  
he knew the task ahead.**

**He quietly savored the salt sea air,  
drank of the infinite blue,  
worshipped the placid sea so fair,  
humbly took his due,**

**turned his face to the morning breeze,  
heard the ocean sway,  
watched night fall on sunset seas —  
lived with the dying day.**

## **THE EAGLES**

**Two regiments on the Schnee Eifel,  
an isle in the enemy tide —  
but every man had a rifle,  
ammunition and a soldier's pride.**

**A chance for glorious action,  
a break through the bristling sea,  
for the tattered foot cavalry of Jackson,  
for a Stuart, a Pickett, a Lee.**

**Two men with birds on their shoulders,  
emblems of rank and might,  
surrendered seven thousand soldiers,  
Americans, still able to fight.**

## THE MINE EXPERT

I have my share of duties, some distasteful, some heartwarming;  
of them all, disarming mines is the most non-habit-forming.

The Army tried to make it habitual with me;  
they sent me to a mine school (Tullahoma, Tennessee);  
they sent me to another near the stones on Salisbury Plain,  
then packed me up to practice with the knowledge I had gained.

I knew the cunning devices, every single working part.  
I gloried in the knowledge (disarming is an art).  
The human mind is superior to insensate bits of steel,  
but I never could suppress the qualms that I would feel.

Solicitous of my safety, the Army trained me well;  
I learned my avocation, or I would not be here to tell  
of a game that is so thrilling, played with hands that dare not  
shake,  
about a sport that's so demanding, your're allowed not one  
mistake.

I have my share of duties, some distressing, some  
heartwarming;  
of them all, disarming mines is the most non-habit-forming.

## RETREAT

The boy in front of me faltered,  
broke stride and slumped to the snow.  
“I can’t go on, Lieutenant,  
leave me here and go.  
I’ll catch up with the column  
after a little rest;  
and if I don’t, Lieutenant,  
it will be for the best.”

A boot to his rump, the answer,  
sharp slaps upon his cheek.  
“Sergeant, help me with this man!”  
We got him to his feet.  
We trotted him back to his place in line  
and he walked the snowy way.  
We kicked and cursed when he faltered —  
and the man is alive today!

## TREES

Fir trees like a child would draw  
against the western sky —  
somber cones on the skyline,  
a day about to die.

He gazed for one long moment  
at the dusky vale so fenced,  
at the bowl of murky twilight  
in the texture of which he sensed  
a silence now so foreign  
as to grate on his very soul.

He put aside his rifle  
and slumped within his hole.

In an agony of hopelessness  
he fervently longed to die. . .

Fir trees like a child would draw  
against the western sky.

## **BOMBERS**

Birds above us westward, boring tunnels' through the blue,  
with brains of joyful pilot and nerves of happy crew.  
Mission accomplished, homeward, less their deadly eggs —  
earthbound, we plod eastward on weary, aching legs.

They'll bathe and dine in England; warm and dry they'll sleep.  
Likely we'll walk on all day (the mud is ankle deep).  
No envy from the Infantry; such envy long since past.  
Each does as he is bidden when the dies of war are cast.

## THE “STRATEGIC” WITHDRAWAL

A sullen river of flesh and steel  
wound sluggishly to the rear —  
machines and zombi men who could not feel  
their own mechanical legs, nor hope nor fear,  
smoking tanks, half-tracks, Jeeps, men weary, limping, lame,  
insensate, but in their eyes, disbelief and shame.

## ATTRITION

Dirty, unshaven, dull-eyed men  
waiting for food in a line,  
a kitchen truck in the muddy snow  
in a shell-scarred wood of pine.

A young gold-barred replacement  
watching the somber scene,  
straight from the Chattahoochee,  
sharp-eyed, confident, clean.

(He'd remould into soldiers  
these shapeless lumps of clay;  
they'd wash and shave, again salute,  
before another day.)

Responding then to an unheard cue,  
he walked the length of the line,  
idly counting as he went;  
he stopped at thirty-nine.

"Which platoon is this?" he asked  
the sergeant standing by.

"Platoon, Man! Where have you been?  
this is Company 1."



## **THOUGHTS WHILE SETTING ANTIPERSONNEL MINES**

A P mines are tricky to set;  
steady hand are required and skill.  
But I take no pride in this devious work  
and I sorrow for what I may kill.

I set them to fell the plodding man,  
not the bounding deer.  
Would that I knew a way to keep  
the innocent far from here.

## THE POET

With clinical eye and mind alert  
he watched the ebb and flow,  
saw in live bodies beyond all hurt  
dead eyes; saw blood on snow.

He walked with death ever near  
beneath an indifferent sky,  
knew the sickening taste of fear,  
watched the valiant die,

watched the cowardly live on,  
knew anguish at broken trees,  
saw the mine-slain forest fawn  
and proud men on their knees.

He recorded minutely in memory  
all that came to pass,  
then, ill of soul, wrote poetry  
as a sick cat eats grass.

## **MAROON MUD AND DOG-TAGS**

A corpse in the road, a column of tanks  
in a clanking, grinding fury,  
maroon mud and dog-tags —  
nothing to bury.

## *Filles De Joie*

Solace of sorts they offered  
to us, uncertain of life.

We took the joys they proffered  
in the interludes from strife.

We thirsted for something greater,  
something they could not give.

Some of us found it later,  
but some of us did not live.

## **A SHELL FRAGMENT**

**Sugar-clean snow spotted  
with steaming flecks of red —  
the jack-knifed body of a friend,  
a hole through helmet and head.**

## **WINTER, 1944-45**

**This year also spring will come  
to beautify the earth.**

**The glory in each icy clod  
even now awaits its birth.**

**Spring will come to this hurt land.  
Its face will then be gay.**

**The splendor latent in each bough  
will swell, then burst and sway.**

**Winter yields each year to spring —  
it's nature's rule, so be it.**

**Even this year spring will come  
and some of us will see it.**

## **THE INFANTRY, QUEEN OF BATTLES**

The sleeping Queen was awakened by the crowing cock' of gold.  
She roused to make the routine call; to her the game was old.  
From the mines and orchards, from schools and shops and  
farms,  
her conscripts came to shoulder her colors and her arms.

She kneaded the motley mixture with hands carelessly cruel.  
Unmindful of one single man, from millions she fashioned a  
tool.

She honed it with exquisite frustration; she tried it in the mud.  
She heated it to desperation, then quenched it slowly in blood.

## THE COMMANDER OF I COMPANY

The colonel assembled the company C. O.'s and made the orders clear:

Attack at dawn in the morning. I was there to hear that I, K, and L would advance abreast, with M to support the three,

to wrest the high ground to our front from the enemy.

I watched the commander of I Company as the council of war went on —

too young, untried, a replacement with bright bars newly won, the senior officer left in I after many a combat day, and Item would not move out at all unless he led the way.

I watched the young lieutenant, and once I caught his eye. He knew; and he knew I knew- that likely he would die. I saw a frantic will to live in eye, bared soul and heart and a mute acceptance of his role with a will to play his part.

They all saluted the colonel and went with leaden souls back to the men they commanded, there to play the roles of confident, fighting leaders of men. (Their motto is "Follow me.")

The attack was launched in the morning. I was there to see how the ridge to our front was taken, how the enemy broke and ran, saw the frantic regrouping and counting of many a missing man.



I saw the young lieutenant for the last time late that night;  
the Graves Crew stopped at our kitchen for coffee, warmth and  
light,  
with a cargo that looked like cordwood, the boy on top of the  
pile.

My helmet off in the moonlight, held to my breast a while,  
in a soul-felt, unseen tribute from an understanding heart  
to one who had never heard of Pope, but acted well his part.\*

\*Honour and shame from no condition  
rise; act well your part: there all the  
honour lies. *Essay on Man*, Alexander  
Pope.

## **THE SHELLING OF L COMPANY**

The captain called for artillery at Willy minus five.  
The liaison officer relayed the call,  
and the guns to our rear came alive.

The captain called for artillery at Willy minus ten.  
“Crossed Cannons” checked his map,  
then called the order in.

The captain called for artillery at Willy less a score.  
“Crossed Cannons” spread his chart,  
and called the colonel over:

“Who in hell is commanding L? A mad man to be sure!  
I hate to shell his position,  
but that’s what he’s calling for.”

The frantic captain called again, “Fire everything you’ve got!  
You won’t hurt us. We’re in holes.  
The enemy is not!”

## **THE GOOD SOLDIER**

First he oiled his rifle.  
Next he cared for his feet,  
then slowly opened a ration  
and forced himself to eat.

## DAWN IN DECEMBER — 1944

The man beside me breathed no more  
at the light of the cold, clear dawn.  
We had talked for hours the solemn eve —  
at daybreak he was gone.

We had talked of rolling tons of steel  
crashing through the pines,  
of foemen in our uniforms  
filtering through our lines;

of happiness afar at home  
that hallowed mystic night;  
and cozy children dreaming  
of a sleigh in magic flight;

of a Child born near Jerusalem  
ages, long ages, ago;  
of the gentle truth He had spoken;  
of three crosses in a row.

We had talked about the weather —  
the cold, the fog, the snow;  
of air support that never came;  
of retreat before the foe.

He missed the golden sunrise,  
felt not the limpid light,  
heard not the throbbing sound of hope,  
saw not the awesome sight:

Shining ships of silver  
droning their cloudless way —  
bright avenging bombers  
aloft on Christmas Day.

## IT TOLLS FOR THEE

In time of peace, poignant  
are rites held for the dead.  
Tolling bells, processions, words,  
precede the earthen bed.

In battle, customs alter —  
no bell, parade, kind lie:  
only relief and thankful thought,  
“Ah, it was not I.”

## RATIONING

Our ammunition rationed  
we counted every shell.  
Fervent were the curses  
aimed at one John L. . .

Mortars, cannons, howitzers  
were mute behind our lines.  
Stateside, men were idle  
and idle were the mines.

John called out his miners;  
they struck for higher pay,  
while some of us were dying  
on a dollar or two a day.

Our ammunition rationed  
we counted every shell.  
Fervent were the curses  
aimed at old John L. . .

## **TIMED ARTILLERY FIRE AT NIGHT**

The synchronized firing of guns in the rear,  
then a whisper of shells overhead —  
one flash to our front in the blackness:  
how many, how many are dead?

## **THE VICTORS**

Fortune may have graced these dead.  
They fell in the flush of youth.  
Their flesh and minds cannot be fed  
to the vultures, Time and Truth.



## *Dulce Est*

In ancient times *pro patria*  
it was reckoned sweet to die,  
with leg-gripped charger, sword unsheathed,  
and banner held up high.

Then, deep chords in love-filled hearts  
throbbed before the strife  
and sweet the thought *pro patria*  
to dearly sell one's life.

There are now no dreams of glory,  
no cause for which to strive.  
And of the two alternatives,  
most choose to stay alive.

Yet dying still is much in vogue.  
In fields mine-sown and muddy,  
causeless men of a weary age  
unthinking, die for a buddy.

## COLORS

Some were olive-drab knights of old —  
their courage the color of burnished gold.

Other, indifferent, driven or led,  
burst forth at times with blazing red.

The courage of most, to endure, a shade  
with the dull sheen of a honed-steel blade.

## **THE "B A R"\* MAN**

**He wore G I glasses and a worried grin,  
was five feet six, and bony thin.**

**One cheek framed a shrapnel scar;  
one shoulder sagged with a B A R.**

**I offered to carry the thing for a while;  
we had walked through mud for many a mile  
and the day looked old in the murky light  
as we walked through the curtain and into night.**

**"Keep your hands to yourself, you great big slob.  
It's mine to carry and I'll do my job.  
I'll lug the thing on my back till dawn  
and I'll be here when the big men are gone."**

**\* Browning automatic rifle**

## HOME IS THE HUNTER

The shotgun with the broken stock,  
wrapped with wire winters ago  
by the hands of one who thrilled to know  
the explosive rise of the pheasant cock,  
stands in the corner by the cane-backed chair  
gathering dust. From fields of corn  
the call of the pheasant cock is borne  
true and clear on the morning air.

There's frost in the shade of the old stone wall;  
the hedgerows beckon; the headlands call.  
Dark green are the clumps of winter wheat;  
the black earth yearns for the hunter's feet.  
The pheasants pipe with voices shrill,  
while the hunter lies on a numbered hill.

## THE KANSAN

My prairie home is far from here; there alone at night  
beneath the sky in a saucer, gigantic, dusky yet bright,  
with the mirror moon above me in the sprinkled star's gleam,  
I'd hear the creak of a windmill and dream a boy's dream:

Of gray and brass transmuted into lush green and gold,  
of shining towns and cities from fairy tales of old,  
of laughing children who'd never know hunger  
(for we'd nurture the bountiful earth),  
of helping the only people I knew  
in that stark, vast place of my birth.

That same great orb is above me, lighting an alien land.  
Again I muse in the moonlight, a rifle in my hand;  
and it takes a desperate effort to curb frustration and fear,  
to choke back the frantic question, "Why, oh why, am I here?"

## THE ARDENNES

Majestic firs, snow-laden,  
in rank-and-file stand,  
A man amid the pungent boughs  
in this ancient, subdued land.

Needled boughs, star-laden,  
Pressed by a grimy hand —  
ice against an anguished brow,  
alone in a troubled land.

## ARITHMETIC

Hear my tale of arithmetic,  
a true story, not just talk,  
how three little pulls of a trigger  
saved a four-mile walk:

“Take the prisoner to Regiment;  
we have no place for him here.  
They’ll question him at Regiment;  
it’s just two miles to the rear.”

The sergeant prodded the prisoner  
out of the lantern light,  
out of the cozy log-lined room,  
into the cold, bleak night.

Five minutes later, more or less,  
two rifle shots were heard.  
Two shots shattered the stillness,  
a pause, and then a third.

The sergeant entered the dug-out alone  
and told how the prisoner died.  
“He tried to escape; I had to shoot.”  
Who knows if the sergeant lied?

Three little pulls of a trigger  
saved a four-mile walk —  
a simple matter of arithmetic:  
dead men cannot talk.

## **THE MEN WHO CARE**

**The men who hold dominion for their short hour  
and go their good or evil ways with power,  
brutal or benign, over life on earth,  
do not reign by happenstance or birth.  
Master and slave are cast from life's same stuff;  
but battles are won by those who care enough.**



## THE ATHEIST

Death I view with object sorrow  
but walk with pride and never cower  
from shock. There is no power  
that marks the fall of man or sparrow.  
For puny lives those pray who can  
in foxhole, dugout, trench and line.  
Not I! Such meanness is not mine.  
I'll live unbroken and die a Man.

If wrong I'm proven when comes death  
to me, cursing weakness with ebbing breath,  
A sacrifice worthy of a king,  
no repentant, sniveling, praying thing.  
One who lived what he was born to be  
without fear will face eternity.

## **THE ATHEIST, OLDER NOW**

Blessed at birth by what I once called chance,  
poor but able, I gloried in the apward fight;  
with intelligence, vigor, toil allied with right  
To self I did my stature thus enhance.  
I learned and lived a code of behavior superior  
to that of lessor, weaker men at whom I sneered.  
Godless, I soldiered with honor, nor death feared.  
For a self image, I gained much, all inferior.

Of my strength and mind I made a god in youth.  
Now in age, a child, I seek Your truth.  
Amidst the ashes of accomplishment, destitute,  
I cry in the night for help, cannot dispute  
that in the sin of pride I broke Your every rule,  
Oh Lord, receive and be merciful to me, a fool.

## THE SECTION EIGHT

Arched from within, he stood it all:  
boredom, frustration, crowded loneliness,  
the carefully contrived unholiness  
of men mass-trained to kill on call.  
The bursting of the intricate shell,  
shock of carnage, sight of death,  
spilled entrails, red bubbling breath —  
with quiet strength, he bore it well.

Then the arch crumpled; the strong man died —  
in his place, a haunted thing who cried,  
cowering, hiding his head from light,  
tortured in the blackness of his own soul's night.  
Two years overseas and a war nearly won,  
then a letter from home that began "Dear John."

## **THE COMPANY CLERK**

Too militantly innocent to comprehend  
the logic of persuasion refined  
by the worldly, sophisticated 'mind  
that credit to our cause could lend,  
the niceties of practical argument  
fell short. The questing heart  
found no way to justify our part —  
no way our actions to defend.

Black was black, not shaded white —  
vast the gulf between wrong and right.  
There was no room for compromise;  
the devious words were subtle lies.  
He could not soldier with a will —  
stark his belief, "Thou shalt not kill"

## HOUSE GUESTS

If you think you've been imposed upon  
by guests who were impolite;  
if they shined their shoes with your best towels,  
set your mattress afire at night;  
if they shattered your antique stemware,  
dropped live cigarettes on the floor,  
complained about your liquor  
(with their glasses held out for more;)  
if stains on polished mahogany  
and burns in the brocatelle  
have converted you to misanthropy,  
Hear the story I tell:

There were homes in war-time Germany  
that housed the U. S. Infantry.  
There may have been malice in those boys,  
for they did not behave like Fauntleroy's.

Through a house they would make an initial pass  
the windows then were minus glass,  
for bursting shells and glass don't mix  
with pillows and blankets the holes they'd fix.

The food they'd devour till all were fed —  
rough, round, rye loaves of heavy black bread;  
hams in the chimney, cheeses yellow,  
then on the wine they would wax mellow.

They'd drink till they could not drink any more  
(the surplus smashed on the cellar floor).

Growing sportive, filled with wine,  
they'd scratch on the polished floor a line  
and through the air the knives would soar  
at the oil on the wall, perhaps a Renoir.

When low on the grate the fire would burn,  
for fuel to the furniture they would turn;  
then from the hearth a warming glare  
as flames consumed a Louis Quinze chair.

Drowsy then with warmth and booze,  
they'd settle down for a sodden snooze —  
muddy boots and muddled heads  
between white sheets on Empire beds.

(If a Nazi item somewhere roused ire,  
departing, they'd set the house on fire.)

If you think you've had tribulations  
by guests with manners distressing,  
re-read my factual narration:  
be thankful, and count your blessings.

## **THE HUNTER**

**I flushed a covey of quail  
on a walk in the morning sun —  
my shotgun back in Kansas,  
in my hands an issue M-1.**

**The M-1 is a worthless weapon  
for hitting birds on the wing,  
designed for a different target —  
an unfeathered, earthbound thing.**

**I thrilled as their fluttering wings  
bore them unharmed away.  
On I walked in the morning sun  
with a stride that was almost gay.**

## INVICTUS

Shattered trunks and branches littered the forest floor.  
The Pine Tree trembled, whispered "I will rise once more".

Standing by itself, riven, and black with smoke,  
"Man plays with fire; I will rise", a promise from the Oak.

I heard their lesser sisters in the forest sigh  
"We only know to always lift our branches to the sky"

In the shell-torn meadow, a murmur from the grass  
"I am Earth's great healer; all of this shall pass"



## MALMEDY

Milton wrote of Man and God,  
Khayyam, of Pots and Potter —  
my verse has a lesser theme,  
an act of human slaughter.

The scene, a cross-roads clearing,  
a forest of towering fir;  
the captured men of the 285  
and a column of German armor:

The show began with a pistol shot.  
A surgeon in line fell dead.  
A private was the next to fall,  
a pistol slug in his head.

Rifles began their staccato fire  
at the men now clutching ground.  
Machine guns joined the chorus,  
from Hell, the sight and sound.

A writhing sea of human flesh,  
shuddering with each blast —  
machine guns lashed the anguished waves  
till all were still at last.

Then to finish the deed begun,  
the killers walked the field,  
with pistol and with rifle butt,  
bayonet and boot, spike-heeled.

The self-appointed super men,  
Teutonic warriors bold,  
bungled, and some lived to tell,  
the story I have told.

## THE CHILDREN OF LUXEMBOURG

The children of Luxembourg talked to me.  
They alone could understand.  
Only the little ones walked with me  
in their tiny, story-book land.

The adults treated me kindly,  
though I came from a far-off strand;  
but the little ones followed me blindly  
and I walked with hands in each hand.

Chattering children, curious friends,  
though my days with you were few,  
the love of an alien soldier,  
I loose on the winds for you.

## **A TABLE PREPARED**

A lull in the shelling, silence like fog,  
small sounds in the villa kitchen,  
the corporal served the flesh of a hog,  
while the corpse in the courtyard stiffened.

The final barrage had felled our S-2\* —  
he lay in stained snow, a sapling pine. . .  
The battalion staff avoided the view —  
mouthed pork and belched and swilled their wine.

\* Battalion Intelligence Officer

## KITCHEN TRUCKS

The kitchen trucks were the Major's delight;  
He kept them spotless, shining and bright,  
Away from harm from mine and shell.  
Miles to the rear he kept them well.

Now the winter soldier in time grew lean  
On the K's, the C's, the canned beef and bean,  
Sometimes warmed, more often cold.  
On such a diet he grew old,  
Grew weak and lost all will to fight.  
An ambulance would haul him away at night.  
Diagnosis: pneumonia, bronchitis, or flu.  
(Poor food, exposure, all of us knew.)  
Major kept his record clear.  
His trucks were pretty  
But the price was dear.  
We had a saying we quoted then:  
'We've never lost a kitchen truck,  
But we've lost a lot of men.'

## **REPLACEMENTS**

Some of the social amenities  
were neglected in the war;  
we understood the necessity  
and the cogent reasons therefore.

But the way we treated replacements  
was excessively impolite.

I've seen them come of an evening  
and be dead by the following night.

We'd shuttle them down to a company,  
usually I or K or L,  
perhaps two weeks away from the States,  
direct from home to Hell.

An attack, scheduled at daylight,  
no time for pretzels and beer,  
no time for tea, but plenty of time  
to sit and think and fear.

And I personally know of a case or two  
when an enemy volley was loosed:  
a man died in the arms of one to whom  
he had never been introduced.

Some of the social amenities  
are neglected in time of war;  
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and the cogent reasons therefore.

But the way we treated replacements  
was excessively impolite.

I've seen them come of an evening  
and be dead by the following night.

## AT HOME IN LOUISIANA

We watched the shy mist on the bayou  
long ago as it fled from the sun,  
mornings on the moss-hung bayou  
awaiting the glorious dawn.

We frolicked afloat on the bayou  
with hearts as light as the mist —  
saw gray blush rose on the bayou  
and melt at the sun's first kiss.

Now a shroud hangs over the bayou;  
my heart is a heavy stone —  
sunless and chill, the bayou,  
as I muse and drift alone.

## THE CAMP AT BRETZENHEIM

We ran a camp at Bretzenheim, near Bingen on the Rhine.  
One hundred thousand unwilling guests went once a day to dine.  
We weren't at all prepared for them; facilities were crude —  
barbed wire and machine guns, and a scarcity of food.

In theory it is healthful to live beneath the sky,  
to breathe the pleasant open air and on the green earth lie.  
But the lofty roof, the sky, let through the icy rain  
and our guests felt some discomfort; I heard a few complain.

The sick ones cried for help; the wounded cried in pain.  
The young ones cursed; the old ones prayed, equally in vain.

Sleep in the open, so I'm told, erases spirit's scars,  
body prone on grassy earth and mind aloft with stars.  
But two hundred thousand trampling feet, beneath a sky of  
lead,  
churned the sodden earth and made a puddle of each bed.

The starving wept with hunger; the wounded wept with pain.  
The proud ones cursed; the meek ones prayed, equally in vain.

Well guarded were the guests by their armed hosts night and  
day;  
but in spite of wire and fire, many quietly slipped away.  
Lesser grew the living, involved yet in mankind —  
prisoners all, at Bretzenheim near Bingen on the Rhine.

## PRISONERS

“Keep your men away from the wire”, was all I wanted to say;  
“The guards are green and jumpy — there’s going to be hell to pay.”

At the sight of the broken commander, at his dumb look of despair,  
humanity welled within me and I pitied him sitting there.

I saluted the colonel prisoner — I was a lieutenant then —  
and said to him slowly in English, “Please, Sir, control your men.

Keep them away from the wire; already too many have died.  
Though the war for you is over and you’re on the loser’s side,  
duty still calls you; stand on your feet.

I’ll be a Man in victory; you be a Man in defeat”.

“You have lost a war; no malice I have won.

If there is a way I can help, call and I will come.

The future will demand from us the finest we can give;  
both of us are Men, Sir; with courage we will live.”



## THE LINGUIST

The colonel took a tutor to learn the tongue of our foe.  
He carefully chose one competent to teach what he wanted to  
know.

The tutor was of the Nordic type, blond and straight and tall —  
she was pretty and pink and buxom; she knew no English at all.

Every night in his quarters, the language lessons went on.  
We marvelled at his endurance — she never left till dawn.  
The colonel must have been stupid, for after many days,  
he tripped whenever he tried to use the simplest German phrase.

I felt sorry for the teacher with a student so inept.  
Had she her choice, I know, she'd have had one more adept —  
a younger man with an agile mind, a more satisfying way;  
but the colonel was her pupil: R H I P\*, they say.

\* (Rank Hath Its Privileges)

## **THE BURIAL DETAIL**

**We gave the sergeant a six by six\*,  
rubber gloves and barrels of lime,  
a crew equipped with shovels and picks,  
and little idle time.**

**The sergeant and I had a standing joke:  
“How’s business?” were the words I said.  
With a sickly grin he always spoke  
“Dead, lieutenant, dead”.**

**\* A six-wheel, six-wheel drive truck.**

## THE CHAPLAIN

He came to us straight from school,  
Book-filled with notions of self sacrifice  
And service to God through Man.  
Brisk, cheerful and, above all, uncensuring,  
A Man of God and a good fellow.

When first the shells rained upon us  
He took his place at the side of the surgeon,  
Cheering the wounded, comforting the dying,  
Helping with the bloody patchwork.  
A Man of God in action.

All night the walking wounded streamed in.  
The litter cases, some shrieking with pain,  
Some dumb with shock, some quietly sobbing  
Like shamed children.  
A Man of God among hurt men.

No rest the day, nor the night;  
No experience from which to learn  
The value of strength withheld;  
All he gave, till he too went with the wounded.  
A hurt Man of God.

In a gentler age would he not have grown  
In strength and stature with each passing year,  
Learned to absorb hurt, live with fear,  
And with resilient faith to fight alone?  
The normal sequence is a dream of good,  
Then shock, dismay, a feeling of betrayal,  
And time, the healer, only does allay  
These birth pangs of a wiser trust in God.

But the blows on him rained far too fast  
And time, the healer, was denied his spell.  
A boy, book-filled, in the man-made hell  
Of the surgeon's tent. He could not last.  
At the rear safely jacketed he lies,  
His face that of a doll with punched-in eyes.

## **THE ANTI-TANK PLATOON LEADER'S ADVICE TO HIS MEN**

**“Our 57 A T gun is a weapon far outclassed  
by the high velocity 88, a killer unsurpassed.  
And a Tiger tank with an 88 is not a sitting duck —  
to cripple one with a 57 takes marksmanship and luck.**

**So if your first shot misses, or doesn't damage that gun,  
don't reload for a second; forget your pride and run  
away from your position, away from the 57.  
For if you don't you'll all awake in Hell (or perhaps in Heaven),**

**for our 57 A T gun is a relic far outclassed  
by the modern 88, a killer unsurpassed.  
So don't try any hero acts. Remember what I say:  
“Try to make your first shot count, then get the hell away”.**

## A PRACTICAL JOKE

Where is he now, the soldier who could see  
the possibility for humor and the chance  
for evoking mirth in the rigid stance  
of what was once a man, then but debris?  
Left forearm raised with out-turned, red palm near,  
unseeing, icy, upward-staring eyes —  
right arm stiff from shoulder to inner thighs,  
flesh, but no more prey to cold or hurt or fear?

Where is the soldier now who understood  
our state so well, neither evil nor good,  
but human and there, who raised the prone  
corpse unright against a wall of stone:  
where it stood for days, brought laughs from all —  
a dead man, a thing, answering nature's call?

## ***Die Kinder***

Emaciated enemy children  
armed with buckets and pans  
in ambush at our mess line  
near the garbage cans

The colonel gave the order  
“Drive them out of sight”.  
The colonel was a sensitive man;  
they spoiled his appetite.

## WINTER'S END

Though the soft entering blackness item seemed sweet,  
A deeper savage wisdom recognized  
Death as death though cunningly disguised  
As a warm dark cloud of all-embracing sleep.

Strengthless, by will alone, he left his bed of snow  
And, dream-like, floated to his feet.  
He lurched into the unfelt driving wind and sleet  
Then sank in soft darkness and ceased to know.



## HOME COMING

A boat came out to meet us  
decked in bunting gay.  
A band came out to greet us,  
to celebrate this day  
on the burnished bay.

“America the Beautiful”  
dimmed each hardened eye.  
“Dixie” made all heartstrings pull,  
resounding to the sky —  
not a face was dry.

“Welcome Home”, the banners said —  
“Welcome Home, Well Done”.  
Exultant troops the banners read,  
silent in the sun —  
now the war was won.

Prayers of joy, thanksgiving,  
mellowed heart, bowed head:  
I listened with the living,  
with the living read —  
heartsick for the dead.

## **APOLOGY**

**Spawn of welling emotion,  
ingenuous heart's overflow,  
conceived of a lonely passion  
that only the veterans know.**

**Artless offspring, misbegotten,  
born bloody beneath black sky,  
your fount will be forgotten  
when the veterans die.**

**Words undisciplined, lines roughhewn,  
will you meet a compassionate eye?  
Perhaps, if brought forth soon,  
before the veterans die.**

## About The Author

Dale Carver is a native of Kansas. He served as a platoon leader in the 424th Infantry of the 106th Division in Europe during World War II. The 106th Division was badly mauled during the initial stages of the Battle of the Bulge. Two of its regiments, the 422nd and 423rd, were encircled and captured. The 424th fought on until the Allies had the situation under control. During the final stages of the war in Europe Carver's battalion was assigned the task of running a POW camp at Bretzenheim, Germany.

Carver was awarded the Silver Star medal, the Bronze Star medal, and a battlefield promotion to 1st Lieutenant. He is now a retired professor of engineering mechanics, having taught at Louisiana State University for 28 years. He resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

### Notes from personal correspondence to the author prior to publication.

*Alice Claudel*, editor, *The New Laurel Review*: "I truly feel your manuscript should be published in its entirety — a bitter-sweet memory of one soldier that all Americans should ponder."

*Jim Bush*, decorated combat veteran of World War II: "I have read them all with awe, sadness and great respect for your sensitivity and ability. You will be letting down these same veterans — living and dead — if you don't publish them."

*C. Lenton Sartain*, 82nd Airborne Division: "The poems reflect harsh reality couched in terms of thought-provoking poetry."

*Darwin H. Shrell*, Professor of English, Emeritus, Louisiana State University: Carver's talents are essentially those of a lyric poet. Some of his most compelling poems ("The Young Lieutenants," "The Veteran," "The 'Strategic' Withdrawal," "The Poet," "Maroon Mud and Dog-Tags," "A Shell Fragment," and "The Good Solider") stab us with brief and illuminating insight — as jolting as lightning bolts.

A poet and good soldier, our friend Dale Carver, passed away  
October 14, 2001.

Service will be held at Rabenhorst Funeral Home,  
825 Government, Baton Rouge, LA. 11:00a.m. Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2001.

Visitation Tuesday, Oct. 16th from 5:00pm to 7:00pm. at Rabenhorst,  
and Wednesday from 9:00 a.m. until the service.

Burial at Port Hudson National Cemetery will follow the service.

## ***BEFORE THE VETERANS DIE***

a book of poems inspired by World War II...

*by Dale R. Carver (deceased)*

**Poet Laureate - 106th Inf Div Association**

**HQs Co., 3Bn A&P Platoon Leader**

**424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division**

BEFORE THE  
VETERANS DIE

by  
Dale R. Carver



**By Dale Carver, Poet Laureate (deceased)**  
**106<sup>th</sup> Inf Division Association**

Order from Ruth Carver  
742 Druid Circle, Baton Rouge, LA 70808  
\$10.00 Post-paid

Dale, died in 2001. He had written poetic memories of the War. His poems appeared in "The CUB" for several years. They all bring back memories and visions of the times.

Dale was awarded the Silver Star for Valor. He disabled German mines, while under attack, that had been placed under a bridge.

For that he received a battle field promotion (from 2nd to 1st Lt.) and was awarded the Silver Star for "gallantry under fire." He told me, during one reunion, that he thought it, the Silver Star, should have been for another time when he led a group of soldiers through a live mine field to safety. The soldiers had walked into

the mine field and were "frozen in fear."