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I Didn't Get Over

Short Story

Francis Scott Fitzgerald

(1936)

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I was 'sixteen in college and it was our twentieth reunion this year. We always called ourselves the "War Babies"--anyhow we were all in the damn thing and this time there was more talk about the war than at any previous reunion; perhaps because war's in the air once more.

Three of us were being talkative on the subject in Pete's back room the night after commencement, when a classmate came in and sat down with us. We knew he was a classmate because we remembered his face and name vaguely, and he marched with us in the alumni parade, but he'd left college as a junior and had not been back these twenty years.

"Hello there--ah--Hib," I said after a moment's hesitation. The others took the cue and we ordered a round of beer and went on with what we were talking about.

"I tell you it was kind of moving when we laid that wreath this afternoon." He referred to a bronze plaque commemorating the 'sixteeners who died in the war, "--to read the names of Abe Danzer and Pop McGowan and those fellows and to think they've been dead for twenty years and we've only been getting old."

"To be that young again I'd take a chance on another war," I said, and to the new arrival, "Did you get over, Hib?"

"I was in the army but I didn't get over."

The war and the beer and the hours flowed along. Each of us shot off our mouths about something amusing, or unique, or terrible--all except Hib. Only when a pause came, he said almost apologetically:

"I would have gotten over except that I was supposed to have slapped a little boy."

We looked at him inquiringly.

"Of course, I didn't," he added. "But there was a row about it." His voice died away but we encouraged him--we had talked a lot and he seemed to rate a hearing.

"Nothing much to tell. The little boy, downtown with his father, said some officer with a blue M. P. band slapped him in the crowd and he picked me! A month afterwards they found he was always accusing soldiers of slapping, so they let me go. What made me think of it was Abe Danzer's name on that plaque this afternoon. They put me in Leavenworth for a couple of weeks while they investigated me, and he was in the next cell to mine."

"Abe Danzer!"

He had been sort of a class hero and we all exclaimed aloud in the same breath.

"Why he was recommended for the D. S. C!"

"I know it."

"What on earth was Abe Danzer doing in Leavenworth?"

Again, Hibbing became apologetic.

"Oddly enough I was the man who arrested him. But he didn't blame me because it was all in line of duty, and when I turned up in the next cell a few months later he even laughed about it."

We were all interested now.

"What did you have to arrest him for?"

"Well, I'd been put on Military Police in Kansas City and almost the first call I got was to take a detail of men with fixed bayonets to the big hotel there--I forget the name--and go to a certain room. When I tapped on the door, I never saw so many shoulder stars and shoulder leaves in my life; there were at least a brace apiece of generals and colonels. And in the center stood Abe Danzer and a girl--a tart--both of them drunk as monkeys. But it took me a minute's blinking before I realized what else was the matter: the girl had on Abe's uniform overcoat and cap and Abe had on her dress and hat. They'd gone down in the lobby like that and run straight into the divisional commander."

We three looked at him, first incredulous, then shocked, finally believing. We started to laugh but couldn't quite laugh, only looked at Hibbing with silly half-smiles on our faces, imagining ourselves in Abe's position.

"Did he recognize you?" I asked finally.

"Vaguely."

"Then what happened?"

"It was short and sweet. We changed the clothes on them, put their heads in cold water, then I stood them between two files of bayonets and said, forward march."

"And marched old Abe off to prison!" we exclaimed. "It must have been a crazy feeling."

"It was. From the expression in that general's face I thought they'd probably shoot him. When they put me in Leavenworth a couple of months later, I was relieved to find he was still alive."

"I can't understand it," Joe Boone said. "He never drank in college."

"That all goes back to his D. S. C," said Hibbing.

"You know about that too?"

"Oh yes, we were in the same division--we were from the same state."

"I thought you didn't get overseas."

"I didn't. Neither did Abe. But things seemed to happen to him. Of course, nothing like what you fellows must have seen--"

"How did he get recommended for the D. S. C," I interrupted, "--and what did it have to do with his taking to drink?"

"Well, those drownings used to get on his nerves and he used to dream about it--"

"What drownings? For God's sake, man, you're driving us crazy. It's like that story about 'what killed the dog.'"

"A lot of people thought he had nothing to do with the drownings. They blamed the trench mortar."

We groaned--but there was nothing to do but let him tell it his own way.

"Just what trench mortar?" I asked patiently.

"Rather I mean a Stokes mortar. Remember those old stove-pipes, set at forty-five degrees? You dropped a shell down the mouth."

We remembered.

"Well, the day this happened Abe was in command of what they called the 'fourth battalion,' marching it out fifteen miles to the rifle range. It wasn't really a battalion--it was the machine gun company, supply company, medical detachment and Headquarters Company. The H. Q. Company had the trench mortars and the one-pounder and the signal corps, band and mounted orderlies--a whole menagerie in itself. Abe commanded that company but on this day most of the medical and supply officers had to go ahead with the advance, so as ranking first lieutenant he commanded the other companies besides. I tell you he must have been proud that day--twenty-one and commanding a battalion; he rode a horse at the head of it and probably pretended to himself that he was Stonewall Jackson. Say, all this must bore you--it happened on the safe side of the ocean."

"Go on."

"Well, we were in Georgia then, and they have a lot of those little muddy rivers with big old rafts they pull across on a slow cable. You could carry about a hundred men if you packed them in. When Abe's 'battalion' got to this river about noon he saw that the third battalion just ahead wasn't even half over, and he figured it would be a full hour at the rate that boat was going to and from. So, he marched the men a little down the shore to get some shade and was just about to let them have chow when an officer came riding up all covered with dust and said he was Captain Brown and where was the officer commanding Headquarters Company.

"That's me, sir,' said Abe.

"Well, I just got in to camp and I'm taking command,' the officer said. And then, as if it was Abe's fault, 'I had to ride like hell to catch up with you. Where's the company?'

"Right here, sir--and next is the supply, and next is the medical--I was just going to let them eat--'

"At the look in his eye Abe shut up. The captain wasn't going to let them eat yet and probably for no more reason than to show off his authority. He wasn't going to let them rest either--he wanted to see what his company looked like (he'd never seen a Headquarters Company except on paper). He thought for a long time and then he decided that he'd have the trench mortar platoon throw some shells across the river for practice. He gave Abe the evil eye again when Abe told him he only had live shells along; he accepted the suggestion of sending over a couple of signal men to wigwag if any farmers were being bumped off. The signal men crossed on the barge and when they had wigwagged all clear, ran for cover themselves because a Stokes mortar wasn't the most accurate thing in the world. Then the fun began.

"The shells worked on a time fuse and the river was too wide so the first one only made a nice little geyser under water. But the second one just hit the shore with a crash and a couple of horses began to stampede on the ferry boat in midstream only fifty yards down. Abe thought this might hold his majesty the captain but he only said they'd have to get used to shell fire--and ordered another shot. He was like a spoiled kid with an annoying toy.

"Then it happened, as it did once in a while with those mortars no matter what you did--the shell stuck in the gun. About a dozen people yelled, 'Scatter!' all at once and I scattered as far as anybody and lay down flat, and what did that damn fool Abe do but go up and tilt the barrel and spill out the shell. He'd saved the mortar but there were just five seconds between him and eternity and how he got away before the explosion is a mystery to me."

At this point I interrupted Hibbing.

"I thought you said there were some people killed."

"Oh yes--oh but that was later. The third battalion had crossed by now so Captain Brown formed the companies and we marched off to the ferry boat and began embarking. The second lieutenant in charge of the embarking spoke to the captain:

"This old tub's kind of tired--been over-worked all day. Don't try to pack them in too tight.'

"But the captain wouldn't listen. He sent them over like sardines and each time Abe stood on the rail and shouted:

"Unbuckle your belts and sling your packs light on your shoulders--' (this without looking at the captain because he'd realized that the captain didn't like orders except his own). But the embarking officer spoke up once more:

"That raft's low in the water,' he said. 'I don't like it. When you started shooting off that cannon the horses began jumping and the men ran around and unbalanced it.'

"Tell the captain,' Abe said. 'He knows everything.'

"The captain overheard this. 'There's just one more load,' he said. 'And I don't want any more discussion about it.'

"It was a big load, even according to Captain Brown's ideas. Abe got up on the side to make his announcement.

"They ought to know that by this time,' Captain Brown snapped. 'They've heard it often enough.'

"Not this bunch.' Abe rattled it off anyhow and the men unloosened their belts, except a few at the far end who weren't paying attention. Or maybe it was so jammed that they couldn't hear.

"We began to sink when we were half way over, very slowly at first, just a little water around the shoes, but we officers didn't say anything for fear of a panic. It had looked like a small river from the bank but here in the middle and at the rate we were going, it began to look like the widest river in the world.

"In two minutes, the water was a yard high in the old soup plate and there wasn't any use concealing things any longer. For once the captain was tongue-tied. Abe got up on the side again and said to stay calm, and not rock the boat and we'd get there, and made his speech one last time about slipping off the packs, and told the ones that could swim to jump off when it got to their hips. The men took it well but you could almost tell from their faces which ones could swim and which couldn't.

"She went down with a big whush! just twenty yards from shore; her nose grounded in a mud bank five feet under water.

"I don't remember much about the next fifteen minutes. I dove and swam out into the river a few yards for a view but it all looked like a mass of khaki and water with some sound over it that I remember as a sustained monotone but was composed, I suppose, of cussing, and a few yells of fright, and even a little kidding and laughter. I swam in and helped pull people to shore, but it was a slow business in our shoes . . .

"When there was nothing more in sight in the river (except one corner of the barge which had perversely decided to bob up) Captain Brown and Abe met. The captain was weak and shaking and his arrogance was gone.

"Oh God,' he said. 'What'll I do?'

"Abe took control of things--he fell the men in and got squad reports to see if anyone was missing.

"There were three missing in the first squad alone and we didn't wait for the rest--we called for twenty good swimmers to strip and start diving and as fast as they pulled in a body, we started a medico working on it. We pulled out twenty-eight bodies and

revived seven. And one of the divers didn't come up--he was found floating down the river next day and they gave a medal and a pension to his widow."

Hibbing paused and then added: "But I know that's small potatoes to you fellows in the big time."

"Sounds exciting enough to me," said Joe Boone. "I had a good time in France but I spent most of it guarding prisoners at Brest."

"But how about finishing this?" I demanded. "Why did this drive Abe hell-raising?"

"That was the captain," said Hibbing slowly. "A couple of officers tried to get Abe a citation or something for the trench mortar thing. The captain didn't like that, and he began going around saying that when Abe jumped up on the side of the barge to give the unsling order, he'd hung on to the ferry cable and pulled it out of whack. The captain found a couple of people who agreed with him but there were others who thought it was overloading and the commotion the horses made at the shell bursts. But Abe was never very happy in the army after that."

There was an emphatic interruption in the person of Pete himself who said in no uncertain words:

"Mr. Tomlinson and Mr. Boone. Your wives say they're calling for the last time. They say this has been one night too often, and if you don't get back to the Inn in ten minutes they driving to Philadelphia."

Tommy and Joe Boone arose reluctantly.

"I'm afraid I've monopolized the evening," said Hibbing. "And after what you fellows must have seen."

When they had gone, I lingered.

"So, Abe wasn't killed in France."

"No--you'll notice all that tablet says is 'died in service.'"

"What did he die of?"

Hibbing hesitated.

"He was shot by a guard trying to escape from Leavenworth. They'd given him ten years."

"God! And what a great guy he was in college."

"I suppose he was to his friends. But he was a good deal of a snob, wasn't he?"

"Maybe to some people."

"He didn't seem to even recognize a lot of his classmates when he met them in the army."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I told you something that wasn't true tonight. That captain's name wasn't Brown."

Again, I asked him what he meant.

"The captain's name was Hibbing," he said. "I was that captain, and when I rode up to join my company he acted as if he'd never seen me before. It kind of threw me off--because I used to love this place. Well--good night."