

Narrative Text/ Question

Directions: The following narrative passage concerns a son serving in a combat zone who is writing a letter to his father. Read the passage and then answer the multiple-choice and open-ended questions that follow it.

OPEN WOUNDS

Dear Dad,

I think I have some idea now of what Grandpa went through in France in WWI, and what you experienced on the destroyer in WWII. Combat's not easy, but I'm doing my best to uphold the family tradition.

Half my time here is spent in a small dirty shack with a rusty five-gallon water can instead of running water. It serves as our battalion Aid Station, and we use it for sick call and minor injuries. We can hear rats under the floorboards and flies use it as an airstrip. It's dingy, but it's my little piece of the Nam. After sick call in the morning I usually accompany the engineers out on the road we are building through the rice paddies. It's not paradise here, but there are many assignments in the Nam that are worse -- a lot worse.

I'm OK, Dad, really, but I've learned my survival depends on many things. I find myself listening for the long, panic-tinged wail for a medic that usually means something is terribly wrong. It happened again today. A long drawn out "Meeddicc!" followed by "Meeeddicc!"

I grabbed my aid bag full of medical supplies and ran like hell.

The dirt road through our compound has been baked into submission by the unforgiving sun and heat. Jungle boots and countless Army vehicles have crushed it, and it lies there like raw talcum powder covering everything with its choking, tea-colored grit. Its softness underfoot made my sprinting more difficult, and 100 yards away two GIs kept yelling and motioning me toward a doorway. Once inside, Dad, I found several young men standing around with the pleading, make-it-all-better look of small children stamped on their faces.

"It hurts...tell my mom..." moaned and murmured a young soldier lying on the crude wooden floor. His face was pinched, contorted with pain and whitish gray like the color of dirty vanilla ice cream.

"I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't mean to drop the rifle," said a young GI. The bullet fired from the mishap had lodged deep in the chest of his friend. I had no time to offer absolution. I had no time to say anything to him, Dad. He'd covered the wound with a piece of plastic bag and muttered "chest wound" as he stepped away.

I pointed at a red-haired GI with freckles, and yelled, "Go to battalion and tell them we need a medivac! Do it now, and don't take no for a *#***# answer!!" He nodded and took off for Battalion Headquarters like a frenzied projectile.

Sweat, blood and a tinge of gunpowder spiced the air as my eyes riveted on that wound -- a small round hole with a reddish-blue hue around the edges. I reached in the aid bag and retrieved a sterile pressure bandage. Pressing it hard against the wound, I pushed my other hand under his back probing for warm sticky blood and a wound of exit.

Because of my training I knew exactly what to do. I sealed the wound with strips of adhesive tape laid vertically and then horizontally, and I got an IV started. I was

scared, Dad. I was sure he was going to die while I was working to save him. I kept praying the whole time so that God wouldn't let him die. I was scared, but I didn't screw up. I even remembered the banter they taught us to use. "Hey. You're doing real well. The chopper's on its way. Hang in there. We'll have you back in the world in a week."

Two other medics roared up in our ambulance while I was using my bandage scissors to cut away his fatigues to confirm there was no wound of exit. We placed him on a litter and got him into the ambulance with the caring spirit of parents putting a newborn infant into a crib.

Our old relic of an ambulance is a bitch to drive. The two medics in the back fought for balance as I worked it through the gears and down the dirt road that leads to the chopper pad. Concern and fear was etched in their faces, but our actions were not the actions of frightened men. I couldn't help wondering, Dad, if their faces were a mirror image of my own.

Thank God for helicopters. The whirling blades assaulted and pounded the air and blasted us with sand and dust as we lifted our patient skyward and delivered him to the crew on board. The pilot revved the engine and the medivac lifted off the ground. We watched until it disappeared. We had done our jobs. Won a small victory. We had beaten death, but my elation was tempered with a vague feeling of guilt. I served in the same unit, but I didn't know the young man except through the bonds of common experience. Why did I have his blood on my hands and uniform? Why was he near death and not me? Like other young men I have placed on medivac choppers, I will never know his fate. Once you leave our unit it is as if you cease to exist.

Who will weep for this young man? His parents? Girlfriend? America? I'm sure the Army won't shed any tears for him. He will be just another Purple Heart to award, maybe another flag draped coffin to bury, or just another change on some sergeant's morning report. He doesn't matter to the Army, Dad. He's just like steak on the grill. There'll be other chunks of raw meat to roast tomorrow.

Most of the guys in my unit are so young, Dad - much younger than me. They should be home with girlfriends, dreaming those delicious thoughts of youth, or busy worrying about their damn grades in school. Some of these kids aren't even old enough to vote. Cars, dates, dances and church socials should dominate their lives, but instead they have guard duty, fatigues, rifles and watching and waiting for a bullet, malaria or a mortar round. Nobody thinks about winning or losing this war. Survival is the name of the game.

I wrote Donna a letter tonight, just as always. And, as usual, the multitudes of evening mosquitoes were ferocious. It's an absolute necessity that I cover every square inch of skin with garments or a coating of oily mosquito repellent or they will eat me alive. A green towel is usually draped over my head so that only my face and hands can be seen. I make a game out of how many mosquito bites I suffer and how many I swat during the course of writing a letter. Donna is always given the score: "Hey Honey, Me 7-Mosquitos 2." The bastards always lose. I started her letter:

"Dear Donna,
I sutured some guy's arm today and we had ham for dinner."

See, Dad, what a romantic I am. She's my wife, and I tell her everything that happens. Thanks for watching over her. I know Mom and you are taking good care of her.

A rat is interrupting this letter. He has just poked his head up through a hole in the floorboards. He looks sort of cute, but I'm going to gently toss my helmet liner in his direction to discourage future visits.

Monks have evening vespers, Dad. Instead of meditation and prayer, I restock and repack my faded, green canvas aid bag. I have packed and repacked the bag so many times that I can find what I need with my eyes closed. The ritual is repeated even if I haven't used the supplies in the bag that day. I have an almost paranoid need to be certain that everything is in its place and that nothing is missing—just in case I might need it. There are no altars and crucifixes here --only the heavy green flack jacket that I place next to my bunk. I have no prayer beads -- just ammunition, held in clips stored in green cloth bandoleers that have to be draped on top of my Aid Bag. Instead of counting sins, I count M16 rifles in the creaky wooden weapons cabinet. Are they all there? Are they clean and in working order? Only when these rituals have been observed can I think of sleep.

Today's been a good one. I got a letter from Donna, and we were served ham for dinner that actually tasted good. We even had ice cream for dessert. It's not the good ice cream like at home, and there was no chocolate syrup, but it was good. We didn't have any cases of malaria or hepatitis. No one died. I didn't have to shoot anyone, and, up to now, no one has tried to shoot at me. Mind, body and spirit have held together under duress, and I've been capable of making decisions and acting responsibly in matters involving life and death.

It's time for lights out and sleep, Dad, but you can bet I'll be listening.

Take care.

Your son,
Dougie

1. Which of the following best states the main idea of this passage?
 - a. Being a soldier in combat is very difficult.
 - b. There is no honor in being a soldier.
 - c. Combat should be avoided at all costs
2. When the author states that "Today's been a good one," he gives the following as reasons:
 - a. They had ham and ice cream for dinner.
 - b. No one had died.
 - c. He had been capable of making decisions involving life and death.
 - d. All of the above.
3. In paragraph 3 the phrase "panic-tinged wail" means: a
 - a. A scary Halloween noise.
 - b. A cry for help made by frightened, fearful people.
 - c. A frightened, sea-going mammal.
4. When the author states "I had not time to offer absolution" in paragraph 7, he means:
 - a. He had not time to offer advice.
 - b. He had no time to give him a drink of water.
 - c. He could not offer the young man any words of comfort or forgiveness.

