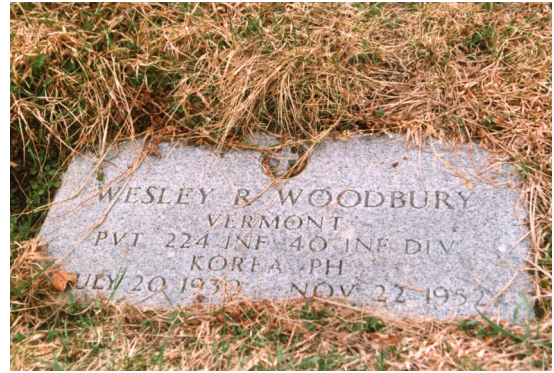


*Woody - a parting tribute*  
*March 12, 2017*

Grove Cemetery lies two miles or so west of Concord, Vermont. It occupies a couple of acres on a steep slope on the north side of US Route 2, isolated from nearby houses. Summers on the hillside are verdant and sweet, but under the arctic winds of winter the same hill must be desolate and bone-chilling; but why would that matter?







My first recollection of visiting this cemetery might have been when I was about ten or twelve years old. But no doubt I had been there when I was quite young as well. I think I went there once more with cousin Dan Kinney when I was about twenty.

When I was in my sixties, some friends and I took a northern route on a long-distance fishing trip from Medway, Maine to Lake Ontario, and as we crossed into Vermont before crossing into Québec I realized that we would be passing the cemetery, so I asked their

indulgence to stop and let me look for something.

It is such a distinctive setting that I recalled almost exactly where I needed to go. I remembered, after more than 40 years had passed, that there was a marker high on the slope, near the back of the field, and in probably less than a minute I found it:

*Wesley R. Woodbury, Pvt, US Army, July 20, 1930 – November 22, 1952.*

My friends gave me a respectful quarter hour to walk around and take in the silence, the loneliness, the finality of it all. There was something else on his grave marker stating which unit he was in: the 40th Infantry Division, 224th Infantry Regiment.

He was one of two from the 40th Division killed on November 22. Before the combat ended, 155 more from the 40th have given their lives. Really, though, now that you may have read a little of his story, what difference is there between Woody Woodbury, my father's younger brother, and all the rest who have died in uniform?

### *First, more about him.*

It was August, 1952, when Woody was able to spend a few weeks at home with his wife and newborn daughter before returning to duty. He crossed the Pacific aboard the *USS General W.M. Black*. After some delay in Japan, he landed in Korea.

In a November 5 letter to my father, Woody wrote: “Letters are pretty hard to write up here. When I write the folks I have to smooth things over so they won’t worry. That leaves me practically nothing to write about. I don’t feel that is necessary with you however. I’ll just tell you facts and you can keep them to yourself. The second day I got in Korea I got a good look at the things that are really happening here. The train that brought me to the front stopped right beside a hospital train. I watched them putting wounded men on the train. The ambulances were bringing the men down faster than they could get them onto the train. It was a sight that made me so sick I had to turn away and vomit.”

In that letter he went on to describe how three members of his unit had been killed. And he added: “I guess our outfit will be on line until about May. If I can keep my ass in one peace that long I’ll really be lucky.” (He spelled poorly.)

And in the same letter, he wrote, ominously, prophetically: “Once in a while we go out into no man’s land and take up mines.”

What was there left of him after a land mine lifted him and half a ton of dirt twenty feet into the air in a split second? Is it the concussion that kills, or maybe the hundreds of pieces of gravel piercing like bullets? Does it lift you so suddenly that your joints pull apart all at once? Or does it literally tear you to pieces? Do you see your guts fly past your face before you black out forever?

Just before I turned two, Uncle Woody gave me a stuffed animal — a copper-colored dog. My oldest daughter, Ruth, has it now and knows its provenance. His widow, Dottie, re-married and had two more daughters, Gail and Cindy Shippee. I saw my cousin, Brenda, on a few brief visits in my younger years, lost touch for most of our adult lives, and in 2007, when she was 54 and I 56, she died of a heart attack.

Did she ever hear the stories of her father’s troubled youth? I wish she were still around so that, in our old age, we could meet again and reminisce. The letters here, the newspaper clippings, and the court records that Dan turned up in 2018 should have been hers to keep.

### *Here’s the difference.*

What’s different about Woody is this: It’s a punch in *my* stomach, a kick to *my* balls. And I hope I can make other people wake up and realize that anyone can be next — to be punched, kicked, or killed.

Woody didn’t die for his country. He died for Korea, sure. And he died for politics. Just about every American military casualty since the Civil War did not happen in defense of the United States but was a sacrifice in another country that posed no threat to our sovereignty. Woody gave up what should have been another sixty years of doing what the rest of us have been doing all the while he has been chilling his bones on a Vermont hillside.

He could have been raising his daughter and having more children. He might have enjoyed rock-and-roll, but he never heard a note of it. He might have liked to try out a Corvette when it first appeared. He didn’t get to see Neil Armstrong step onto the moon. He never saw a computer.

May 30, 2023, was the seventy-first Memorial Day since Woody bit the dust, or maybe more precisely, since the dust bit him. We are asked to remember those who gave everything so that the rest of us might have something. OK, remember this: From

1950-1953 there were 36,516 Americans who did not return from Korea alive, and 4,759 are still missing in action. From 1959-1975 there were 58,272 Americans who did not return from Viet Nam alive, and 2,489 are missing. And since 2003 when we set out to defeat terrorism-in-the-name-of-Islam, more than 7,000 have given their lives, and there are at least 3 missing.

Altogether, since I was born — after World War Two, over 100,000 Americans have not returned from undeclared wars on foreign soil. And I am acutely aware that, wherever our guys died, uncountable hundreds of thousands of humble humans from those other countries have died as well.

We can't honor these war dead by holding a barbecue on the Monday nearest Memorial Day. We can honor them by derisively interrogating anyone calling for more of the same senselessness that killed Woody — prolonged entrenchments with no commitment to ending things immediately and decisively. Does that mean we should not defend ourselves? Not at all.

### *It's about war.*

As a naïve 19-year-old I joined the Army during the Vietnam war. But you can call me a pacifist, because it's not in my nature to want to hurt anyone. You can call me a war monger, too, because it's not in my nature to submit to getting hurt, and I believe the only way to stop the killing is to stop the killer fast. I joined up in 1970 because, if I had not done so, my draft number was next to be called, and then I would have had no say in where I would be sent.

I have this idea about war. It's like, if the bully punches you once, but you're not prepared to resist, then you've been warned, and you'd better be prepared for the very next punch. If, sooner or later, the bully punches you again, and you're still not prepared, by default you have decided to accept whatever he decides to deliver, because life isn't fair and the strong and pushy — the narcissists with political power and with delusions of self-importance, decide how the rest will live.

Once a bully hits you, though, even the first time, he has forfeited all his rights: the right to choose your response, your weapon, the setting, the timing, the intensity, and the duration of your response, whom you enlist to help you, and whether he survives or is reduced to dust.

If the bully is a kid on the playground, you can surround yourself with protective friends or go to the principal. If you're a nation and the bully is another nation, you have no one to run to. It's up to you, and you had better not be ducking around and trying to find your escape route and protecting your nose while he rearranges your internal organs. You're sure as hell an idiot if you're trying to talk peace while he dislodges your teeth.



If you're a nation, and a bully hits you, I think you should lay him out flat, suddenly, and with everything it takes to forever prevent the next punch. I know America doesn't start wars, but when America gets sucked in by some "tinpot dictator with a bad haircut and a pet word for God," (P. J. O'Rourke's words, not mine), I cannot comprehend why we tiptoe around with so-called diplomacy and feed our soldiers to their bullying. If the bully punches first, I think he ought not have time to draw another breath before he gets knocked out cold instantly. The United States has had the ability to do that ever since the end of World War II.

If two other countries are slugging it out and our homeland is not threatened, send some weapons or advice to one or the other, if there is a clear reason, but not our own people. My own preference, rather than sending soldiers and sailors to spill their guts in war after interminable war, would be to decapitate the regime that wants to pick a fight. We can do that, but of course that justifies the enemy's doing the same to the head of this country. So be it. If you want to be President, accept the possibility. If you don't want that responsibility, step aside and let someone with courage assume the presidency.

Our reason for going into Korea in 1950 was all about making the so-called United Nations look important and had nothing to do with protecting the United States. If we've blundered into a treaty to protect some little foreign country, then we need to treat the bully the same as if he had hit us in the nose personally, because the bully which is North Korea is still there, and still just as evil 71 years after Woody was killed (as of 2023). And we still have troops on the ground there. What the hell is that all about?

What will we do when the North resumes where it left off in 1953: "negotiate" or annihilate?

Therefore, because we're still playing war games in Asia, we have announced to the rest of the world that the United States is willing to march another 100,000 enthusiastic young American lemmings over the same precipice over the next, say, 70 years, so that diplomats can continue pretending to work for peace. In the words of Lewis Forester, "while Congress is patting each other on the back and referring to themselves as the honorable Mr. So-and-So, men still die." These are the politicians in pressed suits whose motives need to be questioned, who argue that civilian casualties of a decisive response would be too high, who believe it is fitting and proper to kill 100,000 more Americans *in undeclared wars* in the name of peace during one more lifespan. (These thoughts have been expanded upon in my novel, *Cold Morning Shadow*.)

Here's a radical thought: Armies are comprised of civilians. Read up on Article I, Section 8, Clause 12 in the Constitution. The last time Congress declared war on an enemy was in 1942. Drafting civilians, especially in the absence of a declared war, does not make them professional soldiers. It makes them frightened civilians who want to go home. The uniform that Woody was wearing did not make him a sinister threat to world peace. It made him dead.

Instead of crushing the bully before he knows what hit him back, we put troubled kids from backwoods places like Livermore Falls, Maine, on the ground in places like Inchon and Pleiku and we tell them that, if they just hold the ground for a few more days or weeks, our diplomats will have this all solved and they can go home to the mom and baby they left behind. This is what makes me mad. Our diplomats haven't accomplished anything in Korea in seven and a half decades.



When I visited his grave on that recent trip through Vermont, there were fresh flowers lying at the base of Woody's headstone. His widow, Dottie, then alone and in her seventies, still lived in Vermont. She might have known about the flowers.

Humans have an astonishing capacity for cruelty and violence, as well as for creativity and compassion. In the mere century or so since all the world's populations have discovered one another and, during the same period, communication among all nations has become possible, it is the great shame of mankind that we have not all come together and put an end to war. But more than the shame upon the succession of leaders in all countries is the shame upon the people who have allowed arrogant tyrants to rule them, including tyrants who rule by divine right, dictators who rule by suppression, and elected go-gooders who push idiotic schemes by forcing compliance with feel-good executive orders.

I'm not proud to say I "served" my country. I'd prefer not to have a country. I'd prefer not to dwell among beings who accept living under dogmas that require conflict with other collectives of people — other "nations." But I was young when I joined, and I saw myself faced with criminal penalties for refusing to serve. As for my own easy time in the Army, during the Vietnam war, I am reminded of the line in Milton's short poem (On His Blindness): "They also serve who only stand and wait." I served my time. Yes, while I was enjoying myself in California and Europe, I was available for any other assignment the Army might have thrown at me, any new goof by the politicians, any new field that needed to be cleared of mines. But I was only called upon to wait, (and decrypt Russian radio communications). Then I was sent home and permitted to lead the life that my uncle was denied.

I don't begrudge the Korean people Woody's life. Perhaps, though, the sadness told in this collection of letters and the brief history of this troubled youth and proud daddy will reach just one future politician who is tempted to negotiate treaties obliging our senseless sacrifice or who is tempted to politeness when responding to bully regimes who don't deserve diplomatic deference.

---

le Déserteur ("the Pacifist")

Messieurs qu'on nomme grand, je vous fais une lettre    *Men whose names are great, I am writing you a letter*

Que vous lirez peut-être si vous avez le temps    *Which you will read perhaps, if you have the time*

Je viens de recevoir mes papiers militaires

Pour aller à la guerre avant mercredi soir

Monsieur le Président je ne veux pas la faire

Je ne suis pas sur terre pour tuer les pauvres gens

Il n faut pas vous fâcher mais il faut que je vous dise

Les guerres sont des bêtises le monde en a assez

Depuis que je suis né j'ai vu mourir des frères

J'ai vu partir des pères et les enfants pleurer

Les mères ont trop souffert quand d'autres se gobergent

Et vivant à leur aise malgré la boue de sang

Il y'a les prisonniers on a volé leurs âmes

On a volé leurs femmes et tout le cher passé

Demain de bon matin je fermerai la porte

Au nez des années mortes j'irai par les chemins

Je mendierai ma vie sur la terre et sur l'onde

*Mister President, I don't want to do this*

*I am not on Earth to kill miserable mankind*

Do vieux au nouveau monde et je dirai aux gens  
Profitez de la vie éloignez la misère  
Les hommes sont tous des frères gens de tous les pays  
S'il faut verser le sang allez verser le vôtre  
Messieurs les bons apôtres monsieur le Président  
Si vous me poursuivez prévenez vos gendarmes  
Que je serai sans armes et qu'ils pourront tirer  
Et qu'ils pourront tirer

Adapted from the song by Boris Vian & Harold B Berg, recorded by Peter, Paul & Mary. Published in *Sing Out!* (Vol. 13, No. 2), April-May 1963, "Le Déserteur" was composed at the height of the long war between France and the Algerian nationalist freedom fighters. It was recorded by one of France's most popular singers, Mouloudji, an Algerian himself by no strange coincidence. The French government promptly banned the song and confiscated all recordings. Long may it echo down the canyons of history.

*[This article is an excerpt from the chapter, Woody,  
in the book Relics, by David A. Woodbury.]*