The Plaque on the Wall

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Etched in bronze on a plaque, in heroic profile, was the face of 2nd Lt. William Frank Smith. According to the inscription, he died valiantly in a picturesque Italian seaside villa called Anzio in 1944. Alongside Lt. Smith hung 1st Lt. James Robert Bishop, killed in action at a place called Pusan in Korea in 1950. The plaques were mounted along the corridor leading to the President's office, numbering about ten or twelve. Ken absent-mindedly scanned the others, reading the engravings and noting with interest the wide range of geographical areas represented. Indeed, the University had contributed its share of young men to make the world safe for democracy.

Ken reflected on the unknown faces he had seen on the plaques. "We all have to go sometime," Ken muttered softly to himself as he walked toward the Science and Engineering Building. The basic difference, Ken determined, was the fact that those men had died violently and in the flower of their youth. Perhaps it did not matter how they died. They were dead as all men must be one day. Still, the moment of death was surely frightening. He wondered if dying violently was really any different from a natural death. Of course, only a dead man would know the answer to that question.

Upon reaching class, Ken quickly forgot the men on the plaques and thoughts of the Grim Reaper. Class went well, and Ken was walking to the Student Union Building anticipating a hot cup of coffee. "Hey, Ken, where are you headed?" yelled Dale. "To the Union for a cup of coffee and a look at the women," Ken lightheartedly replied. "I have to go to the business office for a second, Ken. Come along and keep me company." Ken thought for a minute. "Why not, I've got two hours till my next class." Both of them proceeded to the Administration Building.

A group of approximately 300 students had gathered on the parade ground and were listening to a flaming speech by a long-haired man with a microphone connected to three large speakers. "Those SDS bastards," Dale said with disgust, "they shouldn't be allowed to set foot on this campus." Ken was not surprised at Dale's attitude. The speech could be heard over half of the campus. This particular spring of 1969 had seen the University torn with hate and blind passion. The major issue was the Vietnam War. A small-scale civil war was in progress, containing the ingredients which the brew of civil war thrives on, like primitive emotionalism, irrationality, and violence. Dale had been involved in a brutal fight with two members of Students for a Democratic Society three days ago. The two SDS people came out the worse. One had a broken nose and a broken arm. Unfortunately, they did not know Dale was a Black Belt in karate and finished first in his class at Ranger School.

Ken was eagerly anticipating graduation. Four years of time and money were about to pay off with a sheepskin. He was now in the Administration Building, checking to make sure he did not need that trig course to graduate. However, he halted momentarily and looked at a face etched in bronze on a plaque. The plaque said that 2nd Lt. Dale Brodowski received the Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumously, for uncommon gallantry by throwing himself on an enemy grenade so that members of his patrol might live. It was awarded on November 7, 1969, in a city called Pleiku, Republic of Vietnam.

Suddenly a zealous young man with flowing locks came running up to him. Ken realized he knew him. He was very excited. "Ken, didn't you hear the news?" Ken shook his head no. "Man, Nixon's invaded Cambodia. The Weathermen are having a meeting in the Union right now. Come with me!" Ken stared at Dale's plaque again.

"No thanks, Bob," Ken turned and started to walk away. "Say, Kenny, what were you doing? I mean, wow, man, you were burning a hole through that wall. Oh, you were eyeballing the dude in the plaque. Probably some fascist pig. Hmm, wonder who he is, man?"

Ken sighed. "Bob, it is nothing but a plaque on the wall, just an ornament to take up space."