Clarion Review

General

The Bearcats: They, Too, Are the Greatest Generation

Raul F. Salinas
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Korean War veterans like the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield get no respect. Well some respect but they're overlooked by historians and filmmakers alike who prefer to focus on clear-cut American victories like World War II. Whether the Korean War was a loss for U.S.-led United Nations forces or simply a tie depends on how one defines winning. The postwar border between the communist north and the capitalist south was—and still is—close to where it was before a shot was fired.

In 1952 Corporal Roberto Saens known to some as "Sal" is a radio communications specialist near the front lines with a woman waiting for him back in Lansing Michigan. He's sympathetic toward Korean civilians and harbors no great love of glory.

The tightly knit radio squad's members are named after states and cities like "Nebraska" the contraband marketer; "Cleveland" the racist S.O.B.; and "Tulsa" the thinker who challenges narrow assumptions. Other characters are stock types: a nervous short-timer dodging risk a great guy destined never to make it home. Men start off strangers then form profound bonds by surviving close calls together. The old status boundaries fall away as personal respect increases because "…in war ethnicity religion or politics aren't worth a damn. What matters is comradeship."

The Bearcats' squad solidarity is heightened by the arbitrariness of orders from upper echelons. Roberto and his associates aren't much more impressed with distantly devised strategies and policies than Joseph Heller was when he wrote *Catch-22*. The Bearcats refuse to accompany officers who aren't concerned about preserving life and limb out on patrol. Officers are nothing special until a wily three-war veteran named Major Skinner arrives with an unconventional training program. He requires the men to learn each other's natural scents and unique sounds made while moving so they'll know who is nearby on night missions. He encourages them to stop handicapping themselves with unintelligent generalizations about

Koreans saying "'…get rid of the "chink" and "gook" words from your vocabulary and then you'll see their faces and their differences.'"

Waxing philosophical yields mixed results. Metaphor-laden passages (i.e.: a war is a theater play it is a disease) tend toward self-consciousness but the concrete descriptions solidly convey the totality of destruction: "The land which they were about to cross was once rich with rice paddies and human beings and flowers of different colors but now it was flat and desolate…" The steadily dispensed storyline uses both action and conversation to deal with heavy psychology such as battlefield fear and responses to seeing death. It depicts a casual racism typical of the era teamwork courage boredom a touch of insubordination and a barrage of mortars on the bunker roofs at night.

Author Raul F. Salinas founded a bilingual newspaper wrote tool and die manuals worked as a union official and taught Literature at colleges in Texas and Michigan. His previous works *Down and Up the Apple Trees* and *Short Stories* appeared in 2003.