

STOP THE SUN

by Gary Paulsen

Terry Erickson was a tall boy; 13, starting to fill out with muscle but still a little awkward. He was on the edge of being a good athlete, which meant a lot to him. He felt it coming too slowly, though, and that bothered him. But what bothered him even more was when his father's eyes went away. Usually it happened when it didn't cause any particular trouble. Sometimes during a meal his father's fork would stop halfway to his mouth, just stop, and there would be a long pause while his eyes went away, far away. After several minutes his mother would reach over and take the fork and put it gently down on his plate, and they would go back to eating - or try to go back to eating - normally.

They knew what caused it. When it first started, Terry had asked his mother in private what it was, what was causing the strange behaviour. 'It's from the war,' his mother had said. 'The doctors at the veterans' hospital call it the Vietnam syndrome.'

'Will it go away?' 'They don't know. Sometimes it goes away. Sometimes it doesn't. They are trying to help him. 'But what happened? What actually caused it?' 'I told you, Vietnam'.

'But there had to be something,' Terry persisted. 'Something made him like that. Not just Vietnam. Billy's father was there, and he doesn't act that way.' 'That's enough questions,' his mother said sternly. 'He doesn't talk about it, and I don't ask. Neither will you. Do you understand?'

'But, Mom.' 'That's enough.'

And he stopped pushing it. But it bothered him whenever it happened. When something bothered him, he liked to stay with it until he understood it, and he understood no part of this.

Words. His father had trouble, and they gave him words like Vietnam syndrome. He knew almost nothing of the war, and when he tried to find out about it, he kept hitting walls. Once he went to the school library and asked for anything they might have that could help him understand the war and how it affected his father. They gave him a dry history that described French involvement, Communist involvement, American involvement.. But it told him nothing of the

war. It was all numbers, cold numbers, and nothing of what had happened. There just didn't seem to be anything that could help him.

Another time he stayed after class and tried to talk to Mr. Carlson, who taught history. But some part of Terry was embarrassed. He didn't want to say why he wanted to know about Vietnam, so he couldn't be specific. 'What do you want to know about Vietnam, Terry?' Mr. Carlson had asked. 'It was a big war.'

Terry had looked at him, and something had started up in his mind, but he didn't let it out. He shrugged. 'I just want to know what it was like. I know somebody who was in it.'

'A friend?' 'Yessir. A good friend.'

Mr. Carlson had studied him, looking into his eyes, but didn't ask any other questions. Instead he mentioned a couple of books Terry had not seen. They turned out to be pretty good. They told about how it felt to be in combat. Still, he couldn't make his gather be one of the men he read about.

And it may have gone on and on like that, with Terry never really knowing any more about it, except that his father's eyes started going away more and more often. It might have just gone the rest of his life that way except for the shopping mall.

It was easily the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to him. It started as a normal shopping trip. His father had to go to the hardware store, and he asked Terry to go along. When they got to the mall, they split up. His father went to the hardware store, Terry to a record store to look at albums.

Terry browsed so long that he was late meeting his father at the mall's front door. But his father wasn't there, and Terry looked out to the car to make sure it was still in the parking lot. It was, and he supposed his father had just gotten busy, so he waited.

Still his father didn't come, and he was about to go to the hardware store to find him when he noticed the commotion. Or not a commotion so much as a sudden movement of people.

Later, he thought of it and couldn't remember when the feeling first came to him that there was something wrong. The people were moving toward the hardware store, and that might have been what made Terry suspicious. There was a crowd blocking the entry to the store, and he couldn't see what they were looking at. Some of them were laughing small, nervous laughs that made no sense.

Terry squeezed through the crowd until he got near the front. At first he saw nothing unusual. There were still some people in front of him, so he pushed a crack between them. Then he saw it: His father was squirming along the floor on his stomach. He was crying, looking terrified, his breath coming in short, hot pants like some kind of hurt animal.

It burned into Terry's mind, the picture of his father down on the floor. It burned in and in, and he wanted to walk away, but something made his feet move forward. He knelt next to his father and helped the owner of the store get him up on his feet. His father didn't speak at all but continued to make little whimpering sounds, and they led him back into the owner's office and put him in a chair. Then Terry called his mother, and she came in a taxi to take them home. Waiting, Terry sat in a chair next to his father, looking at the floor, wanting only for the earth to open and let him drop in a deep hole. He wanted to disappear.

Words. They gave him words like Vietnam syndrome, and his father was crawling through a hardware store on his stomach.

When the embarrassment became so bad that he would cross the street when he saw his father coming, when it ate into him as he went to sleep, Terry realized he had to do something. He had to know this thing, had to understand what was wrong with his father.

When it came, it was simple enough at the start. It had taken some courage, more than Terry thought he could find. His father was sitting in the kitchen at the table, and his mother had gone shopping. Terry wanted it that way; he wanted his father alone. His mother seemed to try to protect him, as if his father could break.

Terry got a soda out of the refrigerator and popped it open. As an afterthought, he handed it to his father and got another for himself. Then he sat at the table. His father smiled. 'You look serious.' 'Well.....'

It went nowhere for a moment, and Terry was just about to drop it altogether. It may be the wrong time, he thought, but there might never be a better one. He tightened his back, took a sip of pop. 'I was wondering if we could talk about something, Dad,' Terry said. His father shrugged. 'We already did the bit about girls. Some time ago, as I remember it.'

'No. Not that.' It was a standing joke between them. When his father finally got around to explaining things to him, they'd already covered it in school. 'It's something else.'

Something pretty heavy, judging by your face.'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

I still can't do it, Terry thought. Things are bad, but maybe not as bad as they could get. I still can drop this thing.

'Vietnam,' Terry blurted out. And he thought, there, it's out. It's out and gone. 'No!' his father said sharply. It was as if he had been struck a blow. A body blow.

'But, Dad.'

'No. That's another part of my life. A bad part. A rotten part. It was before I met your mother, long before you. It has nothing to do with this family, nothing. No.'

So Terry thought, so I tried. But it wasn't over yet. It wasn't started yet. 'It just seems to bother you, so much,' Terry said, 'and I thought if I could help or maybe understand it better...' His words ran until he foundered, until he could say no more. He looked at the table, then out the window. It was all wrong to bring it up, he thought. I blew it. I blew it all up. 'I'm sorry.'

But now his father didn't hear him. Now his father's eyes were gone again, and a shaft of something horrible went through Terry's heart as he thought he had done this thing to his father, caused his eyes to go away.

'You can't know,' his father said after a time. 'You can't know this thing.' Terry said nothing. He felt he had said too much.

This thing that you want to know - there is so much of it that you cannot know it all, and to know only a part is ... is too awful. I can't tell you. I can't tell anybody what it was really like.'

It was more than he'd ever said about Vietnam, and his voice was breaking. Terry hated himself and felt he would hate himself until he was an old man. In one second he had caused such ruin. And all because he had been embarrassed. What difference did it make? Now he had done this, and he wanted to hide, to leave. But he sat, waiting, knowing that it wasn't done. His father looked to him, through him, somewhere into and out of Terry. He wasn't in the kitchen anymore. He wasn't in the house. He was back in the green places, back in the hot places, the wet-hot places.

'You think that because I act strange, we can talk and it will be all right,' his father said. 'That we can talk and it will just go away. That's what you think, isn't it?'

Terry started to shake his head, but he knew it wasn't expected. 'That's what the shrinks say,' his father continued. 'The psychiatrists tell me that if I talk bout it, the whole thing will go away. But they don't know. They weren't there. Nobody was there but me and some other dead people, and they can't talk because they couldn't stop the morning.'

Terry pushed his soda can back and forth, looking down, frightened at what was happening. The other dead people, he'd said, as if he were dead as well. Couldn't stop the morning.

'I don't understand, Dad.' 'No. You don't.' His voice hardened, then softened again and broke at the edges. 'But see, see how it was ...' He trailed off, and Terry thought he was done. His father looked back down to the table, at the can of soda he hadn't touched, at the tablecloth, at his hands, which were folded, inert on the table.

'We were crossing a rice paddy in the dark,' he said, and suddenly his voice flowed like a river breaking loose. 'We were crossing the paddy, and it was dark, still dark, you couldn't see the end of your nose. There was a light rain, a mist, and I was thinking that during the next break I would whisper and tell Petey Kressler how nice the rain felt, but of course I didn't know there wouldn't be a Petey Kressler.'

He took a deep, ragged breath. At that moment Terry felt his brain swirl, a kind of whirlpool pulling, and he felt the darkness and the light rain because it was in his father's eyes, in his voice.

'So we were crossing the paddy, and it was a straight sweep, and then we caught it. We began taking fire from three sides, automatic weapons, and everybody went down and tried to get low, but we couldn't. We couldn't get low enough. We could never get low enough, and you could hear the rounds hitting people. It was just a short time before they brought in the mortars, and we should have moved, should have run, but nobody got up, and after a time nobody could get up. The fire just kept coming and coming, and then incoming mortars, and I heard screams as they hit, but there was nothing to do. Nothing to do.'

'Dad?' Terry said. He thought, maybe I can stop him. Maybe I can stop him before ... before it gets to be too much. Before he breaks.

'Mortars,' his father went on, 'I hated mortars. I You just heard them wump as they fired, and you didn't know where they would hit, and you always felt like they would hit your back. They swept back and forth with the mortars, and the automatic weapons kept coming in, and there was no radio, no way to call for artillery. Just the dark to hide in. So I crawled to the side and found Jackson, only he wasn't there, just part of his body, the top part, and I hid under it and waited, and waited, and waited.'

'Finally the firing quit. But see, see how it was in the dark with nobody alive but me? I yelled once, but that brought fire again, so I shut up, and there was nothing, not even the screams.'

His father cried, and Terry tried to understand, and he thought he could feel part of it. But it was so much, so much and so strange to him.

'You cannot know this,' his father repeated. It was almost a chant. 'You cannot know the fear. It was dark, and I was the only one left alive out of fifty-four men, all dead but me, and I knew that the Vietcong were just waiting for light. When the dawn came, 'Charley' would come out and finish everybody off, the way they always did. And I thought if I could stop the dawn, just stop the sun from coming up, I could make it.'

Terry felt the fear, and he also felt the tears coming down his cheeks. His hand went across the table, and he took his father's hand and held it. It was shaking. 'I mean I actually thought that if I

could stop the sun from coming up, I could live. I made my brain work on that because it was all I had. Through the rest of the night in the rain in the paddy, I thought I could do it. I could stop the dawn.' He took a deep breath. 'But you can't, you know. You can't stop it from coming, and when I saw the gray light, I knew I was dead. It would just be minutes, and the light would be full, and I just settled under Jackson's body and hid.'

He stopped, and his face came down into his hands. Terry stood and went around the table to stand in back of him, his hands on his shoulders, rubbing gently.

'They didn't shoot me. They came, one of them poked Jackson's body and went on, and they left me. But I was dead. I'm still dead, don't you see? I died because I couldn't stop the sun. I died. Inside where I am - I died.'

Terry was still in back of him, and he nodded, but he didn't see. Not that. He understood only that he didn't understand and that he would probably never know what it was really like, would probably never understand what had truly happened. And maybe his father would never be truly normal. But Terry also knew that it didn't matter. He would try to understand, and the trying would have to be enough. He would try hard from now on, and he would not be embarrassed when his father's eyes went away. He would not be embarrassed no matter what his father did. Terry had knowledge now. Maybe not enough and maybe not all that he would need. But it was a start.