

AN  
AMERICAN  
ODYSSEUS  
THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

CHARLES R. CHAPMAN

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

## AN AMERICAN ODYSSEUS

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*To my wife Beate, whose patience, encouragement, love, support, sacrifice, and understanding made this memoir possible. It was solely due to her constant urging that this journey is recounted.*

## THE SOLDIERS OF THE SKY

Reprinted with the permission of Jim Oliveri. This poem, published in 1995, can be found in his memorable publications *The Torch* and *The Frost Weeds*.

I knew when you became my wife  
the Lord gave me his best.  
So when I reach the end of life  
I have but one request,

Please bury me where soldiers lie,  
in earth that's rich and warm,  
where veterans guard the distant sky  
through wind and rain and storm.

For I was once a soldier too,  
So young and filled with pride.  
I grasped the torch of war and drew  
my strength from those who'd died.

For God and flag we went aboard,  
The Yankee was the stranger  
We met the cruel deadly horde,  
and faced the guns of danger.

We bore the heat, the blood and tears,  
endured the shot and shell.  
We silently concealed our fears,  
and plumbed the depths of hell.

When at last our time was done,  
we left the land of fire,  
changed forever having known  
the bones upon the pyre.

Wiser, stronger, sadder men,  
no gratitude we knew.  
We felt unloved, but gladly, then  
the good Lord gave me you.

And soon came children of our own.  
through sickness and in health.  
What they've become and how they've  
grown means more to me than wealth.

My comrades met the final call,  
the years have whispered by,  
their names upon a marble wall,  
now soldiers of the sky.  
And when it's time for me to rest,  
my duty here well done,  
please let me lie among the best,  
their battles fought and won.

Find for me a sacred garden  
sown with boots and caps,  
where none within have need for pardon,  
and buglers still play "Taps".

Names and faces matter not,  
nor heritage, not color.  
We'll share the honor of our lot,  
our strengths and deeds of valor.

If I should come to God's right hand,  
perhaps he'll pause to tell  
why he permitted me to stand  
while those around me fell.

I'll be with you as I am now,  
no man could ask for more,  
eternal love my silent vow,  
the guardian at your door.

And so my love, we'll meet again,  
of that you can be certain.  
Perhaps you'll lie beside me then,  
when God brings down the curtain.

For on that day we'll be together  
as bright flags snap nearby.  
We'll rest in peace, protected ever  
by soldiers of the sky.

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My editor, Jim Oliveri, is a Vietnam veteran himself, a published author, an accomplished businessman and professional who never ceased to encourage me to tell my story. His experience and his positive attitude were invaluable, and he was ever available to answer what must have seemed like a lot of dumb questions.

Natalie Brown, the first person to ever read any excerpts from the memoir, and the school psychologist where I work, insisted that I keep working on the project when I wasn't sure I wanted to finish. She would check on my progress on an almost daily basis to keep my feet to the fire. I sometimes felt she was more driven than myself to see this through to completion.

I must acknowledge the veterans that I meet or with whom I share "war stories". I am telling my adventures, but it is for each of them that I tell it. They all have their own adventures and I am simply the one lucky enough to be afforded the opportunity to let the world get a glimpse of what it was like. May God bless them all, the living and the departed, who left a part of themselves in the jungles and rice paddies of the Republic of Vietnam.

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Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the brave and enduring allies with whom I had the honor to serve. The people of South Vietnam deserved far better than they received after enduring years of a bitter conflict with broken promises strewn along the path to their ignominy. I wish I could have done more.



# FOREWORD

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE of books about the Vietnam War and its many controversies. But relatively few of those convey the reader with such realistic detail into the mud and blood that was the conflict in Southeast Asia. Charles Chapman has done an extraordinary job of accomplishing just that with *An American Odysseus*. As a Vietnam veteran myself, I frequently nodded in agreement while reading Mr. Chapman's vivid descriptions of not only the intense combat, but of the more mundane experiences as well. His work has a definite "air of authenticity" to it. Chapman's narrative exposes the reader to the sights, sounds, and smells of the conflict between American forces and the highly elusive and dedicated enemy.

During 1964 and 1965 I served in some of the more forbidding areas of South Vietnam—the A Shau Valley, Nam Dong, Khe Sanh when it was still a Special Forces camp. The war was fought on a much smaller scale then, although encounters with the enemy could still be deadly. Most of my experience involved brief firefights with small groups of local Viet Cong guerrillas. I was fortunate to miss the major clashes that occurred later when North Vietnamese regulars took to the field. Chapman found himself squarely in the middle of that escalation and writes about it superbly. I was astonished at the similarity of our thinking on certain subjects, even though we were in different areas at different times facing different opponents. I have nothing but the utmost respect for what the author was able to accomplish under often extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances. He has told it as it was with modesty and little embellishment. We get to see the whole story, warts and all.

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I am especially pleased to have served as editor for this book. Reading it has brought back memories that have either been forgotten or repressed for many years. Some of those have been decidedly painful to revisit. But sometimes it is best to do so for the sake of our own well-being. When reading Chapman's work, you will quickly grasp that writing this book has been cathartic for him as well. For anyone wishing to learn what it is like at "the point of the spear," Charles Chapman's *An American Odyssey* clearly delivers.

—*Jim Oliveri, Phoenix, AZ*

# PROLOGUE

**O**DYSSEUS WAS KING OF the Island of Ithaca, off the east coast of Greece. He was a legendary Greek hero, always thought of as the most cunning, using his mind over matter. Famously he fought at the Siege of Troy, though he was eventually injured and had to withdraw to his ship. Later, he came up with the plan for the 'Trojan Horse', and led the Greek warriors into the city, hidden inside the giant wooden horse. This feat eventually won the Greeks the war. On his way home across the Aegean, he was blown off course, going through tremendous physical and emotional hardship, including going deep into the underworld. It seemed as if each step of his long journey was taking him further away from his desired goal of returning to his home and to normalcy. He eventually did return home and slaughtered all the suitors come to marry his wife. They represented the demons that had haunted him during all the years of his exile. His destiny was now fulfilled. Odysseus was home.

**Somewhere off the coast of Okinawa, May 1945**

It sounded like a low rumble of thunder on the mid-morning horizon. But not a cloud was in sight. The young seaman had heard that sound for days now, but always from the other direction. Until now, the roar of the heavy guns that sounded like distant thunder came from the island that was a blur to the far west. If the wind direction was right, the thunder was clear and distinct, but on most days, it was just a low rumble that would sometimes grow in volume then wane again.

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The rumble grew in volume as if drawing closer. Now, tufts of dark clouds could be seen to the east, and the far horizon began darkening from clouds of smoke. The sun was devastatingly bright and hurt the eyes if you looked in its direction. Klaxons began clanging in an almost panicky manner. The call to general quarters rang out over the ship's intercom, and the flight deck became a flurry of activity. Pilots began scrambling through the open hatch of the Ready Room, as hundreds of deck-crew members began getting the F6F fighters ready for takeoff. The young seaman raced for his combat duty station, preparing his assigned aircraft that was to be one of those to scramble.

The deck lurched beneath him as the massive carrier began to pour on speed and the tilt of the deck became pronounced as the behemoth turned into the wind for the takeoff of its aircraft. The USS *Bunker Hill*, the pride of the Pacific Fleet off the coast of Okinawa, was getting into the war again. The crescendo of fire to the east was growing. The "threat" aircraft had passed the far-flung picket ships, and were approaching the main body of the fleet, whose sole purpose for being was to protect the carriers. Eyes were strained peering into the sun in the east, but still nothing could be seen.

Guns aboard the *Bunker Hill* test fired a few rounds to be sure all was operational as the enemy approached, still invisible to the naked eye in the glare of the hot morning sun. Aircraft began roaring down the flight deck, lifting into the sky, as rapidly as they could get airborne. Suddenly the biggest carrier in the US Navy shuddered as all its guns seemed to blaze to life as one as the first enemy aircraft was spotted. He was low, a scant one-hundred feet above the waves and bearing straight for the ship, coming out of the sun. Tracers and anti-aircraft shells followed the zig-zagging Mitsubishi and its every move. The seaman stared fascinated at the spectacle. More and more planes became visible, a couple falling into the sea as burning hulks when they were struck by shells. They were drawing closer and closer, and it was clear that this was not an ordinary attack.

Everyone on board had survived air attacks over the previous days, but this one was different. It wasn't as well coordinated as before. The

attacking planes were lower and seemed more determined. It struck everybody at almost the same time. These were the mass waves of kamikazes that Tokyo Rose had been promising, the suicide pilots. The young seaman had withstood *kamikaze* attacks before, but nothing on this scale. The noise was deafening, and the sky suddenly seemed alive with planes as American pilots tried to shoot the Japanese *kamikazes* out of the sky and protect their seaborne home. The battle grew ever closer and the seaman watched mesmerized as the Mitsubishi drew near. Shells were bursting so close that the wings were rocking with each explosion and the seaman didn't understand how the plane could continue to fly. The enemy plane began a shallow dive, aiming at the hangar deck where the fuel and bombs were stockpiled. An instant before the collision of plane and ship, it was as if the eyes of the Japanese pilot and the American seaman were locked.

### Astoria, Oregon June 1945

She was from West Virginia, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of a widowed dirt-poor farmer and coal miner. She had grown up in the depression where virtually everyone was guessing where the next full meal would come from. She was just eighteen when the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, and when her brother, who was two years older enlisted in the Army, she decided to get out of the mountains and find a job in the city. She ended up in Norfolk, Virginia working in a ship yard, and while by no means rich, was making more money than she had ever imagined.

It was a heady time to be young and free. The war took precedence over everything else, and a very conservative society found its youth reveling in the decadence of boom times. She met a young seaman on shore leave as they were riding on a Norfolk bus. They hit it off immediately and married shortly after. The young couple moved to San Diego, then to Astoria, Oregon to a small Naval Air Station there, and it was from here that the seaman received his orders to report for shipment aboard the USS *Bunker Hill* and left his young wife behind having only recently learned that she was again pregnant with their second child.

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It was a cool and drizzling morning that a son was born. It was quickly determined that he had all ten toes and ten fingers, blue eyes, and a healthy set of lungs. His footprint was recorded on his birth certificate and the child was given the same first name as his father, who was at that moment fighting for his life a half world away.

The child's father was not one of the nearly six hundred men killed or wounded that day aboard the Bunker Hill. Ever after that day, however, he carried in his pocket, for "good luck," a shard of the shrapnel that had missed his head by mere inches when the kamikaze struck his ship. He arrived in San Diego in June when the ship was sent back for repairs. The seaman and his young wife were reunited, and it was then that they decided that his father-in-law would be taking care of his son. Both parents readily agreed to the arrangement. A couple months later, the seaman was discharged from the Navy following the surrender of the Japanese Empire, and then knocked around a bit at a couple of civilian jobs. The story has it that following a night of heavy drinking with his wife's brother, Ralph, both the former seaman and his brother-in-law enlisted in the Army.

Meanwhile, the child lived with his widowed grandfather and his new wife, who both doted on him, in Laurel, Maryland. After nearly three years of legal wrangling and court proceedings, the state rejected the grandfathers' request for adoption because he did not have enough income to afford to raise the child. The youngster would ultimately have to be returned to the birth parents or become a ward of the state and put up for adoption through an authorized agency. The grandfather then decided to sue the parents for more than three years' child support figuring the cost to be nearly \$10,000.

The stage was now set. The child would become involved in a lifetime of contempt, hatred, and distrust that would impact every aspect of his psyche. The child referred to his youth as the "time of the silent scream," because it seemed that no one could hear him.

The years passed, and the child became a man, bitter to be sure, but with a philosophical outlook and only one real goal in mind. He wanted more than anything to become a soldier. To him it was not a career, it was a calling. But, I'll let him tell the story in his own words.

## My Story

A lot of years have passed since the events discussed in this book took place. I have had to rely mostly on memory since all letters and writings have long since vanished. I never intended to write a book. I instead sought to leave a journal for my children, my grandchildren, and great-grandchildren as to my experiences in my youth and in a very unpopular war.

I was, and to this day remain, patriotic. I always felt that this is my country, right or wrong, and despite its shortcomings, it is still the best social experiment ever undertaken by man. For this reason alone, its values are worth defending.

I make no apologies for volunteering to go to war when my country called, while so many of my generation chose to lie and hide and hate us who did choose to go. I can only assume it is because of their inner doubts about their cause and their concealed cowardice.

I make no apologies for the political drama that has played out over the last half-century regarding what lies were told and by whom. I make no apologies for my continuing dislike and distrust of all things associated with liberals. I make no apologies for my continuing hatred for communism in all its forms.

I have changed many of the names in this narrative for several reasons. Chief among these is that the mind plays tricks over time. It has fascinated me that I can remember the good times much better than I can the bad. I cannot remember at all the depths of pain and misery that I endured sufficiently enough to be able to describe them in any manner that would help to bring the reader even remotely close to what was felt.

Events began to run together over the years, and I tend to remember things out of sequence. It has become harder with the passage of time to remember which person did what action at which time, and so I cannot with complete assurance say that this happened to person "A" or "B." I have also been fascinated with the knowledge that each person who witnesses an event remembers that event a little differently from his fellow witnesses.

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My father fought in World War II, but I know nothing of what he encountered during those terrible years because we never talked. My mother was a “Rosie the Riveter” stereotype during WWII, but again, I know nothing of what she did because we never communicated. I have no knowledge of what my forebears did in their wars, because no history was ever provided. Perhaps this short journal will provide a little insight into just a small portion of the history and effects of growing up in a depressed south and fighting in a small war, in a small out of the way place, in the name of geo-politics.

Finally, I am so very sorry for all the fine men and women, on both sides of the conflict, who died so anonymously at nameless places in the jungle at the hands of an enemy that neither side could see nor understand. One of my greatest fears was to die in some unknown place for a cause that had no meaning. To say I had died in the Battle of Khe Sanh or the Ia Drang Valley would have had meaning, but to die in the deep jungles of the Mekong Delta, at a place with no name in a battle that had no meaning was horrifying to me.

At no time did I ever hate my enemy. I respected and feared him, and viewed him as fighting for what he believed in just as I was fighting for what I believed in. I certainly never condoned his actions or tactics and it would have been easy to slide into the abyss of hatred when I witnessed some of the aftermath of the horrors committed. It was, however, the warmth and kindness of the people of South Vietnam that served to remind me that the people we were fighting were their brothers and sisters, and that under other circumstances, they too were probably warm and friendly.

Returning to normalcy after the hectic years of war was another major adjustment. I had gone through eighteen years of childhood turmoil that had prepared me for war. This had been followed by the heady days of danger, excitement, challenge, love, and family. I was now to enter a third phase of my life, wherein just as Odysseus had wandered for years to reach his goals, I was destined to do the same.

When I finished my first tour in Vietnam, I requested an assignment to Germany, and instead was sent to Fort Gordon. At the end of my



second tour in Vietnam, I asked for Fort Gordon, but was assigned to Germany. I requested an assignment with Infantry near Stuttgart but was instead assigned to a Quartermaster unit in Giessen. I wanted command but was given staff. I knew that the war was winding down rapidly, and not being assigned to branch-related duties would be the kiss of death when it became necessary to reduce the size of the armed forces. Not only that, but I was also saddled with the lack of any college, and it was becoming increasingly apparent that a college degree would be required to keep a commission. Finally, I was an Officer Candidate School (OCS) graduate, historically the first to feel the sword of Damocles when force reduction occurred.

With all this looking at me, I began the third leg of my long journey. This was to be the leg in which I hoped to close the circle and come back to my roots as a reborn spirit free of the psychological bonds which had held me captive all my life. I was on a journey to move from the humble roots of unwanted and unloved child to the goal of being loved and confident and successful. Not in terms of money. Money always meant little to me. I wanted to be rich in memories and acceptance and self-esteem. I knew that now was the time to begin my pilgrimage to wherever it was that I belonged.

Because of my lifelong tendency to be the practical joker and my inherent ability to find humor everywhere, I consciously decided to try to put the images of war as far into the recesses of my mind as I could. I knew I could never forget them, but perhaps I could learn to hide them. I decided to focus on the humor of any situation that confronted me. I set myself goals in terms of education and career, and then set out to see how much fun I could have achieving them. I came to the realization that a military career was fraught with hilarity if it was only approached with the right frame of mind.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# MY PARENTS

**I**N ASTORIA, OREGON, AS a dark mist enveloped the Pacific shore, I was born at 3:30 am. An event of no consequence to anyone except me, and I, thankfully, can't remember the occasion. My father was a sailor aboard the *Bunker Hill* aircraft carrier, the pride of the Pacific Fleet, at that moment clawing its way home after fighting for its very survival against repeated kamikaze attacks off the coast of Okinawa.

A West Virginia farm boy, my father had enlisted in the Navy following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He didn't come from a family with a long, proud tradition of military service, but like so many other Americans, he saw war as an adventure, an act of revenge against the hated Japs, and a chance to break free from the bonds of modern serfdom on eighty acres of rock-strewn and poor-quality soil.

My mother was also from West Virginia and left the mountains to become a "Rosie the Riveter" at the Norfolk Naval ship yard. It was there that she met my father, her future husband, on a bus in the bustling Navy town of Norfolk. The result was a whirlwind romance, marriage, a sister who was two years my senior, and myself. Fourteen years after my birth, another brother and sister were born. Because of the age difference, I never got to know them well.

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Author's parents, Charles and Mildred Chapman

I have always marveled at the human capacity to rationalize. We can rationalize dishonesty, anger, sorrow, pain, hurt, neglect, love, hatred-in short, all the emotions and tragedies and joys of the human existence can be rationalized. The fascinating aspect is that they are frequently rationalized with entirely separate and disparate results. I looked at my youth with loathing, and rationalize as I might, could bring myself to no other conclusion but that I must rebel and reject. My older sister, in the same environment, looked on her youth with loathing, and rationalize as she might, could never bring herself to get away, but instead spent her short life seeking the approval she was never to find.

The day that I first remember meeting my sister, I was three and she was five. She was sitting in the back seat of a car and looking at me with a clear mixture of loathing and contempt. Despite that, she became my only confidant and fellow schemer in a variety of childhood misadventures.

It was on the same day that I met my sister, at the tender age of three, that I determined that I would forevermore dislike the people who kidnapped me, and that I would never become a willing participant in my misery. I did not realize it then, but the long journey had begun.

## CHAPTER TWO

# KIDNAPPED

**T**HE SUMMER OF 1949 is the time of my first memories. Three years old and nearing my fourth birthday, and I remember nothing before this day that was destined to change my life forever. I was sitting in the dirt at my grandfather's house in Maryland on a hot dusty day playing with a toy dump truck. I was alone, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. I was shirtless and shoeless and can still remember looking at the dirt on my arms. I don't know why, only that it struck me that I was very dirty.

Behind me was the rickety porch with its three steps leading to the unpainted and rundown house. As I pushed the truck through the dirt, I saw a car come to a crunching stop in the gravel in front of the house. I don't remember the car, just the tires, and the sound they made in the gravel. Two people got out of the car and walked past me to the house, climbed the rickety stairs, and went inside. They didn't seem to notice me, and I went back to playing with the truck.

I don't know how much time passed before I became aware of yelling and shouting from inside the house, nor do I have any idea how long the shouting lasted. I did have time to realize that something was terribly wrong, and I took my truck and crawled under the porch hoping to hide and block out the sounds.

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Suddenly someone grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the sunlight. I reached for the truck but couldn't quite get it in my grasp. I scraped my knee on a rusty nail protruding from the steps and started to bleed badly, and I was screaming as loud as I could. The stranger carried me to the car, and opening the back door, virtually threw me inside. There was much dust, shouting, and yelling all around me, and before I knew it, the car was in motion.

Thus, I met my parents and my sister. She was nearly six years old and huddled in the far corner of the back seat, terrified and disgusted at the same time by my screaming and filthy appearance. Even at the age of three I was aware of the effect I was having on her.

As I recall that day so many years ago, the one thing I totally lack is any concept of the passage of time. Instead, I recall short vignettes as if they are photographs stamped on my memory. I still can see so clearly the look on my sister's face. I remember darkness setting in as I sat in the back-seat wailing. I remember the woman in the front seat suddenly turning in her seat, slapping me across the face and shouting at me to shut up. I remember the total terror, and I remember the onset of hatred, an emotion that was to persist for the rest of my life, often breaking out in uncontrollable rage. My relationship with my parents, to me my kidnappers, was thus formed on that hot early summer day in 1949.

As the years went by, I learned and was able to piece together the parts of the story that led to this untoward event. I'll try to quickly recall them here. Bear in mind that much of this is second-hand information that I learned over the years from my sister, my aunt, my maternal grandfather, and a limited number of official documents.

It seems that when I was about six to eight weeks old, my parents decided that they either didn't want, or possibly couldn't afford another child, drove to Maryland, and dropped me off with my mother's father and stepmother (her real mother having died in childbirth with her younger sister). At first, it was supposed to be just a temporary arrangement as my father was mustered out of the service with the end of the war, found a job and settled down. However, after a night



Author at fourteen months old with  
sister and grandfather, 1946

of bar-hopping with my mother's brother, my father and uncle, while in a drunken state, decided to join the Army. Thus, settling down to a normal life was not to be. It became more convenient to leave me with my grandparents, a situation that resulted in my grandfather asking if he could simply adopt me and raise me himself. My father had applied to and been accepted to Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning at the time, and he and my mother quickly agreed to this. My grandfather began the initial paperwork filings but ran into some difficulties as he was virtually destitute at the time. He had to find a better paying job with more income to meet the adoption requirements.

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This caused some considerable delay in the adoption process but didn't affect at all my living with my grandparents. It must be noted that during the entire time I lived with my grandparents, I am told that my parents made very little effort to visit, only dropping by a couple times over the three years that I was raised by my grandfather, so I had no idea who they were since I was far too young to remember them. My mother later insisted that since my grandfather liked to drink, and my father was a teetotaler, that he refused to be in the company of a drinker—this of course coming from the man who decided to make a career of the Army after a drunken binge. I also later learned that no child support was proffered during this period, something which, as you will see, was to have dire consequences for me.

After completing OCS (ironically, I later attended OCS in the same company and same barracks that my father had attended, and I came across his old year book in the company dayroom and learned that his nickname had been “Seaman Dinwiddie”). My father's assignments eventually landed him in Cape Cod with orders pending for an assignment to Germany. It was while he was here that my grandfather had contacted my parents to ask them for money to help with my support. This resulted in a hasty trip to Maryland on that fateful summer day and my being snatched away from my grandfather. Grandfather had threatened to take my parents to court for child support, a notion which terrified my father and jeopardized his commissioned status. Since he was on orders for Germany, he could get out of the country with me in tow, and out of the reach of the civil courts by the Status of Forces agreement which protected active duty servicemen.

And so, it came to pass that on a warm sunny day in 1949, I was essentially kidnapped from the only life I had ever known by two people who I did not know and who did it not for love, but for financial considerations. I was to be the ransom paid.