

Spirit of the Bayonet

After several weeks, when we had been through enough PT for the DIs to feel we had been toughened up a bit, the platoon began bayonet training. We were instructed on how to attach the bayonet to our M-14 rifles and then taught the basic movements of bayonet fighting: the thrust; the butt stroke; and the slash. The platoon would practice the three motions in rapid succession over and over again: thrust - - the point of the bayonet aimed at the enemy's chest; butt stroke - - bringing the rifle butt up sharply under the enemy's jaw; slash - - bring the bayonet's cutting edge down diagonally against the enemy's neck. The movements were choreographed like a dance: jump forward with the thrust, immediately step forward and swing the rifle's stock up in the butt stroke, then step forward again and in one continuous movement bring the barrel and attached bayonet down in the slash. There was a hierarchy in the sequence of moves, ideally you fatally wounded the enemy with the bayonet thrust, but failing that, the butt stroke would hopefully do the trick, and finally if the first two moves weren't successful, you went for the neck slash and severing the carotid artery. As the DIs never failed to inform us, if you didn't kill or disable the enemy with these three moves, you were out of chances and very likely to be dead or wounded yourself. We were also reminded that while the bayonet wasn't often used in combat anymore, there had been memorable battles in World War II, the Korean War, and more recently in Vietnam, where bayonet fighting played a crucial role, and it was important for us to be able to fight at close quarters, because if Charlie got that near, only our personal fighting skills were going to save us.

But it seemed to me the underlying purpose of bayonet training was not so much to teach us specific fighting skills, but more to accustom us to the idea of killing a fellow human being. Before every session of bayonet instruction, there was a standard ritual where the DI in charge would shout from the instruction platform: "What's the spirit of the bayonet?" and the platoon would yell in unison: "To kill!" Often the DI would shout "I can't hear you" and the question and response would be repeated again and again until we were worked up into a state of excitement. To me, the "spirit of the bayonet" stuff was grotesque, almost laughable, and brought to mind the lines in Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant*, where the singer is trying to convince a draft board psychiatrist that he is crazy and unfit for duty:

I want to kill. I mean, I wanna, I wanna kill. Kill.

I wanna, I wanna see, I wanna see blood and gore and
Guts and veins in my teeth. Eat dead burnt bodies. I mean kill, Kill,
KILL, KILL."

And I started jumpin' up and down yelling, "KILL, KILL," and he [the psychiatrist] started jumpin' up and down with me and we was both jumping up and down and Yelling, "KILL, KILL."

And the sergeant came over, pinned a medal on me. Sent me down the hall, said, "You're our boy."

Despite the training and DIs' war stories, I had a hard time imagining that I'd ever be sufficiently close to the enemy to be able to use a bayonet. And if I was unlucky enough to find myself in that position, I felt I was surely dead meat and the "spirit of the bayonet" wasn't going to help me much. Regardless of my doubts, however, as the weeks went by I became more and more proficient in executing the bayonet moves.