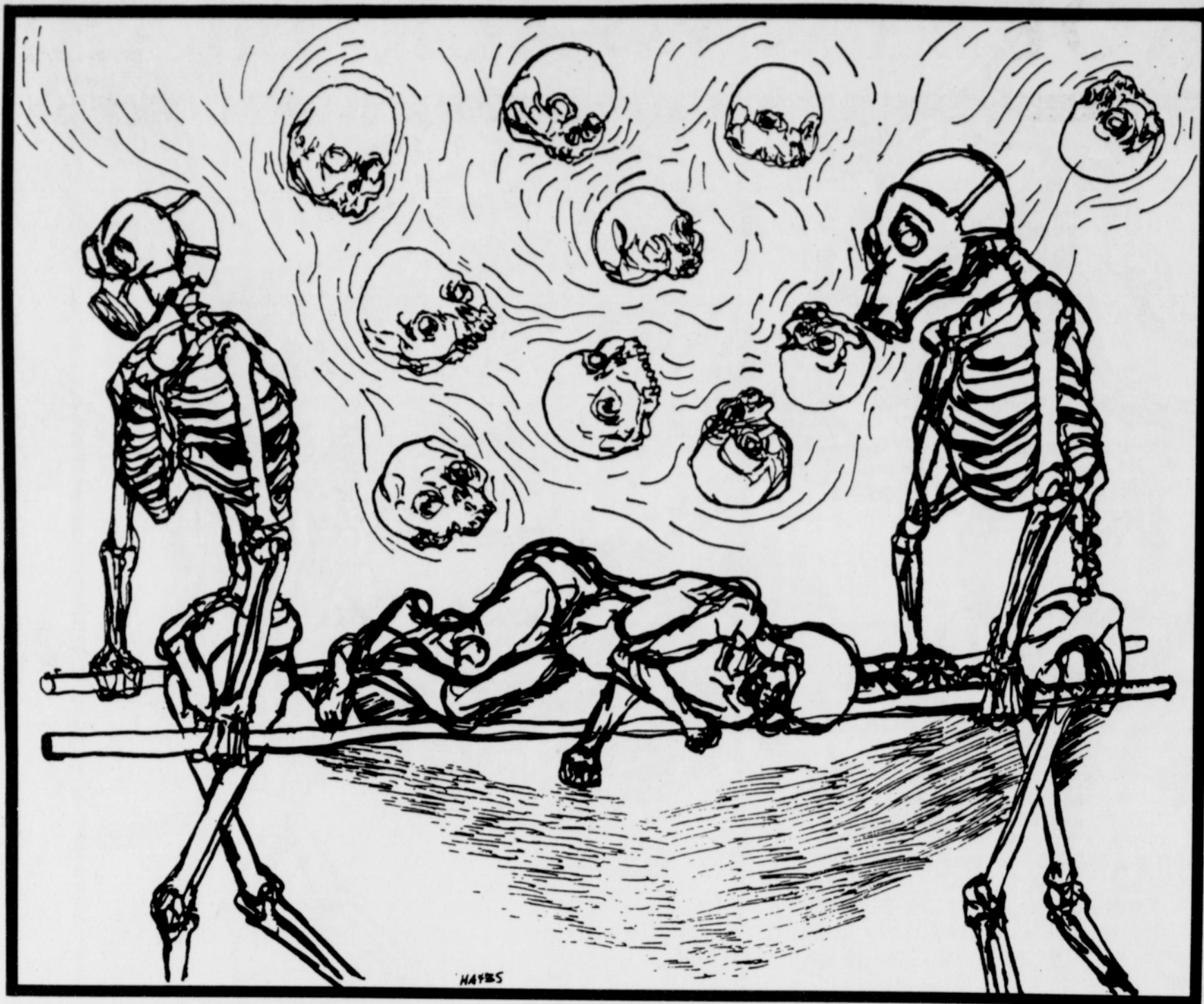




DRAWING BY ROGER HAYES

HE DIED

BY DURRELL D. KAPAN

I was walking across the sand under the scintillating stars with my protective gear undone and down around my waist, despite the fact we were on full alert. It was slightly chilly, the dry air smelled a little like cinnamon on the desert.

We had absorbed heavy artillery several hours before, but now that the dawn was nearly here, a faint streak of rose on the eastern horizon, the shelling had stopped. All was quiet and still except the scraping of a desert rat that hopped away from my feet as I approached.

I walked along the back of a berm of sand, with my head barely above its hastily piled crest. I heard an eerie moaning and hurried ahead to the next dug in position to find a private stripped of his suit laying on his side on the edge of his foxhole. Where was his buddy? I thought. Probably out smoking a cigarette like myself, ducking below the berm to shield its glowing tip.

This guy was prostrate and slightly rocking so I leaned over and touched him on the shoulder. He looked up at me, with a pained questioning look on his faintly bloated face. "Hey man, here's some water, calm down, it's not all that bad," I tried to comfort him; he took a weak sip barely lifting his crewcut head from the sand. He continued to look at me with a slightly ashamed, slightly relieved expression. I whispered, "what's the matter man?"

"I'm going," he croaked.

"No you're not, you're just sick," I replied, trying to be marginally comforting; I could tell it wasn't helping, he just laid on the sand and rocked slowly back and forth. I knelt for several minutes motionlessly above him, one hand on his hot shoulder, without a thought in my head.

Suddenly he tensed up, his breathing started to accelerate slightly. I lowered my head to hear him gasp: "We were wrong, I am not proud of this..." His voice trailed off and he tensed up again. After the wave of pain left I looked down on his sweaty unshaven face. His dark skin looked like wet stone in the faint light of dawn. The sand on the left side of his face made him appear half black, half white. His large dark eyes were staring at me like those of a frightened bird looking up at you after you shot it. His face tensed up and he croaked again: "Hug me man, this is it, hug me..."

I put down my rifle and pushed my mask around to the back of my belt. Laying down beside him I put my arms around his now shivering body. He still rocked slightly.

"I should have been there," he whispered. "I should have been there." I continued to hug him, not forcefully, but with all the strength I could muster. He calmed and started to breathe a little easier, then he mumbled something about not

being good enough. I paid no attention to it and just kept rocking with him. "I shouldn't have lived after the shockwave... my arm, my whole side felt numb, I still can't feel it." This guy was bad off, he must have been very near where the scud landed yesterday. We thought they wouldn't use those on our amassed ground troops. We thought they would be too worried that their own troops would be affected. We thought wrong. I continued to rock him slightly, he and I both breathing calmly, in the stillness of dawn for I don't know how long. I was about to drift off when he said with surprising forcefulness: "Hug me harder, here I go." I grabbed him harder as his body stiffened up like a board, his back arching dangerously, forcing the air out of his chest. This seizure lasted fifteen to twenty seconds, so I knew he was right, when he started breathing again, he said: "Please hold me harder, the pain is so great."

It was a dying kid's last wish. I told him I would try. We lay on the sand, my arms around his torso, waiting for the next convulsion to occur. A large beetle walked past my head, its horns glistening black as its stout legs moved it along with tank-like efficiency. What was it eating in this apparently empty wasteland? I really didn't want to know the answer. I had seen enough of the scavengers of the desert when we surprised an enemy position in the heat of the day only to

find all the men and boys dead in their positions, their faces bloated with white gull-like vultures picking at their eyes. I tried to blot it from my mind.

He tensed again, his body arching back with the incredible power of a once strong body now commanded by a disease. This convulsion lasted over thirty seconds. I counted sixty of my accelerated heartbeats until he went limp. He started to breathe very shallowly. I wiped the sweat from his brow with some gauze from my decom kit* and I trickled some water down my fingers and into his mouth. His look at me said "thanks," although his lips did not move. We lay there for another several minutes, about the right interval, when he looked up at me and managed to whisper: "Over. Thanks. Hug hard." His body tensed like a spring bent and stretched. I grabbed him with all my might, his shoulders pushing painfully against my chest. I apologized for not being stronger as the heat of the convulsion started to mount. I counted my heartbeats while feeling through my chest that his were four times faster. When I got above 100 his body went fully rigid and I squeezed him as hard as I could. A rush of heat transferred from him to me, then his body relaxed slightly as the life went from him. I worked his stiff torso into a more natural looking position and sat up cradling him in my lap. His wet eyes were wide and reflected the light on the eastern horizon. I closed them while continuing to rock.

The sun began to rise, its searing orb dispelling the chill instantly, shunning the life from the desert night and replacing it with the death of the day. I looked into it until I could look no longer. I had to move to my position before head (dead) count. We were all wondering if the commander's assurance that were properly immunized wasn't just a bunch of bullshit.

*decontamination kit.



An old war in the Middle East? A future war? Durrell Kapan, formerly of Cannon Beach presently attending graduate school in ecology in Vancouver, British Columbia, said the story presented itself as a nightmare and he wrote it down in the early hours of a Sunday morning before dawn. "It is a vignette on a possible future I hope doesn't occur," he writes. "I am the soldier, a somewhat skeptical American G.I. who comes across one of our first casualties from a biological bombing (scud attack) the day before. The disease agent is unknown and we are all going to die."

Roger Hayes is an Astoria artist. His work has been featured in the NCTE.