

Sixty years have passed since President John F. Kennedy spoke at my graduation from West Point. This is where my book begins. Days spent at West Point stand clearly in my mind.

What Abides

West Point In Afterthought

by James Ryan

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James Ryan

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Let Us Begin

That highest point of bliss when one becomes completely good and kind, and cannot believe in the existence or possibility of evil, unhappiness and sorrow.

—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

June 6, 1962. The Field House, this day a cavernous cathedral lit from above. Normally home of indoor and early spring sports, this day its earthen floor is discreetly covered. Surrounded by flags, families, and friends, we sit bareheaded in a perfect rectangle limned by perfect ranks and rows. We gather for the last time. Starched white trousers, white cross-belts, the glinting brass breastplates define the tableau of our end. Our complete chain-of-command is witness, from parents through all the appropriate generals to the President of the United States, all in harmonious repose. This will later shatter in an exuberant explosion of white dress caps flung to the rafters. This day the West Point Class of 1962 will graduate.

Our young president is speaking. He did not mention us killing or being “warfighters.” He is one of us, our honorary classmate. An hour ago, we gave President Kennedy the ring to prove it. He tells us to be soldier-statesmen. We must know the limits of military power, he says, when arms should be used to fight and when they should prevent a fight. He says that, above all, we have a responsibility to deter war, as

well as fight it. He said, “above all.” Do we hear him? Do we believe him? Who could not on such a day? The mothers and fathers hear him. Their eyes fly to heaven high above the half-furled field house nets we shall soon fly past.

Outside, a brilliant blue June morning. Inside, you can feel it, the darkness of leaving. Well it should be since only shadows can render definition to clarity. We will leave here today working and fighting for each other, he says. And he will be the first of us to die. A cunning professional murder in another brilliant noonday sun. Nothing could save him. It was a day like today, only in Dallas, only horrible.

Now we will receive our diplomas. In our euphoria we mix our emotions—hurry up, please and...wait! Four years gone. So fast. Too fast. How many ahead? In this graduation resides our true beginning. We now swear our oath to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. What an odd word, “domestic.” Oh, too fast it goes...too fast...*stop!* And then the last command: *Class of 1962 dismissed!*

Done.

YOW! Like flocks of pigeons our startled white caps fly.

“*Jimmy dear...Jimmy dear!*” I see her, I hear her, my mother, waving. Auburn hair, smiling, so slim, so young, forty-four years old. Forty-four! It is over. I run bareheaded, brandishing the diploma like a torch at noon. She kisses me on both cheeks. The local kids are already hawking our caps. Souvenirs at twice the price. It is indeed over. The noon sun is brilliant. Brass breastplates and flashing steel sabers, all that is over too. My stalwart father weeps in my arms. My uncle who had jumped into France with the 82nd Airborne on the same June 6th day eighteen years ago pounds my back. My aunt resolutely nods yes through silent tears. All are here marking this time. It is so...

What Abides: West Point In Afterthought

“Lovely” is the only word that fits. I was so sure no one would ever die.

But time has run on and everyone has mostly vanished. Indeed, it is over. Yet the same dream comes in glimpses... *Class of 1962...DISMISSED!*

This time I hope it will pass into words. And so I begin.

Chapter One: Down Fifth

The one thing I never want to see again is a military parade.

—Ulysses S. Grant, West Point, Class of 1843

Nothing thrills like a snappy stroll down Manhattan's Fifth Avenue on a sunny May afternoon. Today is such a day, Armed Forces Day—Saturday, May 19, 1962—a day to parade down Fifth. Twenty-four hundred of us will step off at noon—as the oldest service academy, West Point always leads military parades.

Again, we will march for our benevolent citizenry—the people who pay our educational way, our salaries (\$111.15 per month), and our enormous overhead expenses, hundreds of thousands of dollars. In eighteen days, six hundred of us will graduate as second lieutenants. Our salaries will double. We are the fortunate ones, and today, and every day, these are the people for whom we polish and shine. They are our collective rich uncle who stakes us to a four-year university experience of a lifetime. They are the taxpayers, the genuine owners of West Point and America. Today is a triumph of spring, a perfect day for a parade, our final gig in New York City.

In our passage to become soldier-statesmen, we are kept well-informed. Early each morning we receive the papers—*The New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*. They are delivered to our room by a

plebe, one of those indefatigable first-year cadets learning the art of subservience. Thus I was able to learn that the fledgling New York Mets had again routinely lost in Milwaukee. The front page held a warning—**KHRUSHCHEV SAYS U.S. TROOPS RISK FIGHTING IN ASIA**. So much for current events. We must now march to breakfast. We always seem to have such little time. Our buses leave at 7 a.m.

Only now, decades later, does old news seem shockingly relevant. The Mets are peopled with has-beens, two of whom had hit home runs last night to no avail—Gil Hodges and Frank Thomas. The team will finish dead last this year, seven years away from being in a celebratory parade. Khrushchev is now less than two years away from being ousted by Leonid Brezhnev. For Khrushchev, this is the Kremlin's equivalent of finishing dead last. Forced into retirement, beset by depression, the man the free world fears most will spend much of his retirement years crying. No parades for him either, though he will prove more correct about Asia than all our politicians and generals with illusory domino theories dancing in their heads.

Someone said at breakfast that President Kennedy will be in the city today. To raise funds, not to watch parades. His trip coincides with an evening fete in Madison Square Garden, where Miss Marilyn Monroe will sing "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." None of us had been invited to provide military support for our civilian commander in chief. We will see him at West Point in eighteen days. He will speak at our graduation. He will also become an honorary member of our class. Happy Birthday and Congratulations, Mr. President.

It is relaxing to ride in a comfortable convoy of buses from West Point to the swank digs of Manhattan's Upper East Side. We form ranks in the shadow of 1140 Fifth Avenue, a residential bastion overlooking Central Park. The entire corps of cadets, twenty-four hundred of us, fills 95th Street stretching two long city-blocks to Park Avenue. We will march a little over two miles down Fifth to the southern end of Central Park. Afterward, we will be free in the city, returning to West Point at 1 a.m. on the same diligent buses. There will not be much time.

What we didn't know then was some superficially good news from troublesome Southeast Asia. A week ago Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, on a two-day whirlwind tour of South Vietnam, made a one-day helicopter barnstorm of the entire country. Accompanied by Paul Harkins—the commanding general in Vietnam—and Ambassador Nolting, he flew from the problematic Mekong Delta to the “temporary” North/South border, the 17th parallel. At his closing press conference, McNamara professed being “tremendously encouraged” about the vastly vexing, troublesome Strategic Hamlet Program. The Secretary had found “nothing but progress and hope for the future.” Asked by reporter, Neil Sheehan, then of AP, how a man of his caliber could be so positive about a war that the United States had just begun to fight, McNamara said, “Every quantitative measurement we have shows that we're winning this war.”¹ McNamara seemed eager to escape Vietnam to tell President Kennedy the good news about progress and further progress and staying the course, bold words all. Bold words and bare lies like these would constitute the framework for all future press conferences, belittled by journalists as the “five o'clock follies.” Harkins thought we'd be out of Vietnam in a year—it will take eleven more. We cadets remain mostly unburdened by these issues. We have a parade to perform.

It is not just our eighteen days to graduation. It's eighteen days until something for all the cadets. Eighteen days until the end of the harassment of plebe year. The soon-to-be senior class has eighteen days until their class trip. And the new junior class has eighteen days until experiencing a month somewhere with Regular Army units. Eighteen-day countdowns prevail like clocks in our brains, things anticipated, every time an ending, every time a beginning. We live on countdowns. They're synonymous with hope. Ask a plebe this very morning how many days until his graduation, and he'll tell you, "Sir, there are 1,113 days until my graduation."

"The end is where we start from," wrote T. S. Eliot. Every West Point graduation is an end and a regeneration. The military academy—The Long Gray Line—grows ad infinitum. Seemingly an immortal, inexhaustible institution, while we, its products, are definitely not. Miss Monroe will die in August; Kennedy will be murdered next year in the brilliant Texas November midday sunshine. But this day is much too fine to think future thoughts. Instead take comfort in the music. For example, one of the songs we learned—"Army Blue"—claims that upon graduation, "our future is a cloudless sky." Like today, only better. Fortunate us.

Glittering steel dress bayonets affixed to our shouldered M1 rifles, we step off. The West Point Band leads the line of march playing Sousa's rousing "The Thunderer." Wheeling left onto Fifth Avenue, we gather our precise interval and liven our step. We will march past priceless museums and posh residences, through sidewalks jammed with people. This parade is different. New York City surrounds us. We are no longer separated from viewers by the grassy expanse of The Plain at West Point. Now, the people are our corridor, our conduit. We march through them, their smiles and applause speeding our way, the

air a bouquet of flutes, drums, and goodwill. Close up we feel their bighearted affection, hear their approving words, feel their joy. Children on fathers' shoulders, like we once were, waving flags; older women, heads nodding, seem almost in prayer, perhaps remembering parades of times past, loved ones, lost ones. We keep our eyes set dead ahead. Oh, what handsome, disciplined boys they think we are. We know it's just the uniforms and the precision of it all. And that soon everything will finish.

We march through the heart of what's now called Museum Mile. There, art treasures abide safely stashed within elaborate Gilded Age architecture—the mansions of Carnegie, Warburg, Guggenheim, and Frick, the so-called “robber barons,” the oligarchs of an earlier age. We pass the Cooper Hewitt on Ninety-first Street. Its art collection resides in Andrew Carnegie's old mansion. A block farther south brings us to the Jewish Museum housed in banker Felix Warburg's five-story, multi-pinnacled town house. Two more blocks and we pass the ascending helix of Frank Lloyd Wright's otherworldly Guggenheim.

How vulnerable we were then, marching in nineteenth-century uniforms, preparing for twentieth-century wars. What if we had been able to see beyond the glitter and glint of parade? Who could? But we were not naive. Like Khrushchev had earlier cautioned, we sensed some worrisome things were afoot in Asia. West Point, the institution, never seemed to mention a word to us. The word? Vietnam.

His last name was a four-letter word, first letter “F.” Bernard Fall, Austrian born, a French citizen by war-refugee passage. Vietnam scholar by passion and academic training, his intellect towered over the bureaucrat-advisers who roamed the corridors in Washington spouting about domino theories, third-world democracies, and the

nation's patriotic duty. His 1961 book, *Street Without Joy*, was a prophetic analysis of the French bloodbath in post-World War II Indochina. It was quietly available in the Cadet Bookstore. I had purchased a copy and read it over the summer of '61. Fall's "street" referred to the treacherous Route 1 that ran from Hue north to Quang Tri. With the ominous capitalized dedication "TO THOSE WHO DIED THERE," Fall laid bare the perils for America that lurked in plain sight. Remember and learn, he cautioned, from all those "who had to walk down the joyless and hopeless road that was the Indochina War until 1954."² This is how it was for them and how it will be for you Americans who follow, he warned. And as it would be for him. With ridiculous irony, Fall would be killed in 1967 by a land mine on the same joyless street, Route 1, near Hue.

"Once more, the enemy has been kind enough to give us the recipe of his victory," Fall had written. "The West is still battling an ideology with technology," he admonished. He minced no words, citing "the bottomless pit" of the South Vietnamese insurgency. He warned that "the Vietminh and its allies throughout the Indo-Chinese peninsula have lost nothing of their fearsome ability to fight and win a prolonged jungle and swamp war against superior forces slow to throw away the traditional book."

Fall's nontraditional book could have saved millions of lives. He wrote of the superior mobility of the soldiers of the Vietnamese resistance over the mobility of large, mechanized units. He described the impossibly difficult terrain in Vietnam, wrote of the incessant ambushes and being overrun by the enemy hordes, the "human waves."

Fall warned that military power could only go so far. Political victory in Vietnam's revolutionary war required support from the local population. This never happened. Without this, the struggle would be lost. By 1965, Fall had concluded that the United States had lost the

war. It took seven more years for the country to realize its catastrophic folly.

Robert McNamara had the gall to lament in his retirement memoirs that “our government lacked experts for us to consult to compensate for our ignorance.”³ Yet again, he lied. Bernard Fall had been widely published in scholarly publications and mainstream media since 1952. He was teaching in Washington, D.C., at Howard University, surely in plain enough sight for McNamara. Besides, Fall was even important enough to be under surveillance by the FBI. But not important enough to be able to meet with the criminally self-imposed, ignorant McNamara. Furthermore, as will be shown later, the Pentagon had voluminous resources on Southeast Asia, Vietnam in particular. The McNamara lie machine had begun. “Know your enemy!” famously cautioned Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* two and a half millennia ago. Another book available in the Pentagon’s archives.

One cadet marching down joyful Fifth Avenue this brilliant afternoon is Tom Reach, a cheerful son of the Southland from Decatur, Georgia, just outside Atlanta. Sent to Vietnam as an adviser in the fall of 1964, Tom was the first member of our class, and the first member of this parade, to die in Vietnam. Ninety cadets marching down Fifth Avenue this brilliant, happy May day will die in Vietnam.

Brilliant sunshine plays on glinting bayonets, and the band strikes up “The Official West Point March.” We pass the mammoth Metropolitan Museum of Art. It stretches four city blocks with a broad plaza and majestic entry steps that front Fifth Avenue. The museum houses a huge share of the world’s artistic treasure. Some swell place, New York, where nature and wealth cohabit in near-perfect harmony.

Fifth Avenue, where both sides of the street are the sunny sides—east, the towering opulent apartments; west, the bowing pathways in the park.

We just passed the Frick Museum and its magnificent front lawn. Ten more blocks until parade's end. Soon comes the posh Pierre Hotel and then we will turn left at Sixtieth Street, proceeding east to our staging area on Third Avenue.

If we had only marched one more block down Fifth, we would have entered the Grand Army Plaza fronted by the Plaza Hotel. In the center of the plaza, a gilded General William Tecumseh Sherman sits astride a gilded horse led by a gilded angel named—what else?—Victory. Sherman, a heroically brutal Union Civil War general, famously said, “War is hell!” He should know—gilded angel notwithstanding—having contributed his own hellish full measure by burning and plundering a wide swath of Georgia from Atlanta to the sea. Given his penchant for “total war”—targeting civilians and private property; arson—he was hurrahed by some historians as the first modern general. He also fought quite valiantly against virtually helpless Native American tribes. He further displayed his “modernity” by eradicating buffalo herds. War is obviously hell. But when Sherman had telegraphed President Lincoln after taking Savannah on December 21, 1864, he had said much more about his state of mind. “I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell.”⁴

Words for all seasons; words for all wars, all widows, all widowers, all children everywhere—all these living, suffering victims of modern warfare. As for Sherman, apparently unconvinced of the truth of his famous aphorism, he continued his “modern generalship” against the Modoc, Nez Percé, and Sioux nations. “We must act with vindictive earnestness,” he said in 1866, “even to their extermination,

men, women, and children.”⁵ Neither gold nor sun can cast a favorable light on the hell of this general’s vindictive profession of arms.

We turn left onto Sixtieth Street and head east to our buses. Directly behind us, and three long city blocks west of Fifth, another hero poses, this one perched grandly atop a seventy-six-foot column in the exact middle of Columbus Circle. He is Christopher Columbus, another great slayer of indigenous people. We should better know the people parades celebrate.

Our buses are parked where the Third Avenue Elevated Railway, widely called “The El,” recently operated. The cobblestone street bears the scars. Abandoning formality and our weapons, we store our gear. We switch to wearing dress gray tunics, a more modest look than the full-dress coat with the shiny bellhop buttons.

This evening we take the subway to Brooklyn, out near the sea. Our classmate comes from Manhattan Beach, and his generous family has arranged a gathering for his friends. His house is across from a seawall upon which we now sit drinking Schaefer beer from ice-cold cans. We sit looking out. The day has been long and evening has finally come. New York Bay lies before us. We can almost feel the far-off robust sea. Farther out, the lights of Breezy Point flicker and fade. Tonight the moon is full and so are we. Its watery shimmer makes ghosts of us. “Land’s end,” someone says. “Parade’s end,” says another. We keep looking out.

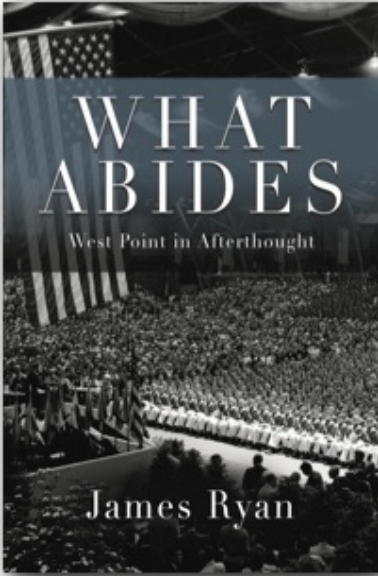
¹ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, Vintage Books, New York, 1989, page 290.

² Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy*, The Stackpole Company, New Jersey, 1961, page 382.

³ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect, The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. New York Times Books, New York, 1995, page 32.

⁴ Daniel L. Marsh, *Unto the Generations*, The Long House, New Canaan, CT, 1968, page 104.

⁵ Alan Axelrod, *Chronicle of the Indian Wars*, Prentice Hall, New York, 1993, page 203.



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