

# ***American Soldier*** by Tommy R. Franks      ReganBooks, 2004

## **Chapter One: Planting Seeds**

**WYNNEWOOD, OKLAHOMA**

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My understanding of the world and its consequences -- of right and wrong, good and evil -- began when I was five in central Oklahoma. That may be hard to believe, but it's true. It was my father, Ray Franks, who taught me those lessons.

"You pull up just as hard as you push down, Tommy Ray," Dad said. He was trimming two-by-fours for our barn roof with a handsaw on the tailgate of the old Ford pickup. The saw blade snarled down through the board and ripped up with a thinner sound. His right arm, tanned like leather under the short sleeve of a washed-out shirt, bulged as he leaned his stocky weight into the saw.

It was summer, nice in the shade of the cottonwood trees near the barn. I was barefoot, in faded bib overalls that were getting short in the legs, sitting in the dirt, watching my father work, listening closely, as always, to his soft-spoken words. He smiled a lot and liked to josh around. But when we were alone together, my dad often took a moment to explain the things he'd learned in his life.

"Here, Tommy Ray," he said, tossing me a couple of splintery cuttings. "You can play with these blocks."

"But, Dad, they ain't *real* toys."

"*Aren't* real toys," he corrected, flipping another board end to me. "But they are, you see. A few years back, kids had to make do with toys their daddies made for them. They couldn't just drive to the five-and-dime in town and buy ready-made."

I fingered the wood, still hot from the saw blade. "How come?"

He wiped his face with a handkerchief, laid another plank across the tailgate, and lined up the saw. "Well, Tommy Ray, we had a war. Most of the countries in the whole world were fighting. America had to fight the Germans and the Japanese. Millions and millions of guys my age and younger were soldiers and sailors and flyers and had to go fight."

*Fight*, I thought. That was like when the barnyard chickens went rolling around, pecking and squawking. Or like when the big kids walking to school in the winter threw ice balls. But what would make a million soldiers and sailors fight?

"How come, Dad?"

"Bad people, Tommy Ray. The Japanese attacked us at a place called Pearl Harbor. It went on for years, and a lot of our boys didn't come home."

"Where'd they go?"

Father laid down the saw and smiled that soft grin he had when he needed to explain something sad, like when Ginger the cat got hit by a truck. "Well, those boys got killed. They died for America, Tommy Ray."

My mother said people went to heaven when they died. Those boys went to fight and just kept going till they got to heaven.

"Did you go fight?"

"I was in the Army Air Corps, Tommy Ray. I fixed airplanes for the boys to fly. I didn't have to fight, but I think my job was important."

In my mind's eye, I could see my father fixing airplanes with shiny propellers. He could mend anything -- the electric water heater for the bathroom, the truck, the tractor, all the different plows and reapers. Folks were always bringing their broken things to the farm for Ray Franks to fix. Mother told me that Dad could never say no if people needed help.

"Did you go to Pearl Harbor?"

My father shook his head, smiling. "No, Tommy Ray. I went to a place called the Panama Canal Zone. They've got palm trees down there, and really pretty birds called parrots."

"Mother didn't have to fight, did she?"

"The ladies stayed home and worked really hard, son. Lots of men, too. The whole country went to work. People planted victory gardens for their food. The boys in my Scout troop collected tin cans and newspapers. Things were scarce. That's why children couldn't always have new toys, why their dads or uncles had to make them blocks and doll houses."

My father always explained things so I could see a picture. So many years later, I recall that afternoon clearly. This was my first appreciation of war. What I learned was clear: Bad people started wars, and Americans had to go fight. I already understood about cats getting run over. About steers going to the slaughterhouse. Now I saw that whenever wars were started, some boys didn't come home.

"Will I have to go fight?"

My father stacked the trimmed boards up against the fender and sighed. "Tommy Ray, I hope not. But you get used to playing with those blocks I just cut, because there are more bad people starting trouble again in a place called Korea. I think America is in for another trying time, son."

I set my blocks in a square and then leaned forward to scratch in the dirt between my ankles, fascinated by the little rust-colored bugs swarming up from the ground. They looked angry, like a million soldiers.

"Oh, hey ..." I yelped. The bugs were crawling up my legs and biting. "Dad ..."

He snatched me up with one arm and shook the flapping legs of my overalls. "Tommy Ray, you were sitting on an anthill. Those little devils are red ants, son. They're nasty."

We were at the garden spigot now, and Dad ran the water over my ankles. It felt cool. But in my mind I pictured crowds of soldiers with guns like my father's 12-gauge shotgun, boiling out of the ground, just like the ants.

That night, I had my bath, said my prayers, and my mother tucked me in. But I couldn't go to sleep right away. I'd learned important new information out in the shade of the cottonwoods. When there are wars, boys go to fight, mothers work hard, and kids like me go without toys.