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Title

Conversations on a Hill I (from Rites and Witnesses)

Permalink

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Journal

Mester, 10(1)

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Publication Date

1981

DOI

10.5070/M3101013656

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Conversations on a Hill I (from *Rites and Witnesses*)

"Hi, how you doin'? I was told to wait here—with you; you know how long we got to wait?"

"I can't say . . . you okay?"

"What?"

"Are you okay? Are you doing all right?"

"Yeah . . . They just brought me in and sent me here. To you. But I'm okay; I'm one of the ones from Charlie Battery, the Two Nineteenth? Been here long?"

"Yeah, but we just set up this morning. We'll probably be moving on again."

"Yeah? Ah, where are you from?"

"The Two Nineteenth."

"No, I don't mean this shit, I mean where are you *from*? Back home?"

"Oh . . . I'm from Texas."

"No shit? I'm from Louisiana; yeah . . . and I've been to Beaumont, Houston, Galveston, Orange . . . all those places. You know where that is?"

"Yeah, that's up the coast from us; I'm from the Valley."

"Oh, yeah? Where's that?"

"That's way down there, by the border. Next to Mexico."

"Is that anywhere near El Paso?"

"No—we're a long way from there, too; we're near the Gulf, by the Rio Grande."

"Oh, yeah. That's way down there, isn't it? How far is that from Houston?"

"I don't really know; I guess it's about four hundred miles . . ."

"You been there? To Houston?"

"No . . ."

"Oh . . . It's a big town Houston . . . Were you guys in the Pass? I mean, were you part of the bunch that got caught?"

"Sure, all of us were . . . you too."

"Yeah, but I was talking about the firing and the thermiting . . . Able Battery . . ."

"Yeah, that was us."

"Boy, you guys are fast. Was *he* with you?"

"Who you talking about?"

"The red-faced guy . . . you know, the sergeant who brought us in?"

"Yeah; he, ah . . ."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, he's . . ."

"How do you pronounce your name, anyway?"
 "What's that?"
 "Your name . . . how do you say it?"
 "Oh. Buenrostro. Boo N Ross Troh. Buenrostro."
 "Run together like that? . . . Spanish, right? My name's Ben Pardue, but they call me Rusty 'cause I'm from Ruston, Louisiana; you know, Louisiana French. I'm a coonass."
 "A what?"
 "A Cajun; that's what I am, what we all are down there; a coonie. You know, Coonass. . . . You Catholic?"
 "Catholic? No . . . why?"
 "I am; all of us are. . . . Here comes that sergeant."
 "His name's Hatalski—he's okay."

 "Rafe, we've got a few minutes yet."
 "This is one of the stragglers, Frank; his name's Pardue."
 "Rusty Pardue, Sarge."
 "You from the Two Nineteenth?"
 "Charlie Battery, Sarge."
 "What'd you do there?"
 "Oh, I spotted some . . . and loaded; fired, too. You know, a little of this . . ."
 "You've met Rafe here? . . . Good; you stay with him. You hungry?"
 "No, Sarge; thanks . . ."
 "Can you operate a phone?"
 "Sure."
 "You'll do that for a while, then. See you, Rafe. . . ."

 "He's okay, eh, Ralph?"
 "Yeah . . ."
 "What's his name again?"
 "Hatalski. Frank. Hatalski."
 "Polish, right?"
 "I think so . . ."
 "Sure he is; look, all those guys with *ski* are Polish; I knew a whole bunch of them in basic. . . . Where'd you do yours? . . . Your basic?"
 "Fort Sill Oklahoma."
 "Oh, I know where it is . . . I've been there, too. . . . You like it?"
 "Sill? Yeah, it was okay. . . . Are you all right?"
 "What do you mean?"
 "I mean, are you okay?"
 "I'm all right . . . it's just that . . . well, I don't know anybody here . . ."
 "Yeah . . . how about a cigarette?"
 "Hey . . . thanks . . . Can I have two more? . . . What'd you do at home? You work?"

"Well, I went to high school and to college, for a year, but my brothers and I, we got some land."

"Ranching, huh? You got a ranch in Texas? With horses and all that?"

"Some, but we mostly do farmwork."

"Yeah? What?"

"Just about everything: cabbage, tomato, carrots, broccoli . . . And cotton."

"Who picks your cotton?"

"What's that?"

"Your cotton; who picks that?"

"Oh . . . We do, and we hire some, too."

"You hire niggers for that?"

"Niggers? Colored?"

"Yeah, you know, black folks for picking . . . That's who picks at home . . . 'Course we pick it, too, but they hire out a lot . . ."

"There aren't that many Negroes in the Valley."

"So who picks it besides you all . . ."

"We do. . . ."

"You're Spanish, right?"

"No; I'm Mexican."

"But you're from Texas?"

"Right."

"Oh . . . When do you all pick? Cotton?"

"Usually from around June to August . . . up to September, just about."

"We don't start till later; we pick in July and then we plow under in late September early October . . . You notice the dirt around here?"

"Yeah, it looks pretty bad. . . . It's a hilly place Korea."

"You can say that again; and rocky, too . . . You guys dry farm in that place?"

"No . . . we irrigate; we use the river."

"The Rio Grandee? Hey, I bet you've been over to Mexico a lot."

"Sure, it's right across."

"Across what?"

"The river; the Rio Grande . . ."

"Oh yeah . . . you got relatives there?"

"Yeah, like I said, it's right across the river. . . ."

"And . . . and, you speak Spanish?"

"Sure . . ."

"No shit?"

(Laughs) "Yeah . . ."

"What's so funny?"

"I speak Spanish all the time when I'm home . . ."

"And we speak French, d'ja know that? Yeah. At home. On the street. In the beer joints . . . anywhere . . . Lemme hear you say something in Spanish . . . Come on, Ralph."

"Rafe . . . ¿Qué quieres que te diga?"
 "What'd you just say?"
 "I said, 'What do you want me to say?' "
 "Hey, d'ja really say that? That's pretty good. Say it again. Come on . . . "
 "¿Qué quieres que te diga?"
 "Tell you what, you teach . . . hey, here comes Hotski . . . "
 "Hatalski . . . "
 "Yeah . . . "

II

"Time to call in, Rusty. Rusty! Call-in time . . . "
 "Oh . . . okay . . . Badger Four. Over. Badger Three calling in."
 "What's up?"
 "Everything's okay up here. . . . Over."
 "Understood. Out."
 ". . . Well, that's that . . . How long now?"
 "One more hour, and that's it."
 "Hey . . . how far are we from home?"
 "What?"
 "Home. How far are we from *home*? You know, miles, How many miles are we from home?"
 "I don't know . . . Five. Six thousand?"
 "Nah; it's got to be more than that."
 "Okay."
 "No—come on; how far are we, Rafe?"
 (Laugh) "I don't know . . . It's a long way, that's all."
 "I bet it's . . . I bet it's nine thousand miles."
 "I guess so . . . "
 "Don't you think about home? Don't you have anything back there?"
 "I think about home all the time . . . "
 "I do too. . . . What do you think about?"
 "I think about home, that's all. Home. People. Home, I guess; I don't know. I think about home, that's all."
 "I do too; I think about it all the time . . . I think about it, well, I think about it, you know. I think about home. You?"
 "So do I, Rusty."
 "I wonder how far it is?"
 (Laugh) "I don't know; it's a long way."
 "How far is it from where you live . . . to, ah, the state of Washington? Fifteen hundred?"
 "Fifteen hundred, two thousand miles . . . I really don't know, Rusty."
 "Okay, say two thousand, and how far is it to Hawaii? No; we didn't go to Hawaii . . . Right? Ok . . . let's see; how far is it then from Washington to Japan? Four, five thousand miles, right? What do you think?"

"Sounds right."

"Well, I'll bet it's no less than five thousand miles and you're two thousand miles, right? And, well, we're not too far from Japan from here, but, how far would you say we are from where my Dad lives in Elton? How far are you from Elton, Louisiana?"

"I don't know. Five? Six hundred miles?"

"How far are you from Houston again?"

"About four hundred."

"Yeah, six sounds about right . . . 'cause we're pretty close to two hundred miles. From Houston. Sooooo, I figure, ah, I figure from Elton to Washington, ah, it's about twenty five hundred miles and then another five . . . We're about seven thousand five hundred miles from home."

"Yeah, I guess we are . . ."

"You think about it, ha?"

"Yeah . . . I think about it all the time."

"Me too. I got a lot of friends back home. You?"

"Yeah . . . I've got some (laughs) friends. Everybody's got some friends."

"Yeah? Well, I've got a *lot* of friends. I have . . . I've got a *lot* of friends at home. A *lot*."

III

"Fog's clearing . . ."

"Yep."

"What time is Rafe supposed to get here?"

"Can't be too long . . . I imagine chow's about over . . ."

"Yeah . . . I was just . . . oh-oh . . . Rusty? Rusty . . . what's that all about?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I don't know. Looks like . . . Looks like there's about sixty of our guys down there."

"Where?"

"Here: take a look."

"Where?"

"Turn to the right. See Two-Tit Mountain?"

"Yeah."

"Okay: go to the right one. Now, come on down to the belly button. Got it? Now, from the belly button, go to three o'clock. Four. Five . . ."

"Oh, shit."

"You see them?"

"Yeah, there's about seventy of our guys; down there . . . chowing down . . . Hold it . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"Shit, that's no seventy guys; that's more like a hundred and fifty or sixty of 'em down there. What the hell are they doing? Isn't that a firing lane?"

"I don't think so . . . What the hell is that, Rusty? Is that a patrol?"
"If it is, that's the biggest goddam patrol I've ever seen. What the hell are they doing down there? Ned, are you sure that's not a firing lane?"

"I'm checking No; it's okay."

"When'd you see them?"

"Just now, when the fog burned off and all . . ."

"Hmph . . . well, I'm going to all Brom and let him know just the same."

"Why don't we just wait until Rafe gets here; it'll be just a few more minutes."

"Holy shit!"

"What?"

"You look through these now. Look!"

"Where?"

"To the left, by where Brom should be."

". . . Gee-zuz! Those guys are Chinks."

"Damn right. How many, you think?"

"Let's see . . . Oh, sweet Jesus, there must be two, three hundred of 'em."

"At least, yeah."

"Man, look at what the fog brought in . . ."

"Yeah."

"Ta-hell's going on, though?"

"I don't know . . . let's see, looks like they're between us and Brom."

"You sure?"

"Well, shit, they're about a thousand yards away, and Brom's what? Twelve, thirteen hundred yards . . . A mile, right?"

"Hey, here comes Rafe. . . . get down, Rafe."

"What?"

"Down! Get down!"

"What the hell's going on?"

"Take a peek. . . . Here. . . . No, no, right down there. . . . Well?"

"Goddam! That's a lot of people down there."

"Isn't *that* the truth. Now, look to the left. What do you see?"

"Shit! Those guys are Chinks . . ."

"What do you think, Rafe?"

"I don't know . . . they're all chowing down . . . One thing though: they haven't seen each other."

"Yeah? How do you figure that?"

"'Cause there's a couple of rises between them . . . Ta-hell's going on?"

"That's what we're wondering."

"Well, shit, give me the phone."

"What are you fixing to do?"

"I'm going to call Bromley up."

"Rafe, you think it's safe?"

"Safe? Goddam, Ned, they went right by him. Let's see if he's alive or holed up or something . . . Hold it a minute . . ."

"Yeah? What's the matter?"

"You. Are you okay, Ned?"

"Yeah; why?"

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay. . . . I'm calling Brom right now. Rusty, what's Brom call?"

"I think he's Badger Three."

"Okay. Get batallion on the line, Rusty; tell 'em to hold on till I get through to Brom. Tell Hat I'm on the other line, and tell him about our guys over by Tit. Okay?"

"Any chance they cut the wire?"

"We'll see. . . . There, it's ringing. . . . Badger One? I mean, Badger Three . . . Aw, shit: Brom!"

"Hey, Rafe; you okay, buddy?"

"Yeah . . . You, ah, you see any Chinks out there?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying: you see any Chinks out there?"

"At this hour of the goddam morning?"

"Behind you, Brom."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Look, Brom, there's some Chink infantry between you and us up here. They're about three hundred yards behind you."

"No shit?"

(Sigh) "Brom . . . what are you doing?"

"Well, I'm looking up front."

"Not up front, goddammit. Turn around and put your glasses on. . . . Now, what do you see?"

"Holy shit! There must be close to a couple-a-hundred guys back there."

"We figure closer to three or four . . . Listen, now: we've also got close to two hundred of *our* guys to the right. You got that?"

"Yeah? What the hell's going on?"

"I don't know, Brom, but I'm thinking of bringing some mortars in."

"Mortars? Shit; that won't do it."

"You want us to call in some artillery, then? Right on top of you?"

"Hell, yes . . ."

"How deep can you go?"

"Deep enough . . . really, Rafe . . . Rafe?"

"Now, I don't know what our troops are doing out there, but we got to get them out before we fire on the Chinks 'cause once we start up, then the Chink artillery'll open up."

"Yeah?"

"Well, we got ours out of the way on the double . . ."

"Yeah?"

"And when that's clear, we start on the guys down there . . . Now, Brom: you're going to have to tuck. Deep. Hold it a minute, Brom; hang on. Rust, you got batallion yet? Good . . . Brom! Brom! Okay: when the shit hits, I figure they'll cut and run down the same way they came up: right at you. They sure as hell can't go to the sides; that's too goddam steep for 'em . . . so, they'll run like hell and right back at you. You're going to have to put up with a lot of shit . . . you know: first ours and then theirs . . .

"Go ahead."

"Give us a few minutes to get Batallion to get those guys moving."

"Check."

"Don't hang up, Brom; leave the line on, I don't want any ringing."

"Gotcha . . ."

"Rust, you still got Hat on the line? . . . Good . . . Hat? Rafe. Hat, we got some Chinks about a thousand yards up front. . . . No, they're chowing down. . . . Bromley. . . . Yeah, but there's a snag: We got some two hundred of our guys over by Two-Tit. . . . We don't know, but if you can move them, Rust and Ned'll work out the coordinates for this place. . . . Yeah. . . . Okay, hang on, I gotta get back to Brom. Hey, Brom! . . . Look, it'll be a few more minutes; you hang on for a little while . . . Ned and Rusty and I are getting the stuff ready for Batallion. Hang on . . . Okay? Stay on the line now."

"Go ahead."

"How you guys coming?"

"It's all here."

"Okay. Hat? Hat? Rafe. . . . that's good. Good! Listen. Rust'll give you the poop, I gotta get back to Brom. See you . . . Brom!"

"Go ahead."

"Hat says our guys are moving out now. Here goes: we've got every bit of ground sensed, and we're going to shell the shit right out of them. Rusty's passing all the coordinates to Batallion. . . . yeah, all of them and in sequence of fire. Got that? Now, we're going to fire past you all the way to Eddie Boy Ridge."

". . . Eddie Boy Ridge; got it."

"After you and I sign off here, you then count for three minutes and after that we'll open up short and then long. We're going to stop two hundred yards short of you and then, two minutes later, we're going to fire two hundred yards further up . . ."

"Two hundred yards . . ."

"We'll wait another two minutes after that. Got it? . . . Okay. And then, we're going to fire all the way to Eddie Boy at hundred yard intervals: Able, Baker, Charlie; Charlie; Able; Baker; and like that. . . ."

"You'll be spotting hundreds all the way to the Ridge. . . ."

"Good boy! Listen: Ned's got his eyes on the Chinks and Rusty's looking to ours; so don't worry about *our* guys. I'm going to start

counting, Brom, and it's going to start raining shit down there. You tuck in now. Wad up. I'm signing off; I've still got Hat on the line and you've got three minutes, Brom, three minutes starting: NOW!

"Hat? We're all set. . . . We'll be okay. . . . Sure. . . . Yeah. . . . Yeah. Okay. . . . *Right . . . okay*, I'll watch him. Over and out and all that good shit, Hat. What? Right; see you, now."

IV

"Rafe, you remember the time ole Ned blew up? You know, when the Chinks? At Eddie Boy Ridge?"

"Sure . . . I remember . . ."

"You know *why* he blew up, Rafe? You know *why* he went crazy?"

"Why?"

"'Cause he talked a lot. Well, I talk a lot, too, but I mean he talked a lot to himself. And that's not right. He heard voices; he told me so. You can go crazy that way, and that's why he blew up. . . . Don't you know about those things?"

"You hungry?"

"What?"

"Are you hungry?"

"No!"

"I wish I had a candy bar; one of those goddam Snickers; you remember them?"

"You went to college, didn't you?"

"Just the one year."

"Well, I didn't finish high school, but I read about that kind of stuff . . . Talkin' about Ned. We had a good school there in Elton. Elton, Louisiana, yessir . . . that's pretty good, right? I mean, that, that's being a sophomore. Right?"

"Right. Call in, Rusty."

"What?"

"Call in. Batallion."

"Right. Right."

"There. . . . You remember when we caught the Chinks there, at Eddie Boy Ridge?"

"Sure I do."

"I wasn't angry at 'em, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I, I don't *hate* 'em; I used to hate 'em. A lot. But not anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't know . . . I just *don't*. Now, *last* year, when they caught us in the Pass? And, they, ah, they put it to us?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, I really did then, boy; I really hated 'em then . . . I really did: they're shootin', and it was cold, and we were caught there. Like rats, you know. Just like rats, and, boy . . . I really did. I *hated* their ass. Man, they. . . why, shit, I'd-a-killed one of them if I'd-a'seen 'im . . . I would've, boy, right there. Boom! You know? Bring in the guns, yeah! But . . . I don't know how. I don't mean I don't *hate* 'em, you know, but they're not my friends, right? And, and that's why we're here and that's why they're over there on that other hill. . . . but . . . but, ah, I don't know, it's funny."

"Yeah . . ."

"Remember that time?"

"Sure . . ."

"Boy, that was a long time ago, right? Eddie Boy Ridge? How many yards is that, Rafe? Years, I mean, how long ago . . . was it?"

"Well—about seven months, I guess. Eight."

"Let's see . . . Well, we can work it out . . . Yeah, ole Ned. He was a nice old guy. . . . I wonder where he's at?"

"Probably home."

"Yeah—he got out on one of them Section Eights or on one of them Section Nines. Boy, I sure don't want one of them. . . . I want to go *home*, but I want to go home *right*. Know what I mean? Be somebody when I get home. I don't want nobody to go around pointing their *goddam* finger at me. . . . How about you, Rafe?"

"Yeah, I want to go home, too. . . ."

"You okay, Rafe?"

"Yeah, I'm just tired . . ."

"What are you going to do when you get home, Rafe?"

"I don't know; I'm just going to go home for a while, but I want to get out of here first."

"Well, I want to get out of here first, too, you . . . I, I . . . we're not home safe, I know, but . . . but, I don't think we're going to get it. Shit, we've been through too much, right? Remember? We were in the Pass. . . . 'Course, Charlie died, but . . . Hey, those are nice guys, right? Those are good friends you got. I got friends like that, too, but they're not here, they're, they're at home, but you got friends here . . . You know. You got Joey, and, and that crazy guy, what's his name? Sonny . . . He's a case, isn't he? Ain't he a lick, though? And I sure had a good time with you guys in Japan. That was good, boy; I, I really liked that. You guys really know how to have fun. I'd never, *never*, been to a . . . a whorehouse. Anywhere. You know; no money. But that was *good*; I liked it there, but you know, those, ah, girls . . . they're not really whores, are they?"

"Oh, they're whores all right."

"Yeah, but I always figured that they, ah, that they'd be real *old*. Those are young girls, I mean, they're, shit, they're *my* age, *your* age, right?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah . . . Boy, I sure had a lot of fun. Did you?"

"Yeah, I had a lot of fun, too. It was good . . ."

"I did. . . . I really did. . . . That was nice. That was a lot of fun."

"Yeah. . . ."

V

"You got a girl back home, Rafe? I don't mean someone serious, you know; I mean, a girl . . . any girl. You know. Someone to write to. Once in a while?"

"No . . . you?"

"I did; ah, I guess I still do—now and then; she was born there in Elton, and I met her when me and my Dad moved there, but then they moved on out to Eunice; that's a big town. Her father's pretty handy with his hands, and he knows a lot about tools, see? His name's Prosper . . . Her name's Suzy. Suzy Postelle. She's kinda . . . skinny, but she's nice. And quiet . . . and real nice. But you must have had a girl in school, right?"

"I was married once, and . . ."

"Hey, I didn't know that. What happened?"

"It was right after I got out of the Army, and . . ."

"You been in before? I *thought* you had. Why'd you come back for?"

"I went in right after high school; a whole bunch of us did . . . And we got out about the same time; we all went in for a short time, eighteen months."

"Yeh?"

"Yeah . . . and when I got married, and I went to junior college for a year, and I worked on the farm, but we planned for me to go to school . . . to college."

"College? Hey!"

"Yeah . . . but she died, Rusty."

"Died? She *died*? No. . . ."

"She drowned . . ."

"Oh, Jesus . . . I'm sorry . . . No; damn! I, I'm sorry, man. Jesus . . ."

"It's okay; I can talk about it . . . Now. The reserve called me up right after that; called the other guys, too. Charlie, Joey, Sonny, you know . . . Called up a cousin of mine, too."

"Who's he? You got a cousin, too?"

"I've got a whole bunch of cousins . . . this one's special; you'd like him, Rusty? he's . . ."

"Yeah? What's he like?"

"He's a pretty good guy . . . he's over here some place."

"No, shit? Your cousin is? In Japan or out here?"

"Last I heard, he was here, in Pusan . . . yeah . . . he's a real good guy."

"Hey, I'm sorry about your wife; I mean . . . you know . . ."

"It's okay . . ."

"Gosh, how old are you, then? Twenty-two!"

"Twenty-one in January . . ."

"Coming up? Oh, man, we got to celebrate; no two ways about it . . . Yeah, no shit, we got to . . . Tell you what, we'll get some guys out . . . You know . . . We'll get drunk, right? Like we did in Japan last Christmas? Remember? Over at . . . at that place . . ."

"The whore house?"

"Yeah, *there* . . . that was *good*, wasn't it?"

"Yeah; it was good . . ."

"Hey, man, I'm sorry about . . . you know."

"It's okay, Rusty; I can talk about it . . ."

"My Mom died, too. Yours?"

"Yeah . . ."

"And your Dad?"

"Yeah . . ."

"But you got your two brothers . . . and all those cousins, right?"

"Yeah, sure . . ."

"Boy, that's nice . . . I only got *one* brother, and he lives in Lufkin, that's in East Texas . . . Angelina County? His wife's from up there . . . and that's where he lives . . . My Dad . . . he, ah, doesn't work anymore . . . He's disabled, you know what I mean? That's when we moved from Ruston to Elton . . . But he's a pretty nice old guy . . . I like him. He's a good man, but he doesn't know how to write, see, and I sent him my allowance *every* month, and it's okay . . . So you got a cousin here?"

"Yeah, and you'd like him; trouble is, I don't have his address . . ."

"Maybe you could write home and get it . . . Know what I mean? Say, that's silly, isn't it? I mean, you got to write *there* to get his address *here*? It'd be good, wouldn't it . . . Wouldn't it? And meet him? When you going to write home the next time?"

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