

## **Holiday Warfare**

by Dennis Gardner

*Winning Student Essay for Narrative Category*

*Beulah Davis Outstanding Freshman Writer Award*

Brave men of war have faced adversities both physical and mental and risen above them as butter from cream. Chivalry and conquest have carried soldiers from pole to pole and across the seven seas. Hardships of campaign life are legendary, and the iron men these trials created go down in history as examples to all mankind.

I have faced battle under duress and have learned I am not a brave man. Shell-shock is partially defined as a "psycho neurotic condition akin to hysteria." To this day I am saddled with the memories of the day I was sent to battle in my Grandmother's kitchen. No man should have to endure these conditions. Women can, with impunity, set foot in the estrogenically charged atmosphere of Grandmother's kitchen on Thanksgiving Day; greater men than I, however, have been broken this way. Men of the world take heed, only the insanely brave or exceedingly foolish would choose to accept this near-suicide mission. Counting myself as the latter, I offer my tale as counsel.

The day was overcast, cold and thoroughly November. I answered the call to arms with the eager sincerity of a private fresh from basic training. My Grandfather wept openly, fearing for my life as I bade him farewell. I entered a young soldier brimming with bravado; I returned a troubled man with bruised ego, clutching hard-won wisdom to my breast.

The fact that women are vastly better equipped for a culinary tete-a-tete with Grandmother should have been apparent to me after the opening salvo, but I was too green, too new and shiny, to heed.

"Have you seen your cousin George's new haircut yet, Denny?" asked Granny. Shot number one had been fired, and I did not even hear the air-raid sirens.

"Yeah, I like it," I answered with none of the suspicion that has dogged me at holidays since my tour of duty.

"It makes him look like a porcupine," chimed in my Aunt Molly, correctly answering the subtle part of the question and putting any doubts about the spike haircut and its social value to rest.

"Uncle Dwight's been smoking again," Granny mentioned tersely.

"I know, I bummed one off of him today already," I said quietly.

"Well, let me tell you about Dwight's smoking, where it has gotten him, and what will happen to you if , . . ." Granny had launched into a surprise flank attack and caught me off-guard!

I regained my senses and dove into a foxhole I had dug out of an old mound of flour. Hiding and licking my wounds, I pondered my first lesson of holiday kitchen combat. Men cannot gossip effectively with professionals. It is dirty, it is dangerous, and it hurts. I thought I was well-camouflaged in my foxhole, but Grandma switched on the radar and found me.

"Melt that butter in the microwave and bring it over here."

This was a seemingly easy mission. My hopes for combat glory were restored. I grabbed my combat-issue wooden soup spoon and charged from my hole, eager to prove my mettle. This skirmish turned for the worse when I pulled the butter out early and delivered it only partially melted.

"Men will never follow instructions," Granny told me with a flourish.

"They will simply never have a woman's touch," Molly fired from the rear guard by the oven.

"So true," replied Grandma. "Your Grandfather cannot even reheat coffee in that thing. He'll take it out before the bell dings, curse the oven for not warming his coffee, and then act plain hateful all morning."

"Men are just too heavy handed," surmised Molly, who obviously loved all men everywhere.

"Damn, ya'll don't fight fair," I retorted as I retreated to a bunker constructed of baking sheets. "Grandpa's not hateful," I said from behind a muffin pan. "He cried when I left the living room!"

A "Humph" from Molly was the warning shot fired in my general direction.

I put a soup pot on my head to guard against flying turkey giblets and hunkered down to ponder a while.

Men will never have a woman's touch I reasoned, not anytime, not anywhere. This is because we are "heavy handed." This consists of being impatient, arrogant, and having an all-around bad attitude. Apparently this lethal combination of character defects alone is enough to forever guarantee that we fight discrimination in the kitchen.

The words, "Denny, you're a restaurant cook, come over here and make the gravy," stirred me from my contemplation. I locked and loaded and rushed from my bunker. As I crossed the kitchen on all fours, timers jangled, grease splattered, heat gave forth from all around, and clouds of flour drifted by.

"My God," I whispered to myself," the despair, the utter despair and horror."

A strange confidence came over me as I made my way to the stove. It was the comfort of a condemned man. I knew that soon this ordeal must end. I was moving towards the heart of the battle, and one way or another--on a stretcher, in glory, or in a turkey basting bag--soon I would be going home.

I believed in my professional ability enough to make a simple turkey gravy, though I did not at the time realize that no man can truly match his culinary skills against his Grandmother's, especially on Thanksgiving Day.

I began to add flour to simmering clarified butter to make a roux. This was where I received the shrapnel in my cooking hand that would ultimately send me home with a purple beet medal for being wounded while preparing food.

"Honey," Granny started, I suppose taking pity on me because of my obvious battle fatigue, "put the flour in with some water and stir it into the broth when it is close to a boil, not the other way around." I visibly crumbled.

"Send him home to the living room," muttered Molly, "his spirit is broken; he's of no use now."

I removed my dirty battle apron, accepted my purple beet, and left the field for the rear echelon of the living room.

Grandpa started crying again when he saw my purple beet and needed a Kleenex when I told him of my gravy. My Uncle Douglas, who was too young to remember the turbulent climate of the days leading up to Thanksgiving, looked at me as if I had been burning bras with the women instead of fighting in futility for the good name of men everywhere.

I settled back into an easy chair to relate my story. The older men, Grandpa and Dwight, looked on with understanding as they had fought in World War II. Douglas smirked in the corner with all the arrogance of a heavy-handed young man. Dwight handed me a cigar and we settled back for a football game, thankful to a man for my safe return.