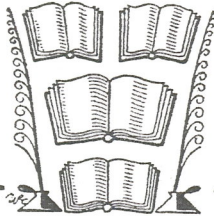


The Hero

John Barkham



RON KOVIC, the ex-Marine who wrote "Born on the Fourth of July" turned 30 last July 4. To all intents and purposes his life ended a decade earlier when a bullet tore through his left shoulder in Vietnam, blasted through his lung and smashed his spinal cord. He survives, a shell of a man, with nothing to live for but to save others from becoming the kind of "hero" he became.

Books on Vietnam are said to be a drug on the market. The nation wants to forget that hideous misadventure. But as long as the Ron Kovics who live on as paraplegics and paralytics thrust themselves on our attention, how can we forget?

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KOVIC was no 1960s radical who marched in anti-war demonstrations on Washington. He was an ordinary middle class kid from Long Island, born on the fourth of July 1946, who dreamed of becoming a John Wayne-type hero fighting for God and country. When Marine recruiters addressed the senior class in his high school he signed up at once.

This is the kind of kid who was dismissed as simpleminded by campus radicals in the '60s. Ron Kovic could hardly wait to get into Marine boot camp. The brutal training he received didn't shake him.

With his illusions intact he arrived

in Vietnam. In his trusting faith in the rightness of the war, Kovic reminds one of Paul Baumer, the young German soldier whose story Erich Maria Remarque told so memorably in "All Quiet on the Western Front." The two books have much in common — the searing incidents of terror under fire, the growing disenchantment with the war, and, in Kovic's case, the atrocities that were committed on the field of battle.

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LONG AFTER he returned home in a wheelchair Kovic still had nightmares about the fire his unit mistakenly poured into a village, killing and maiming children and their mothers. "All a mistake," declared the lieutenant, "they got in the way." But the butchery of that "mistake" haunts Kovic to this day.

His book is not a novel, as "All Quiet" was, but a searingly realistic account of his experiences in Vietnam and in VA hospitals in the United States. It is written in red-hot prose in which the agony, physical and mental, leaps off the printed page. Though the townsfolk in Massapequa greeted him as a hero who had suffered for his country, Kovic sees himself as a young American whose trust was misplaced, whose patriotism abused, and who was left, along with others like him, to rot in VA hospitals. If only for his devastating picture of these hospitals, his book should be made compulsory reading for all members of Congress (McGraw-Hill; \$7.95).