

The Flower Girl

Heat, humidity and the aromas of a thousand cooking fires assaulted my senses as I stepped from the plane. Bangkok. I was really on the ground in Bangkok. That phrase was my personal, secret phrase – ‘on the ground’. It meant I was somewhere new and different. I was someplace with experiences ahead that I could not foresee. Bangkok was actually a stop along the way to my final destination. I was headed for an undercover military intelligence assignment in Vientiane, Laos. It was January 1970, and the Vietnam War had finally inserted itself into my life. There were so many incidents and accidents leading up to this moment, that I still marvel at the twists and turns.

During nearly three years of college I’d had time to think about the war and how I wanted to handle it. Many of my closest friends had already gone into the service. We were the sons of blue-collar workers, and we grew up watching John Wayne pull the pin from many a hand grenade with his teeth. We had seen every manner of war movie, from WWII to those cheesy Italian gladiator movies on lazy Saturday afternoon television. There was no question about whether or not we’d go - no war protesters or draft dodgers here. All of our fathers were vets, so we never even considered avoiding the draft. We were too uninformed to protest, and too unafraid to run away. We were the good guys and we always won, so had bad could it be. Besides, none of us were particularly interested in moving to Canada anyway. No one really wanted to go, but we all went when the time came.

The first Vietnam casualty I can recall was a guy from my high school. He was a couple of years ahead of me – a running back, I think - and the small article on a back page of the hometown paper said he’d been killed in some place that began with a V. His uniformed photo appeared above the notice which contained fewer words than a classified ad. That was in 1965 – the year I graduated high school. Soon afterward, such reports started turning up as a regular segment on the evening news (like the weather report), only now they were so numerous that they were reported as statistics. As Vietnam casualties mounted over the years, many of us avoided watching the evening news altogether. I remember as a child growing up in the 50s my Dad would watch Victory at Sea on Sunday evenings – he’d been in the Navy. Sometimes, the stark black and white

documentary series became too graphic for me, and I'd quietly leave the room. Oddly, the Hollywood war movies of the period never actually showed blood and gore, but those documentaries sometimes contained slices of reality my young eyes were not ready to see. Watching the evening news a decade later as the nightly 'death toll' in Vietnam was announced (as if it were the stats for the Memorial Day holiday weekend traffic fatalities) had the same affect on me. Hearing the number of Americans killed that day, or that week in Vietnam began to wear thin. To make matters worse, friends and acquaintances returning home from their tours of duty told chilling tales of atrocities on both sides, which only added to the sense of hopelessness. But it would soon get worse.

On June 27, 1969 Life Magazine published the pictures of a single week's American war dead in Vietnam. The cover was a patchwork of little photographs, and each had a corresponding story inside. It was shocking to see page after page of bright young heroic faces, each showing such hope and promise, and to realize they were all dead and gone. I think the effect of that issue was to wake people up from the numbing drone of casualty figures. Putting faces, names and stories to the statistics changed things. Sometimes I wonder if it would have swayed my decision to enlist, had that magazine been published sooner. I know the impact it had on public opinion. Time Magazine published a similar piece a few years back on seven soldiers killed in Iraq, and I couldn't help wondering if we were headed down that road again.

By the time my turn came, all my buddies had warned me that it was better to volunteer for three years than to be drafted for two. On the surface, that seems illogical, but the rationale was all too clear. Two-year draftees weren't going to be in long enough for advanced training, so they invariably went to infantry school after basic training and then straight to the bush. A three year volunteer could be given more training before going to war and could be counted on for a longer period of service. With some form of 'specialized' training, a soldier had a better chance of coming home alive – or so the theory went.

Some years later I shared this logic with a woman who had lost her first husband in Vietnam. I was singing for her second wedding. Her first husband was a two-year draftee, she explained. He had told her he just wanted to do his two and get out. He didn't make it. She was still bitter.

Based on what friends had told me, the choice was clear, so I volunteered toward the end of the summer of 1968. August and September were so hot and humid in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, that the Army had invoked its 'heat category 4' alert on more than one occasion, meaning there were days when even the Army knew it was too hot to train. We were grateful for any chance to get out of the scorching summer sun, even if it meant going into a darkened theatre to watch a film on venereal disease. When these 'breaks' were over, we'd return to our heavy M-14s (there was a shortage of M-16s) and battle gear, all neatly arranged outside in pointed stacks, and to our sun-baked canteens, now filled with hot water. At the end of basic training, my entire company was temporarily thankful to be seated in bleachers in the shade of some tall pine trees. We were about to be read our orders, and my personal orders were majorly impacted by an earlier minor event.

When I enlisted, I had volunteered carte blanche. I could have picked a training specialty before signing up, but I had no idea what to choose, so I left it up to chance, and as chance would have it, the Army was about to issue a nationwide call for intelligence candidates, and I was swept up in that call. Now, as our duty assignments were read aloud, some heard the worst posting of all, "Fort Polk, Louisiana, Infantry School." Fort Polk was the kiss of death. It was the only place in the U.S. considered as bad as Vietnam itself, and it was a one way ticket to the bush. Others went to similarly awful AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) destinations, but when they got to my name they read aloud, "Fort Holabird, Baltimore, Intelligence School." No one in the bleachers heard anything after 'Baltimore', at which point the entire company looked at me and questioned that destination aloud, as if on cue. No one was more surprised than I.

The Army has a phrase, 'hurry up, and wait', for a very good reason. It is SOP – standard operating procedure. It describes most duty assignments, and mine was no exception. First there had been a shortage of Intelligence candidates, and now there was a glut. Many were siphoned off to 'holding' companies in places like Ft. Hood, Texas. I was stuck at dinky little Fort Holabird for months – no job – no training. Finally, orders came transferring me to an Intel outfit at Fort Meade, halfway down the parkway to Washington, D.C. At the 528th MI we were trained by returning Vietnam veterans in the arts of interrogation, map reading and analyzing intelligence data and documents. Interrogation training was as much a survival course as it was the study of

such things as the “Mutt and Jeff” technique (good cop/bad cop). These veterans filled our heads with stories. Some interrogators had become so violent during their tour of duty in Vietnam that they’d thrown prisoners out of helicopters one at a time, until someone decided to talk. We were told how one of our interrogators had been killed by a prisoner who stabbed him in the throat with his own pencil. It was with a heightened sense of awareness that we knew our turn was coming, yet still we went nowhere – hurry up and wait. By June I’d been in the Army for ten months, during which time I’d had 4 months of ‘hurry up’ (training), and six months of ‘wait’. While attached to the 528th Military Intelligence Company in Fort Meade, we got word that we, too, were to be re-assigned. Rumor had it that we’d sit out the war in Fort Hood, Texas.

Now, I’d never been to Texas, and the thought of getting to see the Lone Star State would not normally have been an unwelcome prospect. But I knew that if we were assigned to a holding company, we weren’t likely to do much other than busy work – for two years! Given a choice to paint rocks (a typical make work project) and stand inspections in Texas, or go to war, I chose the latter. Rather than get stuck polishing boots, saluting and painting those damned little rocks that border each barracks, I volunteered for Vietnam. I also volunteered for language school, and a half dozen other assignments posted on the barracks bulletin board. I signed up for language training in French, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Slavic and more. I wanted a real job. My luck held, as my next assignment was language school. In the end, I got French because it was the prevailing European language of Vietnam and Laos.

Looking back on it, it’s strange how one single decision can precipitate an entire chain of events. For example, while in college I had changed my major to music. It was no big deal – or so I’d thought. In trying to audition for the college chorus, the faculty music teacher, Margaret Franzone, had convinced me that I had a talent for singing opera. I’d been singing along with my Mother’s Mario Lanza records for years, but I was ignorant of any academic approach to singing. In fact, when Margaret asked me where I’d been studying singing, I responded “Lady, you can either sing or you can’t.” Margaret knew there was more to it than that, and she suggested a change in my academic focus from secondary education to music education. It was a logical choice, it felt right to me, and soon music became my passion. I even received a music scholarship when I

transferred to Temple University in Philadelphia. All was well; however, this decision did not go unnoticed.

The draft board in Bristol, PA decided that anyone who had changed their college major mid-stream (I'd already completed my first year as a secondary ed major) was most likely trying to prolong their stay in college in order to avoid the draft. Although I viewed my decision as a lateral move (after all I was still in the 'education' field), the draft board did not. The Bristol Board changed my status to 1-A and tried to take me in the spring. They had to let me finish the semester by law, so I did and then volunteered after enjoying a summer of girls and motorcycle rides to New Hope, PA or the Jersey shore. When I walked into the recruiter's office on a Friday and told him I wanted to go in on Monday, he thought I was stoned. I hadn't noticed, but it was Friday the 13th (August 1968).

My parents took me to the old Reading Railroad station in Pendel, PA on Monday. I boarded the rickety old commuter train with the wire racks above the seats. The cars were painted a rust color to hide the rust, and the interiors looked as though they were from the era of the James Gang. My Mom was emotional because I was the first of six children to truly leave the nest. My Dad was stoic and made a few wise cracks, as usual. As I waved goodbye, I had mixed feelings. Now I can relate to how they must have felt, but at the time I could not have fully understood. Although I missed them immediately and felt apprehensive about my decision, I felt a profound sense of excitement at having thrown caution to the wind. Like a lot of young men my age, like those bright faces I was later to see in Life Magazine, I was full of hope and promise and this was to be my first adventure as a man.

At the induction center at 401 North Broad Street in Philadelphia, they inspected us to make sure we had two of everything we were supposed to have two of, and then they gave us a battery of tests. We had all reported in early that morning, and we were told that our train to Fort Bragg, North Carolina would not be leaving until 9:30 at night. Needless to say, we'd have a lot of time to kill. They passed out a psychological test to see if we had what it takes to kill when directed to do so. I tried to tell them what they wanted to hear. There were a number of other written exams, but the one that really got my attention was the language test. Someone had created a fictitious language with rules for syntax, grammar and spelling. After reading the rules of this new language,

there were several pages of written text to be translated. You can just imagine how the rest of the guys in that room reacted to this one. Each man in the room found something to do with that exam, other than fill it out. Paper airplanes were a popular solution, along with spit-balls and a larger wad for playing circular file basketball. I sat in the back of the room and dutifully translated every word.

Now, to be fair, I'd had Latin in school, and in fact had once studied to be an altar boy (before we moved to PA from Queens), back in the days when the Catholic Mass still had the dignity and mystery that only Latin could provide. I'd had some French in high school, and a semester of Italian in college. English had been one of my best subjects, and our high school had an excellent English teacher named Stanley (or Stan the Man, as we called him), so for me, it wasn't so much a test as it was a diversion. That one test changed my life. It got me into Intelligence training, which led to language school at the Defense Language Institute in Anacostia, Maryland, and to my assignment in Laos. Odd how your life can sometimes turn on the decisions or the efforts of a single afternoon.

I would soon be arriving in Bangkok - on my way to who knew what or where. I was carrying a brown, U.S. State Department diplomatic passport. Only those in charge of getting me to my final destination had a clue as to my actual rank and credentials. My military occupational status read like a secret code itself. Ninety Six Charlie Two Lima Twenty-Seven (96C2L27) meant that I was trained as an interrogator of POWs, qualified as an intelligence analyst and briefer, and had mastered at least one foreign language - in my case, French. I had just arrived from the states on a long flight that began in Oakland, California. We'd landed in Hawaii and later on Guam. We had flown over an intense thunderstorm on the way in, and I was intrigued by the sight of lightning which seemed to start in the clouds well below us and hurtled down to earth, below us farther still.

Flying was a relatively new experience for me, having just crossed the country from Atlanta to LA on my first flight ever. My parents and I had left Pennsylvania in a heavy January snowstorm, and gone south to see my brother's graduation from helicopter school in Fort Rucker, Alabama. They dropped me at the airport in Atlanta on the way back up North. I flew west to Los Angeles where relatives had picked me up at LAX. I'd never been to the west coast, so it was fun to hang

out with my cousins and my uncles in L.A. After I helped him fix the clutch, my cousin Billy lent me his street bike (a BSA) while I was in LA. Billy had stayed with family when he was stationed in Greenland a few years back. On leave he would work on this Harley he put together from spare parts. I also rode cousin Dicky's dirt bike (a Bultaco) out in the Mojave desert. It was geared so high I could barely keep the front wheel down riding it on the macadam, but when Dicky rode in a 'scramble' race through the desert sands, that thing plowed a trench. My relatives wanted to show me the sights, so they took me to Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, and my uncle took me to my first topless bar. No one discussed the war.

Afterwards I flew up to San Francisco and arrived early one morning at the Oakland Army Base in California. I was in a civilian business suit - part of my new collection of threads, curtesy of Uncle Sam. Where I was going the only uniform I ever wore again was completely unmarked. I was scheduled to ship out in a day or two but had to go through some processing first. Hurry up and wait. It felt odd being out of uniform. The regular army studs didn't like it much, either. I was being issued bedding for my brief stay at Chez Sam, when a young lieutenant wearing quartermaster insignia barked at me, "You better get yourself in a goddamned uniform, boy!" I could tell by the way he said boy with two syllables, he was probably not a northern Yankee like myself, so we weren't going to get along very well. I decided to have a little fun with him, so I whipped out my State Department passport, and proceeded to tell him that he'd better find out just who in the hell he was talking to, before addressing me in that tone. He apologized, addressing me as 'sir', as he either assumed I outranked him, or worse, I was from some branch of government service that only used initials. I was beginning to enjoy my 'undercover' status.

Later that day, I found myself walking into the dayroom to play a little pool and chase away the blues and the boredom. As I entered wearing shades and a dark pin-striped suit, I must have looked pretty odd to the clerk. My black hair was long enough to comb (with sideburns, no less) and I sported a neatly trimmed black mustache. The clerk, a dear little civilian lady in her fifties, blinked and asked in a half whisper, "Can I help you find anyone?" It immediately occurred to me that the clerk had assumed I was CID (Criminal Investigation Division). The nature of her question seemed to imply that she thought I was searching for deserters. In reality, all I was looking for was an empty table, so I responded in a sinister tone, "I'll let you know if I need your help, now get me

a table near the door so I can watch who comes and goes.” The clerk obliged, excited to think that the game was afoot, and she was in on a secret. I remembered a point my uncle Mario had made to me on a visit to Daytona a few months earlier, “If you walk into a place as if you own it, people will assume that you do.” At the time, I didn’t know what ‘my war’ was going to be like, or even if I’d survive it. And with the wisdom that only arrogant youth can attain, I started living my life on the principle that if I’m going to die anyway, I’m going to have fun until the music stops.

In no time I was on my way to Thailand. Bangkok was steamy and pungent. I grabbed a cab outside the airport and told the driver to take me to the Capitol Hotel. That was the destination on my orders, and it was an American Army hotel. The cab ride was particularly disorienting in that, like the British, the Thai drive on what we Americans consider to be the ‘wrong side of the road’. Every time the driver passed another vehicle on the right, with oncoming cars, I felt my life span shorten. When I finally reported for duty, I was greeted by a Sgt. Major who was so anal, that rumor had it that he’d burned the hair off his own head below the ‘bowl line’, just so that he’d never appear to need a haircut. I can only imagine what he thought of me, now travelling in a sea-sucker suit and looking like something out of a Bogart movie.

Two weeks. That’s how long it took them to brief me and to make connections for me to fly up to Vientiane. The Army thought I didn’t know where I was going. However, I’d been stationed at Fort Meyer, Virginia, which is adjacent to the Pentagon. There was a Major in my French class who had already been to Laos, and he was headed there again, armed with his new command of French. Most of the senior Lao officer corps, and in fact anyone with a modicum of education there, spoke French. Major C••••• got me aside one day and said, “I’ve seen your orders, Bob, and you’re not going to Thailand.” I’d asked him how he knew, and he told me the code for Laos was on my orders. I walked over to the Pentagon myself, and, sure enough, my orders said “...Thailand, with Duty Station, Project 404” – the code number for covert operations in Laos. I strode over to the Pentagon myself, crossing under 395 through a tunnel connecting it to Fort Myer. I got to see my orders for myself and there was no mistaking it. Sometime during the following year the Washington Post did an article exposing Project 404 for all the world to see, but at the time the Major pointed it out to me, it was an unknown destination.

In spite of my Top Secret clearance, I had gotten my Dad alone before I left and cryptically told him that if I didn't return, don't look for my remains in Thailand – go north. I made him promise to tell no one, especially my Mom. She was worried enough, with my brother and I both headed to war within two weeks of one another, and in fact, my truest friend, David, was dating our older sister and he was going over at the same time, so it was bound to be a stressful year for our family no matter what.

My two weeks in Bangkok were not without entertainment. There were delights of a sort to be had by men in Thailand that couldn't be had so readily elsewhere. Bangkok abounded with brothels of all sorts. There wasn't a cab driver in town who couldn't take you to his favorite place. Not that they frequented such establishments, mind you, it was more that they were connected to them. Like tour bus drivers at a gift shop, cabbies received a small bonus for delivering Americans to these places. The typical scenario was the massage parlor. There were often thirty or more young ladies, each wearing white shorts and a number on her little blue smock. They waited patiently all day on little carpeted steps, akin to bleachers, behind a two-way mirror. Making a choice was difficult because they were all so exceedingly beautiful, but once chosen, the little darling would look at you as if to say, "You chose me above all the rest, and for that honor I am grateful." I don't know if it was very honorable, but I do know that it ensured a girl's survival with her employer. In fact, a man need only ask the price, and he could take his masseuse home with him for the evening.

After nearly two weeks of briefings and processing by day, and exploring the steamy city of Bangkok by night, I was anxious to get to my real job. One night I decided to go to see the floor show at the NCO club. It was on the ninth floor of a hotel across town. I took my chances in another kamikaze cab and arrived there around seven in the evening. There was a large cul-de-sac about 30 yards from the entrance to the hotel. It was a typical Bangkok building, festooned with gecko lizards and insects on the walls all around the lights in the early evening, but then later on only the bloated geckos would remain. It was Thailand's answer to the bug light.

There was a floor show band whose first number must have been called 'testing' because that's what the little man kept singing into the mike. I remember a comedian coming out and singing "I hold my pants up with a piece of twine" sung to the tune of "I'll walk the line' by Johnny

Cash. It ended with the phrase, "Because you're mine, I'll cut the twine." I was sitting at the bar nursing a scotch, when a British sailor sitting next to me turned and said, "You bloody Yanks!" I said, "Excuse me?" He repeated his greeting and went on to denigrate anything American. Insulted, I pointed out that he was in an American club, drinking American booze, listening to American comedians telling American jokes, and that if it hadn't been for us, he'd be speaking German! Scotch will do that to you.

Well, this could only go two ways. Either I'd be slugging it out with a bunch of drunken sailors, or I'd be getting drunk with them. The big guy looked at my face for a long, tense moment, and then burst out laughing, saying "You're alright, Yank!" He clapped me on the back and signaled his mates and we proceeded to order rounds of beer that kept coming for what seems to have been several hours. By the time I got outside it was late, the geckos were stuffed, the insects were all gone (inside the geckos) and most of the cabs were gone as well. I got to the curb of the cul-de-sac, and only then realized that I'd spent all my money trying to keep up with the Brits. I was in a bit of pickle. I needed to get to my hotel across town but had no money, options or ideas, and to make matters worse, I now noticed a pounding in my head akin to hearing one's own pulse through a stethoscope. Being in the dank night air of Bangkok after several hours in the air conditioned deep freeze of the club, only served to make matters worse. I sat on the curb trying to make my head stop pounding and tried to focus on a solution.

It was then that I felt a soft little hand gently rest on my shoulder like a fallen leaf. I turned my face up to see a little angel standing over me. She was a lovely child. Her long wispy black hair grazed her face in the warm breeze. Dressed in a loose white blouse, black silk pants and sandals, there was an air about her and a look in her eyes that belied her youthful appearance. This was a child who had seen much. It was hard to tell, but my guess is that she may have been twelve or thirteen years old. She was as fragrant as the cut flowers she sold on a circular wicker tray. The flower girl spoke, "What wrong?" she asked. I told her in language that was less coherent than her own, that I was broke and needed to get back to the Capitol Hotel. She smiled at me as if she were my guardian angel. I never saw where he came from, but somehow there was a cab at my feet, and the little flower girl was talking to him and giving him money. I was aware of being helped into the cab, and my little benefactor was whispering, "You go home now." I watched her as we pulled

away, still not sure whether I was dreaming or awake. Bangkok was not a city for an American to be wandering around in - broke, and in less than full control of his faculties. She'd done me a real favor.

When I awoke the next morning, I remembered her face. I was so grateful for her kindness that I decided to go back that night and square my debt with her. But that was not to be. My orders came that morning, and I was off on a series of Air America flights that eventually took me over the Mekong and onto the tarmac at Vientiane airport in Laos. I had to put thoughts of my little flower girl aside for now. I had been trying to picture what this place would look like for several months, ever since Maj. C••••• first told me about my orders. When I'd joined the Army I didn't even know where Vietnam was, and now I was in Laos at a latitude above the DMZ in Vietnam. I knew it might be the last place I'd live on earth, so I was more than curious as to how it would look and feel.

The odd thing is that I never got any of it right. First of all, I never counted on the sense of smell being one of the defining factors in my impression of the place. Not that everything smelled bad necessarily, it just smelled different. I could not of imagined the mirror-like reflections from the rice paddies. Laos was also sunnier than I had imagined. I came from Philadelphia, so I knew all about heat and humidity. Philly can be awful in summer. But Laos was so sunny in fact, that it was blindingly bright. The Army flew me up to northern Thailand to a U.S. Air Force base in Udorn. The last leg of my odyssey was flown in an old single engine plane, one of those remarkable acquisitions belonging to Air America, the CIA's private 'airline.' It reeked of fuel and oil. It was a flimsy old crate, with the cylinders all arranged in a circle behind the propeller. It had cheap doors held closed with a simple handle, and opaque plastic windows like an old British sports car. Air America flew anything that would stay in the air. Inside the plane it had been airless and steamy. Outside the plane it was just plain hot. Laos was a tropical incubator.

A black man in his thirties came walking toward me. He was cool looking, nattily dressed, and obviously American. He wore a crisp white shirt with a stylish tie, neatly pressed slacks, and well polished burgundy wing-tipped cordovan shoes. "You must be the new guy," he said, shaking my hand. He was a sharp, self-confident guy, with city big elan and a slight southern accent. He introduced himself as a staff Sergeant with DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) and told me he had a

jeep ready to take me to 'the compound'. I asked him my most important question, "Is this a combat zone?" "Oh, yes, it is," came the reply. On the ride to the compound I told him I wanted to keep my brother from going to Vietnam. When we arrived at the compound, he set me up with a telephone call that patched me through Hawaii to the Pentagon.

It only took about ten minutes to alter the circumstances that might take my brother's life. I had seen the movie about the Sullivan Brothers when I was kid. The five Sullivan Brothers were lost when the ship to which all five were assigned, USS Juneau (CL-52) was sunk on 13 November 1942. Stories of a "Sullivan Act" in connection with family members serving in the same ship or unit are a popular myth. Although proposed after the death of the five Sullivan Brothers, no "Sullivan Act" was ever enacted by Congress related to family members serving together. Similarly, no President has ever issued any executive order forbidding assignment of family members to the same ship or unit. I didn't know whether the law existed or not, but I was pretty sure that Army policy would not favor placing two brothers into a combat zone at the same time. The guy on the other end of the line at the Pentagon assured me that they would change my brother's orders immediately, and they did. I was worried that the two-week delay in Thailand might have meant that my brother already shipped over. I knew it would be harder to get this done if he was already in country and assigned to a unit. My brother never knew why, but his orders were changed just before he was to leave California for the Nam. John called home to say good-bye just before boarding his plane to Vietnam. My parents told him that the Pentagon had called, and that he was not to get on the plane because his orders had been changed. John told this to the MPs, but they were not buying it (for obvious reasons). But shortly afterward, they were able to verify the change in orders, and His unit went to Vietnam without him, and my brother went to Korea. There was no time to weigh my options and there was no way to contact my brother to let him know my intentions. I loved my brother and didn't want anything to happen to him. It was no more complicated than that. It was a long shot, anyway, and the Army did not have to comply with my request. I knew I'd be on the ground and he'd be in the air, and all things being equal I had to have the better chance of survival.

How true that was became all too clear around the middle of our tours of duty. Nixon invaded Cambodia on April 30th, 1970. The opposing forces were shooting helicopters out of the

sky with anti-aircraft missiles designed to hit B-52s. It was like shooting a parakeet with a shotgun. We lost a lot of choppers that year. My parents were relieved. I was elated, and I treasured that little secret until I got home. Then on May 4th four college students were gunned down during a protest rally on the Campus of Kent State College, Ohio. We didn't find out until the next issue of Time magazine arrived where we were, and every soldier among us was disgusted by the news. It was bad enough that some idiot had issued those troops live ammunition, but the fact that it was locked and loaded and used against American college kids filled us all with contempt. Things were getting out of control. My world was even more bizarre.

Laos was like a wild-west show. I did intelligence briefings every morning and partied at night. I never went anywhere without carrying a concealed weapon. I carried a switchblade knife in my back pocket and wore a pistol in a holster at the small of my back. It was a cut down 410 shotgun which held one shell in the chamber (with two in my pockets). It had been modified to be held with a pistol grip and resembled a German Luger. The climate was humid and hot, and we all wore our shirts out over our belts to stay cool, so wearing a holster turned on its side worked well to keep the little blunderbuss out of sight. I got to go up into the jungle with some Special Forces buddies now and then, carrying a WWII carbine that had been converted to semi-automatic (an M-2). It could take a 30 round banana clip, and was heavier, but more reliable than an M-16. We flew courier flights with Air America, carrying 'safe-hands' materials (things that couldn't go by radio) to distant field sites up near China and down near Cambodia. Sometimes I flew in C-47s just like the one on the tarmac in the movie, Casablanca. They had twin engines and a little wheel in the back where they rested on their tail. USAID used them for rice drops, among other things. But most of the time I flew in little single engine planes called 'helios'. I guess they got that nickname because they land and take off with very little runway. I was not a pilot but always rode in the co-pilot seat on those trips. We were under direct orders to burn the materials we carried in the event that we were shot down, before leaving the crash site (assuming we'd survived the crash). I carried a concealed weapon on those trips as well.

We were under orders from the American Ambassador himself not to carry weapons in town, but I figured those orders didn't make sense since every enemy we had in the Vietnam War had an embassy in town along with us. Vientiane was a 'neutral' zone where the enemy came for

'R&R'. It was strange to see guys with communist rifles (AK-47s) and insignia shopping at the morning market with us. You never knew who was on which side. They had their nightclubs that they frequented, and we had ours. Everyone tried to stay out of each other's way while we were in town. We Americans were supposed to be U.S. AID personnel, not military, so we had to look and act like civilians. It could often be more dangerous for us in town than in the jungle. There were incidents now and then – bloody ones – and yet somehow the danger made it seem more exciting.

In retrospect, I am saddened by the thought that what seemed to me an adventure really had larger implications than I'd realized at the time. I am not proud to admit that I was so uninformed. I reported on the bombing campaign and the 'enemy order of battle', but I really had no concept of what the U.S. was doing to Laos as a country. Since a great portion of the meandering Ho Chi Minh trail ran through Laos, the justification for our bombing campaign lay largely in our efforts to interdict the flow of arms into South Vietnam. However, while I've been home for nearly forty years and my part in the war has faded into distant memory, the people of Laos still live with the results of our bombing campaign. We used cluster bombs, horrendous things that burst above ground and send out hundreds of little bomblets to imbed themselves in the ground over a wide area. By definition these are anti-personnel weapons and they can remain in the ground for decades. There are still thousands of these bombs buried in the lands of Laos, and while other international relief agencies have tried for years to address the problem, the U.S. government has done little if anything to even acknowledge its responsibility for having dropped the bombs there in the first place. We were there. We did it. We should fix it. Every year there are incidents of innocent civilians – often children - being maimed and killed. The war never ends for them.

Six months into my tour of duty I was due for a little R&R myself. Some guys went to Australia, and although that sounded like fun, I had another agenda. I wanted to go back to Bangkok and find my little flower girl. When my number came up for a break, I took the opportunity to spend the week in Bangkok. I went with a buddy named Arnie. He was a funny guy. We stopped in a big nightclub for a drink and found that we were the only people in the place. I guess it was early in the evening. There was a band of young Thai guys up on the stage. I don't know why, but apparently that song was popular back then, because all they sang was 'testing'

into the mikes. Arnie and I had one drink each, but when we got up to leave, they brought us a bill that included a charge for a 'floor show'. We both went ballistic, and when we refused to pay the exorbitant bill it looked like we were in for a fight. We were confronted with eight little guys, who looked like extras in a ninja movie. But before any Kung Fu exhibitions could commence, cooler heads prevailed, and the manager agreed to adjust the bill. We agreed to pay the drink tab and avoided a potentially ugly incident. As we walked down the sidewalk, Arnie angrily stamped his foot in what turned out to be wet cement. It went all over both of us, so we went back to our hotel to get cleaned up.

Afterward, I went on alone to the hotel to look for the flower girl. No one had seen her. . It had been six months now, and there was no telling where she'd gone. I went back three nights in a row looking for her, but I was having difficulty finding anyone who even knew her. Finally, one cab driver told me that he thought he knew her, and that the girl's mother had been very ill, and that she'd not been around for quite some time. I was disappointed to say the least, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was going to find her. Then, on the last night before my leave was up, I tried again.

When I stepped from the cab, I could hardly believe my eyes. There she was with her little wicker tray, festooned with all manner of brightly colored flowers. They were arranged in a fan-like circle about the tray. I watched her negotiate with an American G.I. for a moment, as I waited unnoticed about ten feet away. When the transaction was completed, she was alone again, and she busied herself with the arrangement once more. As I approached her, she automatically asked, "You want to buy flower?" She wasn't paying much attention to me, as she tried to show me various individual flowers that might induce a sale. I asked her how much for everything on the tray? She said, "You crazy!" I asked again, "How much for everything – the tray, too?" She rolled her eyes up and to the left, as if there were an adding machine above her on that side. She quoted me a price and I immediately counted out the appropriate amount and handed it to her. She looked at my hands and received the money as if it were an uncontrollable reflex. Then she looked at me briefly but said nothing, as if trying to comprehend what was happening. She handed me the entire tray of flowers. I held it up to my nose and breathed in the confusing aroma of a wide variety of flora, paused, smiled and handed it back to her. I said, "I bought this for you. It's a

present. You understand, present?" "You keep, now", I said, "you sell again." I had her going now. Obviously, I was a mental case.

I said, "Do you remember me?" I explained to her that she had helped me when I was really in a bad way, and that I'd come to repay her. A slowly dawning light of recognition began to shine in her eyes. Now she proceeded to babble. She explained how her mother had been ill, and that she'd not been able to come to work, and that they were low on money now. She had to work tonight because they were completely broke, but she was worried about leaving her mother alone. I was overjoyed at having found her, and especially pleased that it was at a time when she needed me. But what happened next, was a surprise to us both.

I had known quite a few North Vietnamese who'd been expatriated for religious reasons when the communists took over. They were mostly Catholics and some Buddhists. They lived in Vientiane, and some of the ladies had taken to us Americans. We were occasionally briefed by the CIA station chief to avoid these women, as they might be spies. That from a man who called them "VietManese." We didn't worry much about it. They were often lovely and intelligent women. They had little interest in politics and were much more concerned with everyday personal survival. I'd met one named Lily. She didn't speak English, only French. She was about thirty years old. We'd really taken a liking to each other, and I even lived with her for a while. Her fractured French was not much different than the broken English we heard everywhere. She'd told me we would lose this war, not because the North Vietnamese were stronger, but because they knew what they were fighting for, and we didn't. We'd stopped seeing each other, but before we broke up Lily had given me a little Buddhist symbol on a gold chain, which I now wore constantly. When In Rome..., I figured. It had been visible through my partially unbuttoned shirt, and the flower girl had focused her now misty eyes on it.

The girl, herself a petite and fragrant flower, had taken my little symbol in her hand and had begun to cry. She looked at me as she allowed the icon to rest gently in her hand, and asked in language easy enough to understand, if I knew what it meant. I told her that it had been given to me by a friend, but that all I knew was that it had something to do with the Buddha. The little girl struggled to explain that there are many Buddhist symbols, each with their own significance. I admired her efforts but spoke no Thai, other than hello. She was getting frustrated and spoke

through an emotion choked voice, half laughing and half crying. She was finally able to make me understand that this particular symbol was representative of friends re-uniting. Until that moment, I was unaware that Lily had given it to me in hopes of us getting back together, but now the little talisman had taken on a life of its own.

What had begun as a simple act of kindness in return for an unsolicited favor had become a deeply religious moment for her, and one of the most moving experiences of my life. My eyes welled with tears as I held her in my arms and blinked at the night sky. Stepping back, I looked at her face and touched her cheek with my fingertips. As I gently raised her little face, our eyes made true contact for the first and last time. The silence spoke volumes as we looked through the windows of each other's soul. In a world gone mad, there was a moment of absolute spirituality and clarity. Neither of us could speak, and yet what would we have said? No words could have transcended the moment. I lingered, and then, my mission fulfilled, I stepped into a waiting cab and watched her slowly turn away.

What a world this would be if we could all learn to love one another's children. She was a child of that world who taught me about love. I never knew her name. She will forever be, The Flower Girl.