

A shot to the Heart

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by

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The southern tip of Vietnam is a flat, wet, sparsely-populated stretch, looking like a desert, compared to the lush North. It held little economic or strategic consequence, and was, for the most part, left to the enemy. I was therefore surprised when over breakfast the Navy Captain I was on loan to, Captain Nowe, told me our agenda included a trip into that area for a "top secret" meeting. "Top secret" usually meant a security briefing by the CIA.

Our morning tour of the Captain's flotilla was uneventful, except for some enemy gun fire while on approach to pick up an ill sailor off one of the river patrol boats. The Captain was a pretty gutsy guy for his age and rank. A few bullets coming our way didn't seem to bother him. He was more concerned for the ill sailor.

I refueled at Cantho, and headed southwest, relying on the Captain's maps and directions to guide us to a small village. It looked like any other -- a few huts perched on an island of mud, surrounded by a checkerboard of rice paddies stretching for miles. It didn't look like a homebase for CIA agents. I knew of agents having to live in some holes, but I found it hard to believe they'd have any stationed out here.

About 200 feet west of the village, built up in the corner of a rice paddy, was a ten-foot square of mud, used as a landing pad. I set the helicopter down gently, and hesitated briefly before shutting it down to make sure we weren't going to sink.

"This place gives me the creeps," I volunteered. "I don't like sitting still down this part of the country."

"Naval intelligence says we're perfectly safe here," the Captain rebutted. "Stay airborne if you like."

"Can't afford the fuel," I replied. "If anything happens, I'll take off. You crawl out to the middle of a rice paddy. I'll come down and pick you up."

A broad smile broke across the Captain's face as he gave me a final glance, slid off the seat, and stepped onto the dried mud. He stuck his briefcase under his arm and headed straight for the village, over the zig-zag path of levees.

Knowing we were far from base camp, beyond radio contact, and right in the middle of enemy-controlled territory gave me the jitters, Naval intelligence or no. "The VC could be zeroing in on me with their mortars right this second." I looked around the mud slab for signs of target practice, but saw none. The village, in fact, showed no signs of even being in the war. The Province Chief must live here. Funny how his village never gets bombed or harassed by the enemy. There were no trees close by to hide behind, so unless someone burrowed up out of the middle of a rice paddy, which wasn't out of the question, my only exposure was from the village itself. I sat in the chopper and watched the village.

The only movement noticeable was the pecking of three orange chickens. The only sign of human life was an adult female standing motionless in the doorway of a hut. For a good twenty minutes we both remained motionless, staring in each other's direction. The stillness was broken by the sudden appearance of a young girl at the woman's side. Her daughter, I presumed. She, too, stood motionless, looking my way. We all stared.

I was jolted from my sleepy trance by the movement of the girl, straight out from the doorway of the hut, in my direction. The mother remained motionless. Funny, I didn't see either turn toward each other as if they were conversing. And I couldn't imagine a young girl, perhaps four or five years old, heading out into the rice paddies on her own initiative. A chill ran down my back.

The young girl was clothed in a red striped dress. Her feet were bare, and her long black hair

hung naturally around her cheeks. Her face was empty of expression. She zigzagged her way over the levees in my direction, staring at the path ahead, occasionally glancing at me for her bearing. She walked with a steady, brisk pace, and with her left arm folded behind her back.

Scenes from my "in country" orientation ten months earlier whirled through my head. "Don't trust children," I was told. "They've been known to have bombs strapped to them. Sacrificial lambs, used to take out a helicopter and its pilot." Chills again ran down my back. I got out of my helicopter, zipped up my flak jacket, and crouched down to take a low profile.

I could feel my heart pounding. I removed my sunglasses and wiped my forehead, but never took my eyes off the girl. "What's happening here," I wondered. The woman was still motionless in the doorway. The girl continued her trek, her left arm still tucked behind her. I squeezed my left elbow to my side, feeling the pistol slung under my armpit, then glanced quickly at my rifle hanging over the back of my seat. "God, when's the last time I cleaned those things."

With every step the girl took, my senses grew keener. The girl made a turn on one of the levees, but I couldn't see her back, only the side of her left arm, which was still wrapped around her. I couldn't see anything strapped to her, but she could still be carrying a hand grenade. My mind continued to whirl.

"Why is this girl coming out to me? What is she doing?" I couldn't fathom a positive answer. But I couldn't believe a girl so young and innocent was a walking booby trap, either.

She made the final zag and turned onto the narrow levee that stretched out before me for some sixty feet. I could see her face clearly now. Her head was tilted down, but her eyes were straight ahead, hanging just below her eyebrows, and looking directly at me. Her facial expression showed no tension, no anxiety, and her gait was steady.

She was thirty feet away. I decided the mother was the key. If the mother flinched, I would fire

at the girl's feet, roll over to the edge of the paddy, and get ready for an explosion.

The mother didn't move.

"A sign of anything metal on the girl and I'm leaping directly into the rice paddy beside me. She can have my helicopter."

As she came closer, I could see dimples at twenty feet. Her eyes danced up and down, too shy to remain fixed on mine. A warning shot would certainly frighten her away, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. She was too cute, too sweet. I was drawn in by her innocent face.

When she was ten steps away, I stood up and reached into the cockpit. I crouched down again, unsnapped the case, and aimed. She stopped five feet in front of me, pausing a moment, and just stared. Suddenly, her right hand moved up to the side of her face, her fingers pressed against her forehead. She had come to give me a salute. I squeezed off a picture.

Her hand fell back to her side, she spun around, and started back toward the hut. Her left arm was still folded behind her. The half-clinched fist resting against the small of her back was empty.

The release of anxiety made me lightheaded. I reached out onto the mud to steady myself. Through watery, squinted eyes I watched her retreat. She never looked back. She never knew the impact of her visit. She did not see the flood of emotion, from a young Army officer, who had never been so honored.