



BJ's Vietnam Story

by Jim Perkins

We walked over planks of rough wood rotted by time. The water was stagnant and fowl as something dead. There were wooden stakes driven deep into the water and mud and tied where they crossed. The long rotted planks were laid across these wooden stakes which made a support for them. They went on for what seemed to be miles. Little bungalows, one after another, all with a common wall and a cloth across the door. The stagnant water was putrid. How could they live like this? How could they not live like this!? Time for some more hippies to experience something.

We arrived finally. He entered first showing custom so we would not be embarrassed. Off went the shoes and so did ours. He had two pretty little girls and a very nice and humble wife. They offered us food, in the form of rice and we ate. The beds were woven mats of some flimsy reed. During the waking hours they were rolled up and during the night they were unrolled. There were a couple of shelves and a cabinet of which he and his wife was quite pleased. How do people have so little? How could others have so much? The world is weird sometimes, however, they were there and we did better...no more to be said.

You may never touch one of these people on the head, not good. Remember, the higher on the body supposedly the better...had to guard that. He wore a Buddha in a plastic box around his neck. He showed us where he took a hit in the leg mentioning proudly how the bullet had passed through giving the credit to the little plastic figure in the little plastic box. (All the Thais and mercs had em...) Figure. There is no understanding or figuring how he and his family survived in the stink and filth, or how they lived in the little six by eight foot bungalow just three feet across from the others...all with a common wall. I hope I may never see such again. It's certain I haven't forgotten.

In the north you knew you were looking for downed aircraft and it was close in, otherwise it wouldn't be SAR (Search And Rescue). ...heavily armed and known for their fierceness. A mini-gun was mounted on a post in the bay door of the fuselage, 4800 rounds per minute. Sometimes aft of the pilot was a 20mm cannon...I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of those. They were large choppers but, could and often would inflict severe damage to any threat. ...often came in shot up. There were those that didn't return. You always wanted to think they had been attached/detached somewhere in the south. I remember a fair amount about these happenings but, sometimes it's better left for awhile.

Any G.I. can tell you how stupid it feels to buy a baby chick and throw it to an alligator that hadn't moved since the Japanese surrendered. It seems this little guy got the idea if he could put up a wrought iron fence around an alligator, feed it everyday, keep it wet and happy, he could make a lot of money selling baby chickens to drunk G.I.s that would just love to see a baby chicken between those massive yellow teeth. What a HOOT! Well, you know when someone is drunk, their attention span is nil, so, they'd watch about two minutes then say, "Piss on it.", and try to walk away. The little man then retrieved the chick. Then, this wonderful smell would stop you cause anybody drunk had not eaten in hours. This little fellow also knew this and sold what he called sweet and sour pork on a stick. He would cook this stuff on a little rusty hibachi under a big yellow umbrella rain or shine, day or night. It tasted so good and

when you're drunk and hungrier than twelve hounds you'd buy a whole handful and start eating like there was no tomorrow. But, who cared?

I'm sure more money changed there than the market itself. I would also bet pig meat is not as stringy nor covered with enough spices to disguise that difference. I'd even bet that pig swung from branches and barked like a dog until they trapped it, knocked it in the head, skinned it and cut off that long, skinny, curly, furry little tail. There wasn't no squeal in that pig. I don't know which is worst, telling somebody you've handled a monkey or eat one!

When you're on the line all your mail to the "World" was free, all you had to do was write, "FREE" and underline it twice. For as fast as it traveled I would just as soon paid full first class postage. Your mail could be opened and read and censored at any time. "Mail Call", what magic and music and lightness of mood it brought. That one great thing so craved by almost everyone. Those wonderful bright orange nylon bags! They could change a mood one way or the other in a heartbeat.

No one can start to realize how much something taken for granted in the World, can do when you're trapped so far away. You never again take music, family pictures, or magazines or any simple pleasures of home for granted. Most cherished on the line was mail. Mail...So precious it seemed to be carried by angels to us waiting little people, waiting for any piece of the real world that could take us back. Mail was so much like gold it was often stolen, especially if it was a box or magazines or newspapers. I know most people will never, realize what one piece of mail, ONE, even the crap junk mail or a bill, would do for the spirits of a soul so far from home. Take my advice and always understand the hurt of anyone who took their time to keep your time available to you. As much as mail was valued and raised morale, no one made it possible in speeding it up for us. It took mail approximately two or three weeks to get to where we were, or had been. First the U.S. Post Office...then every military stop in between...then to us by chopper. All of this mail processed where ever it landed each and every time. I was sitting at my parents house long after Vietnam had ended when the postman arrived. When I retrieved the mail, there in my hands was a letter I had written to my mom years earlier! It was worn, torn, and probably laid in some office behind a desk or in a storage area all that time. A letter that old, can you imagine? Think...what if that had been my last? Thank heaven it wasn't!

I remember a period while I was gone that no mail came my way. Occasionally a letter from my mom, but not a thing, not a message or note from the girl I married had come my way. I had called for four months. The TELEX operator always came back with the same news, "We can't get any answer from that number." That's because she had found a new game. I varied the hours that I called just hoping she would get the call in the middle of the night. Then, one night, weak and waiting, I heard the TELEX operator call my name. She had finally managed to get an answer. My body was hot from anticipation and my mind was fighting back strong emotions. I knew what was going on but didn't want to acknowledge it. The conversation was short but seemed like hours. It was quiet as church. Then the words I began to hear between the sobs on the other end of the line were, "I want a divorce." Thirteen thousand miles from home with no one but myself to keep me going and this is what I hear! I almost fell over from disbelief. I managed to talk for awhile but cut it short. Along with that misery and pain of knowing I wanted to be anywhere but There, I realized war is not hell, it's Hurt, the worst hurt anyone could ever imagine and live with! I lived through it! It was not anything I enjoyed but, I endured! I may be a better person, who knows? Maybe just a more experienced one.

We did.....some damage to vessels floating off shore.. The kind manned by fanatics wanting to leave this world quickly so they could see their ancestors.sometimes you'd see long wooden poles sticking straight out of the water fifteen or twenty feet. These poles had dark brown fish nets attached at the top. How in the world those things floated sticking straight out of the water I never knew! There were big glass

balls approximately one foot in diameter attached at various places on the nets and poles. They were used as floats that kept these nets just so many feet below the surface, enough to allow fish to enter the nets. It was something to be out and see a little Vietnamese fishing from a long wooden dug-out canoe! These canoes had two long poles attached perpendicular at each end, there was then attached a lighter pole across the two for balance so it wouldn't swamp.

You could always count on lots of smiles and friendly hand gestures and maybe a couple kowtows while passing one of these fisherman. HOWEVER, Suddenly,..... canoe surfing the wave like a rocket through a pipeline! What a hoot!! This always brought on some fierce fist shaking, accompanied by some hundred mile an hour gibberish I'm convinced was a Vietnamese fisherman's way of questioning our heritage. It wasn't funny but, when you stop and think about a very thin, brown Vietnamese fisherman, shaking his fist and cussing while being slung around in the water like he was on a carnival ride you couldn't help but roll, laughing! Sorry, but that's just the way it was. I certainly wished him no harm. It did make for some great entertainment, however. It could have been sea snakes instead.

Vietnamese patrol boats came often early in my tour but soon figured out there was no earthly future in the venture. It was kind of like letting the big dog play with a mangled groundhog before you took it and threw it in a hole. It took some very determined or very cranked up Vietnamese to try a maneuver like that. The number lessened as our experience in combat became greater. This impressed the Vietnamese enough to keep off our tail.

There were jet fighters to keep up with also. They had many successful "Alpha-strikes" and they fought the good fight. Some, did not return no matter what the effort. We diligently searched for one downed pilot with the promise of an unopened bottle of brandy had we spotted him. He was never found as I know of. I wonder where he is today. Is he with family or is his name written on some wall somewhere? We picked pilots out off the sea

Danger is suspenseful and can be exciting and sometimes addicting. It was the uncertainty that made the heart beat rise. One bloody scrape with "The Danger of the Closest Kind" and suspense and addiction and uncertainty fly out the hind-end while it puckers up, tucks its tail, and rolls over on its belly in submission.

As Haiphong and Hanoi burned, I watched not really knowing that I was seeing something that not many could talk about. Very few have seen this. The country as far left to as far right as a person's eye could see was burning. Orange, kind of like the world's night light. When bombs and shells hit, and they hit hard, you could feel the heat and the push from the explosions. You could feel it on your stomach. Immediately following the explosion the force would turn back and pull toward the hit, another forward thrust came after that. Night after night this came and night after night I watched. ...shelled right in Haiphong just because they would not stop supplying the north while we were trying to stop them....

These were dangerous times....north of the DMZ there was no rescue once the heat started. You had to go in force and stay that way. Some nights the sky would light up in a mini-second. You could never tell when it would happen...there was seldom notice of these kinds of nights. ...starshell that could light up the sky like daytime. Then hell broke loose. One explosion, two, three...the fifth one was the tracer. If you were deaf enough or stupid enough you could stay and maybe get a glimpse of what real power could be. The sky would be lit up for long periods, then silence, then the night would light up from so many tracers, like long hot orange fierce and fast arcs of fire. Sorry Charlie... Should we have dropped the bomb? Everything else we had done so far was being taken as wrong. You have got to be in that situation to call a shot like that. What a time. All seemed forsaken. Try it sometime.

Nights could be an escape. It could get so dark on a starless night that only a memory of what your hand looked like served as a measure. This could be a good time alone or a dangerous time... always too dark to tell anything. After a half hour or so when you found a pretty good roost your eyes became acclimated as much as they were going to. You could sit and rest and no one would really know you were around. They couldn't see you...No smoking was a good idea in the open due to the easy target it made of your head.

He was always talking about Vietnam and how he wanted to really get in country and check things out. He signed the chit, was approved and that was the last I saw of him. Robert Pryor, E3, undesignated, the BEST friend and a friend to many died there in Vietnam. So here's to Robert Pryor and all the D*** work we did cussin' and fussin' and the whole skinny. There's probably more who will read this and remember Pryor, so now you know. Check the wall, he's there. The next month I was there to see how it was....Then the year after that.....Then home....

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