

# Epiphany in Cholon

a short story by Tony Peluso, author of *Waggoners Gap* and *Archangel of Sedona*

In mid-January of 1969, I signed an extension to my nearly completed tour of duty in the Republic of Vietnam. I had orders to serve as cadre at the Advanced Infantry Training Brigade in Louisiana. If you wanted to give the United States an enema, Tigerland at Fort Polk was the ideal site to insert the syringe.

Since I was not a drill sergeant, the job of pushing troops from the barracks to training sites would be even worse than the life of a trainee. At least the drill sergeants got to teach the new guys useful combat and survival skills.

The trainee experience bit the big one. I didn't want to relive it—even from the perspective of a company NCO. Not one of my infantry-trained comrades thought it unwise for me to stay in a combat zone, rather than return to Fort Polk.

When I extended—with my new buck sergeant chevrons—the command ordered me to serve another 90 days with the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) at Camp Radcliff, near the Vietnamese village of An Khe. Duty at An Khe meant dodging rocket and mortar attacks, evading the occasional sniper, and repelling the rare probe of our perimeter by suicidal sappers. Despite these threats, it was safer at Camp Radcliff than any other 173rd Airborne base camp, forward firing base, lager, field operation, or combat mission—where the enemy attacked far more frequently. Staying in my cushy billet at An Khe was a no-brainer.

The first seven weeks of my extension passed without much of note happening—but in Vietnam, a day filled with tedium and monotony could be a good thing. Mission aside, when it got exciting, people died, friends bled out, explosions tore bodies asunder,

and soldiers went home maimed and wounded.

Since the Army managed its forces by mandating a one-year tour, guys got jumpy as their date for expected return from overseas (DEROS) neared. Only lifers, like me, or men desperate for an early discharge ever extended. The wise enlisted men considered an extension to be a fool's bet with a lot of risk and no discernable return.

In the third week of March, I took a detail of four enlisted men to Saigon under the command of a Finance Corps lieutenant. Our job required us to pick up cash, in the form of Military Pay Certificates, to pay our troopers at the end of the month.

Other than the village bars and the basecamp PX, there wasn't much need to spend money at An Khe. Even with jump pay and combat pay, the average enlisted soldier received between \$200 and \$300 a month. The Brigade payroll exceeded one million. Because the primary denomination was a \$20 bill, we could cram a million dollars into a standard-issue duffle bag.

Though there wasn't much to buy in and around the base camps and lagers, payday meant a big morale boost for the paratroopers. Having a few bucks in one's pocket could mean a few beers in camp, 30 minutes of passion with a cute little Annamese girl at the Saigon Bar in An Khe Village, a Seiko digital watch or Nikon camera from the PX, or cash for poker games during brief respites from humping a ruck in the boonies.

The Brigade typically assigned an officer, an NCO—in this case, me—and four enlisted men to pick up the cash, guard it, shepherd it through the Air Force transit system, and deliver it back to the Brigade finance officer. Unit pay officers would pick up the funds at An Khe, and then distribute them to the troops in their various locales on

payday.

The Army compound at Ton Son Nhut Air Force Base stored the money. The Army staff in Saigon provided a date certain at the end of the third week of each month for the Brigade to pick up the cash. The Support Battalion sent the detail four days before that. We'd pick the money up on the designated day at the appointed hour, then immediately transport it from Saigon to An Khe.

We jumped on the opportunity to take a little rest and relaxation in Saigon. Instead of our normal tedious duties in the Central Highlands, we spent three enjoyable days touring the Jewel of the Orient. The streets swarmed with life. People bargained, cooked, washed, pissed, slept, ate, and drank all over the streets of Saigon. Military aged Vietnamese males, known as cowboys, drove aimlessly around on motor bikes with pretty girls sitting side saddle on the back of their bikes, while the wealthy sped by in their closed cars living a life of indulgence. Mostly we hung out in the bars, flirting with the Grade A bargirls on Tu Do Street, getting drunk, and doing what soldiers do.

Kipling must have been thinking of us when he wrote about soldiers in barracks not being plaster saints. Some of the lewd and lascivious antics on that trip might have tested even Kipling's legendary empathy.

I didn't engage in the really bizarre behavior, but I did witness some of it. I wasn't much of an example. Rather than maintaining any kind of professional distance from my men, I knocked 'em back right alongside them and couldn't have enforced proper Army decorum at gunpoint. Two of my men, Hansen and Fleet, were still assigned to infantry units and would return to combat at the end of the detail. From my undemanding vantage point, I figured as long as they didn't hurt anyone or commit a felony, I could let them

blow off some steam.

One afternoon, Bill Hinton—a hulking, red headed Spec. Four with a barrel chest and a bigger attitude—accompanied me and two bargirls—who filled out their *ao dais* like Hollywood starlets—to a movie theater at Ton Son Nhut Air Force Base. It was a real theater with real air conditioning. While primitive by modern standards, compared to a bed sheet hung from the shit-house wall at An Khe, it was Grumman's Chinese Theater.

We bought iced-cold cans of Coke, Pepsi, and Seven Up from the concession in the front. Bill also bought a box of popcorn that must have been surplus from the Korean War. I tried some and almost broke a tooth.

The four of us found our primitive plastic seats bolted into the concrete floor in the center of the nearly empty theater. After a preview of John Wayne's new movie, *The Green Berets*, the main feature—*Devil's Brigade* about the First Special Service Force—began.

Somewhere in the first half of the movie, Bill opened his box of popcorn and began to munch. He poked his date with his elbow and offered her a taste. After grabbing a handful, she dug into the popcorn with gusto, oblivious to the dangers of consuming food so old and putrid. No accounting for taste.

The film drew me in and I stopped watching Bill and his date until she jumped out of her seat, shrieking. Bill had been holding the box in his lap. Through a hole in the bottom, he'd inserted a personal surprise for her. Bill looked confused at her reaction—she'd handled the item in question without any apparent discomfort the night before. Maybe it was the way that he introduced it into the date that startled her. Presentation

counts for a lot in these matters.

Bill had been a minor league hockey player. He and some of his New York buddies had bragged about the popcorn trick when we discussed our lives back in the World. Up until then, I thought the stories were bullshit, since I had never seen anything so raunchy out west, where I grew up. The reaction of the bargirl to Bill's ribald gesture surprised me. I would have thought that she'd have gotten used to vulgar behavior by young American boys in uniform.

I didn't understand at the time that Vietnamese society viewed the character of prostitutes differently than Americans did. While not considered a top-tier lifestyle, bargirls in Vietnam didn't face hypocritical derision like hookers did in the good old U.S.A. Bill's date sold her sexual favors, but she didn't expect to be treated like a slut in public.

Young and insensitive, I laughed at Bill's lewd shenanigans. The Air Force NCO, who managed the theater, stopped the show, turned on the lights and charged down the aisle.

"What do you fuckers think you're doing in here?" He yelled as he came abreast of our row.

"Who the fuck are you?" Bill asked as he zipped up and then moved menacingly toward the manager.

"Listen, dog face. Take that crap back to Tu Do Street. These guys work nights on the maintenance line. This is their only opportunity to see a movie. They don't need some Army puke fuckin' it up for them," the manager yelled as he gestured at the seven or eight airmen in the theater.

I stepped between Bill and the Air Force NCO. Bill would have cleaned his clock. We didn't need a brawl. I tried to soothe the staff sergeant.

“Look, Sarge, we're sorry that we interrupted the show. We'll keep it down,” I assured him.

“Bullshit! You assholes need to leave. If you don't, I'll call the security police and you can explain it to them.”

I didn't like taking any shit from the Air Force, but I didn't want to spend our time in Saigon in a provost marshal's office. I apologized. We left with our dates without further incident, except my buddy's new nickname became Popcorn Bill.

We were staying at the Tran Loan Hotel in the Cholon District of Saigon—a Grade C flophouse. To us, with its beds, sheets, bathrooms, toilets, showers, and hot water, it was Caesar's Palace. It did have a grungy bar on the rooftop, 13 stories above the street. After 2200 curfew, we'd assemble at the bar, drink some Ba Moi Ba beer, interact with the hotel's bargirls, and watch the helicopters, gunships, and artillery work on the outskirts of the city. It was a light show, the likes of which I have never seen again.

On the night before the scheduled money pick up, I woke up at 0230. I'd had a lot to drink and I was still intoxicated. I heard the unmistakable whump of an exploding 122mm rocket off in the distance. I'd heard plenty of them detonate as they impacted in and around the basecamp at An Khe.

This particular rocket was a terror weapon. Even when fired from a multiple rocket launcher, it was notoriously inaccurate. The Soviets had designed it to be an area denial weapon. In battle, the Russians would fire them by the score, hoping to deprive

their enemy of the secure use of a large piece of the battlefield.

The 122mm rocket carried a 14 to 15 pound shaped charge, which was capable of considerable destructive power. I've seen craters seven or eight feet deep and 10 feet in diameter.

The NVA didn't have anything so sophisticated as a multiple rocket launcher. They just crossed two wooden poles, balanced each rocket in the Y intersection of the poles, and touched it off. They had no idea where—within the rocket's effective range—that it would land.

I got up from bed and went to look out the window of my room on the 11th floor. I watched vacantly, scratching my backside, as a second rocket hit two or three miles away, then a third exploded near the second.

In the next instant, a fourth rocket with 15 pounds of explosives made a direct hit on the hotel's fourth floor. The explosion shattered my window. I hurled back across the room, landing on my ass. While there was glass everywhere, and I thought I had broken my tailbone, I was otherwise unhurt.

I dressed, grabbed my weapon, and stood futilely at port arms at my broken window, posing no threat whatsoever to the NVA who had sent these rockets from the primitive sites 10-12 miles away. The explosion took out the corner of the building and set the fourth and fifth floors on fire.

The center of the hotel was a 12-story light well that we'd now call an atrium. It framed a garish space with peeling paint and rusty metal railings. Thick, black unbreathable smoke began to fill the light well. When I opened the door to my room, I had to slam it shut immediately to avoid the thick plumes and potential suffocation. I did

reopen the door when my men came knocking. They were choking, coughing, and gasping.

Like good paratroopers, my men—and some of their evening guests—assembled in my room as we tried to figure out what to do. The fire and thick smoke had trapped all of us on the 11th floor.

We sprang into action while I thought through our deadly predicament. We filled the tub and sink in the bathroom with water. We soaked the towels and pillowcases and stuffed them around the door to keep the smoke seepage to a minimum. We even cut up the drapes and sheets and tried to weave a rope to climb down. It turned out to be woefully short for the job.

Years earlier, I'd seen a documentary about a fire in a high rise building in Sao Paulo, Brazil. I remember that some of the folks trapped in that blaze threw themselves out of the building, rather than burn in the fire. I feared that might be our fate.

After our escape efforts failed, we waited—as the stench of the burning building grew stronger. Seeing no harm, I distributed some San Miguel Beer that I'd hoarded to take back to An Khe.

After gulping down two beers, Popcorn Bill got up, walked over to my shattered window, and climbed up on the inside sill. For a moment, I worried that he might jump. He gazed down for a long three minutes.

“Sarge,” he reported. “The fifth floor is burning like a bonfire.”

“Any sign of the fire department or emergency crews?” I asked.

“Nothing like that. There's not even much of a crowd down there.”

“We need something to put out that fire!” I said stupidly, stating the obvious.

“If I could fly, I’d go for help,” Bill said, as he turned and winked.

“Isn’t there a fire department in this whole fucking city?” Hansen asked, his voice showing his frustration.

“Wait! I know what to do,” Bill said, as he smiled and turned back toward the window.

Facing outside, Bill unzipped, unlimbered, and urinated out the window. His gesture seemed so absurdly futile that the rest of us broke into laughter so hard that tears rolled out of our eyes.

Three bargirls had accompanied my men into my room. They sat cross-legged on the stripped-down bed, calmly playing some Vietnamese card game. Their detachment from our situation struck me. At first, it irritated me. Did they understand our dire circumstances?

As the men lay on the floor coughing from the thick air and laughing at Bill, one the girls shook her head in disgust, rolled her eyes and said something in Vietnamese. The tone of her voice suggested sarcasm. Nodding their heads, the other two girls agreed with whatever she’d said.

This demonstration of moral superiority from prostitutes bothered me. I grabbed one of the last tepid beers, popped it open, took a slug, and walked over to the women. As I approached, they stopped playing cards and looked at me.

“What’s your problem?” I asked the girl who’d shaken her head. She was very pretty, slim, and sexy. She had long, straight black hair. She had hazel eyes—rare for an

Annamese woman—giving her an exotic beauty. There must have been some French DNA in there somewhere.

“You’re behaving like frightened children,” she said with an accent more French than Vietnamese, looking me straight in the eye. “I thought you were all brave paratroopers.”

The comment stung, all the more painful in its accuracy. Though angry as hell, I couldn’t muster an adequate retort. Rather, I doubled down on the pathetic behavior.

“Well, ma’am,” I rasped in my most acerbic voice, “you can see the smoke in the room. We’re about to be burned to a crisp. You’re telling me that you’re not afraid?”

The Eurasian bargirl looked at me, like a dog owner might look at a puppy that just soiled a valuable rug. She shook her head, looked down, sighed, and looked up at me again.

“If it is my karma to die here, what can I do about it? Why should I make it worse by scurrying around like a terrified old woman?”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

I had my whole life in front of me. I was prepared to cling to it with every fiber and take any risk to preserve it. I would never be content to simply accept a fiery death as preordained.

*Damn, I should never have extended. I could be at Polk right now, getting drunk at the NCO Club. The worst threat there would be the clap from some girl in Leesville.*

“So I guess life’s not as important to you,” I said.

“When do you go home?” the girl asked.

“In a little over a week.”

“Will you be safe at home? Will your enemies bomb your house, attack your city, and kill your family?”

“No, of course not,” I answered, thinking of my parents’ working-class home in Phoenix.

“After you leave, we will still be here. You will be safe. You will have a nice life. You will forget us. We will have to endure this and worse. For you, the war will be over. It will only end for us when we are dead.”

Her words struck me like a sledgehammer. It made no difference to her fate that by that time more than 30,000 of my countrymen had died for her freedom and scores of thousands more had been wounded and maimed.

If we survived the fire, I would go home and pick up my life. All things were possible. Though she was just a year or two older than me, her situation appeared hopeless. She would make her living selling her body to Americans until she died or the war ended. Despite the peace talks in 1969, there appeared to be no real prospect for the end of the war.

I wish I could tell you that we did something heroic to extricate ourselves from the hotel fire. We didn’t. The fire burned itself out without spreading above the sixth floor. At about 0830 that morning, it had abated enough that we simply walked out of the hotel, unharmed.

We linked up with the Lieutenant, who had been missing all night. Turned out, he didn’t stay at the hotel. He didn’t tell us why.

We picked up the money at Ton Son Nhut. We flew back to the basecamp without incident. It was classically anti-climactic.

Years later, I returned to active-duty as a Captain in the Army JAG Corps. In 1975, after more than 56,000 American combat deaths, I watched the fall of South Vietnam from the big screen TV at the Officer's Club at Fort Lee, Virginia. In the weeks that followed, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fled for their lives and for their liberty.

Some got into leaky boats and braved the waters of the South China Sea. Some trekked through miles of Cambodian or Laotian jungle to reach Thailand. Tens of thousands made it to the United States. I've often wondered if the incredibly brave and stoic Eurasian bargirl was among them.

Of *Gunga Din*, Kipling's last lines summarize the meaning of his poem and my epiphany. "Though I've belted you and flayed you, By the livin' Gawd that made you, You're a better man than I am Gunga Din!"

In 1969, in a second rate hotel in Cholon, I learned that for all my Airborne bravado, the pretty Eurasian bargirl was a far more courageous person than I ever could be.