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Homecoming

Claes Tholand

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Homecoming Claes Tholand

Senior Chief Bosun Mate Black drove the PBF “Black Jack” at full throttle down the middle of Danang River. Chief Black had been assigned temporary command of the PBF 21 swift boat after LTJG Robert Fitzgerald had been wounded a few days earlier, when we encountered a large sampan hauling weapons and ammunition downriver to VC fighting near Monkey Mountain. I was TDY from my assigned supply duty at the squadron base near Camp Tien Sha. Shorthanded, the swift boat crews were often augmented by whomever in the command they could grab. Today, I was a deck hand.

Returning from a routine search mission upriver, we were wary of ambush, having been seen earlier by Vietnamese ashore. Observing activity on the water, we slowed to investigate and approached a sampan with men and women aboard. Skipper Fitzgerald ordered the vessel searched when it was seen to be sitting very low in the water, clearly loaded with more than coconuts.

As we approached to within a couple of feet, a large mat or tattered cloth was pulled back, revealing perhaps a dozen Vietnamese, smiling, gesturing, some waving nervously. We could not see any suspicious cargo, only more mats and those crouched below. Our boat idled, growling slowly up to within a few feet of the sampan. The Skipper signaled our intent to board and search the vessel, when suddenly a few stood, produced weapons, and incredibly, against overwhelming odds, began to fire.

I hit the deck. Gunner’s Mate Charlie Wade, ready at the bow with twin fifties, motioned to the Skipper that he was firing on the hostiles.

Fitzgerald pointed toward the sampan and ordered Wade to “Give ’em the whole nine yards.” Authority to fire at will, and as long as needed to disable the hostiles.

The recoil from the gun bursts raised the bow of the “Swiftie” a foot out of the water and

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moved it several feet back. The VC on the sampan got off a few rounds. Bullets screamed off our metal hull. The reed craft before us appeared to disintegrate in a cloud of splintered wood, fragments of cloth, and the pink mist of bloodied peasants.

There were explosions muffled in the water as it engulfed the sampan, evidence of their munitions cargo. Brief desperate screams came from a few of the Vietcong floundering in the bloodied water, before they floated away and disappeared under the gruesome debris.

In the silence that followed, no one spoke. The hostiles were simply gone. Their flimsy craft sunk suddenly, unceremoniously. We looked to Lt. Fitzgerald and each other in wonderment and some rush of adrenaline. I saw that he had collapsed to the deck, clutching his leg and grimacing in pain, his pant leg soaking crimson with new blood.

The crew moved to his side as one to help, to fix it. I was nearest. I rolled up a life jacket to put under his head. One of the cabin crew applied a temporary tourniquet above the wound and jammed in a morphine capsule. Someone threw a coat over him, told him he would be fine. That's what you do.

Chief Black, the next in command, ordered the crew back to stations and radioed back to base that we had had an encounter with hostiles, enemy loss of life, and that Lt. Fitzgerald had taken shrapnel to his leg, but otherwise all on PCF 21 were safe and well.

“Returning to base. Over and out.”

Chief Black threw the boat into gear, full throttle, and one-eighty turn down river, sped to base. He was a short-timer, retiring on his return stateside in a couple of months. I was short, too. Although I had not made a big deal about it, I was desperately happy about leaving this place.

We pulled into the squadron base, where an ambulance was waiting to take Lt. Fitzgerald to the hospital. He was in relatively good spirits, all else considered. The morphine injection

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helped. He motioned for the crew to gather.

“I’ll make a report to command about this encounter. You all did a great job and maintained composure where others might not. Job well done. Until told otherwise, Chief Black will take over command of Black Jack. That is all.”

Amid a chorus of well wishes, the ambulance sped off in a cloud of red dust. Damn dust everywhere. Chief Black waved us in.

“We will come onboard tomorrow at 0600 as usual. There will be a briefing on the Lt.’s condition and I’ll lay on the next week’s schedule.”

At 0600 the sun was already hot and the air heavy. We gathered onboard “Black Jack” and waited for the Chief to speak.

“Our mission today is search and destroy.” And reading from a paper in his steady hand, “There continue to be reports of enemy infiltration in the Monkey Mountain area, where paths beginning North of the DMZ and running through the area South, the intelligence folks’ have begun to call the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail.’ More than that I can’t say. There is one other item for discussion.” He looked us over and began to smile. “SK3 Tholand here is rotating stateside day after next for leave and reassignment. You are all ordered to the Camp Tien Sha EM Club this evening when we return. There we will do our best to embarrass the shit out of this mess of a sailor.”

Borrowing a line from Lt. Fitzgerald, he closed our briefing with, “That is all.”

I was the logistics guy for the squadron, so it fell on me to gather up the .50 cal. shell casings littering the foredeck. As the crew settled in to their cast-off duties, one sailor began the all familiar refrain from the Animals rock tune, “We gotta get out of this place,” and those listening picked it up with, “If it’s the last thing we ever do.”

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Chief Black kept us on slow patrol in the middle of the river the next day. He said he was doing that to keep me safe, but he was short, too. There were jokes and sarcasm about that. I wondered how it would feel to be on safe ground and among friends after these thirteen months away.

That night, we all drank too much of the formaldehyde-laced beer, made promises we would not keep, lied about what great guys we all were, and sweated like pigs in the furnace that had been home. There were no war stories; too close to real. We recalled nights on the beach, dim bars, and little girls much too young to do what they did only for money to take home to Mama-san.

I stumbled off to the hooch I shared with eight other marines and sailors and fell onto my cot without stripping off my fatigues. Later, beyond sleep, I stood naked under the tepid water showering from the barrel rig outside. I shaved carefully, knowing it would be a day or two before the next opportunity stateside.

I had packed up my sea bag days ago, but spent that sleepless night checking it again. At 0600 I slung it over my shoulder and walked up to the main gate to meet the six-by transport to Danang Air Base for flight to Tan Son Nhut and then California.

The truck thundered up, spewing diesel smoke and waited for the few of us to board. I threw my sea bag in the back and clambered on board. I left Camp Tien Sha with mixed emotions. Glad to be going home for sure, but not knowing what, if anything, had been accomplished during the months that had passed there.

There was always a little gang of dirty kids and beggars at the gate. Today, one little teenage snot snaked around and shouted at the truck.

“You didimau, shitface GI, you ten thou,” and other unintelligible venom.

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I tried to ignore it. Heard it every day, but it still bothered me greatly every time. My mood was clouded on the way to the airbase.

Danang Air Base was touted as the busiest airport in the world, surpassing even Chicago's O'Hare. Even this early, there were several jets taking off and landing every hour. Ground support moved over the tarmac like an army of ants, hauling gear, fueling planes, and patrolling the perimeter.

Those marines and sailors rotating out this morning were dropped off at one quonset hut in a long line of others along the airfield, there to be issued travel documents, check baggage, and wait. Surprisingly, there was no customs to clear. I wondered what kind of souvenirs those marines were bringing home to Mom. We were herded into a cordoned off area adjacent to where a Pan Am charter plane was fueling and taking on cargo.

With standing room only, we dropped our baggage and stood waiting. It seemed a long time before the gathering began to move, shuffling towards the plane. We bounded up the gangway stairs and jostled for the best seats. I liked to look out and settled in a window seat over the wing. Without waiting, the plane crew circulated to make sure all had their seat belts on, got to their seats in the rear of the plane, and slammed the rear hatch shut. Immediately, the plane taxied and, with a shudder, began up the runway, gaining speed, lift, and then flight. The excitement was electric. Men shouted over the engine noise, fists in the air, disbelief. The plane gained altitude uncomfortably straight up. This was SOP at airfields in Vietnam, where anything in the air was subject to small arms fire. It seemed a game the Vietnamese played.

“We made it. We finally made it.”

And then that all-too-familiar refrain rose above the din.

“We gotta get out of this place, if it's the last thing we ever do.”

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The flight path was Saigon to pick up more returning troops, Guam for refueling, and then straight to LA. Hours and hours, too tired to sleep. No drinks, plastic wrapped meals—worse than C-rations—and sweaty armpits.

For me the feeling of accomplishment was real, the parting comments of a grateful command and promises by new friends to keep in touch. I was literally floating on air.

It was night when the plane approached the sprawling Los Angeles Airport. The air crew made the announcement over the speakers, and the troops stirred awake, trying to stretch out the ache of sitting and boredom. I peered out the dark window at glittering distant lights growing nearer. I rubbed tired eyes and felt the growth of beard, my mouth and teeth dry.

I had packed my service blues uniform at the very top of my sea bag, folded just so to avoid wrinkles and looked forward to cleaning up and changing at the airport restroom.

The plane wafted towards the landing strip, touching down hard with a screech of braking tires. I exhaled cautiously. Safe, at last. We taxied to the terminal, and before advised we could, unbuckled and began to stand and gather our belongings. Many of the troops anticipated family and friends there to meet them. As we disembarked and were herded to a debriefing spot near the terminal, they strained to see them in the dark.

A marine lieutenant addressed the anxious troops with routine instructions no one listened to. He did thank us for our service and said the nation was grateful. Baggage was trundled to the area on carts. We scrambled to grab ours and go. Directed then to the terminal, the young men pushed their way in and for the first time in months were free of military control.

The sun was just up; it colored the sky a brilliant orange. I had orders in hand to catch a flight to National Airport in Washington leaving later in the morning with plenty of time to freshen up, and took my time finding the men's room along the corridor to the terminal.

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Los Angeles airport, even this early in the morning, was crowded with travelers and baggage shuttling about. There were others to see them off or back. There were the curious and always the protestors.

I walked slowly, with my bag on my shoulder, past pretty girls and long-haired boys. I moved past groups of oriental people, grateful to feel no animosity. Hippies stared at me and I at them.

I passed a gathering of young men dressed in orange robes, seated off to one side of the walkway, chanting melodically what sounded like um, num, um, over and over, banging on small tambourines, and begging for money. Having seen real Buddhists every day for the last year, I recognized these as pretenders. Seeing me, one of the group walked up to chant in my face.

He interrupted his chants to accost me, saying, "How many babies have you killed today? How many children have you burned to death?"

He continued chanting and glaring at me. His group stood and chanted, trying to intimidate me with their numbers and shouting.

"Get out of your dirty little war. Get out of your dirty little war."

It was the first I had experienced what we had seen on scant TV reports, even in the Stars and Stripes, and heard in news reports on the radio ever since the US entered Vietnam in any significant way in 1966. My euphoric mood evaporated, but I was determined to get on home and left them to their protests and drumming.

I shook off their assault and cleaned up in the men's room. I dressed in my uniform, working out the wrinkles by hand. I stood in front of the sink and checked my image in the mirror. I wore only my service medal, having not yet having been issued the Vietnam Theater

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Service and Unit Commendation Medal recently awarded NSA Danang. I had dropped ten pounds, but my blue still fit fairly well.

From behind me came a booming voice.

“Young man. Home now, you will encounter those who resent your service, despise you for what they think is wrong. They are entitled to their opinion, but know that there are many more who appreciate that you put yourself in harm’s way and protected American freedom. We thank you. I thank you.” He shook my hand, turned, and walked away.

I was flushed with pride. My gut tightened, with tears in my eyes. “Whew,” I thought. “I can do this.”

My flight was announced, and I walked to the boarding gate. People looked at me. I tried to figure what they were thinking. A few young ones turned away, but most, if they noticed at all, seemed friendly. My fears melted away. I felt welcome. “This is good.” I thought.

I had checked my sea bag and showed my orders to a very pretty blonde gate attendant in a tailored uniform that fit very well. I thought I saw a flicker of interest in her eyes and face.

“This is good,” I thought, and walked on to the plane for home.

I got settled in my window seat, and presently the drink cart lumbered by. I ordered an orange juice and vodka. It was breakfast time after all. I slept through most of the eight-hour flight to National and thrilled at the thought of seeing my mother and father after all this time. I had so much to tell them. So much more than a young guy my age should ever have experienced.

“Whew, I can do this,” I thought.