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What happened in November 1970 could not be wished away. Decades of alcohol abuse and self-medication, both prescribed and self-subscribed, could not dull the memory or push from my mind what happened near Laos that beautiful day. When it happened, it wasn't like a normal experience where a few dozen neurons get lit up with the usual electro-chemical-kinetic imprint intermeshed with whatever feelings were generated and you go your happy way. Normal memories can be looked back on fondly; sometimes sadly. Over time, normal memories can slide away and fade before your very eyes like a Salvador Dali painting. They can become something other than what they were. Sometimes the memory does not even come close to matching the original experience. In my case, not a single atom has changed within my memory of capturing two North Vietnamese nurses that day. It was seared into my heart, mind, and soul. I have accepted the sacred duty of holding all this information completely unchanged and unmitigated by time or circumstance. I remember everything in its pristine horror.

I had half of my infantry company on an operation five clicks from the other half of our company. A click is a kilometer. Five clicks equates to about three miles as the crow flies, except there were two mountains and a series of ridge lines that stood between us. If I had to go rescue them, it would take us two full days to get there. The triple canopy jungle would slow you down to a snail's pace. Looking for the ever-present booby traps on the trail always tripled the time it took to get from point A to point B. Likewise, if I had a mutiny on my hands, there would be no rescue. There would be plenty of time to get stories straight and reinforce alibis.

That other half of our company was led by our company commander. I don't know if he was a good leader because I never saw him. I only knew that he had been in command for two months. It takes six months in combat just to figure out what's going on and not get all your men killed or maimed. Our captain seemed like a good man with good intent. He would probably

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make a good adjutant general someday. I never really got to know him because we got resupplied separately. We were transported by helicopter separately. We got into firefights separately. We set up night lagers and pulled ambushes far removed from wherever the other half operated. On a good day, if no one passed out from one of the ferocious fevers that reached 106 degrees due to malaria, dengue fever, or ten other virulent diseases, I was fortunate to have forty men in my two platoons. If we were at full strength, we would have had seventy-two men. One guy in particular kept collapsing from malaria. The fever alone, which sometimes reached 106 degrees, was enough to fry your brain cells. He always had to be medevacked until his fever abated. This happened three times. The whole operation had to come to a screeching halt so we could find a place for the chopper to land.

Today, our only mission was to search the top of a mountain not far from Khe Sahn. I was walking point, so we proceeded slowly. I watched for trip wires and any signs of movement on the trail leading up the mountain. I listened intently for any man-made noises. I heard leaves rustling ahead and stopped. I signaled to those behind me "Enemy ahead." Just at that moment a North Vietnamese soldier came down the trail followed by two others with no weapons.

I cried out, "Dung Lai! Chieu Hoi!" (Stop! Surrender Arms!)

He answered with a burst from his AK-47. He fired too high. I didn't want to kill him, but he left me no choice. I fired a burst of six into him and he went down. The two soldiers behind him turned around and started to run. I ran after them and caught up to them within fifty meters. They were both females; they looked to be around seventeen or eighteen years old. They had medical supplies in canvas pouches hanging around their necks. They had been so scared and overloaded they couldn't run very fast. They were completely out of breath, so I walked them slowly back to their escort. I heard his death rattle. As we stood there, he breathed his last

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breath. The girls spoke quietly to each other, but I didn't understand all of what they were saying. I heard one of them say the Vietnamese word for "dead."

I said softly in Vietnamese, "Xin Loi," which meant, "I am sorry." The girls started crying.

I set up security in a large perimeter by sending out three-man teams to all four directions. There was a small clearing we had just passed, and I brought the females back to it. Soon we were joined by twenty-five more of my soldiers in the clearing. Something was not right. They began dropping their rucksacks and crowded close together. I saw how they were looking at the girls. With a sense of foreboding, I placed both girls to my left and told them in Vietnamese not to move.

One of my soldiers said my name and nodded that he wanted to speak with me. I took three steps towards him and the group he was with. They all crowded around us to hear better.

He cleared his throat and said with a raspy voice, "Hey, Dave. Did you call this into Battalion yet?"

"No, not yet. Why?"

"Because if you didn't call it in yet, then we could keep the girls and have a little fun with them. Then we could just get rid of them when we're done and no one would ever have to know."

Soldiers within earshot of him nodded in approval. They all looked at me expectantly.

I took two steps back and asked the group, "WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

He repeated word for word what he had already said. I heard him the first time. I was merely stalling for time to decide if I needed to shoot him outright or not. I heard water trickling to my left and one of the girls stifled a sob. I looked at the two NVA nurses. One of them was

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urinating down her black pajama bottoms. It ran onto her feet and then to the earth. She completely understood what the soldier had said. No translation required. Both girls began to sob together loudly. They hugged each other. I felt a choking of my throat and it was difficult to draw my breath. Suddenly, a fireball of white-hot-energy entered my chest and I was filled with a rage I had never known.

“What the fuck are you really trying to say? HAVE A LITTLE FUN WITH THEM? THEN GET RID OF THEM? Does the thought of it all make your dick hard?”

I had raised my rifle to his face and took it audibly off safe. CLICK CLICK! It was on automatic now.

“Does this make your dick hard?”

I paced back and forth, gauging the twenty-five soldiers in front of me.

“All of you, lower your weapons! The first man who raises a weapon against me dies! RIGHT HERE AND NOW!”

They all pointed their rifles and machine guns at their feet. I kept my eyes on the ones I thought were part of the mutiny. The apparent leaders of this group were the same ones I had disarmed two months previously when I made them go through a cold turkey withdrawal from their heroin addiction. The withdrawal lasted for five days. They were always disgruntled about something. They were the same ones I suspected of fragging our old battalion commander. And now this.

“Do you even know what you’re doing anymore? Has dope riddled your fucking brain and caused you to lose all your compassion for humanity? I’ve been in Vietnam two and a half years and NOT ONCE did I ever mistreat a fucking prisoner! THESE GIRLS ARE NURSES! THESE GIRLS ARE NON-COMBATANTS! DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE PENALTY FOR

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RAPING AND MURDERING A NON-COMBATANT IS? THE PENALTY IS DEATH!
THEY ARE NURSES AND THEY ARE OUR FUCKING PRISONERS! WE ARE SUPPOSED
TO PROTECT THEM WITH OUR LIVES! DOES THE MY LAI MASSACRE MEAN
ANYTHING TO YOU? THAT WAS A FUCKING WAR CRIME, MAN, AND I'LL TELL
YOU WHAT; CALLEY IS GOING TO FRY FOR WHAT HE DID!"

I paused as I paced in front of them always holding my rifle ready to fire.

"WHETHER OR NOT YOU KNOW IT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR
EVERYTHING YOU DO IN THIS LIFE. DON'T YOU HAVE ANY SISTERS? WOULD
YOU WANT YOUR OWN SISTER OR YOUR GIRLFRIEND TO BE TREATED LIKE A
PIECE OF MEAT AND THEN MURDERED? DO YOU HAVE A DAUGHTER? WHAT
ABOUT HER? WHAT ABOUT YOUR OWN MOTHER? BE A FUCKING MAN AND GET
THAT SHIT OUT OF YOUR FUCKING HEAD!"

We normally operated in stealth mode and hardly ever raised our voices except in a
firefight. I roared loud enough for the security teams around our perimeter to hear me. I secretly
prayed someone, anyone, would step forward and let me know I wasn't alone in this. The two
girls hugged each other and wept.

I looked at my RTO and told him, "Bring that fucking radio over here! Put the long
antenna on it and drop it on the ground. NOW!"

He did so and returned to the group. I said to the whole group, "Don't make a goddam
move. There's not going to be any fucking atrocity while I'm here."

I stood up the radio and picked up the handset. I broke squelch on the handset and raised
my company commander. I told him we had two prisoners of war and they were both female. I

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told him we had one NVA KIA. He asked if I had called battalion yet. I said, no, but that he should call them right now.

He didn't seem to understand the urgency of the situation, so I told him in plain English, "Sir, I guarantee you that you have no comprehension whatsoever of my situation right now, BUT HEAR ME WELL! You WILL call battalion right NOW and report this, and they WILL get a chopper out to my location to pick up these girls NO LATER THAN tomorrow morning! No excuses, sir! Do you copy?"

"Roger, Dave."

I signaled that the conversation was finished by saying, "OUT!"

I looked around behind me and saw a clump of trees not too far away. I turned my attention back to my soldiers and said, "Half of you set up an ambush to the front and the rest of you set up an ambush to the rear. I'm going to set up two MECHS around the nurses and me and if you want to survive this night, don't even think about coming close to me or the prisoners. If anyone is so fucking cowardly as to throw a frag our way, I will kill you immediately. I won't wait for it to go off. Tomorrow morning, we are going to put these girls on a chopper and go our merry fucking way. Until then, stay clear of me and the prisoners. Now move out!"

I picked up the radio and my rucksack and motioned to the girls to come with me to the clump of trees. I walked backwards and never turned my back on my soldiers. A couple of them came over to me. I put my rifle on safe.

One of them said quietly, "I just wanted to let you know that I was with you, Dave. You can count on me."

The other soldier said, "Me, too, Dave. I wasn't gonna let them get away with it. They're always fucking up one way or another."

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I told them both, “Yeah, I knew that already. Thanks for your support, brothers. Watch your back with these assholes.”

They moved off to join the rest of the group. I still felt betrayed, but these two soldiers offered me a tiny spark of hope that I wasn't alone in this fiasco. I moved to the trees and set all my equipment down. I was still seething. I lit a cigarette and offered my pack to the girls. They didn't smoke. I sat there and ran through the whole episode in my mind.

Something told me, “Never forget.”

It was fairly level by the trees so I wouldn't need my hammock. Before the sun went down, I set up both of my MECHS around our position and started cooking water for our freeze-dried rations. I did my best to explain to the girls that they would stay with me and to not try to escape. I told them in Vietnamese that no harm would come to them. I offered the girls a canteen of water so they could share it. They both took long pulls on it and handed it back. I fished around in my rucksack for meals I thought they might like and mixed it up for them. They ate the food quietly. I asked them how old they were and they both said seventeen. They told me where they were from in North Vietnam. I asked them what their names were. They told me but I couldn't pronounce them correctly, so I called them both, “Chi Hai” which means Second Sister, or Sister No. 2. They both laughed when I told them my Vietnamese name was “Anhhai,” or Brother No. 2.

Before it got completely dark I asked them if they had encountered any B-52 bombings on their trip South and they nodded that they had. After darkness fell I told them to go to sleep. I listened for any movement around our position but especially for any hand grenade handles being released from a thrown grenade. It was one of the longest nights in my entire life.

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When the sun finally peeked over the surrounding mountains, I mixed up some coffee and chocolate cocoa for the girls and then for myself. I let them have some crackers and cheese from my rucksack and they both said thanks in Vietnamese. I told them if they had to use the toilet to do it now before the others come around. They immediately went off the side of the trail to urinate. My company commander radioed that a chopper was on the way so I had to move to an opening in the triple canopy jungle further up the mountain. I gathered up my MECHS and hollered to the rest of my company to pick up their MECHS and get ready to move out.

When the chopper came in, I could tell it was a bunch of Military Intelligence rear-echelon types from Chu Lai by their starched jungle fatigues and polished jungle boots. I helped the two girls up onto the chopper and it lifted off. The sight of them sadly looking at me from the helicopter has been seared into my mind for the last forty-nine years. I had heard rumors about the POW Centers in Chu Lai and Danang. I felt the same sense of foreboding as when my soldiers first confronted me. I prayed they wouldn't be mistreated, but that was out of my hands.