16. Nothing Happened

Once I filmed a combat assault that was to attack a company-sized North Vietnamese Army unit in the Ashau Valley about 20 miles west of Hue. We were supposed to surprise them. Local Viet Cong, however, regularly infiltrated our units and were likely to know of the assault plans about the same time as the assault team. If they chose to fight, it would be an ambush, if not we would find an empty camp. I was definitely nervous that day. I remember not being able to eat after we were dropped into the jungle about 6 miles from the target. Even after walking four hours with seventy pounds of gear and ammunition in 95 degree heat with 90% humidity, when we took a break after 4 hours I was only able to eat 2 teaspoonsful of applesauce and a mouthful of water.

Late that afternoon the soldier behind me dropped his M-60 machine gun. The safety was off and there was a shattering blast as a round plowed into the ground about an inch from my left heel. I never allowed myself to think about what might have happened. I thought that if the bullet hit me somehow it would have gone through the flesh on my calf, it wouldn't have injured me permanently, but actually it might have shattered a bone in my leg, mangled my foot and left me unable to walk. But the real danger of that was that our position was revealed the moment the shell went off. It was too late to call the helicopters back to lift us out. Night was coming on in the jungle and we had just announced our position. Once again I was with a unit in an area known to be controlled by the North Vietnamese and once again we knew for sure that they knew we were there.
Another thing that was strange about this is that I don't remember jumping when the shell went off. It was like a shadow passing over me. I heard it, of course, but I never thought about it. The guy behind me just picked up the machine gun and I turned forward again to look for trip wires and try to notice signs in the jungle. I expected the treeline to burst with fire and mortars to drop.

That night, we got lost. We followed a stream and when it got dark, we could no longer use maps or risk turning on a flashlight. It was literally pitch black, walking along the stream bed, trying to be very quiet, but still making small splashes. The captain leading the mission stopped us and sent us up a hillside. It was very steep and muddy. We had to crawl on our hands and knees. About half way it was so slippery that I'd crawl forward and had to quickly grab a branch or I'd slip down again. We finally just stopped, exhausted. Someone had the energy to slide down, plant a claymore mine and crawl back up to our position. The machine gun was set up pointing in the direction we'd come. Men just fell asleep in position, their uniforms soaked with mud and sweat. When my turn at guard duty came, I had forgotten from basic training how to tell by feel if the safety was on or off so, instead, I took out my .45 and spent my guard duty with it clutched in my hands, safety off, pointing it into the darkness.

When morning came, we discovered that we were in a "V" formation, so that if we had started to fire we would have ended up wiping ourselves out in a crossfire. But we didn't and we didn't get ambushed. We were air lifted out the next day and when people asked how it went I said "Nothing happened."
Curling smoke from burning joss sticks made a surreal fog in the Buddhist hospital. Patients lay on tables in each of the four or five rooms. I was riveted by the sight of long thin needles poking out from everyone, even tiny babies. Needles from their lips, ear lobes, feet. The rooms were sweet smelling from the incense and quiet. It was dim, electric lights were off and strangely peaceful. Walking from one room to the next, I found myself in a small chapel, illuminated solely by candles and a startling bright pink neon halo over the head of a three foot statue of Buddha sitting on a lotus blossom. Buddha’s eyes were nearly closed. The straight line of his mouth gave the subtle impression of a smile. He sat erect in the giant flower blossom with the fingers of his two hands cupped and his thumbs gently touching.
18. Coming out of Hue

One Saturday morning in Phu Bai Al and two other photographers from the 221st managed to successfully requisition a jeep from the motor pool. I was invited to join them for what was promised a day trip to some historical sites. Something about an old palace or tomb five or six miles southwest of Hue. I had no idea what they were talking about, but it sounded like a chance to get off the American base and to make some pictures. Phu Bai was ten miles south of Hue and just west of highway one, but it was necessary to drive into Hue, cross the Perfume River and inch around toward the mountains in the west.

I didn't bring a weapon, but knowing Al he may have stuffed a few grenades in his pockets since they were baseball sized and wouldn't take much space. One of the other guys carried an M-16.

Nearly ten miles inland from the South China Sea, Hue lies on both sides of the Perfume River and was home to thirteen of the Nguyen dynasty emperors from 1802-1945. It was the site of a brutal French attack in 1885 that cemented French control of Vietnam and also the site of the bloodiest fighting during the 1968 Tet Offensive. During the fighting approximately 3,000 civilians the Communists had identified in meticulous lists as "uncooperative" were shot, clubbed to death, or buried alive.

It must have been around noon as we were not a group of early risers by choice that we arrived in Hue. The streets were packed and I was nervous. We were traveling alone without a convoy. Although Hue was not currently in communist hands, a single American jeep stood out and we presented an unprotected target to thieves or VC guerillas.

Coming in from the south we began to skirt the outer edge of the city. As we approached the bridge crossing the Perfume River I noticed more "cowboys," teams of two on motorbikes slipping in and out of the denser traffic as we approached city center. Like bees they buzzed. Again I had a bad feeling.

The city itself was hard to recognize as damage was visible everywhere. Buildings were pockmarked from bullets and shrapnel. There were just heaps of rubble where some buildings had
stood. There was less feeling of a city than of an internment camp. It was impossible to tell that Hue had once been the beautiful Imperial capitol of Vietnam.

Wondering why I don't have pictures of the city, I remembered I wanted to keep my camera in a bag at my feet with my leg through the strap.

Something was pulling at my left hand then it was gone. I looked to my left as two boys on a small Honda motorcycle were drifting back into the river of vehicles around us. I looked at the white band of skin where my watch used to be. It wasn't fancy, I think a $40.00 Seiko I bought at the PX. I felt stupid, why didn't I think and take my watch off? or why hadn't I at least put my wrist between my legs. Why was I advertising the damn thing waving it in front of everyone like I wanted to be ripped off.

I patted my left hip. No pistol. Good thing, too. Who wouldn't shoot? What would happen to this jeep in the middle of traffic if I had drawn my pistol? son of a bitch. I could easily have put a .45 bullet in the head of each of those boys if I had the opportunity. Those motherfucking gooks. We're here putting our asses on the line to defend them and they steal my goddamn watch! We should plow this country up and cover it with asphalt. No, that would be too good for this rotten place.

While I was searching for the proper revisions to U. S. policy, a picture came back to me of when I was five and my parents went away on a trip. I had done something wrong while they were away. It might have been a mural on my parents' bedroom wall with my mothers' lipstick. My mother told me she was going to punish me. She had bought an illustrated book about jet planes which she showed me, but she was not going to let me have it. Oh why had I done that nasty thing? If only I had a second chance. I promise I'll be good. Or later when I'd broken or said something bad to her and she said she was going to have to tell Dad and I knew I was going to get a spanking. Oh, if only I hadn't said that. Or I imagined walking in the gush, one moment you have two legs and the next you just have one or none with a huge sound ringing in your ears and your face singed by the blast and little pieces of metal in you everywhere - arms, face, ass. No
sex for the rest of your life. Just a moment ago everything was fine, well not fine exactly, you were on a patrol in Vietnam, but you were a whole person, now a moment later you're not.

Rage flushed through my system alternating from feeling guilt as a victim to wanting to nuke the whole country. Savage bile welled up for all the times I had been afraid. Somebody had to pay. But the street was filled with old women in conical hats holding chickens fresh from the market as they sat in pedicabs with thin young men wearing only shorts and sandals pedalling them among numberless bicycles, mopeds, scooters and motorcycles, trucks, cars and pedestrians walking silently along by the side of the road or with infinite patience combined with a fatalistic disregard of bodily harm trying to cross the street.
19. In the Emperor's Garden

The old railroad bridge connecting the ancient Imperial city to the "new" city on the other side of the River of Perfume was a rusted French relic that somehow was kept functioning during the fierce battle for Hue during Tet of 1968. Not much better were the rickety repairs on the narrow bridge half a mile to the west. Two directions of traffic squeezed together at a slow walking pace. Truck drivers folded their mirrors flat against the sides of their vehicles and inched by each other. Bus passengers could reach out their windows and touch and opposing truck. The jeep itself was afloat in this human and mechanical stream. In the eternity it took us to cross the river, I noticed the graceful single oared rowing style of Vietnamese women standing in the rear of long, slender fishing boats while their husbands perched in the prow with fishing nets draped over their shoulders. Boats passed under us and reappeared on the other side with the timeless pace of hand powered craft.

After crossing the bridge we drove, or rather bounced over eroded dirt roads for another half hour. Once lush undergrowth on the verge of overrunning the unprotected road brushed against the jeep as our driver pulled to the side to avoid a boy with a stick driving the family water buffalo home from the rice paddies. We turned down a smoothly graded and finely graveled driveway leading to a small parking lot covered with the same sandy colored gravel. Three aged, but beautifully polished black Citroen touring cars with the swooping, lusciously curved fenders that marked the French luxe style of the 30's were carefully parked together on one side of the lot.

Our driver braked and the dust coated jeep lurched to a stop while the cloud trailing us down the driveway caught up, passed through us, and dissipated in a tall, green hedge before us.

I see a stone gateway through an opening in the hedge. An elderly Vietnamese man stands just inside. Instead of the more typical conical straw hat, he wears a tattered pith helmet. This worries me about his night job. NVA officers frequently wore pith helmets.

The gatekeeper stands erect and looks directly at me which worried me more. Confucian modesty makes most Vietnamese uncomfortable with initial eye contact. I worry that ironically we're visiting an NVA stronghold as tourists when we'd been unable to find one as soldiers in the
field. However, he only asks for thirty or forty piastres and motions us inside to a large courtyard punctuated with rows of black stone statues of dragons, horses, warriors, and mandarins. On the left of the courtyard in a building just out of the direct face of the sun another elderly man sits on his haunches sifting rice in a large woven basket. His weathered and wrinkled face smiles as he continues to sift his rice.

"Parlez-vous français, monsieur?"

"Un peu," I reply, even that an exaggeration.

"Qu'est-ce que vous pensez de ce monument?"

"C'est tres, tres beau." Pause. "Etes-vous un homme qui travail" - big pause here while I this this out "surtout cette place?" His face crinkles in pleasure at my attempt. I can see monsieur Bisson, my prep school French teacher holding his head in exasperation. I remember him good humoredly saying he would pass me if I would promise to never take another French course. The old man, though, satisfied of my minimum respectability by speaking at least some French, begins slowly, as if to a child, to explain the history surrounding the buildings of Emperor Ming Mang's tomb.

I understand only about half of what he's saying, but crouching down next to him in the shade, I don't want him ever to stop. Finally, I am unable to ask any more questions, so thanking him repeatedly due to my limited vocabulary, I make my way to the center of the compound. Around me small lakes glitter with ruffling breezes, lotus blossoms beckon on intersecting canals. Spare and elegant, the ceremonial tomb stands austere on the right, however I am drawn to my left, toward a multi-tiered pagoda known as the Pavillion of Light.

Crossing the courtyard toward it, I hear muffled laughter and turn to watch a group of teenaged girls on a school field trip struggle to maintain a decorum in a national shrine. Behind raised hands and sparkling eyes giggles spasmed among them. Perhaps our group of four G. I.'s are the first time these young women have ever encountered the huge, clumsy Americans with their filthy uniforms in the flesh. My friends and I with hand grenades bulging from fatigue
pockets, sun burned as peasants must have looked delightfully incongruous to these young ladies wearing elegant ao dais and carrying parasols to ward off the sun from their pale complexions.

In mudcaked combat boots, sweat stained fatigues, and greasy hair I stand rooted to the stones of the courtyard while the flock of these graceful young creatures in their spotless white dresses over white sik pants dressed for tea in some other world pass before me. How could I not love them, even as I appeared to be literally the barbarian at the gate and the end of civilization?

My glasses slid forward on my nose. Instinctively I push them back. I am too amazed to be here to be frustrated. I am walking now past the statues to the first of three bridges across the canal to the Pavillion of Light. Inside I find my was up narrow wooden stairs to a large room, open on all sides with lovered doors folded back. Fan shaped openings caught the forest in fanciful shapes. Below I see the lotus filled canal with its three bridges and beyond the serene pagoda of Ming Mang’s ceremonial tomb. A polished and intricately carved wooden bed fram stands in one corner. I imagine the emperor coming to this apartment to escape court life. Perhaps he liked to relax here, listening to a lovely court musician playing the delicate nineteen stringed dan tranh and composing his own verse.

He sits on a cushion at a low, richly carved and ornamented desk with his implements spread before him. The stick of finely ground charcoal and the beautifully shaped stone for rubbing the charcoal stick to create powder, a small container of water to blend with the powder to make a rich black ink. Choosing from his collection of Chinese brushes he selects his favorite and stirs the ink in small circular motion. Then a sheet of the finest rice paper is spread across the desk. With his brush in the ink he gazes across the canal to the building that will memorialize his life. Quickly he lifts the brush and begins in quick precise strokes to make character after character. Each stroke perfect, almost splashing the ink, able to suggest a spontaneous turn of thought at the same time showing firm control to give the whole poem a balanced sense of harmony.

The tug on my shutter advance. Out of film. Kneeling on the worn wooden floor I rewind the film into its cassette and pop open the back of my Nikkormat. I thread another roll of Tri-X
onto the take up spool, snap closed the back, advance the film two shots and look again through
the opening between the louvered doors. The gardens are difficult to maintain and it is not easy to
see the hand of imperial gardeners a hundred and fifty years ago. A colorful bird alight in a tree
and caws persistently. The light is the rich glow of late afternoon. Soon it will be unsafe to be on
these back roads. I've made my last picture. We've got to go.

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20. Sick in the Bush

One of the crazy things about war is that you can call in sick. One morning early while
waiting on a helicopter pad at Camp Eagle I began to feel nauseous. Camp Eagle was the
headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division just west of Phu Bai and slightly south of the DMZ. I
was waiting to join a combat assault.
The helicopters were late. As the sun came up hotter and hotter I was feeling sicker. I wondered if I would throw up on my pack, camera, or the extra bandoliers of machine gun ammo I usually carried. I felt awful, but I wasn't going to admit in front of these combat hardened troops that the photographer had the flu.

One of the other guys noticed, "Hey, what's wrong with you, man?"

"I think I've got the flu or something."

"Get the hell to the Red Cross tent, we can't hump you and your shit through the boonies."

I could still pick up my pack. I dragged it up to my shoulders and shuffled over to the Red Cross tent. What if those guys get in contact? I'll miss out and they'll think I'm a pussy. When I approached the Red Cross tent, I could feel from a distance that it had baked in the sun. "I'm feeling weak and my mind's turned to mush." The nurse told me to lie down inside where the sweltering heat from outside was suddenly intensified. It must have been at least 110 (degrees). Sweat poured off me. I started to get delerious. An army doctor bent over me. "Looks like you're sick," he observed. I was too weak to respond.

Artillery was going off constantly prepping for the assault. Through the heat I drifted out of consciousness and then came back with a searing pain in my head, a feeling of nausea, and my world limited to the canvas walls blasted by the sun.

I heard the nurse talk on the radio several times and, after what seemed like hours, the shelling stopped. She called back to me through the curtain of the inferno. "They're going to stop firing for 20 minutes, our truck will take you to the main road. You'll have to hitch from there."

The 221st detachment at Phu Bai was still miles away, but I was in no position to argue. They put my stretcher in the back of the Red Cross truck where the driver took the truck as fast as he could. He didn't want to be trapped in the open when firing started again. I was afraid the stretcher and my pack would bounce out of the truck as I was airborne off the stretcher every few seconds. Finally he stopped. The stretcher slammed forward against the cab of the truck. He pulled my pack out and threw it on the ground.

"Get out, man. I gotta split."
He helped me swing my legs over the side and I slid out next to my pack. He started the engine and roared off the way he came.

Looking around I saw a bulldozed road with no traffic. There was a small dust cloud in the distance. Gradually a deuce and a half full of South Vietnamese troops roared toward me. I was afraid my gear could easily be stolen and there wasn't much I could do about it so I waved them by. Finally a U.S. deuce and a half.

"I'm going to Phu Bai."

"So are we. Climb in."

I reached up my arm and some guys pulled me over the tailgate. Someone else jumped down and pulled up my pack.

"What's wrong with you, man?"

"I'm better now that I've run into you guys. I got hammered by a flu bug this morning at Camp Eagle and I've been getting worse ever since."

Weeks later one of the guys who went on the assault told me they'd spent three days looking for a weapons cache without finding anything.

21. Out of the Field

A supply chopper came in low and fast to the bulldozed hilltop firebase where I was working. One of the other photographers from the 221st jumped off the helicopter with pack and camera. "Holmberg, have you heard? You're going to Saigon."

"What's happening?"
"You're taking over for Abe's photographer who's going home."

My career as a combat photojournalist was over. Now I was Command Group Photographer for Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or less bureaucratically, General Abrams' photographer. Instead of sleeping in damp clothes in the mud, I would be staying in barracks, eating inside, going to the PX, saluting officers, hell, generals. I'd be wearing clean, dry uniforms, and I could take a shower everyday.

I returned to Phu Bai to check in my .45, find a clean khaki uniform instead of the battered jungle fatigues I'd been wearing, drop off film from my last assignment and arrange a flight to Saigon.

My first assignment as the general's photographer was to photograph a brief award ceremony in the general's mess. I was there about ten minutes early in a new uniform, shined shoes, hair cut, camera loaded. I waited near the door of the dining room made from two double-wide trailers. The interior was a kind of mobile home rancho deluxe, country club style. Plastic molded wood paneling, linen covered tables with silver, china and flowers in glass vases. White uniformed waiters passed trays of drinks and canapes. The generals looked like a group of business executives in conversational huddles before the annual sales banquet. Except one. A general stood across the room nursing a drink by himself. I watched him for several minutes. The other forty or so generals were talking with animation. I looked at his uniform. Four stars. General Abrams was standing in a corner by himself. I waited a few more minutes. Then I went up to him.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm Specialist Holmberg, your new photographer. I couldn't help noticing that no one was talking with you. I thought officers were supposed to be gentlemen as well."

He laughed and looked straight at me. "Well, Specialist, he said, "I'm the only one with four stars. They like to talk with their own kind."

"I'm sorry for interrupting."

"Not at all. I notice you're not using a flash."
"Well, sir, I hate flash and since I'm shooting 35mm film, the camera has a fast enough lens that I don't need it."

"I have a Minolta and I can never get the flash to work right on it__" It turned out he was an amateur photographer. I decided to seize the moment. "Sir, I would like to cover more of your activities than award ceremonies. What you're doing is history and I would like to record as much of it as possible."

"I'll talk to my aide about it." Another general approached him, but he had become interested in how I planned to photograph his work. The other general waited while General Abrams asked me more specifically what I had in mind. I was winging it completely as I never intended to talk with him in the first place, but I suggested that when he traveled it might be worthwhile to document the places he went and the people he talked with. Finally, he thanked me for my interest and I excused myself.

True to his word, a few days later General Abrams' aide, Major Tom Noel, called and told me the general had agreed to my suggestion. We went over the general's schedule and we usually found at least one event a week in addition to award pictures for me to photograph.

I'm still surprised to remember how easily I talked with General Abrams. Part of it was youthful bravado, part was a flavor of the times - I refused to be intimidated by anyone, part was the arrogant grunt just out of the field being assigned to air conditioned headquarters, and part was in instinctive chemistry - despite the bravado, I liked and respected General Abrams the moment I met him. Even though he was General Patton's favorite tank commander in World War II and known for his toughness, with me he always displayed his celebrated ability to communicate with the troops. He was warm and friendly, enjoyed humor, and delighted in telling stories and talking about history.

When I traveled with him I knew, although I was never told, that I should not discuss current events. However, on one occasion he asked me why I had not become an officer. I told him that I couldn't be a leader in this war. He appeared sympathetic, but we never discussed Vietnam again. That was good because at that time I knew more about World War II
than I did about Vietnam. The general was pleased because he loved telling and, I expect, retelling World War II stories. In me I think he was happy to have a listener who hadn't heard them all before.

Another time after a pause during a trip to South Vietnam's Army Headquarters, I began a conversation with him. He was quickly into a story. But after we returned to MACV, Major Noel asked me to step aside and explained that I was not to initiate conversations with the General. On our next trip I silently looked out the window. After about fifteen minutes the general turned around toward me and said, "Holmberg, what's wrong with you? You haven't said a word."

"Sir, I replied, I've been asked not to initiate conversations with you."

"Well that's horseshit. You have my permission to speak." A sweet moment, as Major Noel silently stared straight ahead in the front seat.

I had only been in Saigon a few months when Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird visited Vietnam. He was given the complete VIP tour including combat fatigues with his own name tag. Major Noel arranged for me to accompany Laird, flying in the second, or security helicopter, that was part of VIP visits. The security chopper would land first to make sure the site was safe. It also carried several secret service agents clutching mysterious briefcases. I imagined exotic weapons and communications gear, but perhaps they just held shaving dream, toothpaste, and an extra set of orders. As General Abrams' photographer I had access to military facilities that the civilian press didn't and so I was treated with a certain amount of hostility. Irritation developed into full blown hatred from one journalist who saw me at press conferences often photographing the press since I didn't need any more pictures of General Abrams sitting in a chair. He was convinced I was a military spy photographing journalists who asked negative questions. Of course in late 1971 nearly all journalists asked sharply adversarial questions of the military.

The reporter in question was beginning his career with one of the networks and was full of vindicative fire at all symbols of the American military. So sure was he in his paranoia...
that he literally threatened to kill me with a zoom lens after I photographed him asking a question of Melvin Laird. I wondered how he would perform this bizarre act with such an expensive yet unsuited weapon. But since I was the momentary object of his journalistic spleen, I paused thinking how I to convince him I was not a spy. Clearly a futile effort, I apologized and promised not to photograph him again.

Laird arrived in Saigon in a manner also rich with humor which I was unable to photograph since I was an unwitting participant. He was to meet the ranking officers of each of the services in the room immediately below the helicopter pad on top of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The helicopter thwapped overhead and terrific noise and blast of dust followed. The helicopter then quickly lifted off to avoid being too tempting a target. The Secretary climbed down the few stairs into the dim room energized in his fresh new standard fatigues with LAIRD printed above his right pocket. His cherubic face gleamed with an eager smile. The general officers stood uneasily brushing invisible lint from their uniforms. They were all the same rank and didn't know who should speak first. After ten or fifteen agonizing seconds, I surprised myself by stepping forward, "Good morning, Sir. I'm Specialist Holmberg. I'd like you to meet Admiral so and so." The admiral did not glare at me, as I had feared, but seemed generally relieved and proceeded to introduce himself. Mom, bless her soul. can rest in peace knowing that her unsatisfying attempts to teach me manners were put to a higher use than she had ever imagined. As for the Admiral and Generals, Mom could have given them all earful about smiling, looking secretary Laird right in the eye, and warmly shaking hands.

But this was not the end of my farcical adventures around the Defense Secretary's visit to Vietnam. At one of the stops on his tour the Secretary was to arrive by helicopter in front of the civilian press corps and make a few positive comments on the progress of the Vietnamese military in assuming responsibility for their defense - in Nixon's hilarious phrase, "Vietnamizing" the war.

The security chopper circled and touched down onto a large lawn perhaps half the size of a football field in front of a Vietnamese ministry that Laird was to visit. A podium with
microphones taped all over it stood on the grass below the steps to the ministry. Around the podium was the press corps of perhaps 100, and as I realized once again, recognizing me not too happily. The group was composed of the many many nationalities with an interest in the Vietnam war. This was a widely travelled and well educated group. Generally the women dressed with chic that was low keyed but unmistakably sophisticated, the men for the most part dressed in suits and ties as this was a more formal occasion than the regular afternoon press briefings in Saigon popularly known as the "Five O’Clock Follies."

A secret service agent leapt out of the helicopter before me and in front of the press. Audible snickers were the first sign of his crude "cover." The flat top haircut, the shiny black military issue shoes. Then there was the Hawaiian flower print short sleeve shirt purchased perhaps at the end of an especially lively weekend in Honolulu.

And there was one other detail that raised the mirth of the usually unflappable journalists. In the act of his gung-ho leap out of the helicopter even before it touched the ground, he failed to notice that his huge chrome plated .357 magnum pistol which had been bulging under a scintillating blue Hawaiian orchid, had fallen to the ground. I came out after him and picked up his revolver from the grass said "Excuse me" as the Huey lifted off to make room for the Secretary’s helicopter. "I believe this is yours." He spun around, but he only grinned sheepishly and said in a deep Southern drawl "Whoops, Ah guess Ah dropped mah rod." He nodded thanks and shoved it back under his belt. For the first time some of the frigid hostility I felt from the civilian press began to melt.
22. At the Continental Palace

Sitting at a table on the veranda of the Continental Palace Hotel felt like living in a Somerset Maugham story of the tropics. During the summer a short, but violent rain would fall on Saigon each afternoon at almost exactly 4:15. It was a special pleasure to be seated by 4:00 and watch huge thunder heads march above the city's heat. When I could get away I liked to get a table at the Continental just a little back from the white stone railing, one with a view of the street, but away from the rain which sometimes blew in gusts under the eaves. When the wind was especially strong waiters would unroll bamboo screens from the eaves.

Just before the rain the sky would darken. Thunder and lightening cracked again and again. Then the rain began to fall, first quietly and gently, but soon with insistant thrashing of streets and buildings, driving finally into an inpenetrable curtain of water. How could this much water possibly float in clouds? Suddenly it was over and the air felt cooler, momentarily cleansed of its thickness and dense odors. I liked to watch the afternoon parade arrive at the Continental by pedicab, cyclo, tiny Renault Dauphine cabs and punctuated with the occasional ten year old American car pulling up like a ship into port to disgorge journalists, American businessmen, diplomats, or officers. Along the back wall of the veranda sat Saigon's most elegant and expensive prostitutes. They regarded their domain with aristocratic indifference. I enjoyed their haught yelegance and overhearing their soft, musical French accents.

I preferred to visit the veranda of the Continental alone. The mystery of another culture was easily dissolved in a boisterous group of friends. I relished melancholy glimpses of
Saigon's former beauty through the grime of its current state. Not only were trees trimmed to deny snipers hiding places and glass windows taped with masking tape X's in case of explosions, but all the city facilities were overwhelmed or nonexistent. It frequently took 45 minutes of constant dialing to make a local phone call. The Saigon River flowed with sewerage reeking so strongly it took months before I could drive across it without wanting to retch. A city designed for 350,000 had become home to nearly four million.

But the veranda of the Continental was an oasis which muted the effects of war. Graceful women and men sat at the wicker tables under slow turning ceiling fans during the afternoon rains. Time seemed to slip backward across the decades.

23. In India

Gary Thompson dreamed up the idea of going to India. He was a signal corps lieutenant I had known from Long Binh who had been transferred to Saigon about the same time I was. I got to know Gary and his friend Lt. Dick Stevens from the Air Force Office of Information as the two of them set up many of the press conferences I photographed. Because we were about the same age, worked in media and all had responsibilities outside the usual military structure, the normal separation between officers and ranks was largely ignored. It was a relief for me to change into civilian clothes after work and go with Gary and Dick to the officer's club downtown in the Brinks BOQ. Or sometimes the three of us would just spend an evening sitting on the roof of the BOQ smoking joints, talking and watching the lights of the city and occasionally rockets or artillery fire in the distance.

In the MACV information office there was a sergeant known as a wizard with Army "regs", all two shelves of them. Gary presented the idea of our trip as a challenge: We knew that India was not an authorized R & R site, but was there a way we could go there anyway? About a week later Gary dropped by my office with orders for both of us. We were issued the necessary authorization for the trip to India plus space on the weekly embassy flights that stopped in Saigon, Bangkok, and New Delhi on their way around the world.
In the confusion of passing through customs at the New Delhi military airbase a slight wiry man who looked like he could be a high school English teacher approached Gary and me with great confidence. He would be our guide he informed us with assurance. We wanted to travel around the country.

"I will be your driver in a private, air conditioned car."

"Too expensive," Gary scoffed.

"Cheap, very cheap," our would be guide asserted.

I looked at Gary. We didn't have a hotel or even know where we were going, we were just glad to be out of Vietnam and in India.

"Let's see how cheap is cheap," Gary suggested. Cheap turned out to be $37.00 for the week plus a bottle of Johnny Walker Red from the PX at the airbase.

Our driver took us to an old, but immaculate small car of unremembered make. It was indeed air conditioned by a tiny battery operated plastic fan duct taped to the back of the front passenger seat. Gary and I discussed that if our driver didn't turn out well, for $37.00 and a bottle of scotch we could leave him and make our way. However our driver took pride in his profession as a guide. He promptly took us to a good, but not expensive hotel, got us rapidly checked in and explained that he would pick us up in the morning at 9:00 a.m. No matter that we were on vacation, our guide had a definite program planned for us, so we agreed. The only unpleasantness came when we insisted that he provide ganja. We had already if not quite good humoredly accepted his decision that we have no women on this trip. We were damn sure not going to drive around India for a week without dope. He relented we smiled. We said goodnight. True to his word our driver met us as we left the restaurant after breakfast with a baseball sized chunk of hashish. Thus began a fantastic adventure in which we began each day in a small inn or hotel, had breakfast, a mouthful of the soft hash which kicked in about an hour later and began a magical ride through rural India, stopping at historic sites, and sampling wonderful food a small restaurants along the way.
One afternoon we walked through ocre red fine dirt in the streets of a small village. It was in the heat of the day, but still we attracted swarms of children who gathered close to us, touching our skin to see if the whiteness would rub off, as if we were some white painted yogis adorned for ritual. Little boys, fascinated, pulled at the light colored hairs on my arm. They wanted to know what we were. Unable to talk with them, I photographed, smiled, then threw a handful of small change into the air. The children squealed, jumping in the dust to grab most of the coins before they hit the ground. I felt foolish throwing the coins and guilty because I had them to throw. But it also felt stupid not to throw them.

Why did I feel uncomfortable looking into the eyes of these children? Nothing was held back. They wanted to know with an insistent urgency. Talking with adults, I also felt endless possibilities of understanding, but most conversations were short, formulaic and based on a desire to practice stiff English learned from a British textbook. "What are the principal natural resources of the state of Illinois?" was one friendly conversational gambit heard when I answered the previous question, "In which state do you reside?" Beyond corn, coal, and politicians, I was stumped. The eyes of the speakers I spoke with convinced me this was a truly different world than the one I grew up in. The whole United States seemed so far away as to be hardly recognizable even in memory. Something strange was happening to me. I felt less like an observer, distanced from the world around me. India was close, immediate, pungent. It seemed to require a response right now. In Vietnam people tended to avoid eye contact, a way of both denying our presence in their country as well as a distinctive cultural behavior. It was disconcerting in India to find strangers in the street stop what they were doing and without affectation frankly stare with deep black eyes.

The People's fascination with us was never slaked. Men lounging in the lobby of our hotel in Agra, followed the progress of Gary and me through the halls as if we were celebrities. And they were just as fascinated the next day. By the time we reached the Taj Mahal I was floating on a strange current, no doubt assisted by hashish. However sometimes we found ourselves forgetting how long the hash took to metabolize through our systems. One of these
accidental overindulgences found us sitting in the vast garden in front of the Taj Mahal for an hour or so to regain enough equilibrium to walk through the building. While we were sitting, several Indian college students came up eager to practice their English. We asked them how they enjoyed hashish - to our surprise they explained that they came from proper families and had never tried it.

"You are very lucky," I replied. "Today is your opportunity" I unwrapped our only slightly diminished ball. "Consider this a gift from your American friends." I pinched off pebble-sized chunks for each of them and we continued to talk. After some time their conversation in English became noticeably looser and more relaxed. They began to laugh. They told us stories. An hour stretched into three. Shadows began to lengthen in the garden and our driver told us we'd need to get going if we wanted to enter the tomb that day. At last able to stand, we said goodbye to the students and walked along the narrow reflecting pool leading to brilliant marble stairs. From the gigantic porch surrounding the Taj, the slow moving Yammna River drifts below and I am amazed to be here.
Young girls with political banners stood along both sides of the many levels of steps to the south Vietnamese national cemetery outside Saigon. The front and rear panels of their pastel ao dais gently billowed, fluttering against their white silk pants. Bands played at several levels; on others, military units stood at attention.

General Abrams was flushed in the furnace heat of summer sun. There was a large sweat stain between his shoulders. His uniform hung awkwardly over his stocky frame.

Diplomats from South Vietnam, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, and Thailand waited at the top of the monument. The general slowly climbed the steps. At each level he was saluted. I had simply been told that morning in a quick briefing that the general was attending a ceremony and I was welcome to go along. As the general began to climb the steps alone I realized I had no where to go, but to follow him up. So I began to climb, too. He didn't speak. I put my camera to my eye and made exposures, but the pictures were flat and dull.

Senses overloaded in brilliant sunlight, images flashed through my mind of a Mayan temple and a priest-god about to perform a sacrifice. Or Alexander climbing a ziggerat of ancient Persia. I glanced again at the general's face, calm and looking straight ahead; he seemed to be in an inner world.

When we reached the top of the pyramid-like structure, the general was ushered to a seat under one of several camoflage parachutes held up with wires like circus tents. At one point in the ceremony, a gong was struck, then an electronically amplified wail signified the weeping souls of the dead. The general placed two sticks of incense in a small marble vase at the front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He held his hands together and bowed. After the ceremony, he walked among the thousands of blazing white graves to place incense, or to examine a small porcelain photograph of the soldier buried beneath that plot.

When it was over, the general was escorted to a helicopter landing pad. While waiting he started talking of World War II when he was one of General George F. Patton's bold, young tank commanders. He smiled and seemed to drift into a reverie. On the highway
behind us, road blacks were being lifted. Long lines of traffic backed up on either side of the monument began to move forward. As the surge of motorbikes, bicycles, cars, and trucks came toward us, my stomach knotted in fear that the commanding general of allied forces in South Vietnam could be killed with a hand grenade or even a brick thrown from a passing motor scooter. All the while he comfortably reflected on events nearly three decades past.

Normally I was an eager listener. Now I felt we were being watched. Paranoia from the field or practical assessment, I couldn't tell; I felt danger. Diplomats and allied officers were chauffered away in their Mercedes limousines. No one noticed General Abrams standing by the helicopter pad as they drove out of the cemetary gates and turned right on the highway back to Saigon. What happened to the General's helicopter? My mind, already inflamed, envisioned sapper squads popping up form behind the gravestones flinging canvas bags containing C-4 plastique explosive. Swimming in a sea of adrenaline, I looked around and saw the last two Americans, two military policemen who had been directing traffic, packing their jeep to return to their base. I interrupted General Abrams. He stopped, puzzled. As casually as possible I explained my concern and suggested that we walk over to the M. P.'s. "Fine," he said.

They had a radio and immediately sent a message to their headquarters. There was a pause when the dispatcher heard that he was being asked to track down General Abrams' helicopter. However he shortly came back on the air that he had informed his C.O. and a call was being made to the general's office. Orders were given. The helicopter was found.

And minutes later with helicopter props beating in the distance, I took the M.P.'s names, then photographed them talking with the general. Sometime after I sent them a print which I later heard had been tacked over the door of the Saigon MP headquarters. When his helicopter arrived the general said nothing about the security breach which left him stranded. He put on his headphones, talked with the embarrassed aide who forgot to pick him up, and resumed command.
25. Morning

What is surprising looking back on it now were the moments of friendliness, like, for example, waking up in a prostitute's small room remembering her eager willingness to have sex several times in a night that began at midnight and ended at six a.m. as I struggled awake to get my clothes on and get back to Ton Son Nhut so I could shower and be at work at 7:30. Often she would see me off as if we were a married couple. Those were very happy mornings. I never expected such warmth. Partly I suppose I was surprised to wake up unharmed, but I was never treated with coldness and I enjoyed the animated, even if artificial affection in those early mornings. I would hug her and she would tease me and tempt me to stay. Finally I would descend a metal stairway to the street. Wrapped in a sheet, she stood on a tiny back porch smiling and waving. I waved back and stepped over muddy puddles, walked on planks laid across alleys during monsoon season, having no idea where I was, to hail a cab, cyclo, or motorscooter.

Knowing I'd never see her again, nor she me, she waved as if there were another life for her squinting in that blast of early morning sun.

I'd walk down the alley to the street, turning one way or the other by chance, trusting that I would shortly return to the air conditioned world and that I would not be jumped by young criminals, which is why I never brought my camera which would have been more valuable than my life on the black market, though I would love to have photographed some of the kind, gentle people I met on my midnight adventures.

I would always find some vehicle to take me back usually not with a hangover as I was primarily a marijuana smoker, but still feeling somewhat groggy, not completely in the world.
It was pleasurable to walk along a street with buildings tipped in golden light before traffic engulfed it in noise and the blue haze of exhaust. By the time I reached a main street people were on their scooters and miniature Lambretta buses buzzed through steadily growing traffic. And when I found a cyclo driver I eased softly into a seat of worn canvas. The city now rapidly coming alive with bicycles, scooters, small three wheel trucks, big diesels and men pushing heavy loads on large wheeled carts. Feeling the sun on my face and the breeze from sitting in the open while the cyclo squirted through traffic, I was content and could have ridden around Saigon all day.
26. Nixon On The Floor

Often after work there was a party in the office of The Observer, a newspaper for army troops in Vietnam produced at MACV Headquarters, Saigon. My office was next door and after I got to know the staff I left open a door that joined our two offices. The party usually began with a trip to the PX in the headquarters building for a fifth of Bacardi rum, a six pack of Cokes and a bag of ice. Often we went later to bars or restaurants in Saigon, but late one evening we'd stayed in the office when one of our group got on a political tirade about the war, then burst out of our cocoon of Bacardi, Coke, and tape recorder rock and roll to wobble down the hall toward the main entrance of the building where an MP sat behind and information desk. Next to the front door was a portrait of President Nixon. My friend staggered up to the portrait and screamed at it, "You asshole!" then ripped it off the wall and smashed it on the floor.

The MP on duty felt obliged to do something. "Sir, I'll have to call security." John immediately replied, "No need for that, sergeant, he's just received some bad news from home." John and Chuck stepped under our friend's still flailing arms and walked him back down the hall to their office. Kevin and I went to the maintenance closet for a broom and dustpan. We swept up the glass and Kevin noticed that the picture of Nixon wasn't really damaged, but it looked strange to have shards of broken glass sticking out around the frame, so he knocked the frame against the wall until the rest of the glass fell out. Then he carefully replaced the picture on its hanger and straightened it while I swept up the rest of the glass. We
smiled and said goodnight to the startled MP and walked down the hall as if this were a simple evening clean up routine. I was bracing for the sergeant to shout, "Just a godamn minute. You guys are in deep shit." While he wondered what to do Kevin opened the broom closet and he hung up the broom. I closed the door and we casually crossed the hall and entered the Observer office. The moment passed, and no one ever asked us what became of the glass over Nixon’s portrait.

27. Madame Julie

How I loved the polite half hour conversations with Madame Julie when I came to deliver film to her shop for processing. Tea drinking and discussions -- this after I had become a person to her by speaking to her in my limited French. A new world opened to me, one that include elegant restaurants and the French patisserie across Tu Do Street from the Continental, the cafes where youthful Saigonese met to talk politics, the chic French boutiques stocking current Paris fashions, and bookstores carrying the latest "Paris Match" as well as paperbound volumes of French classics.

Sometimes her uncle would join us for a few polite French conversational formulas. Once she invited me into her darkrooms to talk with lab workers about black and white printing. Slowly I learned about how to adjust to a Vietnamese way of doing business. One should not rush or appear overly concerned about the outcome. Personal relationships needed
to be cultivated if business relationships were to be other than indifferent. When I arrived a clerk would get her and she would come out, greet me, and order tea. We would talk of the monsoon or fruit in the market she was eager to suggest I try. Then after several cups of tea she might ask me if I had brought along any film to be developed. She would be surprised and delighted. Then she'd rise from the comfortable chairs where we had been talking and walk behind the display counter. With order pad in hand she would invite me to give her the details of the order.

In late September, just before the presidential election when President Thieu ran without opposition, Madame Julie invited me and my friend John Viebranz, editor of The Observer, to dinner. When we walked up to the top floor of her Saigon home we found that she had transformed her rooftop patio into a sophisticated supper club. Under colorful paper lanterns and with a background of sparkling city lights, we toasted across cultural boundaries. We toasted the end of the war, our respective countries, each other, friendship. Finally, I ceased to be self conscious about my awkward high school French. Monsieur Bisson once passed me in the second year upon receiving my solemn promise to never take another course in the French language. Madame Julie's sister brought her pictures of grand daughters, nieces, and nephews all living in Paris and unable to even speak Vietnamese. It was understood that they would never return. They were Europeans smiling to us in the candlelight. What would they have thought about being displayed to American soldiers? Madame Julie and her sister were so proud. I was sad, but we ate and drank and somehow told stories. The warm Saigon night was perfect. Somehow this Vietnamese family caught in the war seemed warmer and more real to me than my own outside Chicago. The night could have gone on forever. I left that evening with a sweet sadness, thankful to have forged a friendship, sad to think of its end.

We shortly returned to our military routine and after the election in October I didn't need to bring film to Madame Julie as often. Then I learned I was getting a special "Christmas drop." Nixon was trying to increase troop withdrawals and was sending some of us home
before our full year had been served. In my case I was going home over a month early. Going home was the focus of my attention.

Suddenly I realized that I was about to leave Vietnam and I hadn't said goodbye to Madame Julie. Still ignorant of Vietnamese etiquette, I simply requested a jeep and drove to Madame Julie's store and lab in Cholon. I planned to stop in, say goodbye and thank you, then return to MACV and my packing. She had me sit for tea and sent servants rushing about. With a slow dawn of recognition, I knew she was sending out for a present for me and I had nothing for her. In my shame I did have tears, though, when she presented me with a beautiful lacquered screen small enough to fit in a suitcase and a pair of cufflinks. I would never have touched or hugged her, but as I shook her hand for the last time I felt I was losing part of my family. She had cared for me when I was leaving and could be of no further benefit to her, even as the entire American military commitment to South Vietnam was melting away, even as she could be a target for reprisal after the Americans finally pulled out of South Vietnam. Thank you, Madame Julie. I've never forgotten you and the lacquered screen still stands nearby on a bookshelf in my office.

I'm sitting in the Saigon Palace restaurant in Annapolis. I just went to the post office to mail my first letter to Vietnam. It was to Madame Julie. I enclosed a photograph of Saigon printed from a negative developed in her lab. I thought about writing her years ago, but worried that my letter would cause her trouble with the government, I refrained. Recent changes encouraged me finally to type the letter for which I needed help to translate into French. This morning I printed out the French version and put the accents in by hand.

The woman at the post office took my package and typed in Vietnam, country code 307, on her computer. Her electronic scale showed the rate was four dollars and seven cents. It seemed too simple after all these years. I gave her a ten and a dime. Six dollars and three cents change. Then she took my package and sent it on its 20 year journey into the past. Now I'm in the Saigon Palace having fisherman's soup and sipping dark French Amber beer.
29. Obsession, 1973

An artist may be obsessed with subject, a medium, an idea. Others may be obsessed with money, their siblings, parents, a lover, celebrity, religion. These are, if painful, at least acceptable. I haven't yet tried out being obsessed with war in public -- I'm not looking forward to it. I cringe to think of the comments of my step daughters and their friends.

How strange it is to find war a text for learning about your life. I found it truer than family. War never lied. What was learned in its presence remained true, if incomplete.

What surprises me about my obsession is how ordinary it is. Only a few times do I recall waking with frightening nightmares from the war. However I used to catch myself noticing lines of fire when I crossed the street. Or walking at night I preferred to walk in the shadows rather than in street lights "just in case." Just in case what, I never knew.

Sometimes while walking, fantasies such as planning assaults on imaginary locations or designing weapons would pop into my head. Unbidden, these thoughts would bloom then vanish. During the first ten years after my return, books, articles, especially movies about Vietnam had a profound impact. I remember not being able to talk for four hours after seeing "The Deer Hunter" the day it opened in Alburquerque in the fall of 1978. There was an uncomfortable edginess in the audience, which was composed I felt largely of Vietnam veterans. some showed obvious signs by wearing jungle fatigues, others wore parts of uniforms: say a bush hat, a camouflage jacket, or Vietnam jungle boots with green fabric inserts. They wore unit patches on shirts and hats. Some were in business suits. They'd left work early perhaps "to see a few friends" and catch the five o'clock first showing. They looked uneasy. There was no friendly conversation. When the film was over there was simply stunned silence in the theater, then nose blowings and a quiet exit.

I wasn't talking much about Vietnam at this point, but other incidents happened which made sure it was never far from my mind. Kirtland Air Base is in Albuquerque and frequently I heard the sound of a Huey helicopter causing me to instinctively look up. The Albuquerque Police Department also used them. One night I took some LSD and found myself walking for
hours. One of these APD helicopters flew over my head and I had a terrifying Vietnam flashback, unfortunately the pilot chose that moment to switch on his searchlight and I walked right into it. The police evidently thought I looked suspicious as they lowered the helicopter to about fifty feet over my head. I had long hair and was too stoned to speak coherently. I had a bad feeling that I would be arrested.

The flashback turned into a nightmare, I began to run. The helicopter hovered over the tree tops following me with its blindingly bright light. I found myself jumping a fence, running through a rose garden, into an alley through a garage, under trees, desperately trying to stay out of the spotlight. As suddenly as it appeared, the helicopter lifted up above the trees and veered off. I got to Central Ave. where I tried to blend in with the late night crowd on the street and then kept walking for two more hours before I was calm enough to go home.