

## **A Long Run in the Moonlight:**

**Warren Blake.**

The Pink Pussy Cat Bar in Saigon boasted an illustrious history, being a direct descendant from its early days in the late 40's as a French seaman's bar called Le Coq d'Or. The unbroken thread through those turbulent years was its Owner and Manager, who, in the days of the American War, was known to us Old Hands simply as Mamasan. Sadly, that thread was broken when the Red Vandals came to town in May of '75.

Mamasan's character determined in large measure the tone of intercourse in the Bar. She was in turn, brave, brazen, shrill shrew in times of strife, and in times of moral dilemma for her flock a wise and compassionate Mama, to her Girls first and foremost, and even on occasion to her younger patrons, such as me.

In some undefinable way it was Mamasan who determined who should be welcomed into the inner sanctum, the Back Bar, where the regular customers resorted whenever the Front Bar became crowded, when unseemly behaviour erupted there, or when the Gendarmerie arrived, as was their habit, through the Front Door.

The particular virtues that a newcomer needed to qualify were never made clear...I suspect that Mamasan sometimes followed conversations in English, or at least the tone of conversation, in order to judge who had something to offer. Just how I qualified was a mystery to me...it was perhaps my occasional spouting of Shakespearean aphorisms that did it...although Mama's English was nowhere near good enough to actually understand such stuff. Her French was much better, but she confessed to never having heard of the Bard, even in French translation...not surprising, since those French do not hold Him in quite the same regard.

The first time I introduced a friend to the Pink Pussy Cat I hoped diffidently that together we would be accepted into the Back Bar, where all the truly interesting characters, the Old Hands, gathered.

My friend was a young American, about my age, whom I had met several times during the conduct of our daily business. My work was drydocking and repairing US Army marine vessels, and occasionally Vietnamese Marine Police ones. It was during visits to Police HQ that I had met my new friend.

Lawrence and I each seemed to recognize a fellow youthful misfit in the other, each having wandered almost by accident into the surreal world of wartime Saigon. I had sailed in on my own small yacht penniless, looking for gainful employment. He had, by his account, hitchhiked in from Cambodia penniless, and was now "helping out, as a sort of a volunteer", advising the Police in some matter or other. There were not many foreign young men in their twenties in Saigon at that time, at least not many in civilian clothes.

Over lunch we talked, naturally, about the War. Lawrence felt strongly that the Americans' military involvement was a monstrous moral error, the result of a "policy of arrogance" towards the Third World. This was a new phenomenon to me. At that stage of the war, in '67, anti-war sentiment had yet to manifest itself, at least there in Saigon. And I was not sure he was correct. I recognized his criticisms of the nastier aspects of the anti-guerilla campaign, but I felt then, as I do decades later, that the menace of subversive Asian Communism had to be challenged somewhere. All South East Asians, if not those navel-gazing Americans, agree now that Uncle Sam's challenge succeeded, the other dominoes remained standing.

Although painfully shy about his personal life, Lawrence was very articulate in matters that aroused him, and I felt he could hold his own in debate with the journalists and diplomats that hung out in the Back Bar of the Pink Cat, so I invited him to join me there that night.

We had our first drinks in the Front Bar, amongst the usual ruck of construction stiffs, furtive GI's AWOL and dissolute USAID types. I noted quickly that the Girls in the Front Bar seemed to gravitate immediately towards Lawrence, although on that first night he ever so politely declined all their invitations, "Hey, you buy me Saigon Tea?" Before we had finished our beers, tiny Mamasan appeared, laid a caressing hand high on Lawrence's shoulder, and grinned at me, "Hey, Crazy Boy, who my new friend? We take him Back Bar!"

I naively concluded that my status was such that any friend I brought in would be immediately accepted.

In the Inner Sanctum were three of the usual regulars: Brian Simmonds, of the Daily Telegraph, “Dingo” Dinh, of the Saigon Post, and Peter Van der Merve, Bureau Chief of Newsweek magazine...a fine crew of hardened observers of the Vietnam scene off which to bounce Lawrence’s revolutionary ideas.

They were all seated at the narrow Bar further in, with Josephine sitting next to Simmonds, and listening to something serious he was telling her. There were two empty stools at our end, so I chose the first one, motioning Lawrence into the second one, next to Josephine. In this way I hoped to be able to introduce my new friend first to Simmonds, and later the others. Mamasan stayed standing with her hand on Lawrence’s shoulder, and smilingly quizzed him about his origins, his opinions, and his tastes. I could not remember being so intimately treated myself on any of my early visits.

Mama’s interrogation soon caught Josephine’s attention and she turned away from Brian Simmond’s monologue. She brightened instantly at seeing us....or was it just Lawrence?... and joined in finding more about this newcomer.

Now Josephine was, all agreed, the prettiest of all the pretty Girls who “manned” the Pink Pussy Cat Bar. It was also apparent to all that the correspondent for the Telegraph cultivated a very soft spot for Josephine...well...actually, we all did, for not only was she so damned attractive, she was equally gracious in her manner.

Nobody knew quite why such a classy girl was working in what was, putting aside my romanticised view of the establishment, just a massage and girly joint after all. Conventional opinion had it that she was there to look for a foreign husband, and thereby a ticket out to some peaceful, prosperous place. But amongst the legions of disparate human flotsam that washed in the Front Door, and was sometimes hosed out again at closing time, could there possibly be many likely candidates? Certainly Josephine was choosy amongst her customers, as she could afford to be, unlike most of the other, happy-go-lucky Girls, but on the other hand it was apparent too that she enjoyed her work. She remained something of an exquisite enigma to me.

I was surprised that this elegant woman had virtually dumped the company of our most senior journalist for that of a man not much more than half his age. This did not promise a warm reception for the visitor!

Lawrence was characteristically diffident in his replies to the ladies, and I had to wonder quite why he so aroused their sympathies. They were more than sympathetic, they were downright interested in Lawrence the man, despite his shy demeanour. I was amazed, and a trifle envious.

Mamasan left after a while, but there passed some time of animated questioning before Josephine excused herself and slid off her stool.

Against the odds I took this opportunity to introduce my friend to Simmonds. I mentioned that Lawrence entertained “some unusual views about the War!” and the journalist seemed ready, with a glint in eye, to deconstruct this young upstart. To my surprise Simmonds listened long enough to those views for Lawrence to become quite articulate again.

Finally Simmonds asked “This sounds like stuff straight off the campus at Berkeley!...is that where you studied, young man?”

The young American demurred, citing an East Coast College, adding that his views were his own.

“And what are you doing here in Saigon?” the older man enquired.

“I work as a sort of Volunteer, with the National Police...just helping out, really.”

Simmonds chortled, “Just helping a little with the Vietnamese Police, eh?” I sensed mocking incredulity.

To my surprise the veteran journalist then gave a carefully considered riposte to the young man’s points, listing various factors that influenced the conduct of the war, including some that were new to me. Such argument further convinced me that the War was an unsavoury necessity...but I did not detect any change in the young American’s views. Simmonds

finished his reasoned analysis with a distinctly mocking, "I guess we can suppose that the War effort will be advanced no end by your bit of helping out down at Police HQ, then?" Lawrence replied, "Well, at least my efforts do not contribute to an immoral act of aggression! This country can be saved, but not by the US Army blundering about!...more subtle forms of coercion are necessary. Sooner or later one has to take sides, if one is to remain human!" he finished enigmatically.

Josephine's arrival back on her empty stool put an abrupt end to what might have developed into a bitter debate...and certainly froze an icy gap between the two men when she turned one elegant bare shoulder towards the older Englishman, and her radiant smile towards the young American.

After that there was no more exchange between the two men, and sometime later, Lawrence and Josephine both left the Bar....together, I suspect.

The young American came back to the Bar on half a dozen more occasions, but not to debate with the journalists. He came to meet the prettiest of the Girls, and was welcomed by her, by Mamasan and by any of the Girls who were on duty, and in the face of this seeming adoration, Brian Simmonds made no effort to have him barred, nor to dissuade Josephine from her attachment. This was merely appropriate as the journalist was not the kind who might marry the girl, while it occurred to me that Lawrence might do just that, and presumably Josephine probably hoped he would.

Simmonds made little effort to spar with Lawrence, apart from several snide questions asking, "Just what do you do here in Saigon, really?" to which the younger man merely mumbled something along the lines, of "Volunteer...helping out with sporting activities, etc"

This last bit was not convincing, Lawrence was somewhat overweight already, and smoked heavily, hardly a sporting role model.

Simmonds persisted, and one night Lawrence was goaded into a sharp riposte. "Damn it!...if you want to see what I am doing, be at Police HQ tomorrow at 3pm...and wear running shorts and shoes...you will be in for some exercise, I guarantee!" He shoved his stool aside and stalked out, to be met at the door by Josephine, and away they went, arm in arm.

Simmonds said "Haaa!", obviously not interested in violent exercise in the afternoon sun, but I admitted to a curious urge to find out what it was about, and anyway I felt I needed some exercise. In those days I was normally fit for anything, but was suffering symptoms of lassitude after some weeks without going running.

The Englishman looked at me intently for an uncomfortable period, then shrugged, and stated enigmatically, "You may be taking your life in your hands!"

I did not take this curious remark seriously, but I was to remember it later.

I turned up on time, sportingly attired, and accompanied the American in his ramshackle Nissan sedan on a long drive in the country. Lawrence had not been expecting my grinning arrival, but had merely remarked, "Well, you will be surprised!" I was prepared to be so, and my curiosity grew the longer we travelled.

After a couple of hours of driving in silence along the road towards Vung Tau, the coastal port and beach resort, my driver pulled off onto a dirt road that wound first through rubber tree plantations, and then through coastal sand dunes covered in spiny growth. We emerged above a long curving beach, with a view both North East and South West along the coast, where the distant restaurants and hotel buildings of Vung Tau were visible. I could not help wondering whether this isolated area might be under the control of the Viet Cong, at least by night....and dark was only an hour or so away.

Lawrence parked under a tree, and left the keys under the right back wheel. We walked fifty yards along the soft sand at the top of a wide beach to a small bamboo bar and restaurant, seemingly isolated far from any likely clientele. My wonderment at this strange rendezvous increased, but I was determined to match Lawrence's air of quiet detachment, and showed no astonishment.

A young, very brown-skinned woman in demure, peasant's trousers and blouse approached us with a tattered menu and addressed my friend in rapid Vietnamese. To my great surprise

Lawrence replied with several fluent sentences, of which I picked up only a word or two. I was very surprised, he had never been heard to speak one word of Vietnamese at the Pink Cat, despite numerous opportunities. Perhaps he had been learning it from Josephine? I did understand his final sentence, "Hai chai Ba M' Ba, lam on!" ...and in due course two warm bottles of Beer 33 and two cracked glasses with tiny chunks of ice appeared. This hardly looked like a sporting event!

We sat with our warmish beers watching the blue swells of the South China Sea break in the green shallows, their trembling tips coruscating in the almost horizontal evening light, each one swirling a cloud of fine white sand back onto the beach. In any other country, under any other circumstances, this would have been a pleasant time for a companionable silence, but the strangeness of our mission in this strange place was becoming evident to me.

I resolved not to ask pertinent questions. I was still prepared to be surprised, but Lawrence's dour demeanour encouraged foreboding, so I asked about Josephine, by way of distraction.

"So she is the prettiest Girl, and the nicest, of all the pretty Girls in the Pink Pussy Cat!" I started.

My friend looked at me with the first hint of a smile I had seen that day.

"Yes, she is smashing!...as you Brits would say. After seeing all those girls in that awful place, I knew I must protect her! It is not that easy to remain uninvolved. I have to save her! I think I may take her..." He lapsed into embarrassed silence, but obvious was his wish to carry Josephine away from "that awful place!"

"You are demeaning the classiest Bar South of 17 degrees North!" I objected in good humour, but Lawrence's mind was on more emotional issues.

"I sent her photo to my Mother!" he confessed, laughing, "and she was always the one to say that me and my brother must marry...not just an all-American girl... but one from our home town. There must be less than half a dozen young women of my age there...and I would not look twice at any of them, not after...not after seeing Josephine!"

"Where's home then?" I asked, glad to see him cheerful, and feeling a little less apprehensive myself.

"Leonard, in North Dakota...although it ain't much more than a big village!"

"I guess they do not often see scenes like this in Leonard, North Dakota!" I suggested, waving an arm at the continual surge of tropical marine scenery washing up on the beach.

"No indeed!" he replied, but this emphasis on where we were seemed to remind him of our mission, and he looked at his watch and said dourly, "Well, time to be going!"

I noted that we had seemed not to pay the bill as we walked away towards our car in the gathering twilight.

Not completely to my surprise, we waited briefly for the arrival of an Army truck and three jeeps, all without lights. This was a military operation indeed! I was amazed to see that the twenty or so men who climbed out were all in black pajamas, and for one horrible moment I thought we had joined a Viet Cong operation, that my friend was carrying his contempt for American policy to an extreme length indeed...but they all carried the standard American infantry rifle, the M 16, and were apparently not surprised to see another apparent

"American" standing beside Lawrence. Their officer, without badges of rank, obviously knew Lawrence, and exchanged a few rapid sentences with him, of which I understood nothing. My friend then gestured towards me with a question. The officer barked a rapid order to his men, and one of them came grinning to hand me a sweaty Army T-shirt. I looked at Lawrence. He brusquely told me "your white T-shirt is too obvious, change it!"

In hind-sight this was obviously the moment when I should have suggested that perhaps I might watch the moonrise beer in hand from our rustic restaurant, while waiting for him and his gang to do their thing, whatever it was. But I was young and foolish, this looked like being my first combat mission, and in those days I really did think I was indestructible. So I cheerfully held my breath and donned the rank khaki shirt and followed Lawrence and his troops out and along the beach, away from the distant lights of the beach resorts, North East towards...?

We walked in single file for nearly two hours in complete silence, and almost in complete blackness, for the night was very dark. The light from a few clouded stars enabled me to see only three or four black figures ahead of me on the white sand, for Lawrence and I, thankfully, trudged in the rear of the column. The only sound, apart from the ever present swish of the waves, was that of the sand squeaking under my feet. The only times that I stopped, briefly, were to rid myself of the Beer 33, and then I found myself running frantically to catch up with the fast disappearing black shapes. I did not wish to be left alone out there!

We arrived at a small river that debouched onto the beach, cutting a gulley through the sand. The troopers waded across and kept going. Lawrence guided me to the edge of the spiny grass that lined almost every metre of the beachfront, and here we sat down.

**Consider having L. go with the troopers, or follow them later, and be the first of them fleeing back towards me.**

We lay there for what seemed like four hours, but was perhaps less than two. Our only movements were to attempt to brush away myriad mosquitoes which emerged from the long grass. In the pervasive quiet, enforced by Lawrence's utter lack of words, slapping at the insects would have seemed far too obtrusive.

The only event that distracted from the boredom was the rising of a gibbous moon out of the sea, yellow in the East, about half way through our long wait. Keeping to the code of silence I made a sweeping gesture of appreciation towards this Natural marvel, but Lawrence replied with an irate wave of disapproval. Presumably he was chafing at a delay, and fearful the rising moon would soon cast too much light upon our lonely mission.

Lawrence had started up in intense concentration, staring NE, several times before, and so when he did it again, I merely raised my head from my supine position to look in the direction our party had disappeared. I saw briefly a line of silent orange sparks spreading across the beachfront some hundreds of yards away. Lawrence started to his feet just as a staccato crackling sound reached us...only then did I realise that this was gunfire. I had heard enough during nearby streetfighting in Saigon to know that these weapons being fired were the Communist Kalashnikov AK-47's. They were immediately answered by the higher pitched buzz of our side's M-16's. Our men were fighting the Viet Cong only a few stone's throw from our position!

Lawrence ran off in the direction of the fighting...but he was unarmed! I felt this was foolish, but was not yet bold enough to start running myself...in the opposite direction. There was another ripple of orange muzzle flashes, with the sound sooner, louder...and nearer! I heard no answering friendly fire. I could see black figures now in the rising moonlight...running towards us!

Lawrence turned abruptly and began rushing back towards me. Finally I realised that my life might indeed depend on running fast away from the oncoming menace, and I took off as best I could in the soft sand...towards the far distant lights of the resorts, many miles away.

My friend and I started out together, but I soon found that I was drawing ahead...he was indeed no running coach. Several times I slowed down or even stopped to let him catch up, so I found the going relatively easy, despite the cloying softness of the beach. However, I could tell from Lawrence's panting, raucous breath that he was labouring at full capacity and not capable of much sustained effort. What to do?

Behind us there were half a dozen dark shapes all struggling in our direction, quite distinct on the moonbright sand, but there had been no shooting since we started running. I thought of pulling Lawrence into the long grass to recuperate...but were those stark figures in the moonlight ours or theirs? If I could see them in brief glances back, they surely could track our movements ahead in greater detail. Being pursued in the spiny, tangled bushes would be even more heart-wrenching, and even should we succeed in hiding, we might then be left "behind enemy lines", as it were. I decided to press on along the beach.

A rolling, clattering burst of fire spurred my efforts, and set my heart racing even more....definitely enemy AK-47's! One brief burst from a friendly M-16 terminated abruptly.

I looked back one more time. Lawrence was still recognizable, but almost half way back towards the black phantoms, and he was staggering, half falling.

I laboured on, the sand sticking like glue to each footfall. I vowed to myself not to look back unnecessarily. A short burst of enemy fire evoked an involuntary swivel of my head back, and a wasteful stumble. I saw nothing. Had "they" caught up with my staggering friend? I was faced now with the prospect of struggling on alone, without the "comfort" of waiting for Lawrence.

Now the blackness of terror, and guilt swept over me for the first time....up to now, I had been a partially detached observer of what had seemed like schoolboy games....now I was faced with an all-out effort to save my own skin, and I felt powerless, horribly ashamed, that I had not helped my fading friend.

I groped desperately for some form of solace on which to pin hope. The Viet Cong on our heels were encumbered with their weapons, ammunition pouches, probably water bottles. I was lightly accoutred...thanks to Lawrence's sardonic advice...supposing I and my pursuers were of equal fitness and stamina, then surely I should be able to open the gap between us? This worked briefly, and I consciously lengthened my pace, almost bounding along in an attempt to minimise contact with the cloying sand.

Another short burst of enemy fire was followed almost instantly by the whine of some bullets over my head. No more proof was necessary that I personally was being hunted by the most feared guerilla fighters in the world! The sound of a bullet passing nearby that has been aimed at one by an implacable, pursuing enemy must be one of the most heart-stopping experiences possible, but my heart raced on, at full throttle. How much longer could I sustain this?

My struggle descended into nightmare in real-time, exactly the kind where one is being relentlessly pursued, and for some reason cannot summon vigorous movements in one's sleep-drugged limbs. Sometimes I found myself merely walking, gasping for breath...the air seemed to have become rarified...even the rank smell of stale sweat from my wringing shirt seemed to stifle my lungs. A further long burst of fire behind me speeded the descent into the blackest nightmare possible, but spurred me to a run briefly.

I have run Marathons several times in my life, but this was very different... the sand clogged my arteries and my alveoli, and grated in my muscles, the air seemed dreadfully thin, despite my voracious gasping. Only in my head did it seem my blood flowed unimpeded, and there it thumped inside my skull like a bloody form of water torture.

I felt, in rising panic, that it would be preferable to die than to endure the agony of struggling any more. Should I turn to face the enemy, breathe a few times freely and then be gunned down?...or , very conveniently, stagger into the undergrowth, fall down on my face, enjoy a brief bliss of inaction, and then be stitched up the back with a volley of AK-47 rounds? No! no!..better to die on my feet!

Another, very close burst made me crane my neck to look back in dread, and here something strange happened. I instantly lost all sense of balance but could see that I was running sideways towards the sea, leaning uncontrollably to my left. I collapsed in a heap in the edge of the swirling waves. In struggling to get up I realised that my balance, and with it a measure of hope had returned, and I rushed on.

After an interminable period of running, interspersed with brief walks, with no more menacing bursts of fire, I realised that I was halfway along a long curving strand of the coast. I looked back for the first time in many minutes. The moon was now high enough to illuminate my long, narrow world. The glowing beach stretched back hundreds of yards without sign of running shapes, neither Viet Cong, nor staggering adviser to the Police. At the very limit of visibility I could make out some dark little blobs but there was no apparent movement.

I seemed to be alone...and relatively safe! I could now afford to walk more slowly, as my racing heart and lungs returned almost to normal. I could also afford to look back now more often...the beach remained empty behind me.

Now what was I to do? The very idea of summoning a rescuing force seemed too far-fetched. I thought of taking a rest for my drained limbs and lungs in the "shade" of the long grass...but two doubts arose. It would be dreadful to fall asleep and let the Viet Cong pass by and become a barrier between me and civilization. Another run in the moonlight seemed impossible. And I felt sure that my legs would congeal, stiffen and almost cripple me should I lie down for long. I plugged on, slowly.

Eventually, I guess long after midnight, I spied a dim yellow light amongst the trees at the top of the beach. I approached cautiously, in the shade of the branches overhead. I was quite close before I realised that this was the rustic restaurant where Lawrence and I had drunk beer before our nightmare began. I immediately knew how thirsty I now was.

I searched quietly for the vehicles of our group. The Army ones had gone, leaving their wheel tracks in the moonlit dirt. I found Lawrence's car. The keys were still under the wheel.. I exchanged my dripping, foetid Army shirt for my own sweet-smelling one. I pocketed the keys. Now what?

Perhaps I ought to have started on brave plans for a rescue mission back along the beach, or a seaborne landing further North East, or a helicopter assault...but the truth was I was exhausted and very thirsty, bordering on dangerous dehydration. The restaurant beckoned, the light suggested there was someone there...but who?...was the dark-complexioned woman on our side?...maybe she had tipped off a brother in the Viet Cong about our mission, resulting in the apparent ambush I had so nearly been trapped in? But I craved some water.

I sat quietly in a chair on the moonbright balcony, still wondering whether I should arouse anyone inside. I must have dozed off, because I became conscious with a start and a dark figure bending over me. Fortunately I was too exhausted to lash out in terror, for the figure merely placed a bottle and a glass on the low table next to me, and vanished wordlessly. I could read the label on the bottle in the moonlight...Beer 33.

I knew that it was a mistake to take any alcohol in my dehydrated state, but the beer, and the few fragments of ice were wet, and went down in utter, brief bliss.

I woke cold, parched and in a state of near rigor mortis in the first light of a rosy dawn. I hobbled around looking around for my dark-skinned benefactor of the night. The place was deserted. I washed my beery glass and drank several full ones of yellowish water from a tap at a basin in the open restaurant...and again the bill went unpaid

I stumbled down onto the beach...there was no sign of anybody, no sign that a drama had taken place further along. I wondered should I wait...for survivors to straggle back? Or might the Viet Cong be bold enough to venture here in daylight?...there was certainly nobody between me and there to stop them. If some black-clad soldiers were to march along the beach, would I identify them as friend or foe soon enough to make my getaway?...please!...not another run in the sand! I felt I could do nothing worthwhile here, and I felt very vulnerable and alone in this lost and lonely place.

I decided to drive Lawrence's car out to the safety of the main road at least, before deciding what to do. The old Nissan proved hard to start, and the battery was near failing when finally it sputtered into life.

I ended up driving all the way home to Saigon and my apartment, where I took a long hot shower to soothe my aching limbs...and fell asleep for twelve hours.

I awoke ravenous, and tortured by doubt about my actions. What was I doing safe in Saigon, while Lawrence and his band might still be fleeing from, and fighting with the Communist enemy on the China Sea coast? For all I knew he may have reached his car's parking place just a hundred yards ahead of his pursuers, only to find it inexplicably gone...driven off by a "friend" who betrayed him! For the first time I realized that surely the Army trucks would return for the troopers...why had I not waited for them?...to at least report the disastrous ambush.

I wondered where he might be? Was it possible he had made it safe back to Saigon? I did not know where he lived...I could not even recall his family name...who might know these things?

As often happened in the crises of my youth, I took the decision that required the least effort on my part...I went quite late at night to the Pink Pussy Cat. There, I reasoned, I just might find Lawrence himself, or much more probably, Josephine, who might know where Lawrence lived. In addition, I knew that I could buy a pizza next door, even at midnight, and was starving.

The Pink Cat was relatively empty. No Lawrence, no Josephine. Only Brian Simmonds was in the Back Bar, writing in his notebook. He greeted me absently. Tiffany filled my usual mug. I unwrapped a giant size pizza from next door. I decided to confide in the journalist, he might have some good advice about what to do about poor Lawrence.

The Daily Telegraph listened with increasing interest as my tale unfolded. He asked questions about details that seemed to me irrelevant to the possible rescue of the young American, and so I found myself telling the whole story in chronological order, neglecting my cooling pizza. When I got to the part about the dramatic appearance of our men running back along the beach, the "possible ambush", Simmonds interrupted again, this time to say, "This is interesting! This is the only first-hand account, indeed the only actual account of an operation under this new, so-called Pheonix Programme! I was right about young whatever his name is...Lawrence".

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I guessed straight off he was CIA...they are the only ones who would masquerade as anything quite so bizarre as a Volunteer helping the police, for Goodness' sake! And of course, his anti-war views!...most of his slogans were lifted straight out of a manifesto by a hippy Professor at UCLA, at Berkeley...he must have thought that stance would be a perfect cover while he was actually engaging in one of the most creepy projects either side has dreamed up in this creepy war!"

"What is this creepy project, then?" I was starting to be caught up in the drama that the journalist was constructing....we could get around to rescuing the poor man later...and my pizza too.

"The Pheonix Programme, I suspect, is a shadowy assassination programme, run almost certainly by the CIA, that targets Hamlet and Village Chiefs who are known, or suspected, Communist sympathisers. It started apparently when the Chiefs of Staff learned about the effectiveness of the Viet Cong's own assassination programme of RVN sympathisers in local positions...that has been working with remarkable effect for years. Some one asked why the other side should be allowed a monopoly on such underhand methods, and thus Pheonix arose, out of the ashes of the failed Hearts and Minds programme, one might say."

"The CIA use VN special forces, in your case an elite police unit, I imagine, to do the dirty work, but the spooks provide extensive logistical support, usually choppers, etc, special weapons, funds, and cover stories, As far as I know it has been up and running only for a few months. I am surprised your lot were not taken in by sea in rubber boats...easier to get away after the murder...the SEALS know how to do that...actually, your Lawrence sounds like an amateur assassin...I wonder if he is operating on his own initiative to some degree?"

I was appalled, the gentle, anti-war Lawrence as cold-blooded assassin? I wanted not to believe this dramatic portrayal, but had to admit it seemed plausible. Why had I not asked Lawrence his intentions when we were sitting watching the sea, or when his troopers arrived? Because I was so caught up in the drama of my first "combat mission"!...I ignored the obvious paradox of the anti-warrior "advising" an assassination attempt.

"What happened after the fighting erupted?" asked the journalist.

I recounted the nightmare run, the omenous fading away to nothing of friendly fire, the lagging behind of Lawrence, and my final betrayal of friendship by driving off in his car. The Telegraph laughed unfeelingly, "The poor bugger would indeed have been a trifle put out if he had made it back to the start point with the VC on his heels, only to find no wheels!" He continued chortling, in thoroughly bad taste I thought.

“Yes, yes!” I interrupted testily, “but we have to do something about the poor bugger, as you call him!...what about a rescue attempt?”

Simmonds looked at me in incredulity. “You want to go rescue him, or recover his body, yourself?...I am not going to join you!”

“No, what about the CIA?...can’t they do something like that?...shouldn’t we at least inform them?”

Simmonds laughed again without restraint. “The man is dead anyway, and so are a bunch of police troopers. Look, I have contacts in the CIA, but if I go to them with your story, they will laugh in my face....they will deny all knowledge, they will say they never heard of Phoenix, they will laugh at the idea of your anti-war activist.....” He paused, with his mouth open in surprise, smacked his forehead with his open palm and burst out: “Why have I not thought of this before...now this Lawrence fellow is starting to make some wierd sense! He is Alden Pyle all over again!...you’re a literary fellow, don’t you see?”

“Alden Pyle...the name is familiar, but...yes!...Graeme Greene, *The Quiet American!*”

We both sat quietly, pondering the literary connection...Lawrence as another *Quiet American!* Tiffany, behind the bar, sensed our need for sustenance and filled our glasses. We sipped together reflectively.

“I read the book less than a year ago, just I before I came to Saigon.” I admitted.

“Same with me, but I came here a lot longer ago,” grunted Simmonds.

“Several parallels with our Lawrence do ring true....the love triangle, in a faint way, cynical, older English reporter, gorgeous Vietnamese girl, naiive young American CIA agent, his sinister, violent plot...and by golly, yes...he spoke Vietnamese fluently, in the restaurant and to the Police troopers!” I offered. **Film only, not book.**

“Go easy on the love triangle...only the faintest of connections there!” replied Simmonds.

“That was not the aspect that started me off....it was his naiivety, that and his statement about “more subtle forms of coercion being necessary”, which I now interpret as a belief in undercover violence for the sake of saving the country... these are what started me thinking of Pyle. I wonder...Mamasan as Phuong’s sister, maybe?...the little battle-axe that ran the taxi-dancers’ bar in the book.”

We thought for a bit more. Tiffany took our silence for developing thirst, for she rushed in to fill our glasses again.

“Speaking of gorgeous VN girls...where is Josephine tonight?” I asked.

“Don’t know, she was not here last night either,” said Simmonds.

Tiffany had followed this exchange and offered, “Josie go away, take her bag, everything. She go live with boyfriend My!” My meant American...”Lawrence!” I blurted.

“Damn!” said Simmonds, banging his fist lightly on the bar, reacting personally. Then he looked at me with eyes wide, in amused surprise. I was just a little behind him, but saw the connection too.

“Good Heavens! Beautiful Girl forsakes work in sleazy bar...and leaves unpromising older Englishman, to go and live with young undercover American agent! Life imitates Art! You know, before we started on the long walk along the beach Lawrence started to mention how he must save her...must take her away...from “this awful place”...ever so disdainfully...and it looks like he has managed it!” I recounted.

“Posthumously, it would seem!” snorted the discarded older journalist.

“But Thomas Fowler in the story connived in the killing of Pyle.....you did not actually arrange that ambush last night, did you? I enquired, ironically...in order to get rid of...?”

“Sounds like a good idea!...but no, didn’t think of it. Any way, arranging an ambush is more reminiscent of Fowler’s car running out of petrol in Viet Cong territory...after Colonel Thai, or whoever, ordered his petrol to be siphoned out.....I am not guilty in our literary analogy.”

All of this time I had been distracted, by the remarkable literary parallels, from the question of Lawrence’s fate...and what should be done about it...also my pizza was near stone cold.

"I must find out...if Lawrence has come back to his place....Josephine should know where his house is." I said, addressing my pizza, because Simmonds had turned back to his notebook, seemingly bored now by the strange affair of "Lawrence Pyle." Simmonds was not listening, but Tiffany was...her ability to hear spoken English was obviously better than her spoken variety. "Josie come here when bar open lunch tomorrow!" she said.

The next morning I dropped in on my business contacts at Police HQ. Not only did they not know where Lawrence lived, they had never seen, nor heard of him...his name meant nothing. And of course there was no sign of him when I hobbled, still stiff, around the building.

I went to the Pink Cat at lunch time. Josephine eventually arrived. One look at her face when she saw me there was enough to tell me that Lawrence had not returned home...the worst case seemed to be the most likely. She bombarded me with questions.

I had agonized all morning about what I was going to tell Josephine. In retrospect I suppose I should have told her all I knew, but in my craven, guilty state. I could not bear the thought of being accused by this lovely woman of abandoning, betraying her lover. Instead I told her that he was "missing, believed dead, after going on a combat mission", according to a cryptic report I had "received from a policeman in Vung Tau". Josephine crumpled in grief, and I felt worse than if I had told the whole story. I asked Josephine gently whether Lawrence had told her anything about his strange mission...nothing known.

After a while she wiped her eyes and asked, "What we do?" I suggested we go to Lawrence's place to "see if we can find anything there that will help." I told her had in mind trying to find just who he worked for...where I might be able to make a report of his going missing...and conceivably suggest a search and rescue mission. In the worst case I might find his parents' address....

Josephine brightened a little, and produced the keys of his apartment from her handbag....so Lawrence had succeeded in his hope of taking her away from "that place!"...even if "posthumously", as Simmonds had so unsympathetically described this result.

I drove the Nissan with her guiding the way to a side entrance of a non-descript block of flats. The first thing to catch my eye as Josephine opened his door for me was a large portrait of a man in uniform...a British Army officer's uniform, by the look of it, except in place of the cap was an Arab checkered headpiece. Scrawled across one corner was the autograph "T.E. Lawrence"...Lawrence of Arabia.

The next obvious object was a photo of a middle-aged Caucasian woman, with autograph "To my Darling David, Mom" David??

I investigated his desk, while Josephine seemed to search for our missing friend in each of the rooms. There was no evidence of his working activities...only some bills. One, a laundry list, was in the name of "Mr. David." David, again?

I looked at a small shelf of books. There were some travel guides, T.E. Lawrence's major work "Revolt in the Desert", an English translation of a classical Vietnamese poetic romance "Kim van Khieu", Wilfred Thessiger's "Arabian Sands", and...! Graham Greene's "The Quiet American"...this last I picked up in aroused curiosity. There were many sentences underlined in wobbly pencil, just as might result from someone reading, and annotating, in some uncomfortable pose, such as lying in bed on one's side.

I was just reading an underscored, lyrical passage about Phuong, the Vietnamese girl, when Josephine, tear-streaked but still heart-breakingly beautiful, came tremulously into the sitting room. Right then I suffered the grief of separation, of loss, and the pain of war, for the first time in my young life.

With an aching heart I searched further. There seemed to be no clues about who Lawrence's employers were. The room seemed oppressive. I felt the need to leave, to find some other way.

"Do you want to stay here?" I asked Josephine.

She looked around the room. "Every house has ghost!" she said, enigmatically. "I am afraid!"

I longed to comfort her. I thought of inviting her to my place, but the lingering thread of Greene's story made me pause...she was just too fetching...and there had been more than enough drama already. I was secretly relieved when the girl said, "But I want to stay...for Lawrence..for him coming back! The ghost will be happy."

"Brave girl!...I will leave the car keys with you. Can you drive a car?" I asked, with a predictably negative answer.

I decided first to take Greene's novel with me, and then the desert story of Lawrence, although I was not sure why. I left a tearful girl waiting forlornly for a lover who might never come. I resolved to unearth some way to find Lawrence.

At home I flipped through his books. All had the name David Mitchell on the fly-leaves. So Lawrence was almost certainly a nom de guerre! But Josephine, more intimate, but no reader, still knew him as Lawrence.

The numerous annotations in T.E. Lawrence's book centred mainly on "guerilla tactics", a phrase commonly scribbled alongside. Some additions read "This could be neutralised with selective force"...suggesting that my friend was studying anti-insurgency methods. There were no references to his personal life...unlike those in Graham Greene's book.

I flicked through the underscored passages in "The Quiet American". One, on the first page, informs us that "Phuong", (the girl's name), means "Phoenix", and here Lawrence, or David, had scrawled in the margin, "Phoenix! How appropriate!...a good omen" Perhaps he was indeed involved in the shadowy Programme of that name?

Other marked passages seemed to be more literary appreciation, while several merely described the girl's demure, somewhat detached demeanour. Lawrence wrote "Just like J!" alongside two descriptions of Phuong's behaviour.

Some of the passages seemed oddly familiar to me...until I realized I had heard something similar very recently...from Lawrence himself, at the restaurant on the beach, "Seeing those girls, such pretty girls, in that awful place...I knew I must protect her!" And verbatim: "It is not that easy to remain involved...Sooner or later, one must take sides if one is to remain human" used in argument with Simmonds in the Bar. This last quote came from Heng in the book, Fowler's assistant and undercover Viet Minh agent.

It seemed that Lawrence had been acting out a part from the novel...but whose part?...the naive American Pyle, the jaded Communist Heng, or was he really the anti-war activist Lawrence, somehow engaged in the thick of some very nasty war activities? What were his motives in following...or actually organizing?...the failed assassination attempt that awful night? Perhaps they were little more than youthful curiosity, as mine had been, or were they far more sinister?

I read on.

Lawrence underlined a passage where Fowler remembers sleeping with his hand between the "smooth hairless thighs" of the girl, and then added, "Dare I try this?" I wondered whether the lively, lusty Josephine had forsaken her past to sleep untouched alongside an innocent virgin, as Fowler had supposed Pyle to be in the novel?

Alongside a passage about Phuong, was pencilled "I will save her, I will marry her!" This was becoming intensely personal, as if I were secretly reading the man's personal diary. I felt very uncomfortable.

Another sentence read, in the English journalist's voice, when asking himself why he had decided to go on a risky trip to a trouble-spot in the North: "A chance of death? Why should I want to die when Phuong slept beside me every night?" Lawrence had scrawled alongside "I must come back alive, for J. to sleep beside me!" It seemed that he foresaw danger ahead...but his long run in the moonlight had certainly not brought him back to sleep beside Josephine!...however chastely.

I stopped reading, miserable with worry for my friend's fate, and racked with guilt for leaving him to it. Where was he now? Was he still alive?...still lying wounded on that desolate beach?...or in chains in Communist captivity? I must do something, but what? Maybe the next pages of the novel might reveal some clue about his strange vocation...I read on.

I did not find what I sought, but I found myself growing in affection for my friend. His scribbles about Josephine and her literary counterpart grew more intense and more revealing. There was no doubt that his commitment to "saving" the girl was utterly sincere, and the word "marry" appeared several times. I finished reading his comments vowing that if it were now too late to save the poor bugger, at least I should let his mother know about his fate.

How to find his mother? In those days, before the Internet, before Google, there seemed no way that I, in Saigon, could trace a Mrs. Mitchell in Leonard, North Dakota, although I knew it was "Small, just a village really....with less than half a dozen girls of my age".

And even if I could find her, how would I tell her about her son's presumed fate?...only by admitting that I had run off and left him to it. This craven act was, just possibly, forgivable, but could I relate to her my greater shame, that I never went back to look for him, nor ever managed to find out who had sponsored him on that awful run, and so neglected any chance of rescue?

I wondered how many men, and women, on both sides in that interminable, desperate struggle in Viet Nam, had laboured under similar guilt about abandoning comrades, families even?

I never did really try to find Lawrence's, or David's Mom. The only consolation I can find in my turpitude is that by now she has probably passed on too...so...in practical terms, there is no need to try any more. Poor consolation! Besides guilt I still feel horror at the notion that a young, vital person could just disappear from life's stage like that, unnoticed and apparently unmourned.

About two weeks after my visit with Josephine to Lawrence's apartment the girl came quietly, sadly, back to her "work" at the Pink Cat, just as Phuong did in the novel. What else could she do? Life imitates Art indeed. Simmonds was much more sympathetic to her feelings than he had been towards Lawrence's plight, and tried often to cheer her up in an avuncular fashion. Josephine's only direct comment about the affair was "I cannot stay in his house...the ghost is not happy!" It was some time before the cheerful camaraderie of the Pink Cat returned to normal.

Eight years later, in the last desperate days of April '75, with victorious Communist armies encircling Saigon, I returned there on a mission to rescue family members. Walking down Tu Do I was pleasantly surprised to see the lights on in the Pink Pussy Cat Bar. I entered through a throng of anxious expats, most of them engaged, I surmised, on a similar mission to mine. Some sat morosely with their drinks, some with tears in their eyes. At first I could see no familiar faces, until Tiffany suddenly appeared, as always, behind the Bar. Her face lit up in joyous recognition, fueled perhaps, I thought, by a surge of hope that I might somehow be able to help her escape from the horrors of war...a perfectly understandable emotion that I met in numerous other acquaintances during those dreadful last days. But instead of a plea for help this wonderful person turned away to rummage on a shelf, and gleefully produced my favourite beer-mug!

"Sorry not cold! I not know you come!" Tiffany shouted above the anxious buzz in the Bar while she was filling the mug with my usual Beer 33.

I quaffed what I feared might be my last beer in the Pink Cat, while we exchanged notes. She was fine, but understandably anxious about her future. Mamasan, and Josephine!...were fine, and were expected to arrive at the Bar that evening, but...the dusk to dawn curfew had

already started, and maybe they would not be able to negotiate the numerous road-blocks and patrols. Mamsan's unrivalled connections with the Police would probably be of little help under a state of seige.

I had urgent business, despite curfew, and left Tiffany and the Bar, promising, with little confidence, that I would return later that night to see my friends, and with even less hope, that failing tonight, I would return tomorrow before curfew. Tiffany's face fell and I understood her feelings...there is no apprehension more acute amongst the inhabitants of a city under impending attack by hostile armies than is expressed in the agonised question: "How much more time do we have?...one more day?"

I found myself, less than twenty four hours later, on a giant USAAF Starlifter, along with nearly 400 other refugees, including six of my wife's family, bound for Guam, part of the airlift of frantic souls that Uncle Sam provided out of the kindness of his heart. I never did get back to the Cat. Thirty six hours after my empty promise to Tiffany the Red tanks broke down the gates of the Presidential Palace, and the Red Hordes marched down Tu Do past the Pink Cat.

Decades later, Brian Simmonds and I occasionally have a beer together, and reminisce about the old days. When the talk finally gets around to the Pink Pussy Cat we invariably wonder what fate befell Mama, and Tiffany...our friends would not have been kindly treated by the Barbarian conquerors. We seem to avoid much mention of Lawrence, each harbouring perhaps a residue of guilt. But it is the question, "I wonder what happened to Josephine?" which puts an end to conversation, and we sip our beers and gaze off into the distant past. We are both keenly aware that she might now be Mrs. "Lawrence" Mitchell, in Leonard, North Dakota if only we had...

45%.