

Peace is Elusive:

Warren Blake

During the first year of my “tour of duty” in Saigon during the American War, I worked for a giant construction firm that was building infrastructure, both military and civilian, for the Vietnam Government.

I was given the job because the man who interviewed me made just two statements, one statement and one question actually, before giving me a contract to sign. He said, “We need engineers! Are you an engineer?” I answered “Yes!” impulsively, and so got the job. In those days personnel policy was called “hiring warm bodies”, and made sense because this firm’s contract with the US Government was a “cost plus” one, where the Government paid all the company’s expenses, plus a small percentage for profits, so inflating the payroll also inflated the profits. This explains why American wars cost billions of dollars per month.

I had claimed to be an engineer in a fit of rash impetuosity, but noticed that the personnel officer stapled my transcript for my degree in Physics, not Engineering, to my application, so I reasoned that I had not told any lies “on paper”...and I cultivated the hope that my physics would assist me if the engineering proved difficult, the first being the basis of the second, after all.

This hope proved a reasonable one...in the first couple of weeks I managed by telling my supervisor that “I was brought up in the British system, with some differences...” and asked him to clarify, which he proved glad to. At first he was making grand plans, and asking me to calculate small details. I was soon able to offer to take over certain aspects, and within two months I was making very literal “Grand Plans” myself, as my boss found other pressing problems to cope with on the other side of town, which may have involved a girl-friend for I all knew, leaving me alone in my inflated grandiosity.

And Grand indeed were my works! The company was engaged to build seven strategic airbases, initially for military and later civilian flights. My assumed job was to estimate the total civil engineering materials required for each of these airbases...involving millions of cubic metres of “cut” and “fill”, many miles of “pierced steel plank”, thousands of tons of tar, etc etc. Only one of these bases was in the design stage, but by using this as a model, I cheerfully “designed” the others myself, in order to arrive at the necessary estimates. There was one similar base near Saigon that was very much in use, and I, a foreigner and civilian, was given security clearance to ramble around Bien Hoa Airbase measuring and sketching hardstands and revetments, hangars and mess-halls.

The six as yet undesigned bases existed only as topographic surveys of the terrain. Here I blithely decreed that the runways should line up NE-SW, to take account of the prevailing Monsoon winds from those directions, and laid down my bases on paper accordingly, chopping off the tops of hills (“cut”), using the spoil therefrom to help fill valleys, and bringing in extra “fill” to achieve that dead-flat expanse devoid of trees that is beloved of Military planners.

Working in a vacuum of oversight as I was I also indulged in a little whimsy, such as labeling each “warehouse” as “wharehouse”, and even abbreviating this, for economy of space you understand, to “wh’house”...just a joke, of course.

As a twenty five year old foreign imposter, working without supervision, and decreeing great works on a vast scale that would employ armies of ant-like workers for many generations to come, I was beginning to acquire God-like dimensions, or at least quasi-Pharaohic status. Ozymandias had nothing on me.

Fate should have decreed that I be unmasked under dramatic, embarrassing circumstances and flung into the deepest dungeons...but this was war, and I was young and foolish and I actually got away with my manic inventions even unto the highest levels of Authority. I will explain.

One morning my boss was in the office before I arrived at work. He rather anxiously demanded to see my results, and I felt sure the game was up. He expressed initial delight at the copious data that I had accumulated, and commented that I had obviously been working closely with the “Design Team” (what Design Team?) to produce such detailed plans. He asked me to add up all the totals in the various categories as he needed them “for a briefing” the next day. At this point I began to hope that I might get through this difficult day undetected, and therefore contemplated fleeing town at 5pm sharp, before my well-deserved fate should be sealed.

My boss gathered up all my drawings and “Tables of Materials”, and further unnerved me by asking me to be present on the morrow, in the large office outside, all day, while he briefed the mysterious visitor in “his” office, where I had been working, so that he could consult with me on details. I knew then that my goose was cooked, the visitor, who obviously basked in VIP status, judging by the palpable anxiety of my boss, would undoubtedly see through my untutored fabrications within minutes. I could barely wait until closing time, all the while mentally planning an escape by fishing boat down

river to the South China Sea, or a trek down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Cambodia, or anything to anywhere to avoid just retribution.

To my great surprise I arrived at work at 8am sharp. To my further astonishment, my Boss emerged from "his" office with a harassed expression at two minutes past eight, the first time in months, and latched on to me, with a nervous glance over his shoulder....the VIP was in there being briefed already! I had already figured that my only hope of freedom for another day would lie in bold, bare-faced lies and equivocations...far better to be shot down in flames rather than frog-marched off stage in abject confession!

My boss rather diffidently asked for the reasons for the geographical alignment of the runways, and I was ready with a line about being "based on an average of mean wind speeds and directions at both 10am and 4pm local time over a complete calendar year....but really we should call in some military aviation experts before the final design is done!". He let out a long-winded "Aahhh!" in apparent illumination, grinned in pleasure, and hurried back into the inner sanctum. I had survived undetected thus far, but how long before the VIP would rise in furious denunciation of my inventions?

An hour of anxious liberty ensued, with four similar excursions by my professed "supervisor". My glib evasions were taken at face value, and relayed to the palpable Presence in the next room, all without prompting any outraged accusation. I was surviving!...I determined to keep up pretences to the bitter end.

Finally my superior emerged to request my presence in the inner sanctum to illustrate certain points on the maps. I entered quaking. The Presence was standing with his back to me, bent over "my" map table. He was a middle-aged, trimly built man with slicked-down black hair parted off-centre, large round wire-rimmed spectacles and a chequered blue shirt....he looked like a General in civvies!

As I approached the table the Presence looked up to glance at me...and I knew him immediately from countless newspaper photos...Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense of the US Government, chief architect of the entire Vietnam War campaign!

My Boss introduced me diffidently and McNamara shook my hand firmly with the hint of a sardonic grin. Was he on to me?

Our VIP guest proceeded to ask me directly a dozen questions, rather searching ones, into the science of strategic air-base design. I invented plausible answers to two or three. The others defied plausibility. After a few questions I had quickly come to suspect that the Secretary was seeking genuine information, but seemed to recognize the fact that projections of this sort into the future would necessarily be mere guesstimates, and so I managed the succeeding questions with a shrug and a glib: "Well, Sir, in the absence of any published, or unpublished guidelines, I, er, that is we, just allowed for a generous amount here...and skimmed on the expensive stuff there..." My boss, behind McNamara, glared at me and rolled his eyes in horror, but our VIP merely shrugged too, and said "Fair enough, you have to work with what you have."

I was not only evading detection, I was almost approved of! My boss motioned discreetly for me to leave the room, and said dismissively, "Thank you, Warren!", but McNamara intervened.

"Why doesn't Warren stay with us?...he has the facts at his fingertips. By the way, I approve of all these Whorehouses, Warren, that shows strategic thinking!

I almost blurted out, "Well, actually Sir, those are warehouses!", but realized in time that this subtle man was capable of whimsical irony, and needed no further, painful explanation. My boss, not one for whimsy, craned over the drawings in shock, muttering, "whorehouses?...whorehouses?", ignored by the visitor.

I was in!...saved! The Presence had requested my informative presence! I realized too, that I might still be fired for undermining my boss's position, but at that moment being unfrocked as an outrageous con-artist seemed a receding possibility.

I got through the rest of the morning in glib, slightly self-effacing, growing confidence.

Macmamara looked at his watch at 11.45 and whistled, "Whoops! I must be at the Embassy at noon!..I must run...let's meet tomorrow at 8am, Warren,...oh, and you too, of course, Sam!"

I wondered whether I would still have a job at 8am tomorrow...my boss looked extremely upset as we parted.

I have accounted above, in tedious detail, the story of a callow 25 year old's entirely fortuitous meeting with a Person of great Power and Influence, not merely to illustrate his self-importance, but more to sketch the circumstances under which this foolish young man imagined he could influence the course of history...you see I had already concocted the grand conceit that I had played a minor part in American plans for the future conduct of the Vietnam War!...and there was worse, much worse, to follow....

That night I was seated at the Bar of the Pink Pussy Cat, just off Tu Do Street, a bare ten minutes after opening time, hoping there would assemble a suitable audience of old regulars that I could regale with my fantastic exposition, to an exalted audience, of military design and strategic planning...not forgetting a generous allocation of Whorehouses, of course. I had not previously mentioned my grandiose plans for airbases because I had not, until this day, realized the true extent of my strategic genius.

I was in luck. By 8.30 the regulars at the Bar included Brian Simmonds, long time correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, Nguyen Van Dinh ("Dingo" to us Old Hands), caustic columnist with the English language Saigon Post, and Carlos, self-professed Defence Attache at the Brazilian Embassy, who was suspected by many to be working either for the CIA, or the KGB, or, said some, for both.

"Did you chaps know that Robert McNamara is in town?" I opened casually.

"Nonsense!" replied the Telegraph, testily.

"Who told you that?" enquired the Post, caustically.

"No, he is not!" stated the CIA/KGB, emphatically.

My next move was self-evident. "Well, Gentlemen, I have just spent this morning with him at work, discussing six future strategic airbases...along the lines of Bien Hoa. I am meeting with him tomorrow morning for another session!"

The collective reaction was not as admiring as I had hoped.

"What, YOU were planning airbases with Robert McNamara? I do not believe it!" said Dingo accusingly.

"Are you serious?...you really saw, actually talked to the Secretary of Defense this morning?" enquired Simmonds, sceptically.

I attempted a mere factual account of how, and why...but interest dwindled. Dingo and Carlos left their stools, taking their drinks with them to the Cubicles out the back, and to the attentions of the Girls.

Simmonds engaged Tiffany, behind-the-Bar-Girl, in aimless small talk.

I was disappointed, deflated, and did not expect the very different course of events that would follow.

Simmonds looked around behind him, surveying the near empty tables. He picked up his glass, and moved onto the stool next to me, the one still warm from Dingo's corrosive presence.

In a quiet but serious tone, Simmonds asked, "You say you are meeting McNamara tomorrow morning for your, er, technical discussions? Is this definite?"

"Surely!" I replied, a little self-confidence returning.

"Robert McNamara is a great cruncher of numbers and facts...I can believe he actually wants to know the stuff you have been telling him. But will you be alone with him, or in a big group?...more specifically, can you arrange a few minutes or so alone with him?"

"I believe I can arrange that!" I offered impetuously, while struggling with doubts. "What is this about?...do you want to ask him some questions?"

"Not so simple...I got to interview him ten days ago during an official visit. This time he is here incognito...and that raises some interesting possibilities!" said Simmonds.

"Such as?" I asked, not having the slightest clue what this was all about.

"Well....." intoned the Telegraph, eyeing me seriously, possibly sizing me up for a confidence. "You see...there is someone else important here in Saigon right now, also incognito, who seriously wants to talk with someone high in the US defense establishment ...and with the Head Honcho Himself here incognito at the same time, the stage is set, as the Bard would say...two Noble Secretaries, alike in resolve, incognito and held asunder, worlds apart, by a Curtain of Iron!...." Simmonds and I often traded Shakespearean tag-lines, one area in which I felt almost an equal with this august Dean of the journalistic corps. I recognized the cadence, but not the allusion.

"Who is he?" I asked, artlessly.

Simmonds regarded me for a long moment. I knew that I was being judged as a suitable confidant.

After this uncomfortable scrutiny, Simmonds finally relented. "He is from the other side, of course...he is actually Communist Party Secretary for the whole country South of the seventeenth parallel...Political Head of the Viet Cong, you might say!"

I was astounded, and intrigued...my vanity, sorely punctured near empty but ten minutes before, began to swell, turgid again. I saw myself as indispensable go-between two warring civilizations, present at, and instrumental in the inception, and playing a vital but discreet role behind the scenes in a final Peace Settlement in Paris...

As always, the fermenting gases of bloated Ego lent glib plausibility to my discourse. "I will have to give the Secretary a name, McNamara's not one for blind dates!"

Once again, Simmonds regarded me sternly. Finally he looked around behind us, gauged the distance away of Tiffany-behind-the-Bar, but seemed content to ignore Mamasan, "Mother" of all the Girls, and

of some of the younger patrons too, who was sitting quietly at the till, only six feet away. He proceeded to lecture me sternly, if quietly.

"You realize that if you mention this man's name, and presence in Saigon to anyone but McNamara, you will cause a fairly decent man, a friend of mine, someone who sincerely believes in a better future for his country, to be apprehended, tortured and executed by our corrupt Regime?"

I swelled near to bursting, and the surging fluids lubricated my tongue. "But of course! Complete discretion is essential...only McNamara will hear the name...and he will know what to do...or should I tell him where to meet, etc?...or...?" I faltered, knowing I was running out of gas.

"Of course not, idiot!..you will give him my card, that's all! You will have no other part to play!...no need to say anything else, no need for you to know anything else. His own people will contact me. McNamara is about the only American I would trust with my friend's life!...and not one local!"

I subsided substantially, reflecting after all that a career in undercover diplomacy could hardly spring complete from humble beginnings, unlike my former glorious rise as strategic airbase designer.

After another cautious survey of the few Bar patrons, again without seeming to be bothered by Mamasan's continued presence, Simmonds continued. "You will memorize this name: Truong Minh Cong." He spelled it twice for me. "On no account write it down! That is the name he goes under locally, and that is the name McNamara will recognize. You may append the description 'Political head of the Viet Cong.' There is no need to add any of your own interpretations!" he admonished, woundingly.

I nodded humbly, glad enough to be trusted as a courier with a simple message.

As I paid my tab, Mamasan peered closely at me, and said quietly, with a Mother's affectionate sternness, "Hey, Crazy Boy! You be careful, right?"

I walked away, puzzled. What did she mean?

In the 8am meeting the next morning, I did not feel too worried about being exposed as a fraud, I had a new career opportunity ahead of me after all, but I felt quite constrained, almost cautious, in contrast with my effervescent ebullience at the high point of my engineering career the day before. Even McNamara noticed, this, and remarked lightly that "You must have had a late night out last night, eh Warren?" My Boss scowled at me...I realized that nothing I might do would meet with his approval...but I cared little.

Samuel Morris, my Boss, seemed to stick like glue to McNamara's blue-checked right shoulder, and I was despairing of finding a moment for my message. Finally, however, Sam announced that he must go to fetch a certain file "from upstairs".

The door had barely shut when I blurted out my prepared line, "Mr. Secretary, Sir, there is another important man in town presently, also incognito, who wants to talk to you...he is the Communist Party Secretary for all South Viet Nam..."

McNamara's expression barely altered as he interrupted, "That would be Truong Minh Cong, right?"

"Exactly, Sir, Truong Minh Cong he is indeed!"

"Where do you get all your information, Warren?"

I now felt the part of the discreet go-between, the strong, silent type, and realized that the American's question had been rhetorical, hardly requiring an expansive explanation, unlike all his previous ones. I therefore fished about in my shirt pocket for Brian Simmonds' card, planning to present it mutely, playing the strong, silent man in the know.

This gave McNamara the chance to ask "And who is his front man?...the man to contact?", finishing just as I laid the card, with two respectful hands upon it, on the table.

To my astonishment he too picked it up with two hands, as if we were two Confucian Mandarins negotiating, glanced briefly at it and remarked, "Hmm...I don't like what he writes, but they all say he has extensive contacts, on all three sides!" Again I realized that I was not expected to comment, the man was virtually talking to himself.

He placed the card carefully in his wallet, and changed the subject immediately without further comment, or even a word of thanks.

"Now, Warren, we must cover a bit more ground yet on these bases...I question the need for hard revetments for the F-5 fighters on every base... I think we will station the fighters at only three of them..." I was beginning to recognize the terse rhythms of the diplomatic world behind the scenes.

The morning passed with without me being unfrocked. I know that I learned ever so much more about the strategy of an "asymmetric war" to use the latest jargon, than the Secretary did from my imaginary constructions, and so I am reasonably certain that my fictions did little to impede the progress of that doomed war. At that youthful time I did not wonder at the enormous scale of American strategic plans...seven major airbases in Vietnam, Laos and NE Thailand! Viewed from decades later, I suspect

that those plans were part of a strategy to encircle Communist China, and even Red Russia, why not? I entertain, to this day, the Quixotic notion that my feckless machinations might actually have contributed a tiny iota to the eventual downfall of Communism.

I also cherished hopes at that moment that my modest contribution to diplomacy might eventually bear fruit in some sort of agreement, but realized fully that this was the end of such contribution, that from hence forwards I would not be informed, let alone consulted, on the progress of any resulting negotiations. But I outlined to myself the story I would tell my grandchildren.

The rapid unfolding of actual events proved utterly different, quite bizarre, hilarious in parts, and yet deeply saddening...and I was there, in the thick of the fiasco. Thus:

I went to the Pink Pussy Cat later that night in a subdued frame of mind. I felt sure that Brian Simmonds quite obviously would not be there, but elsewhere on business of undercover diplomacy, and that the next time I might meet him the talk would be as formerly, light-hearted commentary on the day's news, and such, and that I must not even mention...

I approached the Bar down the Back Alley, as was my usual manner. A few yards from the Back Door was parked a black Ford Falcon with CD plates...unmistakably American Mission of some form. As I edged past between the wall and the car, I sensed several, large, pallid faces, with huge black eyeballs...sunglasses!...craning to peer intently at me through the tinted windows...US Security types, for sure! "A whole bunch of Quiet Americans!" as we old hands would say.

In my new, humble persona, I restrained the impulse towards giving the Portuguese finger to the inquisitive spooks.

"Oh Dear!" I thought, knowing that Mamasan detested any official interference, especially American, although she was necessarily a little more tolerant of her own countrymen, who at least could be paid to go away. I feared another of her vengeful routings of pesky officialdom, another massacre in the Back Alley. I entered the Back Door resolving to warn Mama, that she might take preemptive action.

The door opened onto the Back Bar, a narrow bolthole where we old hands sometimes repaired to avoid the unseemly ruckus that occasionally erupted amongst lesser patrons in the Front Bar.

To my surprise Brian Simmonds was sitting there...to my utter astonishment, a large man in a golfing hat, large, round, wire-rimmed spectacles...and blue chequered shirt!...was seated about 5 stools further away. Was it possible that the Sec. of Defense was here, in the Pink Cat, with my friend the Front Man for The Party Sec? Tiffany, as ever, was behind-the-Bar, halfway between them, washing glasses, and Mamasan was visible at the other end.

I approached the end stool in great diffidence, doubtful if my presence would be welcome, but cautious of making any sudden, suspicious change of course. I sat on the stool, pretending to contemplate my face in the mirror. To my relief, Tiffany sidled along, and wordlessly filled my usual mug with my usual draft Bia Ba Muoi Ba (Beer 33).

I quaffed the generous collar of white foam, and continued looking straight ahead. My view into the long mirror behind the Bar would, of course, offer me a panorama of faces should I take just a slight, casual glance sideways. Directly opposite me was the famous Strategic Airbase Designer with a white mustache. Further, past a grumpy looking Telegraph, the Large Man in the Hat was... McNamara indeed, in the same shirt of yesterday and this morning! The Sec. did not look up to meet my eye, but seemed to be morosely staring into a glass of dark spirits. Next I noted Carlos, at the far end, engrossed in a magazine...so outsiders seemed to be tolerated. Lastly I noticed a small, brown, hunched figure, a wizened, oldish Vietnamese man with round, wire-rimmed specs, much smaller than those of Sec, seated between Sec. and Front Man. Good Heavens!...could this be Party Sec? He seemed more like an aging peasant farmer than a Senior Communist Revolutionary, but then, the hardships of life along the Trail, and deep in the jungle would surely have taken their toll.

None of the Participants spoke to, nor even glanced at, their interlocuters. I sensed that they had not yet progressed to the point of being introduced.

The mind boggled!...the preliminary round of the Great Paris Peace Talks of 1966 was taking place in the Back Bar of the Pink Pussy Cat!...and I was there, in the thick of it, almost! Fate had, after all, destined me to be a part of the entire process, despite the disparagement of Front Man, and the terseness of Sec...one might even say that I had, in a manner of speaking, started it all! But I had learned my lesson, despite a surge of ego-gases. I resolved not to mention a word of my amazing exploits to the very next receptive audience I might address...that was not the way of the seasoned undercover diplomat...but surely my grandchildren would hear about this!

I quaffed two excited, dyspeptic Ba M' Ba's without any obvious discourse taking place to my right. Perhaps they were communicating using subtle signals?...known only to the highest ranking opposite numbers.

Mamasan rushed to fill my mug. I sensed the merest hint of a wry smile on her enameled parchment face....could she be part of the Peace Process too?

I rapidly downed my third beer in a warm fuzz of togetherness with an extraordinarily disparate group of Comrades, all dedicated to saving Viet Nam, and indeed the whole Free World....even the benighted Communists, why not?...from further years of senseless violence. I knew for the first time the warm glow of virtuous sanctity...virtual Sainthood! What a pity Dingo were not here to share in the glory!

I was on the point of raising my fourth glass in a solemn toast to my reflected, inanimate fellow conspirators, all of us putative Nobel Laureates, when some actual action took place. On stage left, a door, from the corridor to the Cubicles, opened, on the periphery of my vision. A disembodied limb, too high for a leg, too low for an arm, made a vague waving motion. Mamasan jerked into sudden, alarmed expostulation, "Canh Sat den!" ["Vietnamese Security Police coming!"].

My Comrades all understood, and tumbled rapidly off their stools. Simmonds mumbled an audible "Bugger!" Only Carlos, secure in his CIA/KGB connections merely glanced up, picked up his glass and returned to his reading.

Mamasan banged the wall behind her with her fist, in exasperation?...or in some form of signal?

Amazingly, and almost in unison, a black vertical crack appeared in the mirror behind the Bar.

The Peoples' Representative, doubtless long experienced in sudden escapes, was first on his feet, in one direction. He collided with the American Delegation, striving in the other. A sound-track of various muffled expletives, in several languages, complemented the visual action of the struggle perfectly.

Front Man, long versed in Pink Cat survival techniques, grabbed the People unceremoniously by the scruff of their scrawny neck, and pulled him towards me, towards the left end of the bar, while beckoning at the American to follow. The trio of diverse-sized Peacemakers jammed together down that narrow slot, in amongst the sloping legs of the stools, pinning my right shoulder painfully askew with my feet still caught in my footrest. McNamara's scant disguise slipped sideways off his soldier-like head into the scrum.

Instantly Mamasan appeared amongst us from on high, almost as if she had vaulted over the Bar. Her 40kg of skinny, aging Vietnamese femininity, firmly applied, started a measure of momentum towards Left Stage. Mercifully my stool started to rotate on long rusted bearings, freeing my feet. My clockwise rotating motion allowed my free left arm to scoop up my full glass of Ba Muoi Ba in passing....always a good survival reflex, as my Old Man had taught in various tight corners.

It soon became fuzzily apparent that Mama's vigorous physical intention, abetted by Simmond's scatological imprecations, was for everyone to move, as fast as aging limbs, beer bellies and impeding stools allowed, to the left end of the Bar and then back along behind it, down an even narrower front of advance.

Here Mama put all her effort into widening the crack in the mirror, without evident effect. Suddenly all the chaotic movement of individual, disparate Peace Negotiators coalesced into united, forceful cooperation. Every one in the group somehow saw that Escape, even Freedom lay through that narrow black crack. Many willing hands, as many as could be applied out of the scrum, strived to pull the two sides apart. I could manage only one hand, as the other still cradled my beer, but I put my utmost effort into the common goal. The hidden door suddenly squeaked on long rusted rollers, and slid easily at least two feet open. Mama crammed willing bodies in through the gap, much as Japanese train conductors do at rush hour. I was nearly the last to be pushed in, followed by one warm, anonymous body behind me.

Before the door slid closed I could see that the opening behind was but a yard deep, and although quite long at floor level was constrained by the underside, the negative image, of a set of stairs ascending from left.

There appeared no tunnel disappearing towards freedom as the door slid shut...we were all crammed into a veritable cupboard in complete darkness!...crammed together indeed at shoulder level by the encroaching stairs, although at knee level there appeared to be room for manoeuvre. I was near upright, close to a vertical wall to our right, and hard up against something soft behind me.

My first vivid emotion was an unnerving attack of claustrophobia when I realized that there was no room at all between our heads, shoulders and chests for me to raise my glass to my mouth. The second, equally panicky realization was that I was soon in need of disposing of the Ba M' Ba already ingested, now fermenting along with the residual Ego-gases inside me.

Not one Delegate inside that jam-packed, benighted Peace Conference had yet uttered a word...Brian's obscenities had ceased as darkness had come upon us. I was on the point of suggesting that we should

all sit down, so that we could enjoy the relative comfort of greater space lower down, and I could sip at my beer, when I discerned, by craning my neck to the left, that there was a long slit of light entering from the bar, and that by rising on tip toes I could actually see a thin, horizontal section of the same panorama I had studied so nonchalantly from outside. I decided to sacrifice a little extra comfort for the psychological reassurance of a glimpse of the Back Bar, the outside world.

I craned left and right, without seeing anyone...except at extreme left, a distorted image of half of Carlos, still deep in his colorful magazine. This absence of uniformed inquisitors would have been very comforting, except that now we were becoming aware of a developing hullabaloo of sorts, muffled shouts, and distant crashing sounds.

We were now conscious also of various odours permeating our confined space...not all of them fragrant. A strong whiff of garlic was the first to be noted, then an acrid waft of what I had identified in the past, amongst a ruck of less seasoned campaigners, as unrestrained physical terror. Another, even less likely fragrance was just that, a palpably feminine aroma. Who amongst my fellow conspirators would be wearing an expensive lady's perfume for Goodness' sake? The smell of beer was explicable, a little of the Beer 33 in my glass had spilled down my left trouser leg. I wondered whether someone would now fart to complete the onslaught of odours. I also hoped I would not be reduced by long incarceration to wetting my pants in such a tight-packed mob.

The sounds of a developing riot somewhere added to the tension. The people of Saigon had obviously risen in anger, but against whom, and why? The news of an impending peace settlement could hardly have reached the general population yet, surely? I craned to see. Although there were no rioters in sight, only the unflappable Carlos, there were moving shadows against the back wall.

Suddenly several different events merged in a cacophony of loud and destructive noises. First the staccato whap, whap of helicopter blades in a sharp turn, a Huey by the pitch, was followed by the loud breaking noise of a wall, or much furniture, being demolished. Immediately upon that destruction, a flood of intense white light brightened the whole bar area, and then, as on a cue from Lighting Technician, a roiling mass of bodies swept in from my right [ie enter stage left]..the first time in living memory that the Pink Cat's defences had been breached from the Back. Why were the long-suffering people of Saigon intent on invading the Pink Pussy Cat?

Through the shallow spectrum of my view of the flood-lit Back Bar, I could discern no particular character to that desperate mass of humanity, save that there appeared to a struggle, some internal dissension, amongst the rioters. I craned left to Carlos [at right stage], he was still sedately seated, his reading in one hand, but he was surveying the approaching mob, and quite clearly I saw him retrieve a slender green volume from a pocket...his Brazilian diplomatic passport presumably, which he perhaps figured would shield him from popular discontent.

Our Carlos was a cool customer indeed! In marked contrast the incarcerated Delegates were now collectively sweating over each other, adding to the general bouquet.

At this point an utterly distracting, completely novel event took place inside our place of confinement that wrenched my attention abruptly away from the civil disorder outside. First I felt movement in my left trouser pocket. The fear of rats in a confined dark enclosure was heightened by the realization that my left hand, my only form of protection on that side, was constrained by a nearly full mug of Ba M' Ba. The movement continued in an encircling and downwards manner, to end by cupping the...er...family jewels in a firm embrace. It was a human hand!

I was shocked to my very core...who amongst these serious diplomats would harbour such perverse inclinations, and at such an unlikely juncture?...perhaps the same transvestitial individual who affected female perfume...but who could that possibly be? None of the protagonists seemed to be the type for such indiscretion. And how could I possibly react in a way that would both preserve my chastity and avoid a serious diplomatic rupture that could well undermine the peace process at this delicate stage of events?

The racket just outside rose in volume and pitch, with much hoarse shouting and breaking of glass and furniture. Under more "normal" circumstances I would have been riveted to my narrow field of view of the outside, but now the...er.. testicular embrace became more...err...to the point, and increased in rhythmical intensity. Not incidentally, the associated psychological discomfort added greatly to the physical distress of a bloated bellyful of beer.

I decided that riot or not, prospects of peace notwithstanding, I must take some decisive action...grasping the offending hand by the wrist, and slowly but forcibly withdrawing it, would send an unmistakable, but ever so discreet message to the ...pervetrator.

But how? Short of dropping my mug of beer in our crowded confinement, not an option, my left hand, was completely shackled. I reasoned that lower down there was more room to manoeuvre. I bent my

knees, lowering my torso, just as far as my ligaments would bear. I noted that the invading hand followed me down effortlessly, not missing a beat, in a manner of speaking. The perpetrator must have very long arms, I thought. At this level there was just sufficient room amongst the press of bodies, to transfer my beer, with minimal spillage, to my right hand. I took in two large mouthfuls, with knees starting to shake. I then struggled hard to straighten up into my erstwhile space, which was now much reduced by the natural expansion of other bodies. I was desperate to relieve the strain in my joints, and in my groin, but eventually I managed to regain upright stature, to my great relief. We really should have been sitting down the whole while!

After a short breather, short because the rhythmical massage continued, I commenced my preemptive move. I grasped the offending wrist...it was very slender. I advanced my hand back up a smooth, hairless arm...was this then the People's Representative? By craning my joints, I was very supple at that age, I advanced my fingers further up that bare arm, with a wild surmise rising in my mind. I was not very surprised when my fully extended articulatory system of shoulder, elbow, wrist and finger joints, arrived, via the back surface of an enamel-smooth upper arm, at a bare, hairless armpit and shoulder. My progress up that arm was reciprocated in a rapid increase in the movements of the small hand in my pocket, and my exploring fingers were squeezed twice, in a friendly fashion, by that warm, bare upper arm. I retracted my aching joints, aware that my fingers now carried with them that same ephemeral scent of feminine perfume.

I was now not concerned for my chastity. But who was the woman with the indelicate hand in my pocket? Mamasan I recalled was wearing a black blouse, surely with long sleeves?...only Tiffany, demure, chaste, pleasantly upholstered Tiffany, the Girl-behind-the-Bar whom we all treated as sister or daughter, but never even made suggestive jokes with, only Tiffany had been accoutred with bare shoulders, and indeed, only Tiffany could have been present to have been accidentally swept up in the frenzied scrum of diplomats to be jammed under the stairs. Sweet, demure Tiffany! I regretted instantly, there in the dark and with the turmoil outside, that we had never treated her as the Woman she obviously was!

The turmoil outside indeed! The shouting and smashing waxed in crescendo. Several missiles crashed against our mirror wall, with the tinkling crackle of falling broken glass.

Not so morally perturbed now by the movements in my pocket, I stole a belated look through my narrow window on the world. There was dissension indeed in the ranks of the rioters. Amongst several clusters of skirmishers, three distinct categories were discernible. The first was composed of large, pale men in dark suits, one with sunglasses still firmly in place, another with his shades hanging awry, and a smear of bright red blood on his cheek. The opposing group were mostly in white uniforms, some with grey peaked caps, mostly askew. The American spooks were fighting the White-Mice, the whistle blowing, ordinary policemen in white! The third party was a one-man army of vengeful fury. Mamasan was in full battle-cry, wielding her lethal, sharpened umbrella alternately as rapier and as cudgel against any man within range, even those prostrate underfoot, to judge by her vicious downward stabbing movements. Above the hoarse cries of the warring males, Mama could be heard shouting shrill, shocking obscenities in her own variety of Saigon English, and presumably just as insulting stuff in her duck-like rendition of Southern accented Vietnamese. Only Carlos remained seated, at his stool at the far end of the bar, sheltered by the right-angled turn of the bar surface into his small space. He referred often to his magazine...I vowed to enquire later what offered such gripping reading?...and only occasionally glanced up as the struggle waxed in his direction. I believed I could just make out his passport, lying undeployed but ready on the bar's surface.

The hitherto mute Peacemakers now found voice, possibly aware now in the dark that I alone had some barely illumined clue to events outside.

"Oi, Mate, what the bloody hell is going on?" pleaded one.

"This is a trifle ridiculous!" intoned a deep voice from across the Pacific, conscious of inherent irony.

"Cai nai cai xi?" demanded an unamused plaintiff.

At this point it became apparent, following my identification of the owner of the exploring hand as friendly...that the situation in my pocket had changed expansively, in a manner of speaking. Luckily there was room down at that level. I wondered whether, in gallantry I should reciprocate Tiffany's attentions, but felt strangely reluctant. I vowed that whatever I should later say or do, I must not hurt this young lady's feelings! In my taut situation, I found myself quite incapable of articulating any vocal answer to my fellow prisoners' anguished pleas...I could barely even blink!

In an attempt at distracting myself, I looked outside again. "Lights" had turned down the illumination to the normal orange glow. There was a general movement from left to right, [to stage left] towards the

unseen Back Door. The sparring had quietened to mostly vigorous pushing, with reciprocal fending, and the shouting had died to mere murmured imprecations and grunts...the contestants were tiring! Mama brought up the rear, still tirelessly stabbing at cringing torsos, encouraging a rapid departure from her Bar.

I will not bother the reader with yet more details of our painful, tedious and climactic imprisonment, nor of the slow progress of Mamasan's eventual expulsion of the barbarians of various cultures that had invaded her cherished sovereignty. Relative silence finally descended, broken by the drip, drip of liquids outside, presumably from bottles of liquor that had been broken on the shelves above..

Finally there was a loud thumping on our prison door, which opened to a mere slit. Two sets of feminine finger nails could be seen straining at that blessed, narrow slit. All the conspirators, sensing greater freedom outside, cooperated once again to strain together in widening the gap, even with the help of a small, damp hand that had only just vacated my pocket. The door slid precipitously open, spilling Tiffany, me and the Sec. of Defense out into the narrow space behind the bar. McNamara fell heavily against us two, with one leg evidently still wedged amongst the remaining prisoners.

Blinking in the brilliant light, Tiffany and I helped Mamasan get the Secretary to his feet. Our combined mass blocked the increasingly anxious efforts of the others to join us. Carlos, at the other end, surveyed our efforts with interest, even to the extent of laying his magazine down.

I took a moment to give Tiffany a hug and a chaste kiss on her perspiring forehead, but just at this point more action intruded on stage left. The Back Door, apparently recently closed and barred by Mama, burst open again, and three big men in rumpled suits tumbled in ensemble.

Mamasan's lightning reflexes swung as smoothly as the mirror-door on its now well exercised rollers. I was able to put in a shove at the last moment which closed it almost shut, except for a set of ink-stained fingers which remained securely jammed at waist level, with an irritated "Bugger!" audible from within.

Mama went over the bar in one amazingly graceful leap, grasped her umbrella and charged the intruders. They, mindful of their painful wounds already suffered, backed into the doorway. One of them, however, caught sight of the damply sweating, blue-checkered Holy Grail of his nocturnal search, and bleated, in an oddly plaintive, falsetto croak, "Oh Mr. Secretary, Sir! Thank God we have found you!"

Mr. Secretary reacted as instinctively as Mama. He strode vigorously towards the three beaming spooks, waving an admonitory finger, and shouted. "Out! Get Out! I do not need your help!"

One of the other spooks declaimed more authoritatively, "Sir, we have our orders!"

"You surely do! Your orders are to vacate these premises and get back to your quarters! I speak as your ultimate superior! I want to...Damn it!...I just want to have a quiet drink, and to try to make amends to my gracious hostess here...for the damage you have caused...you blundering idiots!"

McNamara announced, putting an arm at waist level around Mamasan's bony shoulders. Mama swelled a little, but diplomatically laid her umbrella behind her, content with an imperious finger indicating the way out.

The chastened trio of blundering idiots, baffled, disheveled, and plainly unconvinced, retreated out through the Back Door, even meekly pulling it closed.

McNamara, with his arm still around Mama's shoulders, looked down at her and asked with the same wry grin as when he complimented me on my copious whorehouses, "Now, what, Mama?"

Mama turned, along with the rest of us to survey the Back Bar. We were just in time to see, extreme left, the door to the Cubicles closing, propelled by a hairy Anglo Saxon arm.

"Mr. Brian knows, never mind!" she said, indicating that our colleagues were safe. Presumably Simmonds knew of a secret exit for his guest, doubtless aided by the resident Girls. We stood there mute, contemplating the chaotic jumble of stools and bottles and shattered glass, each with his own questions in his mind.

It seemed to me then, as now, that a genuine opportunity for peace had been sadly squandered by blundering idiots, in a tragi-comical cameo replay of the whole Vietnam campaign. Robert McNamara did not mention the Pink Cat fiasco in his recently published Memoirs, perhaps understandably. I still wonder what his feelings were at that moment?

Mama shrugged and repeated, "Never mind!...now we drink!" She walked towards the tangled heap of barstools, paused, bent down and picked up a crumpled golfing hat from the debris. McNamara slipped it onto his head with a sigh...of despair?...or of relief?

I would like to relate how McNamara, Tiffany, Mama and I all enjoyed a few convivial, uninterrupted drinks together, while discussing how peace could more properly be achieved...even Carlos might well have some pertinent input...but obviously our VIP guest had other things on his mind, and Mama

understandably wished to start tidying up the mess. Tiffany gave me a long, enquiring look, to which I replied with another stupidly chaste kiss blown in her direction, and then I went sadly home...out through the Front Bar this time.

I felt sad because I knew then that I would continue, in my oafish, insensitive way, to treat Tiffany just as a younger sister.

Before long there would be additional reason for sadness. The war between the Americans and the Communists increased in violence, and three years after the abortive Pink Pussy Cat Peace Conference, the Viet Cong secretly infiltrated Saigon and other Southern cities in the infamous Tet uprising of '68. The fighting and killing were to continue for another seven long years.

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