

Far Eastern Journal

VIETNAM — THE FORGOTTEN CEMETERY



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FAR EASTERN JOURNAL (Continued)

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BY

GORDON G. KINGHORN



“Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods”. (MICHAEL HERR)

When I was a child growing-up in my native Edinburgh during the late 1950s, a small boy, of similar age to my own, was killed in a fatal accident close to the thoroughfare in which we were raised.

His parents initiated what all kin did when there was bereavement within the dynasty, as they waited for the day of the funeral, they placed the coffin of their dearly-departed in the room that faced the street, drew the blinds and

withdrew into their immeasurable grief.

Notwithstanding the all-too-transparent verity that I was still a considerable distance from attaining the threshold of puberty, I nevertheless sensed from my parents grieving reaction to this frightful tragedy, that I had entered adulthood somewhat prematurely, the measure of loss that woefully permeated throughout our community as a whole, was of massive proportion, with collective sorrow being unashamedly exhibited on a scale that I had never witnessed during the brief epoch of my immature existence.

This was postwar Britain, or more to the point, my little segment of it, positioned most notably in a working-class area, where years previously, people of my parents era, occupied Spartan dwellings that were clustered around

numerous factories and busy docks, where Goering's bombs had indiscriminately fallen on British soil, night after harrowing night.

The sagacity of convergence that evolved from the madness of one 'Bohemian Corporal's obtuse quest for world domination was incredibly resilient, nurtured further by the reassuring comprehension that the vast majority of my locale, similar to countless others throughout Europe and beyond, had actually survived the worst that two world wars had thrown their way, thus realising shared hardship and indefinable misery as predominantly, the social adhesive for everyone, throughout thick and thin.

Irrespective of the then societal status quo, I was left in a state of emotional perplex, one day I had been playing football in the

nearby park with my childhood friend Hamish, the next, he was gone, forever!

A mistimed negotiation of a busy road, en-route to a nearby, indoor swimming pool, some 24-hours later, resulted in the sickening collision of four tons of an out-of-control mechanised force, and that of a 10-year-old child, the latter of which was ruthlessly ejected some twenty-feet into the air at point of contact - mortally broken and ultimately coming to rest over one hundred feet away from his intended crossing point.



One of the major hazards of writing about the

sentimentalising of victims is that memory can - and indeed often does, become seriously tarnished - or possibly, fancifully enlarged, thanks to the passage of hazy time, but not my own!

Gone are the days, thank God, when all feelings and emotion were, in reprehensible Victorian fashion, once suppressed, thus hellishly negating personal 'circumstances' to the bin-of-little-or-no-importance, that of which demanded shallow and wholly inappropriate, antiquated demonstrations of the British stiff upper-lip - this sickening criterion ended for me in the June of 1959, my first-ever sight of seeing grown-up's weeping uncontrollably.

The funeral mass for my fallen playmate was held at the local parish church, my brother and I, in the company of two other altar boys, each of which had too,

cultivated a tight-knit friendship with our now lifeless companion, and right up until the instant of his appalling termination, unenthusiastically contributed to the committal rituals associated with the Catholic Church.

Hamish senior, an otherwise proud, six-foot-two, father of three elder daughters, and one now deceased son, had served gallantly in the desert war against General Rommel and the Afrika Corps, proudly possessing a brace of medals to confirm his heroic participation in a plethora of fierce battles that frequently occurred on North African soil during the early forties.

He now woefully stood at the altar of a small Edinburgh chapel, agedly stooped in a submitting stance - one far-removed from the militarily dominant posture of an earlier day Sergeant Major - distressingly adjacent to a coffin

that bore the youngest of his brood.



As he tearfully emitted his pathetic eulogy in the direction of the casket that contained the last of his pro-creation, much-adored endeavors, he ended the maudlin tribute by repeatedly uttering the words; “I just wish that your mother and I had been given the chance to say goodbye, the chance to say goodbye, the chance to say goodbye”.

In many respects, this heartrending chapter forged within me, the critical importance of human life, well before a period that I was expected to fully comprehend the

wretched consequences of been born - in that it is all going to end one day, by virtue of the aging process, general decline of the bodily framework - and/or, unforeseen calamities that would needlessly and inexplicably, destroy one’s biological composition, in but a flash!

“It was God’s intention for it to be that way”, (A frequent, if not disillusioned mantra that constantly resounded within my Celtic domicile throughout the years of one’s upbringing) ...but why did God allow kids to die so young? I often raised this infantile query with my parents after young Hamish left our midst - that of which was met with the identical, inane retort, “God, on occasion, can and does work in mysterious ways.”

I wasn’t buying it, I appallingly surmised that we had many elderly people living within our

community, why didn't the deity opt to call time on one of them - and mercifully spare my childhood companion?

There was the widow, Mrs. Dodd after all, she lived just around the corner, one who had, [quite unbelievably] fervently boasted to me, when, in my capacity as a newspaper boy, one commissioned to deliver the first afternoon edition of the Edinburgh Evening News to the inhabitants of the 19th century tenement buildings that made-up our commune, that her birthday fell on the very day of the last public execution to be witnessed in the city; ergo; 21st of June, 1864!!! (George Bryce, aged 30, hanged at Libberton Wynd in Edinburgh for the murder of a 23-year-old nursemaid). Mrs. Dodd's had apparently outlived my extinct playmate by an

astonishing 85 years!



The sickening mathematics and parental disclaimers to my intrinsic enquiries regarding the injustice of it all ultimately led to a thick ear and extremely sore backside, justifiably so, with the benefit of adult hindsight of course.

How I craved for the courage to [surreptitiously] unbolt the window of young Hamish's home, thus accessing the room in which he lay, then to draw back the heavy, dark curtains and gently relay to him - one's own [puerile] sense of remorse - and that of the void he had left within me - common sense prevailed however,

painfully assisted by the continuing physical discomfort of very tender buttocks.

Despite one's hitherto greenness of judgment at that innocent, fertile juncture, the abrupt and unexpected evaporation of a former companion's company, (and from that day to this) - never removed itself from my disillusioned mind - for children to perish, long before those who created and reared their respective progeny - just did not add up!

Life was never quite the same after this grave catastrophe, as time wore on, and with countless questions remaining unanswered, my father and I argued constantly regarding the spiritual ambiguity that inexplicably revolved around the theological principles of the Holy Catholic Church - plus the one-sided nature of Christian belief as a whole.

Consequently, some years later, I finally severed the-ties-that-once bound - and metaphorically-speaking, 'jumped-ship as a wet-behind-the-ears, 16-year-old during the early spring of 1967 - being at best, a socially, sexually and spiritless virgin - armed only with an imperceptive game-plan to uncover truth, unabashed veracity and inner fulfillment on the shores of Australia.

However, the far-reaches of the Antipodes were shortly to graphically divulge to me, man's inhumanity to man - and that of God's bogus legitimacy within the world order.



Once ingratiated within my new territory, and with meaningful and well-paying employment reassuringly secured, I contentedly dwelt on the top-floor of a three-story, colonial style accommodation on Alfred Street, a quaint, late 18th Century abode located at Milsons Point on the north shore of Sydney - situated near to both the famous 'Coat hanger' Bridge - and that of a large amusement arena known as 'Luna Park'.



As the weeks and months passed, I was becoming increasingly astonished by the speedy manner in which I had been seduced with life on the other side of the world, deliciously aided and

abetted by the presence of a new girlfriend, a vivacious Sydney-born ingénue who stole my heart at first glimpse.

Replete with intoxicating curvatures, if not occasionally reticent conversation-levels, yet those reflecting a joint common denominator with my own thought processes - and adorned with a skimpy, sartorial sense-of elegance, that same that sent my teenage testosterone levels sky-high, I was in heaven - within a week of relationship lift-off however, it was revealed to me that both she - and that of her widowed mother - in real terms, lived-out their respective existences in a superficial, near-empty continuation, locked in agonising purgatory - the consequences of a missing, uniformed sibling and son, lost somewhere, and for over 11-months, on a battlefield in Phuoc

Tuy Province, South Vietnam - the root of their indefinable despair.

During a balmy, dark, October night, shortly after our first meeting, my girl and I aimlessly meandered hand-in-hand through the narrow main streets of the thriving metropolis that is Sydney, during which she extensively expanded on the fullness of the family plight, my new-found love confessed that she had painfully reconciled herself to the dire corollary, that her only [elder] brother had expired within the palm groves of Long Tan in the August of '66, her mother on the other hand, could never bring herself to accept that conscripted 'Devlin', had needlessly perished on a south-east Asian battlefield, so far from home - without saying goodbye!

"Mum's" near-pathological rationale was based on the once straightforward, upbeat content

of her misplaced boy's letters, those of which continually stressed that he was positioned well-rear of the forward battle area - and, in his capacity as a mere trainee 'cook' to the Australian Infantry, the only implement he would be firing-up, was the large, military field ovens, in-situ to provide regular, hot, culinary sustainment for troops heavily engaged in the 'thick-of-it' - but these welcoming and regular testimonies of reassurance from a faraway, soldier son, unexpectedly ceased to arrive from late August of 1966!

Archie Mansfield had been a postman for over 17-years, the last six of which had seen his delivery duties tied to a large stretch of suburbia on the 'north-side' of the New South Wales capital city, a travail that never failed to enthuse the near-

balding, jovial barrel-chested, thirty-seven year-old distributor of bills and personal letters to all and sundry.

‘Arch’, as friends, colleagues and customers amicably referred to him, was widely viewed as a cordial, good-natured, cheery character, a father of four young sons and one well-acquainted with the majority of the populace that he was responsible to ‘over the bridge’ - as his bountiful Christmas tips annually alluded to!

In the months leading up to the imprecise ‘disappearance’ of a 21-year old, military, chef de cuisine, apprentice, Arch had become unwittingly drawn into a situation he both loathed and feared, in essence, the dreaded conveyance of specific brown-coloured, soulless, type-written envelopes, those of which had emblazoned across the top of

each rectangular paper shroud, the words, ‘Ministry of Defence-Australia’.

As the Asian hostilities picked-up their deplorable impetus across the mid to late sixties era, the volume of government communiqués to concerned members of Australian households - had inflatingly increased in worrying proportion - the net result being, that should such an otherwise unwanted dispatch from the Canberra-based administrative centre be addressed to a customer on a postman’s specific ‘patch’, this relay had to be forwarded immediately as a priority, and well before the scheduled-round of general mail distribution commenced, together with a signature from the [fearful] recipient of the ghastly consignment in question.

Since the Genesis of his unenviable obligation, Arch had ceased with his ubiquitous, joyful tradition of whistling as he worked, ergo; an otherwise high-pitched litany of tuneless clamor that erringly attempted to resemble the works of Sinatra, Como, Elvis and The Beatles - those of which had laughingly heralded the indisputable fact that one's letterbox was soon to contain a miscellany of letters, small packages and local paraphernalia, courtesy of the semi-musical gestures that signaled Arch's attendance in the neighbourhood.

In this, the nation's darkest hour since the threat of a Japanese invasion during WW2, it no longer seemed appropriate to unabashedly discharge whistling renditions of past and recent hit music - there was precious little

reason to do so during these uncertain and testing days.

Arch was too, painfully aware that the widowed lady who resided at No.11, had not received an exchange to her perpetual letter-writing to a conscripted child for several weeks, he of a mere 21 summers on Mother Earth, he who had reluctantly taken a ticket on an army national-service lottery only months earlier - and he who didn't wish to scoop the 'prize' on offer, thus; a potential one-way ticket to oblivion - yet, he grudgingly did so, along with thousands of other conscripted young men hailing from predominantly, Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

The puce-textured documentation that Arch held in his moistened hand on one hot and humid November morning of '66, that of which he was engaged to 'hand-



over' to the occupants of No. 11, would soon reveal the precise *raison d'être* behind the unclear correspondence famine from Vietnam - son and brother Devlin was deemed to be, 'Missing-in-Action - Feared Dead!'

I never experienced the privilege of meeting this brave young man - or to the mother who bore him, what I do know is that his grief-stricken matriarch, soon drew the curtains to her son's bedroom for the final time on the 17th of November 1966 - then unwavering locked the door to his sleeping chamber - never to be reopened during the course of her last four remaining years of life.

Over the days, weeks, months and years that followed the dutiful, if not reluctant postman's brief visitation to her home - a once healthy, outgoing, loving and effervescent, *materfamilias*, was gradually transformed into a

pitiable, reclusive and lost woman, one who only ventured out to the small veranda positioned to the front of her home on a vigilant, day-to-day basis, occupying a rickety wicker, well-worn chair, that which was strategically placed in a manner that would enable her to steadfastly, if not forlornly, gaze up the street in the direction of the close-at-hand railway station.

Yes, 'Dev' never said goodbye, consequently, within her aching, destroyed heart - and now out-of-tune psychological framework, she clung to the vexed credence that her boy would one day soon, proudly stride down the street in the direction of her outstretched arms and say, "hello Mum, I'm back!" - He never did!

For the second occasion in my life, I ruefully observed the appalling result of a child inexplicably lost to a parent - and

a disquieting self-absorption from the sickening alterations to a once-vibrant, devoted domestic fold - with closed drapes again, signifying a yearning for isolation and insularity from a mad world - and that of a indistinguishable God - 'Dev's' mother had undisputedly been cruelly robbed of her first-born - by them both!

No requiem mass or funeral service ever took place for a missing, possibly lost-forever combatant son and brother, unlike the immensely unfortunate household of my now long-deceased, prepubescent pal Hamish, those who, in the very least, held the corporeal remains of their mortally, mutilated child, albeit, one despairingly enclosed within a small wooden box - this was a 'privilege' not to be bestowed on the residents of No. 11 - the drawn curtains of their respective, tormented homes,

remaining as the sole similarity that existed between them.

In the run-up to my 20th birthday, some three years later, I re-lived the trauma of witnessing, on no less than five further occasions - the closing-of-the-curtains procedure being carried out by members of stricken domiciles - thus transmitting to the wounded communities, the incomprehensible calamity that another Australian son was irretrievably gone!

The Vietnam War, in my personal experience, claimed not merely the young lives of serving offspring, it had too, without mercy, snatched their remains - ultimately, a total of six young Aussie soldiers added their names to a dire detail of over 1300 international combatants who were never truly accounted for - either in their home-lands - or within the foreign territory in

which they were prematurely and murderously cut-down.

Many drapes and curtains were firmly drawn across the globe during the grief-ridden years, a dark hiatus then prevailed for those who remained - these gloomy, clothed barriers would eventually be parted again, yet for innumerable, surviving victims of the Asian conflict, the light would never return - mournful tenebrosity ultimately extinguishing the loving iridescence that once brilliantly shone between hundreds of families worldwide.

The First World War soldier and poet, Wilfred Owen, recalled the universal practice of drawing curtains and drapes in the line; 'And each slow dusk a drawing down of the blinds', in his nonpareil poem - 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'.

Come June of 1970, and as a newly-established citizen of Australia, I was soon to be informed of my own fate regarding conscription into the Australian Armed Forces - my mind soon becoming ravaged with torturous angst at the thought of my own mother, some 12000 miles away, having to draw her own curtains and lament the demise of yet another doomed youth - namely myself.

Ironically, my services to the lost cause that was Vietnam - were not required, however, I did become a member of the UK national militia - and remained so for over three and a half decades.

Throughout the duration of a long and unswerving commitment to soldiery - and having observed, whilst playing my part on operational duty, the grim consequences of inane, geo-political differences that existed

between vehement nations, no fallen soldier of ours was ever unaccounted for, each man was lifted from the battle arena and ultimately interred with military honour, dignity and respect, that befitting the hero's they all were.

Without ever being physically affected by the demands of contemporary warfare, I nevertheless failed to shake-off the memories of those soldiers who simply vanished on Vietnamese soil during the sixties and seventies - brothers-in-arms who paid the ultimate sacrifice - but never yielded the posthumous recognition they so richly deserved.

Come my official retirement of 2014 - and when pondering on how to best 'celebrate' the conclusion to a full and fascinating working life, and thus, positively confront the spectre of my melancholic gloom, I started

to toy with the idea of venturing across the remote regions of former Indochina, largely to visit some of the place names that had become familiar to those of us who could only watch the abhorrent ravages of the Asian Armageddon on television - and then attempt to glean from the surviving, former defenders of the Vietcong credo, what precisely happened to the missing allied warriors who never returned to their own homelands - dead or alive!

It took several weeks to orchestrate a meaningful *modus operandi* - hampered somewhat through the tedious task of securing visas - to not merely Vietnam, but that of Cambodia and Laos - thus giving me access to the wider and highly relevant areas of this once scorched corner of the planet.

With rucksack packed, camera and binoculars stored in one's hand luggage, that of which also contained my PC, an essential addition as this held a multitudinous volume of research that I had compiled in the approach to my day of departure - I came to occupy seat 28e on my Thai Airways flight to Bangkok via China, with a view to connecting to Hanoi, courtesy of a previously-booked Air Asia flight to the principle city of this ancient nation - and once upon a time, the most dangerous place on Earth.

Once aboard, I immediately quashed the notion that one was enthusiastically embarking on a well-earned vacation - in effect, my break from routine was actually a lifelong quest to uncover the truth - that concerning the fate of soldiers such as myself, yet those who

never made the road home - what I eventually uncovered was more than I ever bargained for!



"You will kill 10 of our men, and we will kill 1 of yours - and in the end, it will be you who tire of it."

(Ho Chi Minh)

Throughout my lengthy aeronautical sojourn eastwards, I reflected on days gone by, predominantly dwelling on the futility of war - in all my years as a soldier on the operational front, it has always proved incredibly difficult to determine precisely what good ever evolved from

armed conflict - the older I have become - and the more I attempt to vainly fend-off the ever-encroaching liberal tendencies that now sit precariously close to the periphery of my sense of reason, one is left in little doubt that there exists but a mere handful of organisations who unashamedly benefit from pan-global unrest; including; suspect governments, Arms dealers and international media being the main benefactors from any form of blood-letting, in any corner of the world.

The power of television to influence world events is manifest, I watched coverage of the Vietnam War from its near USA/Australian commencement, right through to the closing stages of the conflict, and equally, saw the massive relief - incredulity almost, that the long and hellish ordeal was finally coming to an

end - and then being sickened by the fallacious claims, with typical immodesty, by intercontinental television companies, that it was their wall-to-wall coverage that eventually forced the hands of the politicians - making it impossible for them to keep pouring American/Australian plentitude and soldiers blood into an unworthy and reprehensible struggle.

In stark contrast to these pointed assertions however, there was something credible in the networks claims. Graphic illustrations such as GI's setting fire to the roof of a grass hut, in the inane belief, inexplicably held by respective Command HQ's that villages had to be destroyed in order to 'save them'. Or pictures of soldiers smoking pot through the barrels of their rifles, or the interminable succession of body bags, each delivering the

unquestionable horror and human wastefulness of the war into the lounges of the outside world, none more so than the mothers, fathers, wives, sister and brothers of those tasked in assisting with the annihilation of an otherwise bunch of unskilled will-o'-the-wisp brigands - the same who would eventually overcome the military might of the most substantial Army in the world by refusing to comply to the rules of conventional warfare - not in their backyard!

As much as the politicians succumbed to the opposition of the war, whether they wanted to or not - the worldwide public's reaction to the televised coverage certainly contributed in achieving détente - it was finally over - the troops returned home and the politicians began to count the full cost of their heinous faux pas - and the TV cameras stopped

rolling - yet for over 1000 military personnel still trapped and imprisoned in Vietnam - their war continued - they were never to go home!

Before long, I was to discover the brutal truth behind their demise.



After giving myself a couple of days to recover from the draining effect of a prolonged and tiring journey to Far Eastern climes, that of which ferried me to Bangkok, then to Hanoi, I soon boarded train No. SE3 in the direction of HO Chi Minh City, some 1720kms south of Hanoi, but a pleasant, (overnight) rail transfer it proved to be, constructed along a national tracked route that is referred to as the Re-unification Railway Line, one that takes in some of

the most incredible sights in the entire world, there exists are a veritable feast of beautiful attractions such as, high mountains, verdant valleys, deep forests and of course, the ocean, namely, The South China Sea...as I gazed from my sleeper compartment across the magnificent scenery, it struck me as incomprehensible that such a sublime panorama was once compromised by warring nations, the tranquility that oozed from the natural sights that graced my eyes, seemed bereft of anything that suggested otherwise.



Ho Chi Minh City, (Formerly known as Saigon) is a vibrant and attractive metropolis, located far south in the former French colony, a bustling centre and one that was famous for its pivotal role in the Vietnam War. In modern times, it has retained much of the Gallic presence that once was, I was immediately struck by its resplendent, French colonial architecture, including that of the Notre-Dame Basilica and the neoclassical Saigon Central Post Office - the European 'feel' is quite intense when strolling through this intoxicating municipality - but familiarity with the western world is soon quashed when one enters the area known as the Ben Thanh Market - food stalls are packed and lined throughout the city streets, but nowhere more so than the aforementioned retail arena - my original aim hitherto, on this particularly hot, steamy

day, was to casually jaunt from train station to the War Remnants Museum, no more than a considered 30-minute stroll, but a gentle walk that failed to take into account the immense distraction of rattan and corrugated covered kiosks, those vending divine examples of Vietnamese cuisine - and for a rock-bottom tariff that was as inviting as the nutriment on offer.

My intended half-hour bid to reach the museum was prolonged by nearly three hours, torturously slowed by the allure of mouth-watering fare and that of my insatiable inability to resist temptation, to say little of the friendliness of the people who make-up this special community - and for their need to engage with a newly arrived son-of-Caledonia, I was overcome by the manner in which the populace wanted to meet and greet the 'new-kid-in-

town', it was good to talk - I certainly couldn't consume anymore noodles, chicken or spicy beef, but that was not an issue in their warm and reassuring eyes, simply to familiarise themselves with the outside world and a representative of it - brought with it a sizeable social profit that could not be gleaned on any other day - I was humbled.

On gazing at my wristed, Accurist timepiece, I politely severed my ties with the market people and hastily made strides along the busy conduit known as 'Vo Van Tan', racing against time to reach the museum before its doors closed for the day at 5pm - some 45 minutes hence!

With 20 minutes to spare, I finally entered the building and soon acquainted myself with its surroundings. This historical establishment was the prominent start point in my pursuit for

further knowledge regarding missing military personnel - and then to unearth those one-time Vietnamese combatants who could provide further assistance to my queries.

The museum specialises in military research, collecting, preserving and exhibiting the remnant proofs of Vietnam War crimes and their consequences. It was opened on the 4th of September in 1975 and welcomes over half a million visitors each year, attracting both Vietnamese and international tourists, including American and Australian nationals.



There exists within the walls of this special building, a mother-

lode of distressing artifacts and acutely hideous memorabilia connected to the war - that of which painfully introduced me to the stark realisation that no less than 134 journalists, from across 11 countries, also perished in their pursuit of journalistic endeavour. The catalogue of themes that are compressed within the museum cover a plethora of subject matter, none of which I hasten to add, glorify war or the final outcome of the fighting that occurred on Vietnamese terra firma, over four decades ago - this confirmed by a large framed testimony, unavoidably viewed as one crosses the threshold to the museum - thus; "The Museum Calls the Public to say 'NO' to War - and 'YES' to Peace for World People Solidarity".

I unhesitatingly concurred with this profound sentiment when

passing through this portcullis of my posterity - and soon met the man who was to guide me to a site where tourists seldom, if ever tread, many miles north into a dense, inhospitable jungle-based settlement, that of which told its own powerful story - all too vividly - one that led me to a consecrated corner of Vietnam - and Laos - those that hold the hidden, interred the remains of soldiers hailing from Perth to Pennsylvania - plus that of countless, innocent Vietnamese nationals, men, woman and children!

As I slowly meandered through the glassed conduits of the museum - and vainfully attempted to absorb the odiously explicit and agonisingly striking contents of the innumerable cabinets on show, including hateful items connected to aggressive war crimes and

imprisonment conditions during that accursed epoch, I came to recognise that the peaceful ambience that permeated throughout the building - was more to do with me being the only visitor who remained - all others had paid subservience to the listed opening and closing time and had subsequently left me, alone with my thoughts and utterly oblivious to the demands of the clock - thus; a rather large and delightfully ornate sphere of mechanical timekeeping, that of which hung proudly on the main wall of the establishment - undoubtedly a remnant of the days of French occupancy in this wonderful land - one that commenced life in a French railway station quite possibly - and one that was urging me to quickly quit one's engrossing perusal and evacuate the museum with immediate effect.

As I reluctantly headed for the exit, briefly pondering en-route as to what to do next with my day, or the remainder of it, I detected light footfall pacing directly behind me - my initial thoughts were that one of the several ushers employed within the museum, was possibly dissatisfied with the near-geriatric, unadventurous strides one was making towards one's point of egress - and had therefore opted to accompany me to the door in an assisted and all-together brisker fashion - as I turned in the direction of my stalker, I was met with the rather diminutive figure of a Vietnamese national of around my own age, I [incorrectly] ascertained - bespectacled, balding and beaming from ear-to-ear with an enormous smile, that of which drew to one's immediate attention that regular consultation with a competent

dentist had not been a huge feature throughout his entire existence - his personal denticulation being represented by a trio of near-blackened, well-worn pegs, those defiantly housed in his top gum.

“Parlez vous monsieur anglais”, he cheerfully offered, combined with a mild spray of saliva that must have been incredibly hard to contain during each and every occasion he uttered a word or statement - given the unprepossessing and regretful absence of the molars and incisors that once lodged within his skull, the light spritz that moistened my face when he firstly addressed me - could have resulted in an unwelcome reservoir of Asian spit being splattered across one's facial features - thankfully - and from many decades of practice I suspect, a possible torrent was

quelled by his undeniable oral aplomb whilst engaging in social intercourse.

In answer to his out-of-the-blue query, I responded in the affirmative, but strongly stressed that I was a Scot, not an Englishman, one that utilised the English language purely as a means of human communication - emphasising further that all comparisons with England ended there - he immediately burst into a spell of incredible, uncontrollable laughing, lasting the best part of a minute - “good, very good” he chortled in broken, yet sufficiently proficient English, “just like me, I’m no Thai or Korean - no a ‘fookin Chinky either, I’m Vietnameeeese-and I too very proud of that!” I instantaneously came to like him.

As it transpired, my small-scaled inquisitor on the day proved to be a fascinating human being, one

that simply went by the name of ‘M’, his mother, apparently, had set her heart on calling her son Minh, (meaning intelligence) yet the wider family disapproved of her choice of title for her second born, ultimately, she settled for ‘M’ as she couldn’t come up with another honorific that began with the afore-mentioned letter.

‘M’ confided that he quickly determined that I had been military man, largely through his first impressions of my gait and upright and muscular frame as I entered the museum - an astonishing analysis when one considers that I was nearing 65-years of age at that specific juncture - but an accurate assertion nonetheless - I inwardly applauded myself for maintaining a life-long gym regime and dedication to the game of golf, musing further that one may take the boy out of the army, but

never the army out of the boy, personal fitness being my mainstay - and long after my 'green suit' had been returned to the Quartermasters Department of one's final regiment.

Readers of my narrative thus far, could be easily forgiven for [wrongfully] assuming that 'M' represented the museum in a professional capacity, he certainly does not!!

'M' - in quintessential western speak, is what can be best described broadly, as an opportunist, or, dare I say, a hustler, one who could easily and misguidedly be considered as little more than a 'devil-may-care' guide, one bereft of true planning and principles regarding the tour travail he pledges to undertake with 'selected' members' of the customer ratio he regularly approaches within the halls of the museum - and on

a bi-monthly basis. Yet, as I was to emotionally learn, he was a million miles removed from that of some fast-talking prevaricator or fanciful fabricator of fact - his crinkled facial skin told its own story, each crevice and elongated line that adorned his semi-weary appearance - was not solely the result of a long existence under the ubiquitous and unforgiving Asian sun - but that of the agonies he had uninvitingly endured during the course of his torturous mortal coil.

With the doors of the museum firmly locked behind us, 'M' and I opted to sit on the steps directly to the front of the institution in order to continue our lengthy conversation - fuelled by endless cups of coffee, ('M' does not consume alcohol) courtesy of a nearby female vendor - plus that of two plastic dishes of a noodle-based substance that my late

mother would have referred to as a 'dogs-dinner' - yet, despite the suspect appearance of this rough and ready repast, 'M' ravenously gobbled down the entire fare with unrestrained rapture - if not a little unconvinced by my admission that I had eaten copiously only an hour or two earlier in the day - for a brief moment, his demeanor struck me as being mildly dejected by the refusal to join him in eating - some time later - and with the benefit of hindsight - I so wished that I had made at least a timid effort to share a little 'Bánh phở' in his company - a remiss decision that I now unreservedly regret - it was the gesture that was critical - and not the consumption of more noodles and beef - I scolded myself for this display of crass myopia - and for several days too, I reluctantly must add.

No matter the horrendous booty that filled this historical institution, I had unwittingly come across an individual who had actually lived through the appalling debacle that was the Vietnam War, a son, husband, father of three and farmer he once was, and his story crushed me - to say nothing of the journey that was soon to follow in his company.

As it transpired, 'M' revealed that he was in actual fact 76 years of age, one who was born and raised as one of five siblings, and then in-turn, he reared three of his own, together with his school-teacher wife in a village community that by went the name of Bến Súc, located deep in the Dầu Tiếng district, some 20 miles to the northwest of Saigon - During the early morning of the 8th of January, 1967, over sixty troop-carrying helicopters took

off from the Dau Tieng airstrip and deposited 420 soldiers right in the middle of Ben Suc.

The US military intelligence sources of that era decreed that Ben Suc was the headquarters for Vietcong control of the widely known 'Iron Triangle', and therefore, a legitimate military target - and one that had to be 'taken-out'.

The American soldiers who were tasked to infiltrate and ultimately take control of the village on that sultry, hot morning, had actually expected considerable resistance on arrival at this specific locality of military significance. Instead, they encountered only sporadic small arms fire. Following the brief battle that ensued, the villagers were immediately evacuated from their homes and taken to a new refugee camp at Phy Loi, near Phu Cuong.

The 1st Engineer Battalion of the 1st Infantry Division then moved into Ben Suc with ploughs, tank bulldozers, and a number of M-48 anti-mine tanks - and then leveled the entire village within an hour, thus destroying every home and building, the soldiers then continued to eradicate all evidence of the jungle habitat by bulldozing the mango, jackfruit and grapefruit fields that enveloped this now dead community.



In addition to this thorough raid by US Forces, miles of tunnels used by the Vietcong were also destroyed. Astonishingly, 'M' assured me that a mere two days

following this attack, the Vietcong were back in the area, re-building their destroyed stockade. What could not be rebuilt, nor returned, ever, were a wife and two daughters, lost to a simple farmer, one that had lived in constant fear of such an occurrence ever happening within his domain, the continued presence of the Vietcong in his village would ultimately draw in the might of the western military he constantly and scarily mused - when that brutal day unavoidably and finally arrived, the harrowing US charge transformed 6000 members of the surviving community, into confused, frightened and wounded civilians, displaced refugees - many becoming orphans, thus rendering the military consensus on pacification and “Search and Destroy” missions to a receptacle of utter waste and soldiery ineptitude.

When the noise of battle subsided and the helicopters and other forms of mechanised military hardware - along with countless numbers of innocent civilians, departed this once tranquil and abundant hamlet, ‘M’ sat by a nearby stream to nurse a severe wound to his right leg, hitherto, he had wrongfully figured, in a dazed, bloody, pain-ridden and tearful state, that his entire brood of three children, along with a 27-year-old wife, had been removed from their ancestral home on that loathsome day, he then detected the sound of tormented groaning and a child’s pitiful weeping close to where he lay - as he desperately crawled along the bank of the waterway to uncover the source of the distress, ‘M’ was soon met with the mortally wounded frame of his eldest child, Chinh, a son of eight years, one who had wandered down to the stream to

collect water just prior to the earlier attack - and one who had sustained a bullet wound to his infantile chest during the violent melee that occurred only a couple of hours earlier.

Chinh, despite the magnitude of his injury, clung to life for three more days, when the Vietcong forces returned to his village 48-hours after the US clash with their resilient foes, 'M' pleaded for a medical representative to come forward to assist in his child's plight, yet little regard was shown to the stricken youngster, other than a disinterested and medically unsophisticated explorative investigation to remove a large chunk of shrapnel from the dying child - the result of which led to his passing within minutes of the bamboo-speared excavation into his crushed ventral plate.



To this day, 'M' carries in a small locket draped around his neck; the same piece of shrapnel that claimed the life of his young son over 48 years ago, the only remnant remaining of a life previously lived. As he talked and unconsciously fondled the offending piece of steel that sat within the mini-casket on the gold chain, he caught sight of my somber attention to the distressing metal nugget - and then with dexterous slight of hand, speedily freed it from its encasement and invited me to examine it more closely. Irrespective of the intense heat that permeated throughout the

city centre during our now near-maudlin discourse, that small mass of murderous crystalline was a strangely cold - as with everything it represented - indisputably chilling.

I soon started to quiz 'M' on his apparent lack of bitterness when re-telling of the atrocities that so consumed his life, "I forgive, I forgive" he repeatedly stated, adding further that it was a stupid war and that he was not alone in his sense of Herculean loss, the bloodshed pertaining to the Vietnam War had caused pain and misery to many other loved ones across the globe, in his profound opinion, "From Saigon to Sydney to Sacramento, we who survived, all cried the same tears and shared the same heartache, stupid war, stupid 'fookin war', I'm 'no' alone in my situation, but that's why I do this, I never forget, my family must have this,

it's my duty to them". I struggled to contain my own tears during his determined and unabashed confession.

As we bade each other goodnight - and with firm plans in-place to meet up the following morning in order that I may accompany 'M' to visit a number of sites that bore testimony to the horrors of days gone by, I cursed myself for displaying uncharacteristic emotion on a scale that he seemingly struggled to comprehend, why oh why had I become so sentimental and distressed when he had so comfortably - and in an all-together composed non-retaliatory fashion, graphically exuded his terrible recollections, without evidenced of deep-seated hatred?

I guess I have evolved into an incurable cynic regarding the ever-increasing sentimental, if

not the hypocritical Western climate in which we exist these days, thus seeing me living within a 'rush-to-gush' social atmosphere where there is great premium on displayed emotion, that which it's good to be seen to emote. Yet, it disturbs me when some 'stick-insect' models or 'one-hit' wonder pop star divas, so-called, lends their presence, as an example, to the inhumane struggles endured within some failed African state, per se, sartorially dressed down and bereft of the make-up that enhances their otherwise plain facial appearance, they who pounces on a photo opportunity to be snapped holding a baby dying of AIDS or starvation, they are possibly undertaking a valuable service to a more than worthy cause, but at my age, I always remain unequivocally skeptical when looking at such media opportunism, one is never

lost to the undeniable fact as to the benefits of the photo shoot for the 'celeb' in question

I have therefore become hardened and possibly disparaging to those who attempt to extol moral vanity on critical and life-taking issues - yup, when the lights go out and the 'players' return to the remote comforts of their newly acquired 21st century lifestyle, any semblance of relief or liberty from their brief presence in under-privileged lands, seldom appears to alleviate the inherent struggle for survival in destitute nations.

As I laid my head on my pillow late that special evening, I recognised that I had softened in my otherwise draconian and skeptical stance on matters of the heart - I am no 'celeb' and I did not seek financial remuneration or public recognition from this new-found relationship with a

victim of earlier day terror - as my eyes started to close at the conclusion of a rather long and testing day, I subserviently submitted to the call of Morpheus, wearily sensing that what I was about to experience over the time that was soon to follow, would stay with me for the remainder of my life - it shall indeed!

Come 6.30am the following morning, 'M' and I were underway, tightly squeezed into his beat-up and incredibly uncomfortable 2CV Citroen motor car, heading in the direction of the Củ Chi district of Saigon, slightly less than a 60-minute drive in his beloved jalopy - yet a journey time that would have been comfortably halved in a more contemporary mode of transport. As we cruised towards the site of the infamous Củ Chi tunnel network, my guide

informed me that the underground conduits used by the Vietcong were initially utilised in order to evade American and Australian forces during the elongated course of the war, adding further that some of the fiercest and bloodiest battles took place in the intensely humid and utterly harrowing confines of these underground passages.

Furthermore - and contrary to popular belief, the tunnels in question were originally created during the 1940s, many years prior to the Vietnam War that was, and were principally designed to combat and annihilate the occupying French troops of that earlier and equally barbaric epoch.

As we neared our intended destination, I reminded 'M' of my need to secure information on those soldiers who were slain by their jailors and never returned

to their homelands - “yes, yes” he replied in mild agitation, “All in my plans for you today, no worries...but it is not going to be nice for you I think”, he ruefully concluded.



When one fully examines the tunnel infrastructure at Củ Chi, one is left in no doubt that the subterranean enclaves of Vietnam were a highly sophisticated arrangement of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines, positioned well below ground level and near impenetrable, housing, headquarters, kitchens, food stores, rest areas, hospitals, armories and ventilation systems - the latter of which provided an

early-warning of approaching US helicopters and other mechanised forms of military transportation.



The entrances to the tunnels are too, incredibly small and narrow - and it takes a keen eye to identify their points of entrance and egress - in addition, it also takes a very small human frame, replete with the waist size of an average 8/10 year old child, to descend into these former centers of Vietcong command and control.

To the outsider, and even - it has to be said - to some historians, it is inexplicable that the Vietcong - and those who commanded their military forces for the duration of the war in these unforgiving

jungle conditions, still merit re-assessment of their overall tactics, intertwined with insatiable interest and intense curiosity worldwide, of which I am no exception.

On the face of it, the Vietcong were hardly paragons of military astuteness or virtue - they were a savage, barbaric and unforgiving assembly of brigands, but this shallow assertion of 'Charlie' - misses the point to a large degree.

The Vietcong were a one-off - and shall remain so, particularly in comparison to the Islamic cowards who blight our planet present day - and most that preceded them. Similar to those they faced on the battlefield, they were incredibly brave, (near-suicidal) well-organised members of a national militia who reacted violently to inane decisions reached on Capitol Hill,

located in a land far away from their own. - this in stark contrast to the people they actually are, that being, warm, welcoming and utterly weary of discussions on war, even those who were not old enough to understand fully the affliction and torment endured by all who participated in an unwinnable conflict of decades past - fail to experience even a modicum of comfort when the distasteful subject of the conflict is raised in conversation - one senses that to venture into detailed dialogue with Vietnamese nationals on matters pertaining to the war, that one is hitting a nerve, simply too painful to dabble with - 'M' was the exception to an obvious hypersensitive societal rule - and for that I was grateful.

Following nearly three hours of strolling across the area of the tunnels, and with 'M's running

commentary continuing to ring in my ears, we once again jumped into the car and headed in a northerly direction along a bumpy series of back roads, before long, these otherwise, semi-satisfactory highways, soon transformed into little more than well-worn tracks, illustrating all too vividly that the vehicle in which we travelled was in sore need of mechanical attention to its shock absorber system, by the time we alighted from the antiquated automobile, I mused on the distressing actuality that my backside had not felt such villainous malaise since the 1950s - essentially during that period when my father considered that I warranted yet another assault with his belt for whatever transgression - no matter the intense heat and humidity of the location I found myself in, and being engulfed in an area that was uncomfortably overgrown

with dense forest and tangled vegetation, and inhabited with armies of airborne insects and Asian arthropods, those that immediately took to my flesh with appreciative zeal - just to secure liberty from 'M's vintage carriage, was Utopia indeed, irrespective of the draining meteorological conditions that intensely prevailed during that mid-morning in May.

Once parked up in a jungle clearing, my guide suggested that we walk in a single line fashion down and along the route he had opted to take, it was at best - a sheer drop into oblivion - dangerously steep and lacking any credible evidence that human kind had ventured into the location since Buddha was but a slip of a lad, I inwardly applauded myself for accepting 'M's invaluable advice the previous evening, thus stressing the

importance of sturdy footwear and light clothing for our expedition, plus that of copious amounts of drinking water - I carried no less than 4 quarts of liquid with me that day, on reaching the foot of the treacherous incline which we carefully traversed, my water supply had been reduced to that of a meager dribble, my sweat loss was incredible - the man that paced ahead of me in an incredibly spritely manner - swinging his sharpened machete with sang froid expertise to create a continual clearing - was one who belied the fact that he had lived well over seventy summers in this testing and uncongenial terrain - yet one who did not sip a single drop during our long descent - I was in awe! Unbeknown to me at that moment in time, 'M' had drawn us into a location that was not

too far from his home of earlier days, within this locality, we soon stumbled on forgotten military relics from decades previous.

Just prior to reaching the site in question, the full glory of the forest was revealed to me in the birthstone bright light that seeped through the jungle canopy, I was indeed ensconced within another world. The mighty almond-brown trees stood magnificent and serenely- and their crusty exteriors, helped by the first blushes of a new day, gave them a green-going-to-gold complexion, none to dissimilar to the horticultural changes that one sees as late summer transforms into autumn in the country of my birth.

As we strode past the many suede-soft flowers en-route to our intended rendezvous point, I caressed them gently and received a strange, but not

unpleasant sensation of tingles as I did so - my ears then perked up at the metallic, tinkling sound of a close-at-hand stream, confirming that our destination was a mere stones-throw away, I then caught sight of the narrow rivulet to my left, it flashed with a tinsel tint through the heavy lace of leaves, a majestic sight, appearing as a polished mirror of silver, a shiny spillway, bordered with chalk white boulders, that of which were embedded in deep pillows of moss.

As we continued a little further down the restricted track that now ran adjacent to the babbling brook, the rapidity of the water flow appeared to increase in speed, causing a rocky gurgling as water met with stone, emitting sounds that can be best described as swishes, clunks and clops.

I was becoming intoxicated with the natural feast that graced my

eyes - sight and smell vied for my attention in this enriching dream world, together with its sweet fragrances, alluvial and palliative - delightfully soothing the pain of my previously numb rear-end and aching knees - it was at this juncture I wanted to scream long and hard in a skywards direction - in a futile attempt to shake God from his inexplicable slumber to explain his lack of attention to detail - or pitiful justification for a job 'half done' on this troubled planet he allegedly created - the peace and tranquility that oozed from this small corner of a south east Asian jungle was an all-too-rare experience for the vast bulk of his supposed creations..."Where did it all go so wrong for mankind", I solemnly deliberated - poor management on an absent Jehovah's behalf, I bitterly surmised.

The conclusion of our downwards trek on this stage of the journey was heralded by ‘M’, raising his trusty machete above his head and wearily stating that we had arrived - “You rest mistah, take water and then we go in”. Go to precisely where I couldn’t fathom-out as there was nothing to be seen other than the aforementioned jungle spectacle - I chose not to remonstrate with his proposal - in fact, I enthusiastically complied and placed my back against an upright boulder, with head nestled on a mossy mound that adorned it. My eyelids soon closed, allowing one’s stream of consciousness to take hold and transfer one across the threshold of infinity - the memory of that soft and peaceful interlude still lingers today, I could have slept for many hours if not for an interruptive prodding on my shoulder, “Time to go in mistah, you wake up now”.



I wearily raised myself from my makeshift sleeping position and followed behind ‘M’ - for no more than a hundred yards, he then parted a final curtain of foliage -



We had stepped back in time, to an era when the paradise in which I then stood, had descended into an abyss of death and destruction, many years ago - and where the jungle had, over time, hidden and enveloped evidence as to the existence of

former jungle dwellers - what did remain was the broken tools and the effects of their repellent presence during the Vietnam War.

Shortly after commencing on this phase of my journey, 'M' suggested that we stop for a while in order to consume some sustenance before continuing further, my senses told me that my elderly guide was beginning to feel the strain - but had driven on [relentlessly] in order to secure his \$US40.00 tour fee - a paltry sum by western standards, but a veritable, financial windfall by his own. We soon occupied a well-shaded corner of our new location, wearily positioning ourselves under a large, woody perennial plant that is referred to by local inhabitants as the 'Sao Den Tree', a hardwood species that provided villagers in earlier times, with a highly durable trunk

in which to carve hulls for their fishing boat fleets.

As we each consumed a bowl of spicy soup, that of which was provided by a diminutive, painfully frail and antiquated [female] member of the jungle residency, this somewhat frugal, if not incredibly tasty fare, immediately reignited conversation between 'M' and me.

"You 'guv-a-ment' mistah - you wok for guv-a-ment? I was mildly surprised by the question put to me by 'M', I, after all, had earlier revealed to him that I had served as a professional soldier and had represented my own government for many years in a uniformed capacity. As I again stressed this point, my host impatiently responded by saying; "No, no, not you guv-a-ment, my guv-a-ment?" In order to quell further the apparent angst that

now consumed my companion, I again emphasized the circumstances behind my mission - and that he should be under no illusion regarding the sole, private aims of my draining quest.

On taking receipt of this unabashed utterance -twinned with the genuine honesty that accompanied the riposte, 'M' laid down his empty bowl beside the machete sheath, then blew out his cheeks and completed the action by taking a deep intake of breath.

"I lie to you mistah, I no forgive any people, they all 'fooking' bad, they kill my 'familee', they kill me, I dead for long, long time - I hate all people who did this to me - no the Yankee's, no the Aussie's, I hate commie's - they still here, must be safe by no saying much to wrong people - you 'understan'?

I nodded silently in 'M's direction, engaging his eyes as I did so, registering that he was a victim, not merely a fortunate survivor of the unquestionable horrors that had claimed everything dear to him, but a near-anonymous casualty of a war that no one really understood - belonging to a loathsome, far distant epoch of which few in the contemporary world can possibly remember - nor wish to!

Yet, 'M' remembered all too well the Armageddon - and graphically delineated to me, during that hellishly hot and humid day, his own personal account of the inferno that was the Vietnam War - I determined that he had waited a long time to ultimately find psychological release with a trusted source - he had found it - or me, more to the point.

Some hours following the death of his young son, and with his

remains interred in some makeshift hole on the jungle floor 'M' speedily recognised that the invading forces of the north, that of which now occupied his near destroyed village, were not in a mood to tolerate the presence of anyone other than those who made up their own numbers, he therefore decided to flee the burnt-out surroundings that once represented his home environment and make for a safer haven, somewhere in the American sector - wherever that was, he [erringly] selected a northerly route as this was the direction that most of the US aircraft were coming from during their now-incessant bombing raids.

As he struggled to venture towards liberty in the direction of a dense and unforgiving jungle, together with a injured and now seriously infected leg wound, it

dawned on him that he had not been afforded the opportunity to provide his deceased son with a fitting farewell in accordance with his theological beliefs - in effect, he had bid a reluctant 'goodbye' to his boy only hours before - and for the final time - with only a small metal nugget to remember him by - he vowed that he would never part with it!

For more days than he can recall, 'M', now a lost and lonely fugitive in a dangerous and unforgiving tropical rain forest arena sensed that his own demise was imminent. Having strapped his injured left leg with inadequate bamboo sheaths, he was soon incapable of staying on his feet, the pain that ravaged his entire body had rendered him incapable of limping on any further - so he crawled, he crawled for approximately two days before eventually being found by the

‘Pathet Lao’, the Laotian equivalent of the communist Viet Cong - He had unwittingly entered Laos.

Once apprehended by his captors and being informed as to his precise location, ‘M’ quickly determined that he had covered over 200kms since embarking on his escape route, several weeks earlier, now starving, dehydrated and dangerously emaciated, he silently wept and asked of his God, to quickly snuff out his life, he had no more to give - but his orison went unanswered - ‘M’ was to live on to both witness and [ultimately] survive the most bestial and barbaric excesses known to mankind.

The members of the Pathet Lao militia took him captive and dragged him on a makeshift wheel-less trolley through more jungle. Each night, he was tied spread-eagled on the ground to

four stakes, to stop him from escaping. Each morning, his face would be so swollen from mosquito bites he was unable to see, but far worse was to come. After an early escape attempt, ‘M’ was picked up by his guards at a jungle water hole. This was when the real torture began.

“I had escaped from them - and they wanted to get even,” ‘M’ mournfully recounted. They would hang him upside down by his ankles, with a nest of biting ants over his face, until he lost consciousness. At night, they suspended him in a freezing well so that if sleep came, he feared he would drown. Other times, he was dragged by water buffalo through villages, his guards laughing as they goaded the animal with a whip.

Bloodied and broken, with fear of gangrene to his injured limb being a constant worry, he was

asked by Pathet Lao officials to sign a document condemning America, but he refused, so the torture intensified. Tiny wedges of bamboo were then inserted under his fingernails and into incisions on his body to grow and fester; the appalling scars of his physical persecution remain clearly visible to this day.

“They were always thinking of something new to do to me, I so wished for death”. “M’ recalled the night when one of the intensely cruel Vietcong jailers tied a rope tourniquet around his upper arm. He then placed piece of wood into the bind, and twisted and twisted until his nerves cut against the bone. My hand was no good for six months”, he dejectedly summarised, gently stroking his now-near withered left hand as he did so.



After some weeks, ‘M’ was handed over to the even fiercer branch of the Viet Cong. As they marched him through a village en-route to the prison camp, a man stole the metal nugget that claimed the life of ‘M’s son, he desperately complained to his guards of the theft, they soon found the culprit and summarily chopped-off both his hands with a machete - then threw him aside like a soiled rag, throwing back the small chunk of shrapnel to their horrified captive, namely, ‘M’. “I know right there and then that you don’t screw around with the ‘fookin’ Viet Cong,” he mournfully added.

Ultimately, 'M' arrived at the designated destination: a Viet Cong/Laotian prisoner of war camp, located many miles from civilisation as he knew it "I had been looking forward to stopping," he [ironically] said. "I was tired, hungry, and thirsty and so wanted to stop being dragged by 'Charlie' through the jungle." What he initially came to see horrified 'M' - his weariness immediately subsided the very moment he laid eyes on the first prisoner who came into view - An American officer adorned in military rags - barefooted and aimlessly carrying his intestines around in his hands - he died shortly afterwards.



Within moments of his arrival at his new place of confinement, 'M' was thrown into a large metal box, similar in design a shape to that of a modern-day shipping container. Ensconced within this hellishly hot torture chamber, lay 11 other prisoners, a mixture of Thai and Vietnamese nationals, plus a brace of Americans, presumably, downed pilots, one of which had no teeth, the direct result of constant pleading with fellow inmates to knock-out his rotting denticulations with a rock and shaft of bamboo, a draconian action to release a reservoir of poisonous pus that had built-up in his gums over many months of

dental neglect - in actual fact, the occupants of the 'oven' had been held as prisoners by the Vietcong for over two years!

Within the horrid confines of his prison - and several weeks after his capture - 'M' sensed that food was beginning to run out, his leg wound was now healing but his stomach was empty...as with the remaining group who shared the cramped metal cabin.

Subsequently, tensions between the incarcerated population soon grew, they were now facing famine and unavoidable starvation - before long, 'M' and his fellow inmates were provided with a single, heaped bowlful of rice to share, (An entire day's food ration} their guards on the other hand, would stalk deer and then remove the grass from the slain animal's stomach and present to the prisoners as an additional means of sustenance -

the guards then roasted the carcass on an open fire and devoured it accordingly, in direct line of sight of those who were dying of starvation.

For 'M' and his fellow prisoners', the only "treats" on offer were snakes they occasionally caught from the communal latrine, or the rats that lived under their hut which they could spear with sharpened bamboo spears. Nights brought their own misery. The men were handcuffed together and shackled to medieval-style foot blocks. They suffered chronic dysentery, yet were made to lie in their excrement until the following morning.

Following several months of inhumane torture, 'M' and one of the Thai prisoners, overheard the guards talking.

They, too, were starving and just wanted to return to their respective villages. They planned

to march the captives into the jungle, and shoot them, pretending they had tried to escape. One of the US service personnel convinced the others that now was the time to make a move - He explained to me that the stronger prisoners intended to overpower the now meager guard-force at lunchtime, (Only seven guards were in place during the day by this point) when they put down their rifles to take food. They ascertained that there were precisely ten minutes in the day when they could effectively strike.

During that brief interval, they had to somehow release all prisoners from their shackles. When the day finally arrived, the cook yelled 'chow time' and then 'M's' handcuffs were removed in order that he may attend to his daily duties in and around the food preparation area. With heart

pounding; he slipped through a loosened fence adjacent to the waste area, out of sight of his captors, he then went on to seize a large bunch of keys, three rifles and a number of belts of ammunition.



He ran back into the camp with his booty, dropping two of the weapons as he did so, but thankfully, these fell fairly close to the main cellblock he was making for, a run-down concrete structure that housed a number of Australian prisoners - those who he had rarely laid eyes on during his confinement - but those who always appeared as the most able to instigate the initial

breakout - always the most vocal too!

On entering the building, 'M' passed the remaining rifle in his possession, together with all the ammunition he had acquired, through a food hatch, an aperture that was positioned centrally in each cell door. The recipient of this mini-arsenal, a tall but gaunt, deeply undernourished Australian serviceman, immediately grabbed the firearm and bullets and roused the others that shared his cell - then loudly yelled to 'M' to stand well back, he intended to blow the door-lock with the rifle now in his control - he duly did so, the noise that emitted from the weapon was ear-shattering, to say little of the wood splinters, dust and debris that completely enveloped the entire area. 'M' screamed to the Australian personal that two more weapons lay on the ground

just outside - together with the bunch of keys that he had dropped whilst racing to the prison building - the keys remained on the dusty surface - but the guns were soon in the possession of the now, semi-liberated Antipodean prisoners - then, all hell broke loose. 'M' opted to remain within the cellblock during the inevitable conflict that transpired outside - more scared than he had ever been during the course of his entire lifetime - he then vomited and retched repeatedly, not knowing what was occurring only feet from where he lay - he remained in his crouched position for over 8 hours, only lifting himself when silence was absolute - when the gunfire had subsided and no hint of voices could be heard from the outside of his fragile sanctuary.

As he reluctantly exited the cellblock, the full moon gave off an iridescence of floodlight magnitude, enabling 'M' to scan most of the camp landscape with relative visual ease. Scattered across the central area of the encampment, lay a number of dead bodies, seven of which were the Laotian/Vietcong guards, plus that of the cook, he being quite dead, sustaining bullet wounds to both the head and chest regions of his anatomy - yet, still brandishing a steely machete, tightly clenched in his right hand, defiant even in death. The other cadavers that lay strewn across the central ground, approximately fifteen in total, were those of the inmates who had, through utter exhaustion, failed to reach freedom, some dying from bullet wounds, the majority from lacerations received to their emaciated

frames from machete's and sharpened knives various.

As 'M' attempted to count the dead that surrounded him, primarily to ascertain how many had actually survived the forlorn escape bid, he detected movement to his immediate right, some ten yards from his position, in the flickering light from under a tree - he caught sight of one of the presumed Vietcong dead, moving - and groaning as he did so. 'M' approached the fallen guard and bent down to recover a pistol that was positioned only inches from the dying man. He then raised the weapon and placed its barrel into the open mouth of his former captor - and pulled the trigger - he never handled a firearm again.

Oddly as it may seem to those of us who have never endured such bestial viciousness, 'M' confessed to me that he was overcome with

hunger pangs of no equal; and this only moments after the 'mercy' killing of the guard - he was a different specimen now, hardened beyond compare, with his family 'gone', as with his home and small holding far in the south destroyed - and utterly alone in a world that had seemingly forgotten him - he was also starving - nourishment was now the priority - he then stealthily moved in the direction of the camp kitchen.

'M' consumed the remains of rice in the bowls of the surprised and now deceased guards, contained within these wooden containers was evidence of some meat ingredient - snake he suspected - yet, the hot spice that infused the cooked animal flesh in question - and despite the fact that this source of nutrient was stone cold, 'M' devoured every grain of rice and each sinew of

meat that was now freely available to him - the net result of ingesting such a plethora of food led to more vomiting - with his deflated stomach unable to cope with the windfall of sustenance that had descended into the lower reaches of his digestive system - food brought a continuance of life - but over-indulgence to a deprived belly nearly brought death - an ambiguous irony of no parallel - but distressful reality nonetheless.

He then drank copiously from a substantial, natural reserve of water, that of which the Vietcong had been using to quench their thirst, and then storing the liquid that trickled from a jungle chamber of porous rock in both metal and stone containers - bodily scrubbing for the Vietcong militia however, being addressed solely by the availability of a

nearby stream, without soap or any other bodily cleaning aid to cleanse - this measure denying the enemy to determine the precise location of Vietcong legions, those strategically deployed deep within the rain forest environment.

Surrounded by dead bodies that now totaled no less than fifty, 'M' nevertheless opted to remain within the confines of the kitchen until dawn, then make a break southwards, once again through the thick vegetation and undergrowth that he had been dragged through by the Pathet Lao militia, several months before - the Vietcong, in his opinion, would all too soon, descend on the camp and restore the former stronghold, wiping out those who did not subscribe, or fit the communist credo - how astute he was.

Come day-break, 'M' speedily embarked on a task to prolong his life, just a little longer, by firstly stripping the shirt, trousers and footwear from a deceased, yet surprisingly, easily manipulative guard, one who had either passed through the rigor mortis stage prematurely - or one that had succumbed to death considerably later than 'M' had originally determined.

Once adorned in his 'fresh' attire, 'M' plucked a fly-infested, headless chicken from a rusty hook that overhung the food preparation area - then enclosed the long-dead bird within a composition of green leaves and thick grasses that sprouted abundantly throughout the forest - held together by the laces of the footwear of a fallen Vietcong soldier - the same of which enabled him to craft a satchel to place across his shoulder - thus

allowing for the conveyance of a small quantity of water - he may have been dying - but he was not yet dead!

As he quietly and respectfully tip-toed over the many deceased that greeted his every step en-route to the camp egress, 'M' faced an abhorrent and undeniable truth in that he was the only one to come out of it all alive.

But escape brought its own torments. As he wearily trundled on through, 'M's feet soon transformed into white, mangled stumps from trekking across the dense jungle, the flimsy fabric of his footwear soon yielded to the saturated conditions of the jungle, leaving him, before long, with only one shoe to wade through the incredibly long and arduous trek that lay ahead - he strapped the existing shoe with

rattan and alternated its use for a few minutes respite.

Following several days of trudging through the dark, dank undergrowth - and with rations depleted and little drinking water available to him, 'M' finally decided to just lie down and die. He sensed that many Vietcong soldiers surrounded him; there was sufficient evidence on the jungle floor to suggest they were present, small tracks of flattened grass created by a single-file procession of military personnel being a major indication. If he was once again intercepted by the communist forces - he would die at their hands for sure. He therefore crawled into a small jungle hollow and covered himself with sufficient foliage to camouflage his withered and exhausted frame - and slept, not expecting to wake, but he

eventually did so, to the sound of rushing, gurgling water.

Heavy rains to the north of the country during previous days, had transformed a narrow stream into a torrent, 'M' had not detected the sound of a river as he laid his head to rest, several hours earlier, the rainwater was still cascading down from the mountainous region of the country, many miles distant from where he was positioned - but the raging waters had now arrived - creating a highway to freedom, 'M' immediately sensed that the fast-moving river would flow into the Mekong Delta, which in turn would ferry him over the border into Thailand - and safety.

As he considered his options, 'M' determined that he was just too weak to construct a raft or similar platform to float downstream on what was now, extremely ferocious rapids, he also had no

wish to create unnecessary noise, that of which would only draw attention to his presence and into the hands of the prowling Vietcong.

'M' gazed forlornly at the ever-widening cascade of water - he dejectedly conceded that his chance to finally break loose was gone - he then spied a large tree trunk moving speedily along the concourse, then another, and another, pretty soon, there appeared a vast number of fallen trees, all casualties of the massive force of descending torrents that raced through the jungle from higher ground.

He leapt from the bank and straddled the trunk of a tree that had come closest to his position; 'M' would cover more miles in the space of an hour than he did over the course of an entire week whilst crawling through the near impenetrable conditions of days

earlier. Yet, his passage downstream was also filled with much danger and frightening uncertainty, the water flow became incredibly fast, and at times, 'M' struggled to maintain a positive grip on his 'getaway' vehicle, his legs too were being crushed by other large fallen trunks, those that rammed into him at each bend in the river. On one of the banks that he passed by, he spotted a number of Vietcong soldiers standing at the water's edge, totally immersed in the natural spectacle that was evolving before them - they failed to identify with the fact that one of the floating logs was carrying a passenger - 'M' started to believe that liberty from war-torn Vietnam was achievable - time would soon tell, but time was a resource that was running out for him.

As the river slowed in pace, many miles distant from the area that 'M' initially embarked on his nautical quest for freedom, he managed to get close to a part of the river bank that was not too steep, and slid from the timber conveyance to reach relatively dry and untroubled land. He was now weak, so weak that he could barely muster the energy to scale the few feet to the top of the bank - yet did so after becoming motivated by the sight of a well stocked banana tree, only a few yards from his muddy position at riverside.

With the aid of a fallen branch and around 30 minutes of frustrating prodding, the banana tree eventually parted with a large bunch of its long curved fruit, the cluster of plantains landed at 'M's feet with a resounding thud - he then started to ravenously consume the soft,

pulpy flesh of more bananas than he could possibly recall - he had not eaten for five days. In addition, the attack on the banana tree had stirred one of its sleepy house-guests, a medium size snake, that of which appeared somewhat agitated by 'M's' unwelcome intrusion - within moments, the viper had managed to address the problem of the next meal, it was swiftly killed and placed in a small haversack, that of which contained the metal projectile that claimed the life of his son, so many months before.

'M' knew that he had little more to give; his only hope was to ascend a nearby hillock some two hundred yards away, then rest at the clearing on its apex and await rescue - or death! This was to be his final resting place, whatever the outcome. As he slept on the crest of the rise, he dreamed of

his wife, son and two daughters - it was a beautiful dream.

Flying low over the dangerous and impenetrable Laotian jungle on a bombing mission against the Vietcong, a U.S. Air Force Colonel saw a lone figure waving to him from a clearing below.

He continued on his flight path, but ten minutes later - puzzled that a native in this hostile terrain would try to attract his attention - he decided to turn back for another reconnaissance of the area. This time, he saw the letters 'HELP' spelt out on a rock. Beside them stood an emaciated man dressed in rags, waving the remains of a dark shirt over his head and signaling desperately.

The pilot radioed his headquarters, who told him that no Americans had been shot down in the area, and instructed him to carry on. But the man continued waving, mouthing over and over

again: “No leave, no leave me please.”

Eventually, at the pilot’s insistence, two rescue helicopters were scrambled. Dropping a cable down to the frantic figure, they winched him on board. Fearful that he could be a Vietcong suicide bomber, the crew pinned the five and half stone man to the helicopter deck and searched him - his satchel turned out to contain only a half-eaten snake and a small metal nugget.

Almost beyond speech, the man whispered to the crew that he was a farmer from the south and that he had lost his wife and children to the fighting, adding further that he had been a prisoner of the Vietcong and escaped from a Laotian Jail, Before passing out, he uttered the words - “Please take me home.”

‘M’ had been missing, presumed dead, for 15 months, and subjected to barbaric torture at the hands of his captors. But, plotting his getaway shortly after the attempted breakout, he escaped his prison by sheer force of will, surviving in the world’s fiercest wilderness with primal tenacity as death stalked his every step.

‘M’ was taken to Da Nang Hospital in Vietnam for treatment, where he was interrogated by, “lots of people in uniform”, all wanting to learn more about the precise location of the camp in which he was imprisoned, along with the American and Australian military personnel who shared the same suffering, they repeatedly asked for the names of the servicemen in question, “Were they Rangers, were they Pilots, were they Infantry? ‘M’ could only recall the name of one the western soldiers;

one who went by the title of 'Bluey' he being the lofty individual who 'M' passed the first seized rifle through a cell door.

At night, however, and for many months following his release from hospital, 'M' was tormented repeatedly by awful terrors and had to be tied to his bed. In the end, his friends put him to sleep in a large cot surrounded by pillows, positioned in the corner of a small sleeping chamber "It was the only way that I felt safe," he said.

The image that haunted 'M' related to the 'pot' - this being a large wok in which those prisoners who failed to curry favour with their jailors, found themselves thrown into - and then fried alive in scorching palm oil. The screams that rang out from the section of the camp where the horrible instrument of

unthinkable torture was carried out, shall remain with my guide for the remainder of his existence on Mother Earth.

He never returned to farm the land, opting to remain in the big city, undertaking a vast range of jobs spread over four decades, ranging from market vendor to city cab driver. On the 27th of June, 1977, 'M' was informed that his wife and daughters had perished around the 12th of February 1968, shortly after the commencement of the disastrous 'Tet Offensive.' No remains were ever forthcoming by the authorities- and 'M' was never informed as to the specific causes of his family's demise - or where they now lay - he does not possess a single photograph of those he lost.

Although he recovered physically, 'M' never successfully put his ordeal behind him, He told me in

his own special way that men are often haunted by things that happen to them in life, especially in war. Their lives come to be normal, but they are not. From my own experiences in uniform, I would venture that a truer word has never been spoken; many of my former uniformed colleagues would unhesitatingly concur with this profound and thought provoking analysis too.

The final destination we visited was to a small wooden construction positioned atop a rather large hill that overlooked a verdant and lush valley, although a little bemused by 'M's' ongoing reluctance to be photographed by me, this largely due to an almost irrational fear that his formers enemies now ran his country - the consequences, in his humble opinion, of relaying his personal story to a Westerner would be too harsh to contemplate, he

therefore asked for no images of him...or that of his old French banger of a car, to be taken - his decision saddened me greatly as I had considered that a close affiliation had developed between us - yet, I respected his wishes and began to climb the grassy kop in the direction of a bamboo hut that he wished to show me.

The door to the establishment was not locked, as we entered, it dawned on me that I was inside a place of Buddhist worship, decorated with images and artifacts of religious significance, plus that of photographs of people from another time. To the right of the hut was a large window, covered with a rattan blind, the same that 'M' quickly rolled up in order that I may take in the incredible views on offer?



My host lit a few of the incense sticks that sat on the makeshift altar in the centre of the room, he then offered a litany of prayers to an effigy of Buddha, a very large bust that took up around 50% of the available floor space. As I gazed out over the landscape, 'M' emerged from his spell of prayer offering and stated that he believed more in rebirth - and not that of the human soul as we Christians do. In view of the fact that the place we now found ourselves in - was little more than a geographical stone-throw from his former family home, he was convinced that following the death of his

kin, they returned to this beautiful place in another form - thus remaining close to husband and father 'M' - I so wanted to believe him. As we turned to leave the building, 'M' indicated that he had to roll down the blind that covered the large window, adding further that this was a very important task as he didn't wish for those he loved on the outside, to witness the grief of he who remains on the inside - "Do you do this in yoo country mistah" he unabashedly enquired, I felt my eyes welling up and simply nodded in agreement that we too, undertake something very similar in the West.

'M' and I spent six days together, five longer than initially intended - covering many miles across Vietnam and southern Laos - his antiquated motor vehicle holding out comfortably for the entire journey. As we headed

southwards in the direction of Saigon, I dwelt on the issue of parental loss once again - and the tragedy of not being in possession of the remains of both offspring and loved ones who are lost to us.

There existed many Vietcong prison camps that were based in Laos, the vast majority of which held soldiers and airmen who were interred in conditions equal to that of 'M's' place of confinement - never to be heard or seen again.

Hitherto, there have been no final goodbyes - or regular visitations to a graveside to pay respects - to make pledges of ongoing, undying devotion and gratitude, for many hundreds of parents, wives, children, brothers and sisters who never witnessed the return of those they cherished, Vietnam did indeed become - the forgotten cemetery.