

Da Nang City
Walking the Dead Beat
July 1965
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Da Nang ... July, 1965: Having arrived at Da Nang AB on 8 July 1965, I was more than ready by month's end, when a few of us Airmen went downtown Da Nang City, to check out the sights. At base-orientation we were given the speech about STD, warned to stay together, and alert for suspicious actions by civilians, such as suddenly disappearing from where you are.

Gary Eberbach, J.B. Jones, Tom Baker, and I rode the blue Air Force bus. I was still unused to the *anti-terrorist* screened windows. Dropped off on the main street, we were immediately surrounded by a horde of begging kids that we waded through, to shouts of *You dolla-me...Numba Ten thou G.I.*

We waded through the horde and continued sauntering along, looking at the open shops and girls in Vietnamese attire, ignored the *sour-stench* of the street, and computing the official exchange-rate for South Vietnam's Piaster, or "P", and the U.S. Dollars that troops were paid in at that time. The crowd was like treading-water in a bustling cess-pool of humanity, and then we stepped out in to an island of space with plenty of elbow-room.

A young Vietnamese woman suddenly came up to us and unexpectedly thrust a package at me. Instinctively, I took the cloth bundle, which was light weight, and I instantly thought it was a bomb. I looked down—it was a *dead infant with a elephantiasis head, and stank-fiercely*—and I shoved the baby back into her arms. The mother pleaded in pigeon-English for us to help as she needed *beacu-P* for the baby's funeral. Young American G.I.s are easy targets because of their natural generous nature and desire to help. We emptied our pockets and the woman moved on down the sidewalk. I was horrified that a mother would

have to take to the streets to beg for money to bury her child.

Further up the street, we encountered some buddies from the Airbase. I began telling them about the tragic scene, and turned to point out the woman with the dead baby—*I could still smell the putrid scent on my clothing*. Just then the woman *lateral-passed* the baby's body to another woman, and casually walked away rubbing her hands on her clothes. The second woman assumed a devastated expression and began panhandling other GIs. At first I was stunned, then angry and cursed at the new *mother*, and wanted to call the *White Mice* (SVN national police). Neither of the women were starving or underfed. The simple truth was self-evident: they were just *walking a beat* and using a dead infant to con American servicemen—and it was working.

We returned to Da Nang AB, broke, a little wiser, and with a growing hatred for a society that could indifferently permit such an abominable scam in public. I realized that I had just been *had*—played for a genuine sucker—and resolved *never* to fall for another sympathy scam to separate me from my too few dollars.

To this day I still haven't—and never will—give a dime to con artists. The sight of a dead-beat on street corners or shopping centers reminds me of the pan handlers begging with a dead baby, and can fry my blood in anger.

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