



Tân Sơn Nhứt AB

Tet 1968

Charlie

by Nik Boldrini

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377th Combat Support Group, USAF, 1967-1968

Sitting Duck - I'll never forget the night I saw Charlie. Not the VC Charlie, just a guy named Charlie. Though time has blurred the names of most the troops I lived and worked with at Tân Sơn Nhứt, I'll never forget his name because every time the word *Charlie* used it always referred to "the commies", or "the VC", you know---*the ENEMY!* Now there, standing before me, was a real person named Charlie! Rusted tight in my mind for eternity.

Midnight had come and gone and I had walked to the mail room to blow the cobwebs out of my box. The lights were off outside the building as usual and as I approached I noticed an airman leaning against the wall, reading a letter by the flickering yellow pall of descending flares.

"How's it goin'?" I nodded to him as I walked by. He jerked his head toward me, startled. I felt as though I had intruded upon his quiet solitude and muttered an apology.

"Oh, No problem, just lost in thought." He replied.

Box empty, I turned to leave. He called me over and we made small talk about some of the action that had been keeping us awake every night since Tet. I couldn't help get the feeling this guy wanted to relieve a terrible weight on his shoulders. I looked questioningly at the handwritten letter open and limp in his hand, and he told me it was from his twelve-year-old sister. I asked him if she was OK. He choked, said "Sure", then quietly added that the previous night he had killed a girl the same age as his sister.

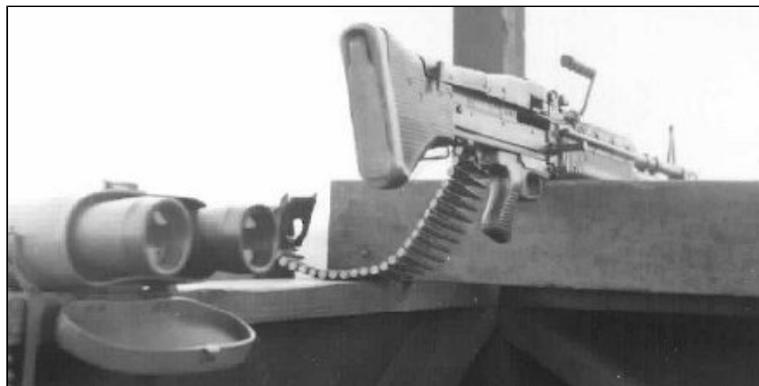
Then he started to cry.

When the big offensive hit Tân Sơn Nhứt that memorable night of January 31st, 1968, Charlie had been one of two guards manning a remote guard post on the outskirts of the base. He'd never pulled guard duty before but the *377th Security Police Squadron* needed reinforcements for Base Security, and he had volunteered as an augmentee.

Everything went wrong that could go wrong that Tet-night! Not just for Charlie, or even the Viet Cong, but for all of us. No, this wasn't exactly the Battle for *Khe Sahn* or the Siege of *Hamburger Hill*, but it was the wanton onslaught of enemy forces stabbing everything at once into the vital organs of South Vietnam and though we were not caught completely off guard, we were not well prepared.

The story that Charlie revealed to me was a tragedy consisting of valor, duty and guilt. It forced me to re-evaluate my role and purpose in the war, but what about Charlie? What destruction would that awesome feeling of guilt, however undeserved, wreak upon his character and moral fiber? Would it fester and devour him to spit him out at the end of life a withered and empty old man? Funny thing about life: Though it always fulfills completion, it leaves a lot unfulfilled.

Around 2300 hours Charlie had just checked in on his radio and his eyes were straining into the blackness surrounding his sandbagged guardpost. His sentry partner had snuck out the back to water the grass when Charlie thought he heard a movement near the sandbags directly beneath the protruding barrel of his weapon. The one he'd learned to operate the preceding day. He froze. The cold finger of fear ran its jagged nail into the small of his back. Desperately focusing on the sound, he scanned the darkness but the thumping of his heart confused him.



Then he saw a human figure scrambling away and he screamed "Dong Lai - Dong Lai!" (Halt! Halt!) This made the figure pick up its pace so he leaped to the gun, charged the bolt and held the trigger down. The M60 barked and shook in his hands as the rounds leaped out at the target, Charlie's target. He was blinded by the flaming muzzle blast.

Charlie huddled there in the dark for a long while. The crack of small arms fire from other battles being fought here and there around the sprawling base seemed hushed and far. A Security Police gun jeep finally drove up to investigate and an officer with a flashlight crept out to the small

figure lying discarded in the trampled grass. With a motion of his hand he signaled Charlie and the others to approach, which they

did, slowly, as if wary of the dead. In the circle cast by the hand-held light lay the remains of a black-clad adolescent Vietnamese girl.

The girl had already penetrated the perimeter, unseen, placed an armed satchel-charge explosive, and was leaving the way she came in. For some unknown reason the satchel charge she placed against the side of Charlie's guard-post had not detonated. Was this child forced by the VC to attempt to kill the two American sentries? The news media back home would have us think so.

Months later, I thought of Charlie as my flight landed stateside. Like so many of my veteran brothers, I changed out of the uniform worn so proudly, into civilian clothes as soon as I could. I feared what I would do if a college student or hippy spat on me and called me a baby-killer, like the stories we had all heard. Was it coincidence that these home-grown atrocities soon halted when the draft boards shut down?

I prayed that Charlie would eventually see that little girl for what she really was, the enemy. She *was*... Charlie.

From SITTING DUCK, Tales of a Saigon Warrior by

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Tân Sơn Nhứt AB, South Vietnam 1967-1968

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