

Hotel California ... Tân Sơn Nhứt - 1968

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Memories of Hotel California -

Old French Fort, Vietnam I was in a strange place, far from home. The Tet offensive brought me to the face of death. After two months in country I was tired. As I arrived at the fort I thought I heard them say: Welcome to the Hotel California. *What a lovely place.*

I was permanently assigned to an RVAN CO on the northern most tip of Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base. The CO was situated in an Old French Fort. The fort was right out of a French Foreign legion movie. The walls were 20 feet high; three feet thick white washed concrete and formed the perfect rectangular defensive position. The Solid Iron gates secured this impenetrable fortress. A courtyard surrounded by tiny cubicles, arched doorways, a well-fortified RVAN CO compound. At times I expected to see French Legionaries march through the gate. Just across the fence line was a small hamlet, a civilian mortuary and a cemetery with thousands of white head stones. Our mission was to detect and prevent an enemy assault in a very vulnerable area, the 055 gate. *What a lovely place.*



We were deployed at dusk and headed back to base at dawn. What I thought would be long lonely boring nights turned into bonding friendships with Officers, soldiers, children, and families. I was readily welcomed into a world I was not prepared for. Military courtesies were not used and I soon found myself part of a family. The RVAN troops were gracious hosts. They always stopped and talked, always smiling, always asking if there was anything they could do for me. Little did I know how close we would grow in the next eight months. Many relationships grew inside and outside the high whitewashed walls. *Such a lovely place*, plenty of room at the Hotel California, anytime of year, you can find us here.

Our first few weeks were challenging. The rat population, and their huge size, were beyond description. I wrote to my Dad asking for the biggest rat-traps he could find. And big they were. He went straight to the Victor Animal Trap CO and sent me the biggest and the best. They were more like bear traps. We set the traps baited with c-rats, and thirty seconds later all six traps popped. Great, we got so good we didn't even use bait. Down the wall, set the traps, up the wall and wait for the traps to spring on an unsuspecting rat. One hour each night of killing rats seemed to bring the rats under control. Then the rice bug (cockroach) population exploded. They were everywhere: In our food, in the sandbags, everywhere we walked and sat. We started stomping cockroaches every night. This began getting out of hand, and I felt more like an exterminator. Then Lt. Tiep stopped by one night to meet us. He wanted to make us feel at home. He also wanted to help with our pest problem. His advice, "Leave everything alone. The rats will eat the rice bugs and will leave us alone. The rats will keep the rice bug population under control." Put another way; Don't kick a sleeping dog, or fool with Mother Nature. You know he was right. Everything fell in place and the rats and the rice bugs did not bother us again. It was a lesson I've applied to my life ever since.

During the first month at the fort the commander of the RVAN CO would call me to his office late at night. The office was sparse, a table and several chairs centered in the white washed walls. A single light bulb hanging in the middle of the room. He was gracious and polite, offering me a cigarette or a coke. Then he would open a copy of the Wall Street Journal and start reading in English. I was to listen, help with words he didn't recognize, and explain the meaning of what he was not sure of. I would often drift into a daydream, watching the geckos clinging to the white walls, waiting for the occasional insect for supper. Our relationship was more a friendship. I helped him with his English and he found anything I needed, like rounds for our recoilless rifle. The commander was one of my first and best friends in Vietnam. He was a Captain. But for some reason I cannot remember his name. *They're living it up at the Hotel California.*

Lt. Be was a slight man. A very quiet squeaky voice would call my name, "Sargent Cook, how you today?" He would shake my hand. Be was always polite but I often had a sense that he could not be trusted. My mistrust turned to pity. Our storage area at the fort was broken into and C-rats were missing. Be was the thief. His punishment was three days in the brig. The brig consisted of four pieces of portable runway strips held upright to form a cage. There was enough room to sit. He stayed in that cage for three days, and not aloud out for anything. I saw him every night and gave him food and cigarettes. He gave me a note asking me to talk to his commander the Captain. I spoke with my friend the commander but backed off realizing I was interfering with his authority. I kept that note in my wallet for 20 years. I'm not sure why, but I finally let go on my visit to The Wall, and left his note there. When the three days passed, I never saw Be again. Tiep told me Be was assigned somewhere in Saigon, but he did not know where.

Baldy: A private, no a lower grade, lower than the lowest grade. A simple man. Not a hair on his head. Not even eyelashes on his pockmarked face. Baldy's his smile beamed between jug-ears that could double as beer mug handles. He was proud to be a friend of an American. He had a rare talent, eating coke bottles. I was astonished the first time he bit the end of a coke bottle, chewed and crunched it, and swallowed the mouth full of glass. I invited friends to come out and see the glass eating man, Baldy. Such a small insignificant man. His voice was down the corridor and I thought I heard him say, *Welcome to the Hotel California.*

The May Offensive was a tense time at the fort. The RVANs and the 377th SPS made many preparations. The entire fort was equipped with claymore mines. Old sandbags were replaced with 55-gallon drums filled with sand. Extra troops were posted at night. A Rapid Response Team for the CONUS was sent to TSN. My bunker went from a three-man position to a 21-man unit. The new troops were like every new troop, scared. Intelligence reported that TSN would be hit tonight, and the likely point of attack was my 055 gate. The commander made his rounds every hour. Tiep was stationed nearby. All my friends were on post that night, and we were prepared for a

fight. We were in this together.

Some time around 0200 hours Tango 10 called Central Security Control, "CSC this is Tango 10, we're picking up rocket flashes off to the north." Just as I heard Tom's transmission I heard the strangest whooshing sounds in the night sky. KABOOM, KABOOM, KABOOM. Rockets were hitting 200 meters behind my position, and close to Tom's Tango 10. I knew that a ground attack would come in directly under the rockets. I was on the highest point on the fort, looking through binoculars for the ground assault. The white headstones played tricks on my eyes, but I was looking hard for any sign of movement. When I was satisfied nothing was out there, I let my vigil down. I looked around and saw the eighteen new troops curled into balls behind 55 gallon drums. I laughed for a minute, then paused to think about how disassociated with death I had become. They were right to take cover, but more importantly, we needed to be aware of what might happen.

The new troops were pulled the next day. But I spent the next week on post. No problem, my friends took care of me. We didn't want for anything, not even beer. So I called up the Captain, "Please bring me my wine." The days following the May Offensive brought a new realm into my New World. A small pub was just outside the Fort's white walls. The days were too hot to sleep and I would spend my time at the pub, shooting pool, talking with my Vietnamese friends, and drinking warm Tiger beer. A care package from home arrived, and had five boxes of beef jerky. Ah, beef jerky and warm Tiger Beer; things just don't get any better than that. Our conversations rarely talked about the war itself. Mostly politics, and occasionally, how Nixon would win the war.

The children played in and around the pub. They were so small and slight. With coal black hair, and deep black eyes. It was unusual for me, barely more than a kid myself, to notice the children. But they were so precious, so shy, so... happy. They had nothing and they were happy. I wrote home asking for all the small toys they could send. BINGO! Christmas in July. The toys included small dolls, balls of all colors and sizes, toy cars and trucks, the list went on and on. I sat by the community well, surrounded in a sea of kids. They screamed and hollered anxious for that special toy that would be theirs. I sat and laughed as I was swamped in a sea of kids. There was no doubt how little they had as they raced away with their own special treasure. All the adults came out to watch. They were happy to see their children happy, just like any parent would on Christmas Day. *What a lovely place.* A smile on every face. I miss their smiles, and I miss them.

Mirrors on the ceiling and pink champagne on ice. As time went on, I became more involved in the daily life and routines at the fort. At night a domino game was always cracking on a table. I could hear the bricks slap the table like the crack of an M16. This was a serious game and I watched for many nights before I was invited to sit in. I always refused opting to watch the charisma of the players making outstanding plays. There was pride in their skills, and their open display of ability allowed them to show the American just how good they were.

With their steely knives. The fort was becoming my world. I was no longer in-country. I was with family and friends. I was allowed to blend in whenever and wherever I wanted. At the time, everything seemed so natural. But as I reflect on my experience at the fort I think of what a privilege I had to live, work, and grow close to a beautiful gentlepeople. People who reached out with their kindness and understanding to a stranger far from home. I now find it difficult to leave that beautiful place, a place that became my home. We haven't had that spirit here since 1968. How can I tell you what it is that won't let me leave the Hotel California?

Lt. Nngnen Tat Tiep. He was as tall as I, a full face, a soft gentle manner and voice with a French accent covered the fact that he was Vietnamese, a North Vietnamese. Tiep was born in Hanoi. When the Communist came to power many educated people died. Tiep's father was a doctor. One day the Communist came to his house and took his father away. He was never seen again. Tiep's Mother fled to Saigon with the rest of his family. We spent many days together, talking about the war, his family, my family, Vietnam and the U.S.. Our talks would often take place at the pub.

I remember one day we had a bit too much Tiger Beer which was usually served on ice. I avoided all local water and generally drank my beer warm. It went straight to my head. I took Tiep's Honda for a ride on the perimeter road, a combination dirt and gravel back road. The alcohol glazed my judgment and good sense, and I crashed the Honda. Tiep's first reaction was anger. I just had just wrecked his prized possession. Then he saw the blood running down my leg and his mood changed to compassion. The injury was mostly superficial but it hurt like hell. Tiep cleaned me up, bandaged my knee, and made sure I was OK. He never said another word about the wrecked Honda.

Tiep taught me Vietnamese and I helped him with his English, and again, the family back home came through for us, sending a supply of phonics books. Later that year, Tiep got married and of course I was at the wedding. After Tiep and his wife settled in I was often invited to their house for skinny-chicken meal. What an honor, Tiep was my best friend. I believed in the war because of Tiep's experience. We were fighting Communism. I didn't see our efforts as barbaric. War was war, and not meant to be pretty. To this day I believe our first intentions were in the right place. If only the rules would have been in our favor?

Like most Vets, I regret that I didn't maintain contact with friends, with Tiep. When Saigon fell to the North, I could only wonder what happened to him. Did he die in a battle? What would have happened to him at the hands of the North? Did he escape and find refuge in the states? I often relate to Dith Pran in the *Killing Fields*. I hope that some day we'll be reunited and my worst fears put to rest.

Now, I start my search for Tiep. Any and all suggestions will be greatly appreciated. I need to do this for Tiep; I need to do this for me. I need my own version of closure.

I've wondered why things happened the way they did, and it's sometimes difficult to understand the way things are now. There were so many losses, but at the same time, there were many wonderful things to remember. God put me in these things, although I don't pretend to understand His infinite wisdom, and I place myself in His hands. We search for the truth; we search for the *meaning* and the *reasons* of our war, then and now. But God knows the truth. He loves us all. He is with us now as he was without us then. He is our peace.

Welcome to the Hotel California, you can check out any time, but you can never leave.

I would like to dedicate the story of Hotel California to the Vietnamese people, a beautiful people, Vietnamese Veterans, and of course to Tiep.

Den

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