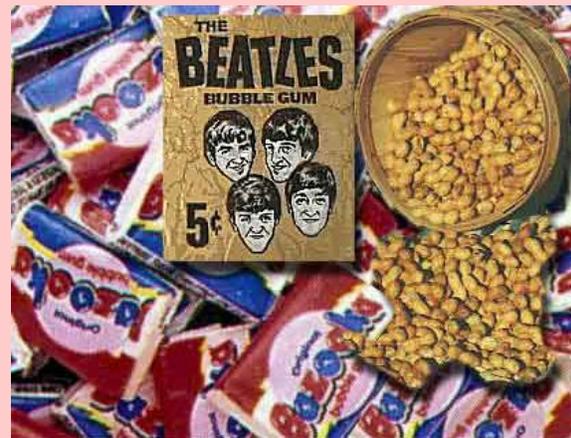


VIETNAM

Phan Rang AB
1967-1968
35th SPS - Panther Flight

Peanuts and Bubble Gum

by [Tony Gonzales](#)



As I sat on the dusty bench on a busy Tijuana boulevard with an iced cold Corona in my hand, I saw her walk towards me with an outstretched hand containing a box of gum. “You buy, you buy?” she asked in her best English. The lost and desperate look in her eyes made me want to melt with pity and cry with anguish over her unwarranted lot in life. She couldn’t have been more than six years old but the street life had robbed her of the childish gleam that every little girl should have. I stared for a moment at the dullness of her reddish hair, bleached by the rays of the hot Mexican sun. How I wanted to pick her up and just squeeze her if just to show that I knew her suffering and that I was going to take care of her and her baby sister who was pulled along side of her by the pleat of Lu Mai’s tattered dress.

What?! Did I say Lu Mai? How could it be Lu Mai? She must be in her forties by now and half way around the world. Perhaps still walking the red clayed roads outside the “Strip” in Phan Rang, but most likely no longer pedaling her bags of stale, saltless peanuts for 5 piasters a bag. Lu Mai, how she loved to visit me at the gate I guarded so often. We would spend hours watching the stream of G.I.s take that short dusty walk from the perimeter road, past the cactus patches, to the countless bars and shops contained within the confines of our own “love haven and sin city” located about a quarter mile outside the base. Little Lulu as I called her, couldn’t wait until 5: 00 p.m. each day because that’s when the same stream of crazy, dead drunk soldiers or airmen came stumbling back across the creek and into the Air Base. She would run up and try to put her tiny hands into each pocket as she tried to make a sale. More than once she had to pick herself up from the ground after a swift backhand or shove from a pissed off G.I. If this didn’t work, she went with the droopy sad eyed routine, begging and pleading because as she said, she was sure to get a beating from “her mamasan” for taking unsold bags home. Lu was a master to watch work. This kid could have made a fortune working on any used car lot in America. The sad thing was, that this kid WAS poor. This kid did need to do what she was doing just to insure that she and her family would have something to eat. It wasn’t because she loved being around me that kept her coming back on the hottest days or during the hellish downpours. It was pure and simple survival. She possessed that look of pain and hunger I thought I had forgotten. That is of course until that warm afternoon this passed year on that busy Tijuana corner.

As in Lu Mai’s case, there wasn’t too much I could do for the little Mexican girl. But as I had so often done with peanuts, I bought all of that damned bubble gum.

Tony Gonzales
35th Security Police
Phan Rang Air Base
1967-1968

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