

The Soldier

Sam silently rolled his half naked and broken body from side to side in an unconscious, but deliberate motion. Relieving the pain of the rock-hard cylindrical bamboo tubes that seemed determined to wear away at his brittle and protruding bones that pressed steadily outwards against his tightly shrinking skin. Rocking back and forth was the only way he could relieve the pain of bone bruising, even if it was only temporary. But what it didn't help, was, to soothe the hundreds of pestilent pinching bites from the army of ants, and insects that continuously feasted on his malnourished, skeletal thin body. At times his scratching at the torturous itching would rival that of a mange infected dog, if his hands weren't bound behind him.

The sweltering jungle nights were a cravenly invite for every insect and rodent that inhabited the wet, steamy, impenetrable boondocks, to his cage. Fending off the biting critters was a never ending and exhausting battle. At times, Sam struggled to remember what it was like to get any longer than fifteen to twenty minutes of a continuous sleep without being awakened by some large fur covered arachnid, or some bizarre looking multi legged arthropod, or, just the spasmodic reflex of a dream induced imaginary insect crawling across his blistered, and inflamed body in the oppressive and stifling humidity. The ceaseless buzz of the enormous malaria carrying mosquitos was hastened insanity. If he wasn't scratching, he was slapping.

But always, he welcomed the thick, warm, heavy monsoon rains. With a tilted head, jaws locked open, and his eyes shut tight, his fervid tongue lapped at every drop of the fresh cascading water that was driven through the narrow openings of the low-set bamboo ceiling. It was God's way of sending him fresh water, he thought. Saving him from the gastrointestinal torment of dysentery and everything else that came from drinking the parasitic infested waters of the nearby Mekong River.

Sam had long ago given up any hope of someone looking for him.

Every night, just after sunset, while tethered to his cage he watched helplessly, as the hurried, cockroach like movements of a seemingly endless trail of silhouetted fighting figures spew up from the camouflaged spider holes in the jungle floor. He also watched as they gathered in small groups and prayed as they prepare for battle, against his fellow soldiers, and the anti-communist citizens of south Viet Nam. Did they share the same God? he sometimes wondered, because, he prayed every day as well, at times, all day.

The nights were blacker than anytime he could ever remember. Apart for maybe the one time when he was only eight years old, when he and Tommy, his younger brother had discovered an abandoned well on the family farm. Long covered over by time, after it went dry. Together, they pitched rocks through a small opening in the ground, eagerly listening for echoing sounds as the rocks splashed in the darkened water below. Then, without warning, the unstable sod edging

broke away, dropping Sam feet first towards the bottom of the lightless well. For Sam, the collapse came in a slow, fluid motion, as the cylindrical brick walls narrowed around him, descending through the thick, entangled layers of undisturbed spider webs to the bottom. Landing with his feet embedded into soft muck below a shallow water surface. He was surprised he wasn't hurt, nor felt any fear. A slight sucking sound could be heard as he pulled his entrapped feet free from the muck below the frigid knee-deep water. Tommy started to cry as he peered into the darkened well, just before he ran off. Grateful that it was him in the belly of the well, and not Tommy. Confined to total darkness, save for a small opening above him, he watched blue sky fade to darkness as the hours passed. Waiting against the cool damp walls that was home to every air-breathing insect and spider, with an occasional wandering water snake. It was hours before his parents returned from town, and Tommy was persuaded to tell them what had happen to Sam, and before he was pulled from a cold, wet, and blackened early interment. Sam never cried, even as a child.

Any movement from his cage, *or parlor*, as Sam thought of it - *A memory of home, when guests visited, Sam's mother would usher everyone "into the Parlor" as it was an emotionally comforting, and peaceful sanctuary to receive valued friends.* Would get the attention of one his Viet Cong captors, who would inevitably blindly slice a rifled bayonet blade through the pitch-black night air into the bamboo slats, cursing and yelling unfilled threats. keeping Sam's fractured mind teetering on the edge of madness. Sam was their American trophy, they wanted him breathing.

Sam's parlor was his bamboo sanctum. Not from physical abuse, or the elements, but a refuge to collect his mental, and emotional strength. When he was caged, the Viet Cong left him alone, most of the time. Colonel Po's orders.

Sergeant Philip Whitney and Sam made a great team, they feared little, and Sam felt no sorrow when he thought of his own death. At night, in the darkest part of his parlor, he honed his psychological courage. At times, summoning an enervated memory that would subjectively flash him home again, to his family, and the farm. The brainwork that he sometimes thought was just an illusory fantasy of an unhinged mind, but always returning him to a jubilant reflection of his last days at home.

As the sun warmed a magnificent late spring Sunday afternoon, Sam sat tightly wedged between his classmates on the over-crowded wooden bleacher on the fifty-yard line of the Bensenville High School football field. Robed in his cumbersome midnight blue academic costume, a small metal stamped "sixty-eight" clutched at the yellow braided tassel that danced back and forth in Sam's face as he mindlessly followed the marching band on the freshly mowed field.

Alluring impatience's controlled his awakened thoughts, and sometimes his dreams. Inspired in part, since the fourth grade and the weekly air-raid drills of the cold war. With the evils of an unseen communist menace and their threatened world oppression. A blasting claxon from the school's public-address system would send Sam and his classmates beneath their desks for cover, shielding them from the imaginary communist nuclear bombs. But, it was also Miss.

Greenfield, his fourth-grade teacher, who unwittingly etched into Sam's psyche an eternally erotic, and enraptured memory. When she once suddenly appeared from behind, and knelt next to him as he sheltered beneath his desk. She gently held the top of his head with her calming palm and softly whispering an affectionate caution, "Don't bump your head Sam!" Instinctively, Sam swiveled his head in reflex, stopping inches from her full, firm, captivating silky-smooth breasts, visibly restrained by a sensuous white laced bra, beneath a white lucent blouse. Her soft touch and infusing fragrance held his innocent eyes bound to her heavenly chest. The striking, twenty-six-year-old, raven haired, Miss Greenfield reminded him "Sam, it's impolite to stare", as she stood and gracefully drifted towards the blackboard.

Not yet eighteen, the Army required a parental signature-- his mother wouldn't even discuss the military, other than to say "God bless those boys". After what he considered compelling arguments, based on lineage justification, (A McCord in every American war, since 1776), his demurring but emotionally tore father yielded and lastly gave Sam his blessing, not as a loving father, but as a sponsoring veteran. Sam's envisioned military achievement would be a position in the historically elite 75th Ranger Regiment, following his father from WWII.

With accolades, and achievements conveyed, plans and pledges of staying in touch were made, with the best of intentions. The marching band's final pass by the bleachers, played Americas favorite fight song, John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes forever".

"Sam!" his mother called from the bottom of the bleachers.

“come down here, we have to take pictures” she added, as she turned around and began nudging brother Tommy and sister Peggy together for another grudging photo. His father smiled, as he assumed his ever-present defending posture behind them, patiently waiting for Sam to join in. From a distance, Sam eyed Karen’s rhythmic jog across the field, after her final farewell to friends and their remembrance photos.

Sam and Karen had been inseparable since the ninth grade, since just after her mother’s long but courageous battle with cancer ended. Karen was accepting of Sam’s aspirations in the military, somewhat reluctantly, but never the less, she understood.

“Sam, you and Karen stand together”, I want more photos his mother insisted, as she herded them closer together with outstretched arms. After almost eighteen years of posing for family photos, he silently and obediently followed the directorial skills of his mother, who was armed with the family Browning box camera. Distantly, he realized the emotional effects that his first prolonged detachment from the family and Karen could be, as he somehow felt the importance of each photo. Sam’s mother promptly finishing off two rolls of black and white 135mm film.

“I’ll meet y’all at the house later” Sam said as he turned towards Karen.

Taking Karen’s left hand in his right they interlocked their fingers. In a slow and intimate stride, they crossed the crowded athletic field towards the open doors of the school gym, obligated to return the caps and gowns.

“Sam?” Karen whispered softly.

“Yes”

“I had a dream, that something terrible happened to you” Karen said, as she slowed her

pace.

Sam laughed. "I'll be OK"

"No Sam, I don't think you understand, how much I'm going to miss you!" she said, as she stopped and turned to face him.

"I understand sweetie, I'm going to miss you to" Sam countered in a reassuring tone.

"I love you Sam, more than you know" Karen said as she squeezed his fingers between hers.

"Sam, I know what it's like to lose someone you love, I'll wait for you forever, but I won't be there in the morning. I can't watch you get on a train, knowing that it could carry you out of my life forever." She stated, glassy eyed.

"War is not benign Sam McCord!" she added harshly, as she started to cry, quickly pulling away from him and disappearing through the open gym door and fading into the ceremonious turbulence of all the students and their families.

Sam couldn't explain it, nor did he really understand the evangelical feeling. Maybe it was the air-raid drills from the fourth grade that had instilled an unconscious burden, or maybe because it was his deep devotion to protect his family, or maybe it was because of Miss Greenfield, or, a little of all these things. Whatever it was he thought, it was in his head, and in his soul. He would take the fight to the enemy, to guard his family from the ravages of war and the oppressive communists, at whatever the cost.

Sam guided his rebuilt 1947 Knucklehead Harley around the large circular entrance between the house and the barn, kicking up a cloud of gravel dust as he came to a sliding stop on the grass edge by the back door of a beautifully maintained three story Victorian, that had been called home to his family for four generations. Leaning the bike on its kickstand, he bounded up the wooden steps of the back porch that lead to the kitchen.

“Don’t come in here mister, your father wants you in the barn” his mother yelled through the screen door.

“OK, Mom”

Sam turned, and strutted across the loose gravel driveway towards the two-story red barn. Stepping into the barn he saw his father in bibbed overalls, a sweat stained, faded yellow straw hat look up.

“Sam come here, and sit for a minute” he said, with his fatherly expression, as he stood tall in front of a wall of neatly stacked bales of hay. Bales, Sam stacked the past fall together with his brother Tommy, (Tommy was eleven months younger than Sam, Irish twins, as everyone joked). Sam’s father removed his worn leather gloves, laying them neatly on a bale of hay next to him, “have a seat Sam” he said as he padded the hay bale with his bear paw sized hand.

“everything OK?” Sam asked nervously, as he sat next to him.

“yep, just needed a minute with you alone, that’s all. While we got some free time” he said, as he placed his strong hand on Sam’s shoulder.

“I know we’ve talked about you leaving and all, bout the Army and stuff”. Sam’s father said with staggered hesitation, and avoiding any eye contact.

“ya also know that mom doesn’t approve, she didn’t like me signing the papers either.” He added with a guilty grin.

“Is she mad at me?”

“Nah, she ain’t mad Sam, she’s already lived through a war. One that took the life of her only brother. Now that she has her son going into the Army, and there’s another war, well, that changes a lot of things for her, she’s having some emotions about it.”

“I should talk to her” Sam said, feeling bad that his decision was upsetting her so much.

“ya can, but unless your prepared to change your plans, I wouldn’t bring it up, it may just make things harder on her” his father added.

“I can make a difference Dad”

“Yes Sam, I know. I know you think you can. You’re only seventeen, you have three weeks until your birthday, you don’t have to leave tomorrow, you can change your mind” he said wishfully, as he considered Sam’s eyes for agreement.

“yeah I know” Sam said, secretly hoping the war wouldn’t end before he got over there.

“Sam, I just don’t want you to have any regrets, life’s not easy to begin with, it’s even harder with bad regrets. Nothing good ever comes from war”, his father uttered as he locked eyes with Sam.

“Sam, this is one of those times in life that there ain’t no turning back, no do overs

“I know, I’m good with-it Dad... and thanks again for signing the papers, and letting me leave all the farm work to you and Tommy” Sam answered jokingly.

As they stood, their matching six-foot frames leveled their eye contact, as his father wrapped his over worked, but powerful arms around him, “We love you Sam, and don’t ever forget that. I’ve been where you’re going son, never, ever, ever, give up, and God be with you”.

As the train sluggishly pulled away from the station in the predawn hours. Sam waved from the yellowed, smoke-stained window to his family as his mother wiped the tears from her eyes.

The train made all its scheduled stops, few people boarded. Aside from a small town about two hours south of Bensenville. Sam watched with uncertain curiosity as a tall, long haired, bearded, disheveled looking stranger boarded the train and struggled towards the back of the train car half dragging a well-worn and tattered suitcase, ricocheting loudly as it deflected from seat to seat. The stranger fell into the empty seat across from Sam, pulling the small suitcase close in behind, as Sam moved closer to the window.

“Sorry man” the stranger said.

The stranger pulled a bent and twisted, almost empty package of cigarettes from his coat pocket, carefully straitening the last one with his fingers, as he lit it, he leaned back into the seat.

“where you heading?” the stranger asked.

“Fort Polk” Sam said, without taking his eyes off the fast moving country side as the train picked up speed.

“me too” the stranger added.

“Fort Polk Army Base?” Sam questioned in amazement, turning to study him.

“yep” the stranger said, blowing smoke towards Sam.

“Philip Whitney, my friends call me Lip,” the stranger boldly announced with a broad smile, thrusting an inviting open hand towards Sam.

“Samuel McCord, my friends call me Sam” pumping the extended hand.

“Get your letter?” Lip said, searching through his suitcase.

“what letter?”

“Your letter from the draft board!”

“Draft board?”

“How old are you Sam?” Lip asked as he pulled an unopened pint bottle of Blackberry brandy from deep within the old beat-up suitcase.

“I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks”

“you signed up for the Army, kid?” Lip said laughing, before taking a very early, but long swig from his pocket bottle.

“Yes, and you?” Sam stated, sitting upright proudly.

“Not me, my friends and neighbors signed me up” Lip said, as he pushed the bottle towards Sam.

“no thanks” Sam said as he waved an open palm.

The long train ride afforded the needed time to measure each other, and share their lives.

They leaned on each other throughout basic training, and their friendship grew, despite being referred to as “Kid “, (Lip was four years older) whenever Lip addressed him. Their ages and life styles were worlds apart, but they would soon be in the same orbit. Ranger training was a lifelong bond.

landing in Cam Ranh Bay, Viet Nam with the 75th Rangers Regiment was Sam’s dream come true, his nineteenth birthday fewer than a month away. Sam and Lip were in Bravo company, second battalion, and wasted no time engaging the communist enemy. Firefight after firefight in the first three months strengthened their bond.

Then on May, 16 their Platoon was missioned for a 0400 hours’ low altitude support jump just north of hill 937 (Hamburger Hill) in the A’ Shaun Valley. The 101st Airborne Division was engaged in a fierce battle with three divisions of the North Vietnamese Army, and taking some heavy casualties.

The mechanical vibrations and loud whooping sound from their circling helicopter two thousand feet above the drop zone didn’t drown out the fierce firefight raging below. Lip was the first one out the door, Sam followed him into the Gothic darkness. The sounds of battle

grew louder with their rapid descent. Seconds later Sam was jerked to a quivering bounce, his chute snagging in a large banyan tree, dangling him precariously off the jungle floor. The whistling of incoming mortars, the red and green tracers from machine gun fire made it look like Bensenville after dark on Independence Day, only worse. Sam managed to cut himself free from his chute, falling to the soft jungle floor. The barrage of enemy fire was relentless. Gun smoke permeated the breathless humid night air as Sam searched through the darkened chaos for the rest of his unit. He hadn't covered more than fifty yards, when he stumbled over Lip's lifeless body. A rush of sad emptiness, instantly turned to a fog of loneliness as he lifted Lip's ethereal body onto his shoulder and scanned for cover. Suddenly, the punctuated and deafening whistle of an incoming mortar exploded in front of them. Lip and Sam were propelled backwards through the air by the fierce and forceful mortar blast. Lip's body cushioning Sam's landing. In a painless but mesmerizing like state of consciousness, Sam saw that his left thigh had been blown open exposing a blood-filled cavity of muscle and bone. Dazed and disconnected, Sam had the nebulous sensation of softly floating horizontally above the ground, through the tall buffalo grass.

Sam was stripped of everything he carried, even his clothing. His hands tied to a wooden pole behind and above his head, he strained to open his eyes through swollen, blood-crusted eyelids, as local villagers sought out their anger. While mostly, old men and women, their hoes and rocks were no less painful than the strike of a North Viet Nam soldier's heavy rifle butt. Sam had been taken prisoner: submissively paraded by his proud captives, through the many different tiny grass-shaded villages of the north Viet Nam's southern border. The mortar shrapnel had cut an eight-inch gash into his left thigh, embedding an otherwise priceless piece

of rusted Chinese steel next to his femur. He was often tied naked and stretched by his limbs on the ground, as the pain of thousands of ant bites forced him into unconsciousness. The communist Viet Cong commander Colonel Po, stood five foot five, and enjoyed the privilege of rank as evident by his pot belled outline, in an always fresh uniform. The spaciouly fake smile on his full, round, pumpkin face boasted a complete set of off-white buckteeth, below a profusely wide nose, that consistently balanced a pair of thin, wire rimmed, silver dollar sized sunglasses.

Colonel Po's entertainment was executing South Vietnamese prisoners, and forcing Sam to watch. With his perfect English, Bastard Po, would frequently visit the parlor to re-tell his egotistical story of being a scholastically gifted foreign exchange student in America, a graduate of the University of Villanova, "Phi Beta Kappa fraternity brother" he gloated. Without exception, and always angered at Sam for not showing that he was impressed, the frat brother ordered immediately afflictions.

His dream state was abruptly returned to reality by an unnerving gang of large jungle rats gnawing at the slats of his parlor, as he madly kicked them away. Food was scarce, for everyone. Sam had immediately and desperately moved into a survival mode, learning how to catch the occasional snake or vermin that wandered to close to his parlor, eating it raw. At times, his chasm of despair was deeper, and hurt more than any abuse from his captures, or his wounds. Though in the end, he knew it was far better for him to suffer, which he would gladly do, to fight the communist on their soil, even if it meant dying in some jungle, to protect America and his family.

Sam gauged time by the growth of his hair and beard, but ended that with confusion, when his hair fell beyond his shoulders and his beard touched his chest. He wasn't even sure how old he was anymore.

A young, high cheek boned, female Viet Cong soldier called Ha often tended to Sam, sometimes giving him extra rice, or treating his infected insect bites, trying to make it a little more bearable for him with his wound damaged left leg. Ha would look into his eyes and say "*Xin Loi*" (I'm sorry) revealing a compassion in her deep, black opal, almond shaped eyes.

Just before dark every night, Ha marched Sam down the footpath to the Mekong riverbank to carry buckets of water back to camp. Never without her AK-47 and always without speaking. Ha would untie his hands at the riverbank and place the long bamboo pole across the back of his bony thin neck with a heavy water filled bucket balanced on each end, as he struggled back to camp. Then one afternoon he overheard American voices, squawking from a Viet Cong soldier's radio, the radio antenna pointing south. Sam knew radio transmissions were only good for about twenty-five kilometers. It was time he thought, before they moved him again. He knew he could never escape on land with his limp leg. So Later, at the riverbank, he stood behind Ha as she knelt at the riverbank filling the water buckets. Finding a baseball sized river rock in the mud, and with all the strength his thin, weakened body could muster, he drove the rock deep into the back of Ha's head. A hollow thud, was followed by squirting crimson blood from her long thick black hair as she slumped quietly into the muddy water. He glided his languished body onto hers and with the full force of his body weight held Ha's head below the water's

surface. As blood colored the dirty brown water red around her head, he waited for less bubbles to percolate to the surface. In an unexplainable but benevolent move, as Ha's life was rapidly disappearing, her body going slack underneath him, knowing he was losing precious time. Sam grabbed Ha's shirt collar and pulled her unresponsive head out of the muddy water. Her face pale, eyes closed, blood mixing with the dirty water gushed from her open mouth. He was too late, she was dead, he thought. With his arm wrapped around the stomach of her comatose body, he feverishly looked around to see if anyone heard them. Just as he was about to give Ha to the river, Sam heard a slight gurgling sound, as Ha's chest began to move, her eyes opened and filled with fear. Too weak, and unable to struggle. Quickly, he removed his thin wet cotton peasant shirt and wrapped it around Ha's bleeding head, he helped her back onto the river bank. Testing her eyes, he simply said "*Xin Loi*" (I'm sorry). Without getting out of the water he pulled the bamboo poles from the muddy riverbank into the water and pushed himself out into the swift moving river current. He glanced back towards Ha as she watched him being ferried swiftly away, never reaching for her AK-47.

By sun up the river narrowed, and dumped Sam's deteriorated, and cadaverous looking body onto a small mud caked landing. A passing U.S. Army search and destroy patrol found him. After a month in a military hospital in Japan, Sam was released and shipped home.

Grabbing the lone taxi at the Bensenville train station, they passed the local Pontiac car dealership, with its freshly printed banner "1973 Models have arrived"

As the taxi turned into the driveway, seeing a small red, white, and blue service flag with two faded gold stars hanging inside the bay window, puzzled him. He also couldn't help noticing

that the grass needed mowing, the house and barn needed paint and major repair, and the wooden fences had seen better days.

“Does anyone live here?” the taxi driver asked

“I’m not sure, you can drop me off here though” Sam said

“Do you want me to wait for you, soldier?” the driver asked.

“No, I’m good” Sam said, as he paid the fare.

The driver took Sam’s duffle bag from the trunk, and laid it on the loose gravel driveway.

“Good luck to you” he said, as he pulled away.

Leaning on the cheap wooden government issued cane in the driveway, between the house and the barn, Sam looked around at what he remembered to be one of the finest farms in the county. Sam felt lost, like an intruder, but with a pitiful sorrow for his once elegant home.

“Can I help you?” a weak voice called out from inside the half open sliding barn door.

Pivoting to face the barn, unsteady on the cane, he saw a thin hunched over elderly man emerge from the darkened barn into the bright morning sunlight, holding a bladed right hand over his eyes, blocking the glaring sun.

“Can I help you?” the elderly man repeated.

“Dad?” Sam questioned half aloud to himself.

A weak elderly man shuffled a couple short steps towards Sam, lacking the confident and authoritative gait Sam had so remembered. Sam also had to remind himself that being three

suit sizes thinner, he barely recognized his own image in the mirror, a gaunt 110-pound broken man, in a uniform his father had never seen him in.

“Dad, it’s me, Sam.”

“Sam?” his father repeating softly as he dropped his arm and somehow managed the strength to shuffle a little quicker, stopping in front of him.

Silently, absorbing each other, his father grasped Sam’s thin face, between his frail, aged farm hands, as he began to weep. Sam watched the disbelief drain from his face. They hugged, like Sam was five years old again.

“where is everyone?”

Lowering his sad and tired face towards the ground, he said “Let’s go into the house, son, we need to sit”

Stepping into what felt like an old abandoned house, with thick stale air, the kitchen table littered with unopened mail, dirty dishes piled high in the sink. His father gently pulled out a wooden chair from the head of the century old wooden table. Taking his childhood place, Sam eased slowly into the chair, as he watched an old man with a deep somber expression sit across from him, looking years older than he should.

“Sam” he said, staring into the table. “This isn’t going to be easy” his voice breaking with revisited grief.

“The letter from the Army saying you were missing in action, body not recovered and presumed dead, was devastating. Especially heavy on your mother and Tommy. Tommy quickly joined the Army the next month, to go looking for you, he couldn’t accept that you were dead. In the meantime, your mother suffered in a painful silence, she needed to know what had happened to you.” he said shifting uncomfortably in the wooden chair. His voice growing softer as he continued, “Tommy, was killed in the A’Shaun Valley a year later” he said, as his eyes glassed over and his words thickened from a drying mouth.

“Losing her only sons to war was too much for her fragile heart. Mom died a year and a half ago.” he said, with clasped hands shaking on the kitchen table, the tears streamed down his weathered face.

“Peggy’s in her last year of college; she comes home every couple of weeks to check in on me” he added.

“but Karen!” his father continued.

“She’s married, and is expecting a baby in the spring, she married a nice guy from Pennsylvania, he’s a Phi Beta Kappa from Villanova” he smiled.

As muted grief, and deep regret drew the remaining oxygen from the musty room, Sam struggled to quivering feet, he turned, took two unsteady steps and felt his knees weaken. When he suddenly felt the physical support of his father’s right arm around his withered waist. Sam’s eyes welling with hot tears, as he heard his father whisper “War has no boundaries Sam”, and together they limped and shuffled mournfully into the family Parlor.

