

## The Music Teacher's Pilot

He had been an amazing youngster, brighter than the sun, and the nicest person in the world. Loved by everyone, he was raised in a family of hard working, cash-strapped millworkers on the southern Oregon coast. Steele was the McInerney family's finest hour. My brother grew into exactly what he was supposed to become: a fighter pilot in the US Air Force serving in the Vietnam War. His single-seat Super Sabre had broken apart in the air. There was nothing to recover.

That boy with the unquenchable drive for excitement and that searching curiosity.... That boy with the mischief in his eye and tireless energy in his bones was gone. That young man, who had seen poverty as a steppingstone to greatness, had flown his plane into the sun and achieved greatness.

As so many have done before, I tried to figure out the instant he ceased to exist. Tried to remember what I might have been doing and why, in that instant, I hadn't known. Hadn't somehow felt him torn away from us, from me.

And then there was Gene Vasquez, Steele's buddy, the person who knew Steele as well as we did. The guy who had Steele's back every day and night and on every mission they flew together. After Gene's tour ended, his first stop stateside was to visit the family of his closest friend and constant companion.

Gene brought the one measure of comfort that came to us in those hard months after Steele died. It was the simple knowledge of who Steele had been in those last months and what

he had done. How he lived. What he cared about and what he feared. What kind of man he had been. How he had lived the life of a fighter pilot, a life that was so foreign to all of us.

Gene brought with him some things that Steele accumulated during his months in Vietnam: Steele's ballpoint pen, which I have to this day; some photographs, silly trinkets, and a diary, so precious to our family across the years. Gene had chosen the things he thought his family would want to have if something had happened to him.

A few weeks after we were notified of Steele's loss, a box with some civilian clothes and shoes that we did not recognize arrived. But the clothes had a strange musty smell, maybe a different soap smell, which we did not recognize. Those things hardly seemed to belong to Steele. The things did not produce a sense of loss in us; they just left us lost. There was nothing there to cling to. Nothing that spoke to us of Steele.

Steele's months in that faraway country came to life for us as Gene shared pictures and talked about their lives. Talked about the missions they had flown and their love of flying. Gene spoke of that need to be there, to test themselves against the sky. To see what might be behind the next cloud, down the next valley, or around the next bend in the river they were flying; and what lay in wait that they could test themselves against.

Gene also spoke of those odd moments, the random things that drew a pilot's attention. On a clear moonlit night when Steele caught a plane's shadow suddenly cast across a shining, white karst escarpment that had the power to strike fear into an otherwise routine run. Whose plane was it. Had they finally come from the North or was it one of ours. The sense of relief when Steele realized his mind had drifted momentarily, and it was his own plane casting the shadow. And Gene spoke of flying, one moonlit night, above broken clouds. Clouds that had cast shadows on the earth that looked like lakes that should not have been there. The charged moment

until he could reorient himself. Or of nights sitting in a dark world, startled by an unexpected crackle from a radio that had gone silent. Those stories of days with endless missions and night flights sitting alone in the cockpit and not drifting, to not let the darkness play tricks.

Gene described the sound and smell of an aircraft that was so intoxicating to the men who flew them. And the odd desire to hurry toward the next mission. To forgo what any reasonable person would want—to reasonably live safely and predictably. Because it was never like that. It was a life built around the next mission, a life built to challenge all they had been raised from childhood to believe, that safety was an option. The constant challenge to the basic human tenant that life, itself, is the ultimate prize. The hypnotic pull of the sky, the willingness to lose it all for one last fast ride. The insane game of cat and mouse played out each and every sortie, night or day, across so many months.

But Gene was also telling a story about the random disasters that made even a moment of peace impossible in war. The waiting through the hours or minutes or days of rescue attempts for a fellow pilot downed in some unlikely place; the catastrophic mechanical failures crippling their planes and charging already tense situations with impending mayhem, and hours of mundane time on their hands with nothing to do.

On leave in Saigon, Steele and Gene were photographed in front of a beautiful cathedral built by the French in the 1870's. It showed Steele very close to a young Vietnamese woman, as he had been in several other photographs Gene shared with us. Phong Lan. In Vietnamese, the Orchid, the girl in the pictures and on the pages of Steele's diary. Lan, the girl to catch Steele's heart.

The church had a clock over the main gate into the building. We carefully studied the clock to see what time it held. What time had Steele and the young woman been there? But then,

was the clock even working. So many unknowns. Not a whole life reconstructed for us, only a taste of what Steele's life must have been like.

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It had started so simply. A walk down a side-street in Saigon. An older part of the city with blocks of identical, ancient white-washed colonial buildings lining the street, an area of paradise set aside from a place that should have been paradise, but wasn't. Ancient palm trees over-topped and sheltered the buildings, while broad verandas protected louvered windows. Those windows shuttered against the afternoon, their louvers angled to catch any cooler breeze that might breathe through the neighborhood. Steele could see that behind the shuttered windows the interiors were dark and still and seemed to be quietly waiting for families to return.

Behind old wooden gates Steele could see into courtyards that were lush with tropical vegetation and carefully tended. The peaceful sound of the occasional fountain whispered into the street. The hubbub and bustle, the traffic noises of Saigon, were muted sounds living in the distance, coming from what seemed to be a far-off place.

Steele could finally hear soft piano music spilling into the street. And soon he came upon a school that Catholic nuns had established long ago, during the French colonial years. Steele walked slowly by the school, listening, and stopped momentarily at the gate before moving on. Astonished to hear the strains of "Whispering Hope" being beautifully played by someone hidden behind those sturdy walls. Steele had played that very song for his mother after mass one Mother's Day Sunday when he was about ten-years-old. The beautiful, lyrical melody touched him, brought the only longing for home that he had felt in all the years he had been away. It was a truly lovely melody, and Steele was amazed to hear it played there so far away from home.

Steele now found himself drawn to Saigon. The music haunted him. Whoever played was

exceptionally skilled, had worked at their craft for many years. It was not the “Whispering Hope” that Steele played as a child. He hardly recognized the melody, now drawn into an intricate variation that humbled him.

The piano he had heard that afternoon seemed so rich and its sound so full, its tone so exquisite, it drew Steele back to the school. He wanted to touch those keys, play that superb piano. And he wanted to see who had been playing on such a magnificent instrument.

If you were a flyer in Vietnam, it was not hard to get into Saigon. Soon Steele had snagged a lift back to the city. And in the afternoon he slipped away from his companions, back to that same neighborhood. He walked slowly down the street as he had done before and there it was. The same piano, the same artist at the keyboard.

As he approached the gate, a young woman beckoned to him from the building where the music had come from. The girl in the pictures. She said she had noticed him stop at the gate the week before. She always watched for her uncle, come to accompany her home. Her English was perfect, her smile the sweetest thing on earth. Her hands, Steele noticed, delicate but strong from playing since childhood.

She asked if he played, and he said that he had. She simply said “show me” and led him into the conservatory. She indicated a small upright against one wall, the student piano. Hers was the grand that occupied the center of the floor. One of the last pieces Steele had studied was “La Golondrina,” a piece favoring magnificent chord progressions and a sweet melody. He placed his hands over the keys and let them rest there.

Steele played a few bars then looked at the young woman apologetically. She laughed softly and said, “Ah, ‘La Golondrina.’ Like this.” And she played. “Do you know what a *golondrina* is?” Steele shook his head. “It is the swallow. Here, now listen to this.” And she

played again. “This is ‘La Paloma,’ the dove. Do you know it?” Steele shook his head again.

“We teach these songs to all of our advanced students. I will help you learn. A flyer should know such things.”

A knock on the door and the girl’s uncle appeared, looking quite concerned. She laughed her sparkling laugh and turned to Steele. “My uncle is quite conservative. I play here every afternoon after school.”

The trips into Saigon became more frequent as the weeks went by. Each afternoon when he could, Steele made his way to the school gate and waited as the children left for the day, their music books with the pink, blue or purple covers clutched to their chests...just as Steele recalled from his own childhood years, years when a kindly grade school music teacher had given him lessons after school. A luxury his family could never have afforded.

Lan began to play as the last child left. Then Steele made his way through the courtyard, along a winding gravel path past heavy, carved doors set deeply into buildings, doors that revealed nothing of the life behind them, and past small leafy grottos honoring saints Steele did not recognize.

Lan asked why he had stopped at the gate that first afternoon. What was it about “Whispering Hope” that had made him stop to listen to her play. He told her about playing the child’s version for his mother that Mother’s Day so long ago and how long it had been since he had seen her. He was seated at the piano, she standing to look at the music over his shoulder. She placed her hand on that shoulder, this man so far away from his own family.

The students began to expect Steele’s presence at the gate and, giggling, asked if he was the music teacher’s pilot. And eventually Lan’s uncle gave up what had become a pretense of disapproval. When he found them sharing a piano bench, he did not object.

Finally Steele was invited to the family home for Sunday dinner, an event that left him gasping internally. Everyone appeared immaculately dressed in the finest of civilian clothing, which gave away nothing. The women were charming and gracious in their silken *ao dias*, the men thoughtful and erudite in more western attire. Lan said not to be afraid of them, it was all for show. They were really a simple, everyday people who worked hard, loved their family, and made it to mass with absolute regularity.

As it turned out, the old uncle was not a relative at all but was Lan's bodyguard. He had served the family for decades and had become Lan's constant companion upon her return from France where she had been educated.

Steele continued to fly mission after mission, day after day, week after week, sometimes through the most perilous skies imaginable. It was an odd relationship. Lan never spoke of her family's comings and goings, although there seemed to be an ever revolving cast of characters at the dinner table on Sunday. And Steele never mentioned what he had been doing on the many days when he was not in Saigon. Never mentioned how far from Saigon his missions had taken him, nor what he had done on those missions. Life with Lan was their music, his friends, her family, and their time together.

A few more weeks passed and the old uncle would meet Steele at the school's gate and the two of them would wait together until the children left. He spoke no English and Steele assumed that it was the old man's way of showing approval. He finally let Steele walk Lan home.

Then, at last, the old man let Steele put his arm around Lan's shoulders. For weeks, every time Steele tried to take Lan's hand or put his arm around her shoulders, old uncle would appear out of nowhere with a stern look on his face. Before Steele could even act on his impulse, old

uncle would be by Lan's side. The old man would grumble and Lan would say something cheerful to her protector in Vietnamese. Then turn to Steele with a translation, her eyes laughing. Apparently "over my dead body" is an expression in Vietnamese as well as in English. It was not the courtship of a young man's dreams.

Steele eventually kept a room in an old French hotel, down a side street outside a busy retail center. It was a place where he and Lan could find some time alone together. His room was on the second level with floor to ceiling louvered windows that opened onto a broad verandah. The room was startlingly white with a huge bamboo-paneled ceiling fan lazily circulating the air around the room.

Things had begun to change with Lan's family and with the old uncle. One Sunday Steele was summoned into the library by Lan's father. The men in the family generally retired to smoke after Sunday dinner. Steele was alarmed to find that none of the other men moved toward the library with them. It was as if they had been warned away. Steele crossed the room to look out the window. He was expecting the worst.

Lan's father laughed. "I didn't bring you in here to shoot you. Sit down." Steele sat.

Steele's host had indicated two chairs in the corner. A humidor sat on the table between the chairs. He lifted the lid and selected two worthy candidates: long, firm, beautifully crafted Cubans. The odor was intoxicating, even to a nonsmoker.

Lan's father had been preparing the two cigars and he handed one to Steele. Then he chuckled contentedly as he lit the cigar and handed the lighter to Steele. The elder man was silent momentarily as he tended to the perfect ignition of his cigar. Steele, meanwhile, was just hoping he could get the thing going.



Lan's father smiled to himself. "The only good thing about the Communists is that I won't have to give these things up when the time comes."

He observed Steele for a moment. "You know, we didn't want Lan to come back from France." Steele nodded, he knew this. "She is the only one of us whom her mother and I thought could live in the West. The rest of us have Vietnam too deep in our souls. We couldn't give this life up. And now Lan's music draws her back, too. She loves her school.

"We know this war isn't going to go well for us. Our family has too many irons in the fire, as you Americans say. We are going to wind up on the wrong side. It is only a matter of time.

"Lan's mother and I believe that you love our daughter. And we believe that she has come to love you. That is why we have allowed you to take certain liberties with her."

"Sir, no liberties have been taken."

"Nevertheless, we have instructed old uncle not to kill you." Lan's father had a twinkle in his eye as he said this.

"Thank you, sir."

"Do not be afraid to love Lan and take her with you when you leave...if you can get her to go. We think you are an honorable man, and we would trust her into your hands. We are glad you came into her life."

Steele considered for a moment. "I have been thinking about this, myself, sir. More and more lately. I don't believe she could go with me. There are formalities that take time. Red tape.... My life here is uncertain."

"Lan's mother and I understand this. We want you to know what our position is, that is all.... And now let us finish these fine cigars and go join the others."

On Steele's next trip into Saigon the old uncle appeared by Steele's side, as usual. He leaned his umbrella against the gate and played with its ornate handle, examining it carefully. Steele had fancied that the ever-present umbrella was actually a dagger or some other weapon disguised as an umbrella. In actuality it was probably just an umbrella, carried to protect Lan from the random downpour. But Steele enjoyed the thought that this was the real thing, a concealed weapon carried by a master. It wasn't hard to start thinking that way in a world where people actually had bodyguards.

On this day old uncle fiddled with the umbrella handle for some time. Finally, he dug into his pocket and handed Steele a piece of paper. Written in carefully crafted, rather large lower-case letters was a cryptic note from the old man. He tapped each word on the piece of paper then said "good word book, smart help."

The note was simple and direct. "you care precious orchid. do good. move miss into usa." He ended by saying, "father correct."

Steele knew that the old man loved Lan and simply nodded, touching the old man on the sleeve.

Steele and Lan had spent the early months of the year attending festivals, walking through open markets, and dining in small, hidden, out-of-the-way restaurants. As Vietnam's summer season wore on, though, Steele and Lan spent more and more time at Steele's old French hotel. They read on those hot afternoons when Steele could get into Saigon. And listened to music curled together for the night when evening came. Steele began to forget old uncle's presence outside, keeping watch on the hotel entrance. There was no violent banging on the door at a proper hour; some wheel in the universe had turned and the rules had changed. For which Steele was more than grateful.

Steele continued to fly, the missions becoming ever more dangerous as the enemy became more skilled at defending itself. Steele had two separate lives to live. In one life he was the ultimate adrenaline junkie, a man among men. The same Steele who couldn't get enough time in the sky. The same Steele who was constantly looking for the next contest, the ultimate test to see whether he would live or die.

But at the same time, so thankful for that second life with Lan. The life Lan and her family pursued was an incredible draw. The comfort of attending mass with the family when he could, the comfort of those familiar Latin passages that he had known since childhood. To understand the passion Lan felt for her music. And the hours alone with her to simply look into that beautiful face. He had found peace in the midst of hell on earth, and Steele felt a contentment that he had not known in years, if ever. So unbelievably tragic to lose that.

How to sum up the tragic death of a beautiful, young woman, a simple music teacher.

That morning, Steele felt Lan get out of bed. It had been a rough week and he was exhausted, had slept late. Lan slipped out of bed quietly to let him rest, and he had not really heard the door close as she carefully shut it after herself.

It had been their practice that he would get up early on Sunday mornings and walk to the local café for coffee and newspapers. On that morning, however, Lan had decided to go out herself. The café was only four blocks away and she wanted Steele to rest.

The café was down the street that Steele's hotel was on and around the corner another block. At night the café was a lively open-air bar with a western-style band playing late into the night. The rowdy clientele faded away as the night wore thin and by morning only the staff remained. It then turned into a simple coffee shop, frequented by a few hung-over early risers in search of something to take the edge off their misery.

The building was the typical architectural disaster found so frequently in tropical climates: stark white cement construction with wide open spaces between columns that anchored wood-louvered floor to ceiling doors. These intended for closure in the event of a downpour that got out of hand. Generally they were never closed, the crowds so dense it was simply impractical.

The building sat at the end of a block and fronted onto a wide multi-lane roundabout, giving the patrons lots of room to carouse around. At night there was constant bumper to bumper traffic vying for position, the drivers all leaning on their horns, a racket that blended with the music pouring out of the bar. And a constant string of cabs loitering in the outside lane looking for drunks to haul off.

By morning the scene had completely changed. By daylight the young Vietnamese family who owned the newsstand had set up on the sidewalk outside the café to catch anyone sober enough to read a newspaper. A patron could always find newspapers and magazines in multiple languages and always current. It was there that Steele had usually gone to get their coffee and to purchase the papers. English language for him, Vietnamese for Lan. The young father who took the early first shift at the newsstand spoke fairly good English, and Steele had enjoyed their brief conversations.

Steele felt the jolt. And was fully awake before the sound arrived: a deafening crack before the sickening sound of cement collapsing in on itself began. He knew instantly what had happened. He looked around desperately hoping to find Lan crouched in a corner. His first fear was more for the old man whom he knew to be outside somewhere.

That initial fear was instantly replaced by another when Steele realized Lan was not there. With a start, he remembered that Lan had quietly slipped from their bed, and he

remembered hearing the soft closing of the door as she left. In moments he had dashed down the stairs and into the street, joining the legion of others racing toward the blast. He searched for Lan and the old man in the crowd, and hoped the old bodyguard had been able to get to Lan and take her down a side street or into an alley for safety.

A cloud of cement dust materialized as Steele neared the corner into the roundabout.

Steele reached the café and stood surveying the damage. Whatever had been thrown had rolled into the newsstand before exploding. The debris from the newsstand crashing into the café pillars and the shock wave from the blast, had sent the two story building down on itself in a matter of seconds, leaving huge chunks of the cement ceiling to crush everything in the café below. Steele stood looking in disbelief, transfixed by the extent of the damage. As the sirens wailing in the distance drew closer, his eyes fell onto the hem of a dress buried in the rubble. It was Lan's.

The old uncle had surely been nearby, possibly even by Lan's side, but he had been unable to save her. He could ward off kidnapers, robbers, and assassins, but not cowardly men who threw explosives into newsstands from scooters.

But the target had not been the newsstand or the café. It had been an attack on an official government vehicle traveling through the intersection and whoever was inside. The black car and the scooter had sped away, down different streets exiting the roundabout and instantly disappeared.

Eight days later Steele was flying again. He had been restricted to base for some days. And it was several weeks before he was able to get into Saigon.

He and Gene had gone to the family home in that quiet neighborhood Steele had come to love. But the neighborhood had changed. There was no longer soft music in the air, even the

fountains seemed silent. The house was dark and shuttered, had the air of being deserted. The house was not quietly waiting for someone to return; it was vacant, mourning its loss alone.

The two men walked through the neighborhood to the school. The gate was open and Steele and Gene went in. The courtyard was silent; there were no longer children taking music lessons in the afternoon. As the two men walked up the stairs to the conservatory, they were joined by the priest. The three men stepped into the room where Steele and Lan would sit at the piano to play during those wonderful afternoon hours together.

The priest filled in the blanks. Lan's family moved into the mountains, where they had an estate, to grieve in private. Her parents were devastated and the priest doubted that they would return to Saigon to take up their old life there for a very long time.

Steele nodded and moved to the piano. In his mind he could hear the music, almost feel Lan's presence in the room. He had a momentary need to play again but struck, instead, one last note on the piano, the middle C. And then he closed the cover over the keys of that magnificent instrument.

In the end, Steele's plane made an unexpected, hard starboard turn that proved to be fatal. The quick maneuver had startled Gene.

My brother was born in January of 1937. Steele was 28 years old when he died.