

Time Say

The series of barbs bit into Twan's left knee. Dirty metal tines framed him in a whorl of wire that pierced his darkened skin and left a starburst of wounds diffusing blood into the dust that clung to him. Constellations of pain stretched him tight inside and out while he squatted on his haunches. His scabs cracked in the morning sun.

Da Nang sweltered in river humidity that rose off the delta to nearly steam the stitches off the U.S. Marine name badges sewn above the pocket of their olive drab shirts. The nights never cooled in summer, they merely stopped burning for a few dark hours to smolder in the hum of insects and the beasts that ate them. New dawns did not promise a rebirth of anything. Instead the sun drove the Marines to any shade they could find while their prisoners shuffled, shoeless across the trodden infield of the temporary prison camp enclosure. Despite the river so close and sweat so profuse, the dust under the Vietcong captives sucked life like liquid down the gaunt straws of their legs. "Cái khó ló cái khôn," said Twan huddled quietly under his brother's shirt he spread over his head for shade. "Cái khó ló cái khôn - adversity is the mother of wisdom," he repeated again and again to gather his courage.

Corporal Blythe checked his clipboard in the guard shack to read the morning orders. He kicked the crate under a private and told him to gather the troops and line up the trucks. "The Colonel wants 30 VC per deuce and a half. Clear the camp." Soon three trucks rumbled from behind the barracks. Blythe turned his attention to the cramped beds of the trucks and grumbled, "Where the hell we sit?" Crust-eyed and crease-faced the late roused Marines stood only half awake. Two hung off the back of each truck, M16s at their hips ready to work.

Dehydrated prisoners started to shuffle. Dust billowed ahead of ten more Marines herding prisoners toward the trucks. New tears caked into gray streaks down Twan's face. He continued to crouch in the dirt ready to burst. He did not follow any Vietnamese toward the trucks. A Marine put a boot sole to the side of his head to push him. Twan lost his balance, rolled into a ball inside the same shirt he pulled from his older brother's dead body after their side street ambush of American troops slid sideways. On that morning as hot as this one Twan escaped, but his commander told him, "Cái khó ló cái khôn - adversity is the mother of wisdom," and next time he would allow the Americans to capture him. He would stuff himself with wisdom. Then pull them close.

Twan now lay the only prisoner in a ring of grunts closing fast. "Time to rise and shine Charlie." Twan pushed both hands into the dust, propped himself up slowly on his two straws for legs. He clutched his brother's shirt in his left hand. Corporal Blythe stepped in the ring and seized Twan's arm below the shoulder to hurry his ass along. Blythe nearly lifted Twan off the ground, but he shrugged away from Blythe's grip, refused to dust himself off. "Time," said Twan. "Time!" Then in halting English Twan taunted his tormentors. "My people... say... time pass." He reached down the back of his sagging shorts with his right hand. "But... time say..." Twan pulled out a line of Primacord that disappeared into his shorts, his thumb on a blasting cap. Confused, Blythe knit his eyebrows. "People...pass." Before Blythe's eyes could widen with alarm, Twan's thumb pressed the blasting cap that turned all their lives to liquid and steamed Marine name badges off their crimson soaked shirts.