

Memoirs of a Bodhisattva

Short stories by Skip Nelson



A Quiet Night in Saigon

While serving in Vietnam from 1967 until 1968, I often volunteered to do Official Courier runs to U. S. Army Headquarters in Long Binh, about 24 miles outside of Saigon. You see, back in those days, although we had computers (IBM 1105s, which fit in semi-trailers) we had no way of transmitting the information so we had to hand carry the paperwork from place to place.

Leaving my compound in Quy Nhon at early dawn, I would take my Priority Two Orders to the airfield and wait for a flight. There were very few direct flights in those days, so we had to do hops from place to place until we got to our desired destination. I often flew on private helicopters of very high ranking officers as well as normal aircraft to get where I was going. My Priority Two Orders made that possible. I basically always got the next flight out.

When doing Courier Runs to Headquarters, you got a free three day pass. The trick was.....if you arrived at your destination early enough on the first day and got your mission done, you would have two days of free R&R. That was always my goal. Saigon was very fun in those days and relatively safe.....during the day.

On a particular trip in 1968, I did just that. I arrived at Tân Sơn Nhất Airport in Saigon in late afternoon after a long, multi craft hopscotch trip from Quy Nhon. I walked across the tarmac to the heliport opposite to the main terminal to try to arrange for a flight to Long Binh, where the US Army Vietnam Headquarters were. That was my destination.

At about 3:30 PM, I finally caught a hop to Long Binh arriving at around twenty minutes later. I immediately grabbed my parcel containing the computer print outs that were destined for USARV and jumped out of the Huey. The helipad was directly beside the headquarters building, so it was a short walk to the statistics office where I was to drop off my paperwork.

Having completed my mission, I went back to the helipad and waited for the next hop back to Tân Sơn Nhất Airport.

I arrived back in Saigon about 5:30 PM. I hired a cab to take me to my hotel in downtown Saigon....about 20–25 minutes away, depending on traffic. In those days, there was a curfew which started at sunset and went to sunrise. Since Saigon is only 10–12 degrees or so off the Equator....it has pretty much 12 hours of daylight. 6PM is the beginning of darkness.

As we approached downtown, the cab driver turned and said to me that he needed to drop me somewhere because he needed to get home before curfew. I was taken aback. He wants to drop me in the middle of nowhere at sundown in Saigon?? No...I don't think so. I argued with him and told him he needed to take me to my hotel immediately. He refused. As the argument proceeded, we reached a stand off. He was not budging. It was then, and only then, ever, that I have ever pulled a gun on another person. I reached down and pulled out my .45 automatic and pointed it at his head. I said he need to take me somewhere safe. He promised.

He drove a short way and then pulled up in front of a rather large house by Vietnamese standards. The house was surrounded by a wall and gate. He parked the car and immediately went through the gate towards the house. A woman came to the door and they had a brief conversation.

He ran back to the taxi and quickly opened my car door and ushered me through the gate and to the door. He introduced me to a friendly woman and explained to her, I guess, in Vietnamese, what the circumstances were. She welcomed me into her home, where she introduced me to her husband, and family, including a small boy with a small white dog. She showed me to a room at the top of the stairs and, although she could not speak English, indicated to me that this was my room.

As I was settling in, I noticed the small boy, with his dog, looking at me through a small open window between the stairs and my room. We smiled and waved at each other and attempted to connect. (I took a great photo of them, but, somehow, through the years, I have misplaced it.) After about one hour, the boy returned and indicated that it was dinner time.

I went back downstairs and was greeted by the family and invited to sit down at the table. This family was obviously very westernized, as most Vietnamese did not sit at dinner tables. They normally sit on the floor. We smiled and I expressed my approval of the food and my appreciation to them for providing me with a well needed home cooked meal.

It was easy to forget, at that moment, that I was in an unknown location, with unknown people in the middle of a war zone. Nobody in the Army, or anywhere else for that matter, knew where I was. I could have easily “disappeared”, but, as has always been the case, I trusted the Universe to take care of me.

After dinner, I excused myself and returned to my room. I was tired after a long day of traveling.

In the morning, I awoke to a sunny, beautiful day. I was served a small breakfast by my hostess and then bid her and the family farewell. I grabbed my small suitcase went out into the busy street and hailed another cab, which completed the trip to my hotel. Since that time, and often, I wonder about the family. I wonder if they were OK after hosting a US soldier in their home.

But that is assuming that they were aligned against the VC. Maybe they were VC sympathizers. Maybe I spent the night with the enemy.

I will never know.....but I will always remember the great and unexpected experience I had one evening in war torn Saigon. And I hope they are safe and know how much their kindness meant to me on that very unusual night.