

The Booby Trap

Short by today's height standards, Jim's potbelly conceals his once finely toned, muscular body. The friendly smile behind his greying beard gives no hint to the once hard and bitter attitude that allowed Jim to kill whenever the military mission demanded it. Although every death pained his soul, Jim is proud of the fact that he never killed when there was another choice. And rarely did he kill anyone that wasn't trying to kill him, or one of his own. Many of his targets deserved to die, some didn't.

After years of therapy at the VA he finally came to terms with those rare exceptions, mercy killings some might call them. The part of Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* where the VC sniper girl begs for relief, "Kill I... Kill I," is always hard for him to watch. It brings back memories. One was a girl who was setting a Chicom antipersonnel mine along a trail.

On patrol one afternoon Jim caught her in the act of planting the mine. He wasn't sure whether she made a nervous mistake or blew herself deliberately to avoid interrogation.

Knocked over by the blast, Jim slowly got to his feet and shook off the daze. Easing cautiously up to her, one slow step at a time, he watched three charred and bleeding stubs writhing in a macabre dance. The

remaining arm, peppered with red holes from shrapnel wounds, reached toward him while her mouth silently screamed. All he could hear was ringing in his ears from the explosion.

Sadness, mixed with pity, filled his heart as he stood above her, looking down at her contorted face. Her once beautiful long black hair now matted with wet crimson was tossed and disheveled.

Closing his eyes, Jim visualized her silken black hair hanging loosely over her slender shoulders. The brief glance of her, squatting Asian style over the round pale green land mine, imprinted on his mind's eye. Drawn tightly against her knees, the legs of her black silk pajamas, revealed long slender, finely toned thighs and a small youthful derriere. Long raven hair framed a stunning slender face.

“In a different situation,” he remembers thinking. “I’d be asking her out.”

Her panic-filled eyes interrupted that perfect momentary vision as they darted in his direction. Her silken black hair whipped around fanlike as a bright orange, yellow and red flash ripped her world apart. Jim’s eyes clenched tighter at the image of instant terror, frozen on her face and in his mind, forever.

He hated himself for catching her. Why didn't he follow the other trail? As the vision began to fade, the self-hatred he felt transformed into hatred for the Communists who dragged her into this war. "Was she fooled," he wondered, "by propaganda? Or did some VC cadre member steal her from her bed one dark night, like so many others of her age?"

Jim's eyes snapped open as she grabbed the barrel of his M-16. The slender shrapnel-peppered fingers of her remaining hand tugged it to her face and pressed it against her forehead. Her eyes ... her beautiful dark eyes begged for relief. Slowly her screams replaced the ringing in his ears.

"There was no way she could survive," Jim thought. His mind raced, trying to rationalize what he knew he was about to do. What he must do.

"There must be a ton of shrapnel in her abdomen," he thought. "She'll bleed out before a Medevac can get her to the field hospital. What would her life be like if she did survive? Would she even want to survive? Would *he* want to survive in her situation?"

Clenching his eyes, he slowly squeezed the trigger. Flinching at the recoil, he kept his head turned away from his buddies. He knew they were behind him, he could feel them there, staring at the scene.

"Hard core!"

"Holy Shee..."

“Gung Ho!”

Their distant long-forgotten words penetrate his thoughts. He remembers how he couldn't let them see the salty tears he tasted, as they dripped across his upper lip.