



For Cissy Shellabarger, R.N., Wherever You Are

Tet-stunned
and very nearly scalped
by a hundred razored fragments
from a Chicom* 122mm rocket,
my unconscious carcass
was hastily carted to the Cu Chi hospital
and added to the long line
already there and awaiting attention.

An anguished and blood-sotted doctor
too weary and rushed and young
for what he'd already been conscripted to do,
glanced at my cranial lacerations,
shook his head sadly,
and went on to the next American teenager,
who obviously had a far better
"survival probability."

But an Army nurse (someone told me later)
just as weary and rushed and young
had already seen enough of death that night
and simply decided to buck the odds one time.
"Nobody croaks on Cissy!" she warned both me and God.

And she was right.
I didn't die.
In fact, I suspect the more grievous wounds were hers.

* Chicom—GI abbreviation for Chinese Communist





Nui Ba Den

In the central highlands of Vietnam
the mountain of Nui Ba Den
rises three thousand feet into the clouds
from the jungle floor near Tay Ninh.

Once, in the distant past,
a mourning woman named Den
climbed the peak and committed suicide
as close to heaven as possible.

Den's husband died as a soldier
and she hoped the gods would
allow her to join him quickly
and would act to prevent further wars.

But Den's final resting place
is of strategic importance in the area
and for centuries, enemies of the Vietnamese
have fought for control of it.

Chinese, Japanese, French and Americans
have died by the thousands on the mountain's slope
and Ba Den's ancient sacrifice is lost
among the international bloodstains on its summit.

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U S A R M Y

APO 96225*

A young man once went off to war in a far country,
and when he had time, he wrote home and said,
"Dear Mom, sure rains a lot here."

But his mother—reading between the lines as mothers
always do—wrote back,
"We're quite concerned. Tell us what it's really like."

And the young man responded,
"Wow! You ought to see the funny monkeys."

To which the mother replied,
"Don't hold back. How is it there?"

And the young man wrote,
"The sunsets here are spectacular!"

In her next letter, the mother pleaded,
"Son, we want you to tell us everything. Everything!"

So the next time he wrote, the young man said,
"Today I killed a man. Yesterday, I helped drop napalm
on women and children."

And the father wrote right back,
"Please don't write such depressing letters. You're
upsetting your mother."

So, after a while,
the young man wrote,
"Dear Mom, sure rains here a lot."



* APO 96225, Army Post Office Number 96225
—Official address of the 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam



In The Long Sleepless Watches Of The Night

When the midnight ghosts rise up
to choke me with old fears,
to gorge me on yesterday's terrors,
to rekindle that latent shallow rage—

I spring from my bed,
rush downstairs to my office,
grab a fully-loaded pen,
and launch an immediate counterattack
of rhyme, meter,
hyperbole, imagery,
metaphor, connections
and symbolism.

The words words words
repulse the demons,
and rise like a bunker of sandbags
to shelter my besieged sanity.

Hours later, the assault repelled,
I stumble back to my pillow
exhausted from the fight,
and collapse.

Yet even as my eyes close,
and my body surrenders at last to sleep,
around the perimeter of my newly-reinforced defenses
I can feel the old enemies regrouping.



Some Vietnam Vets I Have Known

Peter never made it out of Vietnam.

Neither did George, Ira, Martin, Bill, O.T., Gandy, and so many, many others.

Al disappeared in Mexico about 11 years ago.

Allen and Dave and Stewart and Abel all committed suicide.

Duane deliberately goaded his wife into killing him
(after I refused to do it).

Thomas lives alone in the mountains of Idaho.

Joe has become an avowed communist and works somewhere in New York City.

Jim and Terry and Ted died of cancer before reaching 30.

Chris is in the Arizona State Pen, doing 15 years for smuggling drugs.

Evan has dropped completely out of sight.

M.T. and David and Michael and John and Robert, and nearly all the others I could name, are divorced.

Basil left the country sometime in 1973. I don't know what happened to him.

Larry died unexpectedly last Spring.

According to historians, the war ended on April 28, 1975.

Yet the casualties continue to pile up, these many years later.

I wonder if there will be a place for all their names on the Wall in Washington, too . . .



Face-To-Face With Uncle Ho

Morning shadows still shroud the gray-slabbed mausoleum located in Ba Dinh Square in downtown Hanoi.

The glass sarcophagus is located deep in the building's interior, up one flight of smooth marble stairs worn slightly hollow by thirteen years of endless pilgrims.

Ho reposes upon a bed of plum-colored silk, dressed in his customary olive-drab military uniform.

The vibrant eyes—even with the lids gently closed—seem to directly return my gaze.

Facial lines etched by 79 years of war are still evident, but the body's attitude reflects an overwhelming sense of final peace.

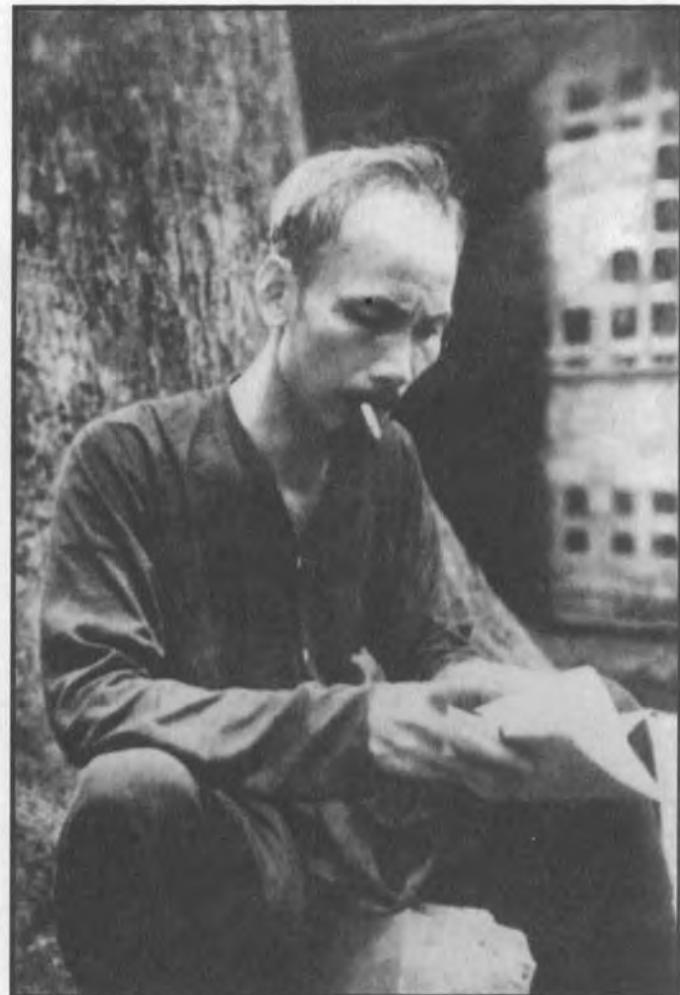
And there is more in this cold tomb than just Ho's animate corpse and silent echoes.

Buddhists believe that the soul hovers above the departed's coffin, praying for the forgiveness of those who offended the person in life. Leaving the darkened room, I picture the faintest twitch of a smile, as if Ho was letting me know that he was aware of my presence.

Outside, in the palm-shaded garden, a warm winter sun lights the faces of a long line of waiting children.

They are laughing and fidgeting, a hundred happy sparrows full of life and song.

A whole new generation who have no memories of war, Americans, or even Ho Chi Minh.



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Fifth Daughter

Don't be angry that I talk of hard matters,
but I haven't spoken to an American since 1973,
and I have many questions to ask.

I am the fifth daughter in a family of nine children.
My last sister was only just born
when GI's killed her and my mother.

Please forgive my personal questions,
but why did you come to my small country
to make war on us in our own homes?

My father told us when we were little that Americans were good,
that your nation was very big and very rich,
and that you were coming to Vietnam to help us.

I am sorry that I cannot speak without these many tears,
but my memories are so pitiful
that I cannot help myself.

You destroyed my city and my youthful years,
and I may never get the chance for asking again.
So—what do you tell your own children about the war?



Ballet Of The Mortar Rounds

My name is Madam Nguyen Thi Kim,
and I am a former member
of the Vietnam Song, Dance and Musical Ensemble
from Hanoi.

I was only just out of high school when I was asked to join,
and had lived in the comfortable city all my life.
But my singing and dancing skills were needed
to encourage our fighters in their patriotic resolve.

Our twelve-member troupe traveled along the trail
constantly for eight years,
giving up to 28 shows per month.

We performed in jungle clearings and in caves,
on mountain tops and in tunnels.

We wore elegant gowns or black peasant ba-ba's,*
recited verses from Bac Ho** or "Kim Van Kieu,"
and sang popular resistance songs like
"Saigon Rising Up," and "Making Clothes for Our Soldiers."

My favorite number was one I created to recognize
the women who carried the heavy 81mm mortar
ammunition on shoulder poles
from the depots in the North
to our comrades in the South.

Their endless task was a fugue of brutal toil,
but they carried it out with heroics, love and grace.
And in their honor, I called the dance
"Ballet of the Mortar Rounds."



* ba-ba's—traditional peasant work clothes
** Bac Ho—"Uncle" Ho Chi Minh