

I Was an Outsider

By Paul Mayo, submitted by his surviving brother Dann.

At our plane's last refueling stop, in Tokyo, there'd been snow on the ground. At the one before that, in Alaska, it'd been easy to fancy that there was no such thing as ground -- just snow; now, as the plane's door opened onto Ton Son Nhut airport in South Vietnam, the ground veritably rose up to meet us on shimmering waves of heat that made the ramp of stairs pulled up to the aircraft seem unnecessary: "We could float down in this stuff," I thought, and it seemed almost true.

We'd moved again. It was 1964. I was nine and an Army brat and already used to moving, but this was going to take a little getting used to. I couldn't believe the heat. I couldn't believe that at the Continental Hotel, ooh-la-la, we had to boil the water. I couldn't believe that our hotel window overlooked a field containing a water buffalo. And I couldn't believe there was a war going on, a fact I do not recall anyone's mentioning to me until, shortly after our arrival, my older brother delighted in breaking away from the family group as we shuffled along Saigon to ask of passersby, "Are you a V.C.? Are you a V.C.?"

"Uh.. .what's a V.C.?" I asked my parents (as they swatted my older brother and told him to shut up). And I found out.

So, you're in a war zone. Nothing to it: You share your school bus with two armed guards and learn your multiplication tables while soldiers carrying M-16s crunch along the gravel on the roof overhead; you forego P.E. (and most other outdoor activities) for a while, and instead of fire drills, you have sniper drills, and practice diving under your desk; you play tag with your friends and wind up impaling your wrist on one of the steel spikes gracing the gate outside your house (See? That outside stuff'll get you); you ask General Westmoreland's daughter Margaret, to go steady, and you get your class-consciousness raised ("Me?" she said; "With you?"); you sing altered-for-Vietnam versions of Christmas carols ("And a V.C. in a palm tree..."), which is kind of fun; and you finally and forever give up on Santa Claus on a 105-degree Christmas Eve while you take cookies outside to the soldiers guarding your house and listen to the shelling going on outside of the city; and you discover perplexing new feelings -- somehow scared, somehow sad -- when you see your mother one night sitting on the terrace, rocking, with a loaded .45 in her lap.

Finally, one March morning in 1965, the radio served my mother and siblings and me news of escalation (of the war) and evacuation (of us) with our breakfast; it seemed we were moving again, in a hurry. And, so we packed, and the reporters descended to film us vacating our school and traipsing to the airport, and we rode the air currents up in to another plane and were gone.

Now, it'd be ludicrous for me to even so much as suggest that my schoolboy's experience in South Vietnam was hellish or horrific. More than that: that'd be an insult to those, and especially the children, for whom that and other wars have been those things, up-close-and-personal. No: I had a basically normal childhood under somewhat other-than-normal circumstances, and while in Vietnam I was guarded, protected, and even pampered. But it'd be making no false claim to say that I somehow changed while in Vietnam. Perhaps that change in me was merely the difference between eight and nine; I don't know. But I do know that somehow, while in Saigon, I stepped over some invisible line of demarcation and stepped irrevocably outside of my childhood, or at least an early phase of innocent childhood. I feel that this happened as surely as Santa, while I was there, was consigned to my mental toy chest, put away as an idea I didn't play with anymore. I don't know when this event occurred: while the soldiers crunched over our heads at school, or while I dove for cover from imaginary snipers; or, perhaps, when the general's daughter blew me off, or on that Christmas Eve when the sky was lit by cannon fire; but I know that the world became a less innocent place, and I became a less innocent boy, just for having perceived the change. And those feelings I had -- somehow scared, somehow sad -- when I saw my mother with the gun in her lap, rocking, welled up because, I believe, I had sensed that I'd stepped outside of my innocence. That lap with the gun in it -- I'd used to crawl in that

lap, and now it was 1965, and I was nine, and I wanted to crawl in it again --maybe just for old time's sake.

I did not personally observe my mother sitting with a .45 in her lap on Christmas Eve, 1964, and I have wondered about that detail since then. To the best of my knowledge, the weaponry in our house at that time consisted of my father's 7.65mm Mauser pistol and an old Japanese bayonet (which I kept under my bed, as mine was the only bedroom on the ground floor, and I slept better with this likely useless piece of metal – as in “never bring a knife to a gunfight” – nearby). It was not until I returned to Saigon as a tourist in 2016 and we went by where the Brinks Hotel used to be that I made the connection with the history that I knew. As an officer's wife, my mother was not allowed to have a “real job” overseas, so when we were in Saigon she had some sort of volunteer position in the American Red Cross. On Christmas Eve she was downtown, shopping I presume. When the Brinks was bombed, the USO club (on or near Tu Do Street) was used as an aid station and I know, because she told me, and I saw the blood on her dress, that she ended up there assisting with casualties. She did not tell me about the gun. My guess is that as she was leaving there for home, someone gave her the sidearm with advice along the lines of “Best you be careful, ma'am, there's bad guys out there.” Now it all makes sense to me: this woman, traumatized by what she had just seen, rocking quietly with a loaner .45 in her lap wondering, on Christmas Eve, what she had gotten her five children into. Dann Mayo