

## **Iron Goddess of Mercy**

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*"I have tried to do good"*

— *Mark Twain*

If you die in a combat zone, you have to figure that what they box up and ship home to your Momma is going to be something short of the full field pack she issued you. Take traumatic amputation — trip a Bouncing Betty or a rigged 105 shell, and, well, lots of times the leg or the arm or the foot, or whatever got blown to Hell into the treetops, will get left behind in the dustoff. Get sniped, and even with a simple gunshot wound through and through there's all that blood to account for. Depending on the season, it seeps into the dry red earth or gets mixed with the sucking red mud, and then who's going to bother to police all that up and stuff it in the body bag along with the rest of you?

So, the fact is a man can leave an awful lot of himself in the 'Nam when he goes home in a box, and those remains work like a poison in the poor, thin soil. Laterite it's called, because it turns to red brick, leaving mangy bare spots where the jungle looks like it's caught its own rot. They say it's because of the 'palm.' But it isn't the napalm, not really. We have wildfires bad as that causes every few summers back home on the Island, burn so hot they suck the oxygen right out of the air, and the forest always grows back. In the 'Nam, the ground stays bare, like we sowed it with rock salt. Except in this one place I know, where the jungle's grown up wilder and greener than ever on the site where a Huey went down.

Chopper pilot was a friend of mine. We called him the Red Baron, not because he was redheaded — neither was the original, for that matter — but because he was a real ace, and that's a Hell of a lot harder to pull off in rotary than in fixed-wing aircraft. I wasn't a pilot myself, just manned the door guns for them, so what did I know? But to me it looked like a man would have to be able to pat his head, rub his belly, march backwards double time in place, whistle Dixie, fart, chew gum, and maintain a direct line of communication with his Savior all at the same time to keep one of those babies in the air. Nobody did it better than the Baron. There were guys in the 227th who'd swear he could fly that bird upside-down.

What he was doing there, nobody knew, wasn't like he got his ass drafted like your run-of-the-mill cannon fodder. We all figured the man had to be crazy to give up the Ivy League school for the 'Nam. Me, I'd have sat this war out, gladly, if my folks could have put up the money to keep me in Orono on a nice safe 2-S deferment for four years. But the Baron just came from a different world than the rest of us, one where privilege was paid for with self-imposed obligations. Told me once he just figured the Country'd given him a lot so far in his life and Vietnam was his first best chance to give something back. Lot of the time, that meant going in and bailing the ARVN's ass out of a sling.

Tell you the truth, I never could see much difference between Charlie and the ones who were supposed to be on our side. All gooks look pretty much alike even to each other, so how were we supposed to sort them out? Ask 'em, 'Hey you, you VC?' 'No no, Dai-uy,' they'd tell you, call an enlisted man 'Captain' to set him up for the lie, 'no VC here. Khong, khong.' In the whole of the Republic of Vietnam, for as long as it lasted, there was no such thing as the Cong, just like there's no Mafia in New Jersey. Well fuck 'em, our job's done then, that's what I said, let's you and me go home. It's different now that we've gone, of course, and they've turned to lying to each other about which side they were on. They're all VC now all right, they all call themselves Victor Charlie now.

But the Baron was one who thought what he did made a difference. If there was such a thing as the best of us, then he was it, what we Cav. thought we were when we thought about being The Cav. The man believed, he truly believed, that it mattered whether the friendlies were reinforced or not. Like maybe *this* time, when the advisors we flew in passed the word to 'Di-di-mou, attack!' they weren't going to look over their shoulders to find the troops whose butts they came to save di-di-mou-ing all right, in the opposite direction.

So, when this friendly unit got pinned down under heavy fire near Dong Phong, naturally he was the first to volunteer to ferry in the reinforcements, same as he'd done yesterday and the day before that one and the day before that, till he had damned near 500 missions on his flight log in under six months. Man was a sucker for punishment, or maybe he just liked it better in the air where he felt that he had some control, I don't know. But I said what the Hell, I'd fly with him. Somebody besides God has got to look after the great fools and little children, and he gave me thumbs-up and that 'What-Me-Worry' grin. You can see it here in this snap some guy took of us all, running around buck naked in the monsoon rain, all soaped up for a shower.

“See that?” the Baron indicated the LZ we were headed for to his new right seat, an FNG so green he didn't even know enough not to volunteer. I looked and saw room for a single chopper, maybe barely enough for two, if the pilots really knew their shit about flying with their rotors overlapped and didn't mind whacking bush on the way in. “It’s fuckin’ Thermopylae all over again down there.”

I didn't know what he was talking about till I looked it up later. Had to ask for help with the spelling, but I'd been in-country long enough by then to know a trap. All the same, we flew I don't remember how many sorties that day. Flight logs got fried, but seems to me it was four and a half. Didn't even get dinged too bad that first run, just one or two rounds through the plexiglass canopy and another that came up through the deck and the extra flack vest I used to double up and sit on, right between my legs, just missing. Took it real personal, I did. Back and forth and back again we flew in formation, dropping down in our turn like an eagle on your little old kitty cat, door guns sterilizing that hot LZ for the ARVN reinforcements we had to shove out the door while the crew chief and I covered them in case they decided to turn and fire on us. Then it was up and out of there on a sly drunk’s tail-wagging course meant to fox anyone on the ground who might be trying to draw a bead on us. Damned near got away with it, too.

We were just setting down that last time when we took a rocket hit. They say you never see the one that gets you. Nothing the Baron could have done about it if he had. Once he heard that Tkkk! and felt the gear box go, not even Christ Himself could have kept that bird in the air. The terrain was heavily forested, rocky and rough, no real LZ like I said. We set down hard, one skid in a rut, a blade hit the deck, then we were over on our right side and burning all hot and white from the magnesium alloy in the bird’s skin. Dolan, the crew chief, and that newbie peter pilot were both down, the reinforcements still alive in the tail screaming and choking on the smoke.

“Let’s go!” the Baron yelled. “Got to get ‘em out before she blows!” We unstrapped and set to work, him pulling them out of the wreck, me dragging the ones who couldn’t walk clear, bent double under the incoming. Don’t ever forget the incoming. He’d just turned to dive back into the smoke for the next man when the fuel tanks went up. I stood halfway up to turn towards the noise, and something hot and heavy and sharp caught me in the back, throwing me onto my face in the dust.

“Get the AC out, get the pilot, you doofus!” I screamed at the medic.

“Easy with this one,” he ordered the men loading me into the dustoff chopper. “We got us a fuckin’ spinal cord injury here.”

“If he’s one of those, his fuckin’ days’re over,” one of them answered.

“Got yourself a stateside wound, you lucky mother,” is how they broke the news to me.

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Later, in the VA hospital back here in Togus, I started playing with the numbers. We’d loaded thirteen (thirteen — that’s unlucky, the worst, ‘numba ten’ the dinks say) on board a chopper that was built to carry six, what with the weight of the bird’s extra armor, and the reinforcements we were carrying, and the crappy density altitude that hot, wet day. Six men — five ARVN Rangers and myself — somehow survived. What’s that mean, the way the odds just evened themselves out? It *feels* like that ought to mean something, but what? I keep thinking that if only I could figure that out, then I’d have the key to the inner workings of the Universe in my grasp. Maybe then I’d understand about the Baron’s death. I mean, I know *how* it happened. But the only answer I can come up with to *why* is that he died because an ignorant, faceless peasant with a rocket launcher believed in some stupid slogan that was not worth a man’s shit, much less his blood. ‘Swim like a fish against the current of imperialism,’ or some such crap — what’s that supposed to mean?

He was a tall man, tall and thin and growing thinner with the dysentery and the sweating in that heat, running on adrenaline, cannibalizing what little fat he had and then the muscle, living in the air eight, nine, ten hours a day, no time to eat or rest. And those boxes they ship you home in are only aluminum, it’s true. But still, what they planted in Arlington that March was too light by half.

In the jungle where he died a vine grows, grows up behind my eyelids every time I close my eyes. It looks like any other jungle plant — poisonous green, leaves like razor blades, whipcord for a stem, and so aggressive in its growth it could strangle you in your sleep. But there is only one of these, as there was only one of him, and like him it is a giving thing. An infusion of its leaves takes away all pain. Even its taste is pleasant, a lot like kwan yin tea. No pregnant woman who drinks it will ever lose her child, the paste made from its stem heals all wounds without a scar, and the resin, unlike opium, lets a man forget his sorrows without costing him his will.

Monday through Friday nights, Nurse Merrihew helps me into bed. She holds the water glass for me while I swallow the sleeping pills, then drains the piss bag taped to my leg.

“Two hundred and twenty-five ml, nice and clear, no sign of infection,” she says. “You’re doing better this week.”

Her hand on my dead prick when she checks the tubes is gentle and sure. I can see that, but all the feeling I have is in my memory now. You should have known me when, Merrihew, I want to tell her. Piece like you, I would have shown you a real nice time. You should have known me when.

She puffs up my pillow and turns down the lights. Then she gives me the little radio with the jack for my ear in case the pills don’t work, which they never do anymore. If I could just get my hands on the least little ball of that resin to smoke, maybe then I could sleep.

“Sweet dreams,” she tells me.

“Sweet dreams are for civilians.”

“Some civilians don’t sleep so well either. Why do you think I work nights?”

“Because we’re drugged up at night, no trouble at all.”

"Got news for you — you’re always drugged up. Have to keep you that way so you don’t kill yourselves, or each other."

“That’s my excuse. What’s yours for hanging around here so long? Thought you were going to marry that boyfriend of yours soon’s he got back from the ‘Nam.”

“Yeah, well, he came back all right. Problem is he was packed in a box.” Her eyes fix on the cracks in the linoleum floor. “They won’t let you look under the lid, the Army. You know? I told them I just needed to make certain it was really him. How do you go ahead and bury somebody without knowing for sure? And they said for me not to go worrying about that, ‘cause the way that he died, there was no way I would ever be able to tell even if I looked.”

“You ought to get out of here now, go back to the real world outside.”

"You too, Mainiac? You want me to go around pretending Vietnam never happened like all those happy dummies out there? Just do me one favor, okay? Don't go asking me how come it's been six months now and I'm still not over it yet. You do, and I swear I'll stick this IV up your nose."

"Marry me, Merrihew," I say to change the subject. "Hey, I'm a good catch — got a steady disability check from the VA and all the time in the world for you, you'll always know where I am, and you'll never have to worry that I'm stepping out on you..."

"You're crazy. You know that?" she laughs.

"No, I'm not. I'm the Mainiac. Crazy's crazy; he's in the next room, ought to be on the 'light Deck'..."

"Shhh!..." She turns her head to listen. As if on cue, old Crazy starts setting up his nightly howl. "Got to go give him his meds now," she tells me, "before he goes wild again."

"Heard about that. Boomer told me."

"You missed it, Man!" Boomer wheeled himself into my room to announce, couple of weeks ago now. "Merrihew had his head up against those big tits of hers, rocking the Craze back and forth like a baby. Only thing that shuts him up when he gets going like that, you know? And damned if he didn't latch on, bit her left nipple clean off. Shee-it! Two tours in Veet-Nam, and I never seen nothin' like that. Man, you should've heard her scream!"

I did hear her that night. One minute she was singing away old Crazy's panic, soft and low just like your Momma used to sing:

*"Hush you bye, don't you cry  
Go to sleepy little baby.  
Way down yonder in the meadow  
There's a poor little lamby.  
The bees and the butterflies  
Peckin' out his eyes.  
The poor little thing cried Mammy..."*

The next, she was screaming, and I damned near killed myself falling out of bed trying to get to her. Got all tangled up in the tubes, tore them right out of my prick, did myself a bit of damage and her no good at all. After that, she was gone for a week, and I thought she would never come back.

“Boomer talks too much,” she tells me. “It was nothing. Couple of stitches, tetanus shot, and a few days R and R, that was all.”

“Can't they get a male nurse to take care of him? I don't like you having to be there when old Crazy gets going that way.”

“Earley,” she says, “his name's Earley. And he isn't any crazier than anyone else in this hole. NVA skinned his best buddy alive. Did you know that? And when he tried to stop them, they started in on him; that's why he's all wrapped up like that. Nights when the pain gets too bad he thinks they've come back to finish the job, and he screams. You would, too.”

“Jesus! Can't the docs do anything for him?”

“Like what? We're already giving him all the Demerol he can take without killing him. Some nights I hear him screaming, and I think if I were a good nurse I'd go give that poor kid just that little bit more myself; it's a crime that we can't. Try and get some sleep now,” she urges. “I'll come back later to check on you.”

It's too bad about Nurse Merrihew. She could go for me, I can tell, if only I could put the moves on her. I watch her high firm ass retreat, left cheek hitch, right cheek hitch, left again... Then the Baron comes and stands by my head, tall and thin and whole. In Heaven we shall each have our scattered bodies back, that's nice to know, but do I get Nurse Merrihew's, too? Or will she still want the reconstituted mess in that box?

“Long time, no see,” I greet the Baron.

“I've been busy,” he smiles at me and shrugs, “becoming Vietnam.”

Hanoi Jane's on the air again tonight, crying crocodile tears over the way we treated the dinks, burning them out of their hootches and bombing their villes, toasting their pigs and babies with napalm like marshmallows, and all just because they were Cong ...

“Look there.” The Baron points to the vine in the jungle, his rainbow sign of forgiveness for what the good People of Vietnam have done to *us*.

“So?” I ask him, refusing to let on that I understand.

“Don't you see?” he persists. “If I can do that, then soon I will be able to flood those bombed-out craters and grow the rice again. Miracle rice this time — you've never seen anything like it!”

I turn my face away from him. “Don't talk to me about that. What the fuck do I care for rice? I hate the shit.”

“Then stuff your gut with bread. But people here eat rice, they need the medicine in my vine. And I need some help with this mission, Mainiac. Vine's no good to anyone unless they know where to find it and what it's for.”

If I had one drop of his goodness in me, I might show those little bastards where to find him, so they could murder him again. But they can save themselves the face they'd lose kowtowing before my wheelchair throne, for all I care. No more of the Baron's fool's errands for me. I have learned too healthy a respect for the Jungle's rules he knew as well as the rest of us but refused to be bound by — never volunteer, cover your ass, no good deed ever goes unpunished.