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Crazy-Land - A Grunts Memoirs - Chapter XVII

Misery Whistle - How the harmonica found me.

The Mekong Delta is one of the most beautiful places on the face of the earth. The Mekong River, the heartspring of the Delta, starts high in the snow packed mountains of Tibet. What begins at 16000 feet as Spring snow melt , grows and tumbles, carving deep valleys, as it moves relentlessly towards it's inevitable destination, the South China Sea. The River is like a tread in time that has stretched for eons over the course of human history. The indigeous people call it the 'Mother Of Life'. The river flows for over 2700 miles across China, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and finally Viet Nam. It is in Viet Nam that it empties into the Mekong Delta. That is where this story takes place.

It was 1969, a lifetime ago, but in some ways it seems like yesterday. I was 22 years old and the furthest I had ever been from Pueblo was Denver! The year before, all that changed. For reasons, I still haven't been able to fantom, I decided that Uncle Sam needed me. That's right, I didn't get drafted, I volunteered. I thought I was going to be a pilot, that didn't work out.

Regular Army, Ft. Polk, Ft. Wolters (WOFT) - dropped out, Ft. Gordon, Viet Nam - (11-Bravo). As a result, one extremely hot and humid day, I found myself gazing down on the 'River' for the first time. It was a sight I'll never forget. The river water was as brown as coffee and so wide the far bank was a blurry haze. The smell of a thousand years of decaying vegetation hung in the air like a fog. You could taste the smell. The humid air was so thick it felt like you were wearing it. Water everywhere, punctuated by endless rice paddies that stretched to the horizon. The Mekong Delta.

I was in the infantry, but on a converted troop ship, the 'Benewha', in the middle of the My Tho River. Only the Army would come up with that. We were the ' Mobile Riverine Force', the MRF. The war was in the Mekong Delta so we became water soldiers, 'water grunts'. Now to be clear, this story isn't about war, heroic deeds, great battles and all that other bullshit, it is about how the harmonica found me.

After spending several months in the MRF, "Vietnamization", turning the war over to the ARVN, cranked up. My unit, the 3/60th, was the first unit that was going to be withdrawn and sent back to the 'world'. There was a catch though. All the short timers that were due to go home anyway were paper transferred into the 3rd. Brigade. All of us, that a had full tour left, were assigned to other active units. The Army, in it's infinite wisdom decided to move me to the 5/60th then to 2/60th, holding down the fire support base - 'Tan Tru'. OMG, it was the butthole of the world. Like I said earlier, the Mekong Delta is one of the most beautiful places on earth. Tan Tru missed the memo. Three under strength companies of grunts and a battery of 155mm howitzers plopped down in the middle of a water logged paddy became my existence. Surrounded on all sides by paddies, streams, waterways and spits of jungle like hedgerows, we were in what the grunts called 'Indian Country'. Oh yea, least I forget, there were those angry little Asian men that didn't want us there. The feeling was mutual but fate has it's own agenda and there we were.

That is where I met Bernie Willer. Bernie was a hippie piano man from St. Paul. Unlike me, he was drafted. He had been playing in a Rock & Roll band on the West Bank, hanging with the hippie chicks, living the 'free life', when the War Machine decided play time was over. I got my first guitar when I was 15 years old (that's another story), so I knew a bit about music. Bernie was a musician, he knew a lot about music, especially the 'Blues'. He couldn't carry around a piano, it would have got in the way of the ammo belts, 'alice' gear and M16 -LOL! - so he had the next best thing, a harp, harmonica, misery whistle, pocket rocket, Mississippi saxophone! He could play that harmonica too. I think that was the first time I ever heard someone play 'Blues' harp live. When we were standing down, Army talk for taking a break, Bernie would jam that harp. There was another guy, Jimmy Cosolino, a street guy from Newark that played guitar. He had come up with some cheap Japanese acoustic that he kept around the hooch. Together, him and Bernie would lay into Blues shuffles for hours on end. The jam sessions in the hooch were some mighty fine times. As the war raged on outside all around us, we were in our own little 'juke joint'. Grunts did what grunts do, we lived for the moment. No guarantees you'd get tomorrow. I LOVED IT!

There was one rutted dirt road that led in and out of Tan Tru. About 40 miles away that road eventually hooked up with the infamous Highway One. Outside of the base, a small community of locals had set up shop on that road. Laundry ladies, pho stand, a tailor, other forms of entertainment if you get my drift. It was like a little town. There was one enterprising entrepreneur, a young lady, that had a box much like the cigarette girls from the old speakeasy days. The box hung around her neck and contained packs of cigarettes, 'Ruby Queens' (the other kind of cigarettes), vials of speed left over from the French, playing cards, various pharmaceutical drugs, condoms and Hohner Marine Band harmonicas, all in that box!

One day, on a whim, I bought one of those harmonicas. \$75 p (piasters). I still have it. I had no idea what to do with it. I had observed Bernie, so I knew you blew in and sucked out of it. Of course I did what most people do when they play the harp for the first time. Huff and puff, in and out. A strange thing happened though, instead of a garbled cacophony of notes, a single, almost sweet sound came from the reeds. I was a bit shocked. As I began to play the harp I was instinctively playing single notes, bending reeds, all against a blues scale I didn't even know existed. I guess the harmonica had found me.

A short time later, we were hanging in the hooch. Jimmy began to play the guitar and Bernie of course joined in. As they began to settle into a lazy bluesy groove, I pulled my new harp out and began to play along. I knew nothing about keys, scales, crosssharp, positions, all that stuff, I just felt the music and started playing. By chance, my Marine Band was in the proper key - 'C'. As I was playing Jimmy and Bernie stopped and just stared at me. Bernie finally said, ... "you didn't tell us you played the harp". ... I admitted that this was my first time. They both had big grins on their faces. "Well, welcome to the jam". I've been playing in the 'jam' ever since. Bernie and I have remained life long friends. Over 50 years later, playing that harp has taken me all over the world, opened the door to great opportunities, helped me make a living, play on movie sound tracks, have a real career in the music world.

Viet Nam fundamentally changed me at so many levels. I was lucky. I came home with all my parts and half my mind. I also came home to a life path that I never would have

dreamed was a possibility. Fate is some crazy shit, out of the fog, chaos and madness of war, I found my path. A lot of bad 'mojo' came out of Nam'. On the other hand, I found my 'mojo' in "Crazy-Land"
The harmonica found me.