

Plywood

My morning ritual is simple enough; up out of bed, wake my daughters for school, get a cup of coffee, and check my email. On weekends, the girls sleep late and I read the news.

Years ago, I would have strolled out to the driveway like a bathrobed Tony Soprano to pick up the paper and glare at the neighbors. Now I get the electronic Times and click through the e-pages before my second cup of coffee.

The whole process is punctuated by grunts and weary exhalations. I have read so much news that the world often seems like a tired old sitcom: even the wildest occurrences have a way of flattening out before the third act.

This past Saturday morning, a New York Times article by James Brooke described how the U.S. Army is using re-supply helicopters to alternately carry cargo, ferry suspected Taliban sympathizers to and from interrogations, and carry out covert counter-attacks.

The headline read: U.S. Tasks in Afghan Desert: Hunt Taliban, Tote Plywood.

I stopped reading to recall my own experience “toting plywood” as an Army Sergeant over 40 years ago. A different time, a different conflict, but the same freestyle supply procedures that have been a part of every war and war zone.

Stored in my garage, between the Christmas decorations and luggage, is “the box.” In it, photos and documents, journal pages and medals hold the evidence of my two

tours of duty in Vietnam. I dug into it, looking for the details of the deal and this is what I found.

The water buffalo's hooves were like tree-trunk roots sunk deep into the road's damp soil and, despite the Papa-san's urging with a eucalyptus switch, the mud-caked bull stared off, lost in serious bovine rumination. This would have been a Kodak moment, if I wasn't sitting in a truck full of Black Market contraband in the middle of nowhere. So I looked past the rice paddies around me, into the brush where anyone could be drawing a bead on me.

By '69, the Army's supply chain in Vietnam was so nailed down that getting a hold of extracurricular goodies like T-bone steaks and top-shelf booze took a bit of wangling. And the path to a platoon barbecue with Jack Daniels took some appropriation, horse-trading and back-scratching or, in this case, bull-whipping.

The gold standard of bartering was VC souvenirs – weapons, flags, medals, sandals, photos... anything Cong. A load of that sold like hotcakes at the Saigon Officer's Club since every rear-echelon desk jockey wanted a red star pith helmet with a bullet hole in it or a Little Red Book in Vietnamese or a Ho Chi Minh medal to build his homecoming brag around. And AK's, SKS rifles, Makarov pistols? Literally worth their weight in gold.

A breeze whipped up and, as if on cue, the buffalo shuffled off the road. Papa-san gave me a head bow and a toothless smile and whipped a begrudged trot from his bull. Green light - go.

I was driving through Long Khanh province, about 70 klicks northwest of Vung Tau, scrounging stuff for my unit and looking for target-of-opportunity deals, when the sky opened up. Within seconds I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. My three-quarter ton truck had a canvas roof, but it was folded in the pickup bed and I had the windshield flipped down so I could get a facefull of wind in the 90 degree, 90% humidity morning. I knew the highway was somewhere out there ahead of me, hidden beyond curtain of rain. I was driving blind.

So, rather than ditch into a rice paddy or smack another wandering water buffalo, I decided to wait out the deluge at the Bear Cat compound where I had always had a good trading relationship with the Thai troops.

The U.S. 9th Infantry ran the joint, but there were Aussies there too and they had the best stocks of beer around – including Swan Lager which they called Black Duck because it was said that the brewery's water was dairy farm runoff. It sure beat Pabst though, and I knew where I could move cases of it fast. So I routinely kept the Poms happy with the occasional gift of Johnny Walker Black Label. The Vietnamese troops, referred to as ARVN's, were also quartered there, but had squat to trade. But were always looking for oddball American crap: Hai Karate cologne, fringed leather jackets, Playboy key rings and Beatle Boots.

For some reason, they always tried swapping me a Spider Monkey for contraband goods. Spider Monkeys were fun for a day or two, acting the clown, jumping around and whatnot. But then they turn into little thieves and take everything that isn't locked up. Cripes, I should know. I was my Battalion's Supply Monkey and didn't need any competition stealing shit.

The Thais, on the other hand, were wheelin'-dealin' pros. Having lived in war all their lives, they saw this episode as nothing more than a continuing opportunity to haggle and trade and work around their supply system. Same-same me. Of course, their culture and style took a while to adapt to, but that was just part of my job – making friends, cutting deals and working the angles.

So there I was, sitting on a straw mat in this Thai Colonel's hut, talkin' shit while he's bustin' up hashish temple balls on a Recon map of the Delta.

The Buddhist monks in Nepal grew vast fields of dope and, when the buds ripened, they walked though the rows rubbing them until their hands are covered with resin. A quick rub, palm to palm, produced little balls that got rolled into bigger balls and then they stamped the monastery's seal on it. It was in demand, compact and produced incredible bong hits; body rush, bell tones, the works.

Like I said, we were just getting down to business and he was being sociable.

Yep. Just this "full bird" commander and me, stoned silly in his hut, with rain on the roof and him playing with the radio. After the first toke, all I could think about is how trippy it would be if I was getting high with *my* Colonel.

Anyway, the Bird leans over an' says real slow an' careful, "Sergeant, do you know what I want?"...and the dizzy bastard is winking at me like a three-dollar whore.

Well, I freak nine-thousand, man! I got four, five different things running through my head at the same time, like a wall of yakking T.V.'s at a department store.

Now I'm flashing drunken midnight scenes in red-light Bangkok, feeling the Chicom pistol in a holster under my sweatin' armpit, thinking Birdman probably wants to score cases of that mess-hall wonder-meat the Thai's like for trading, and imagining stacks of Black Market greenbacks traded for bushels of piastre, all jammed together in the weirdest, shame-faced combos you might ever want to forget.

Well, I didn't got all day to dick around. What *does* baby Buddha want for Christmas?

I said, "Sock it to me, sir!" and took a pull on the bong.

He gets dead serious and says, "Prywood"

I choke and start coughin' on the toke. Snot's flyin' outta my nose and, just as the hit comes on, I fart like an old biscuit dog.

"Plywood?"

I coughed so hard my throat went raw and it took a couple swigs from a Rolling Rock to put out the fire.

Fuckin' plywood? Amazing.

I couldn't quite talk, so I start noddin'. And HE starts noddin' too. We're like a couple of Dodger dolls in the back window a sunbaked Buick.

Seems he wanted to partition off his whole battalion's barracks into private rooms, so his troops could have some privacy when their 'girlfriends' visit. There's a word that got a workout in The Nam... "girlfriend." Jeez...

I say, "How much plywood?" and he laughs this nervous little laugh, takes out a metal soda cracker tin and sets it on the floor between us. He pops the lid and, I swear, there's dozens of these tawny hash golfballs inside, wrapped in plastic bags, sweatin' out piss-yellow, popskull sap in the pounding Bear Cat heat.

I'm thinkin' to myself, *One of these is worth a week of fun in Cam Ranh Bay. Two buys a handmade suit in Cholon. Three or four would swap for a Nikon.*

Then, remembering my guys... *Merry Christmas Marc, Merry Christmas Tim, God Bless us every one.*

Soon as I'm able to blow the foam off my brain, I hit him with my pitch, "Five plywood, one Temple Ball." He laughs that little, uneasy laugh again and takes the bong away from me. "You smoke too much, you dinky dau."

Yeah, I'm the crazy one, but you're the guy with a need...

"Bullshit!" I spit out, fishin' a double hit of blotter acid from Boston outta' the heart pocket of my fatigue jacket - scored to split, ya' know, like for now `n later.

I'll be damned if this peeny little squirt is gonna' yank *my* chain! So I stare the Bird down and snap off half a hit, stick it to my tongue and send it off to work with a glug of brew.

"Let's you and me savvy a deal." I say, holding out the other half hit, stuck to the tip of my middle finger. Now, Thai's don't dig acid. Puts `em on the wrong side of the gate; gets `em like "the ghost who walks" and other woo-woo nonsense.

So, he's lookin' at me like I'm holding a snake. The snake that lives under his mudhut brain and he don't know if its bite would wake him up or shut him down; in plain English, scared shitless.

I wait `til he shudders then sing out, "All the plywood for all the balls!" Now I got `im by the balls and he can dance my wide-ass jig. Not that I knew how I would pull off closing the deal without a rumpus...

"How much?" he says, screwing his face up into a little, twisted, shit sniff.

"How much YOU got?" I crow, an' he's a Full Bird! Bird, bird, bird, buh, buh, bird is the word!

I set down my beer and it leaves a wet ring on the Recon map around Cat Lai on the Dong Nai River where the Navy's pullin' out.

Every inch of Gia Dinh Province is hotter than a pot-metal pistol. Lotsa' empty barracks, lotsa' plywood, lotsa' Cao Boi's - little fuckers, fourteen-year-old kids with AK's, no food for days, air buzzin' like a press of hornets, too hot to stop, `ceptin' rain.

Gotta go in with the radio up full blast. motherfucker! One pistol, one grenade launcher and a Hidey Ho! If the grenades don't buy me an exit, I got eight one-way tickets home in the magazine. I ever stop rollin' midway? I'm latrine meat, Jackson.

You see, there was a non-com beer hall in Cat Lai built over an abandoned fortress. During the last war, the Japanese sealed seven French officers in its cellar and left them to die. While rats picked at their bones, upstairs the Imperial Officers Club toasted Hirohito and their imminent victory in the Pacific.

Guess again, Yoshi.

Tet `65 arrives and the 11th Transport makes it *their* club, shining on the night-thump Jap shades, but leavin' the French spooks to roam – their haunted room always twenty degrees colder than the rest of the building, *parle' vous* chatter in the dead of night and, even when the air was tombstone still, no candle could hold a flame within its walls.

But, fuck howdy, I ain't afraid of no *Frenchie* ghosts.

Big Bird says "When?"

I drop down around on one ear and the snake pulls the walls in close up tight.

I go chilly, "Whenever you like."

He says, "You bring... I pay then."

"Hoo baby! THAT smells bad. I'll set it up you go get it. Cash on the barrelhead, Champ." Damn, I ain't the Mayflower man.

"No can do, YOU bring..."

I let him simmer a bit, and he tosses me a bag of temple balls, ten, maybe twelve, and I must say, I got a thrill.

But I stay coo-cool. "Fuck. Usin' my deuce an' a half? My fuel? My time? Risking MY balls?"

"How much?" he says.

So I toss the bag back at him. "Double it."

"No can do! You crazy"

But he can't think clear about nothin'... but that other half hit of acid on the rock-steady tip of my wavin' finger. He don't budge, givin' me the stink eye.

So, I get up, give him a lefty salute, and start to walk.

Well, he don't bat an eye. Gets up, lifts the lid of his footlocker, and - I ain't shittin' ya' - there's twenty, thirty more bags in it. Maybe 4-5 kilo of them tawny blond vacationballs. The piney-skunk smell alone, enough to blast all your bees back to your bungalow for a week of Wednesdays.

No bullshit, Man! *NOW* I'm thinkin', Gingerbread Victorian in Port Jefferson, `67 Dino Ferrari with spoke wheels, big nasty blonde babe in the bucket. Ya' know? Somethin'! Somethin' for me to come home to..."

I goof on it for a beat, then get a shock that goes straight from my heart to my ass. Hey, whoa! At ease, Higgins. I pick up on something and it stinks.

Bird's wearin' a gold Rolex. His teeth? Perfect. A blind Mama-san walks in, stops dead in her tracks, spins and va-vam, didi mau back out the door scuffin' sandals sideways. Thai guys cockin' rifles on the revetments, choppers cruising the berm, windows whispering, gut rumblin'... wrong, wrong, wrong.

The humidity is 100% the aluminum *walls* are sweatin' in here, *and the Bird is bone dry!*

What am I seein' here? What DO I see?

C. I. A., man. C.I.fuckin' A.

Bird says, "When?"

I put the second hit of blotter on my tongue and wash it down with a swig of Rock.

"Fuck it, Birdman. Tonight. I'll go set it up tonight and we'll square up in the mornin' Can do?"

"Number one!" he says, "Number one!"

I toss him the bag, get up, and walked out of his hut into the rain.

Then I steered my threequarter to Xuan Loc, to take a steambath, get a massage and drink enough beer to forget about the deal that I only ever make good on - in my worst nightmares.

- end -

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Martin Higgins

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