
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Linda J. Albertano: “Nha Trang”

Linda J. Albertano · Wednesday, April 14th, 2021

We flew, strapped to the floor or to jump seats in stout C-130s, at an altitude of 20,000 feet to avoid incoming anti-aircraft fire. When nose-diving to the edge of a sawed-off mountaintop, there was always that “hold your breath” moment when we first met the nearest rim of the makeshift airstrip. The pilot had to slam his shuddering craft into reverse as soon as his front wheels kissed the peak’s granite lip to prevent plunging, snout over teakettle, down an abyss at the other end of the absurdly short strip. Landings and takeoffs were the most perilous as they would bring us well within firing range.

There were seven of us in this particular USO troupe. Shannon and I were folksingers. A drummer, bass player, dancer, comic and MC completed our raggedy band of entertainers. We were sent to select bases in East and Southeast Asia... Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Where children were the barometers of the cultural weather and attitude of each country.

In Japan, we were politely ignored. In the Philippines, I was startled to find school kids filing out of their homes behind me as I strolled a dirt road in the evening. Even more surprising was their spontaneous singing...”do, a deer, a female deer; re, a drop of golden sun...” voices riding starward in the balmy air as we walked. And in Korea, youngsters gleefully mobbed us, giggling and grinning, whenever we appeared on the street.

But in Vietnam, where we’d be as exposed in an open-front cyclo as oysters on the half-shell, small gangs of wrathful children would descend upon us shouting, “Give me money!” And we’d part with the black-market piasters we’d so recently bargained for in a somber shop on the Street of Flowers behind the Majestic Hotel in Saigon.

Soldiers who’d been assigned to escort us, however, were of a more homogeneous temperament no matter where we landed. Our chaperones were not the narrow-shouldered boys glimpsed at the back of a mess hall perusing a frayed copy of “Siddhartha.” No. Our hosts were louder and prouder. And now they’d been launched scattershot into distant lands where everyone was a “foreigner.”

In the center of Seoul, our jeep driver burst from the army compound gunning his motor through a congested intersection, laughing as terrified pedestrians fled in every direction. In Vietnam, I turned away from the pornography of documented “kills.” But I couldn’t avoid seeing chicken wire and barbs from behind which local faces peered. We were admonished not to be too curious. “Don’t ask,” was already a watchword.

It was easy to feel clumsy and coarse around the diminutive Vietnamese. Their streets were filled with willowy manual laborers. We saw no trucks moving to and from construction sites. Instead, slim women in graceful dresses over pajama pants were the preferred methods of conveyance. Waterfalls of black hair cascaded from under their flattened conical hats, and they each carried a pole over one shoulder. From the ends of which hung small pallets of bricks as balanced as scales in the hands of Justice.

Mostly we flew once or twice a day in muscular cargo planes, the C130 workhorses. Occasionally we were helicoptered to an outlying camp. Or we'd travel by jeep down a jungle road passing clusters of South Vietnamese soldiers, so slight in their uniforms, they looked like Boy Scouts earning their wilderness badges. We were issued M-16 rifles in the event we'd need to defend ourselves against a Viet-Cong ambush.

"Never roll into a ditch at the side of the road," cautioned the soldier behind the wheel. "Or you'll be impaled on fire-hardened bamboo stakes planted there." But we were untrained in the use of weaponry, so the rifles were simply props on our laps as one USO troupe fatally learned the following year on the very same road.

On our travels, we sang in theaters filled with hundreds of servicemen. We also sang in tents, and in hospitals and in mess halls. We even sang from the back of a flatbed truck in the middle of the jungle where an audience of soldiers in combat gear and helmets, rifles over their shoulders stood in a semicircle around us. Until an order was quietly given mid-song, and they melted into the dark and dappled green of the primordial forest.

We were up early and often chewing our way through the air to Da Nang, Khe Sanh, Bien Hoa, Pleiku, Ton Son Nhut and destinations too small and too numerous to be named. We were also given breaks, staying for an extra day here and there to relax. The most memorable of which was Nha Trang, a rest and recreation area for armies of both the North and South.

Nha Trang! Where red and golden sunsets bled like crazy into the bay, lighting the sails of Chinese Junks from behind as they floated there.

Nha Trang! Where clean and glittering waters, generous beaches, lazy palms and easy weather gave rise to a Bali Hai of relentless beauty.

Nha Trang! Where public walkways were lined with fruit-bearing trees from which I pulled a purple mangosteen or two marveling at its fleshy texture and tart-sweet taste. I dropped in to a local shop to sample some banana-flavored water buffalo yogurt and to buy a pack of sour umeboshi plum gum.

The soldier to whom I'd been assigned was Sergeant Battle. I could scarcely believe the irony. But he invited me to dine with him and a few Vietnamese army officers that evening, and I was delighted at the prospect!

That afternoon I donned a swimsuit to wade into the transparent sea in front of the hotel. Once I was rib-deep, a gaggle of children began mercilessly splashing me. I volleyed back, and we all laughed and carried on. Then two of them separated from their crew and joined up on my side of the imaginary line. Now it was a fair and furious fight! Exhausted after a time, we all crawled out of the water and went our ways. My two comrades-in-arms walked with me to my door. Holding thumbs up, they declared, "You numbah one cô bé!" meaning "girl." With pleasure I shook their

small hands before entering the hotel.

After changing, I decided to promenade the byways once more. And there they were! Agleam in fresh shirts and pants and wearing glad smiles. We window-shopped through the modest downtown, happy as three musketeers. At a tailor shop, they chose fabric they liked and were measured for new shirts. The proprietor promised they could retrieve their gifts once he'd finished them. On we went until we came to an ice-cream stand. Oboy! While we waited for our cones, Minh tapped both his and his sister's chests. Gesturing toward me, he made a great swooping arc with his arm like a plane flying across the ocean.

"Numbah one!" He exclaimed again.

To be sure, Nha Trang itself was a paradise. But who wouldn't want to flee the rest of that pock-marked, bombed-out, agent-oranged, barbed-wired land? I wanted to smuggle them away in my duffle bag. Still, you don't get to find children on the street like a pair of hungry kittens and take them home with you.

Now I was heading back. I left Quyan and Minh licking their cones and hurried to meet the Sergeant.

The café, though small, could've come straight from the set of "Casablanca." A ceiling fan twirled above and a friendly gecko parked on the whitewashed wall beside us. Our lobster dinners would be two dollars each. I was charmed by the refined and literate officers as they recited delicate poems and sang traditional songs in English and Vietnamese in their lovely, lilting voices. I couldn't imagine our troops doing the same at a local restaurant unless well-primed with libations. And in two languages? Not likely. Chaos would most certainly ensue.

As dinner came to an end I thanked my hosts and Sergeant Battle for a singular evening, and we walked the one block back to the hotel. My two pals were once again waiting by the door, radiant in the moonlight.

"Oh, look!" said I. "It's Minh and Quyan."

"Get away!" barked Sergeant Battle.

"But..." I protested, "They're my friends."

"No they're not! They'd just as soon slaughter you as look at you. They only want money!"

He pushed a five toward Minh, who recoiled from it. He shoved the money into the pocket of Minh's shirt. Minh snatched the bill and threw it on the ground, spitting at it. He kicked it back toward the Sergeant, who, ignoring the outcome of his ploy, roughly grabbed me by the elbow and shoved me through the door.

"You'd better pack tonight," he snapped. "We leave at 0600 sharp!" Apparently he too had taken a ride in an open-faced cyclo where he'd parted with some ill-gotten piasters. And could never forget it.

I lay heavily on the bed wishing for rapprochement, for diplomacy, for a moment of fellow-feeling, for a deep and decent meeting of souls, for a fresh new way of being... like Saladin retaking Jerusalem from the Crusaders. Rather than massacre all Christians down to the last man, woman and child as they had done to the Muslims, he'd offered safe passage. Ah... to be the bearer of safe passage.

I sank into sleep.

The next morning as I was hustled — guitar, duffle bag and all — onto a waiting transport truck, I spied Minh and Quyan out front. Their eyes glowed like birthday candles! I scrambled to claim a place on the bench by the back opening of the truck so I'd be able to wave goodbye. Then we started to roll. Minh and Quyan ran after us while the truck slowly picked up speed. Finally depleted, they stopped and stood frozen in the middle of the road. I watched them grow smaller and smaller until we rounded a bend. And then they were gone. Forever.

Photo credit: Alexis Rhone Fancher

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