The Deserter

A Short War Story

 By Maryanne Peters

I am not a coward. I consider myself a patriot too. I was proud to volunteer. My family had a tradition of service. My grandfather fought in World War 1, my father in World War 2. I was sent to a military academy.

While my father and grandfather were army men, I joined the marines. At the time it seemed that the army was full of draftees and I had the idea that in the marines I would be part of a professional soldiering force. I was eager to face combat.

I am not sure how it happened this way – command decisions are rearely understood – but my unit was sent to Thailand. Perhaps few know about the involvement of Thailand in the Vietnam war, but the Thais were very involved. They had their own concerns about communist insurrection in their own nation. In the sixties and early seventies Thailand was run by a military dictatorship they sought to suppress the rise of communism by joining forces with the Ammerica efforts in the region. Thailand sent ground troops to Vietnam and also made available 6 airbases in Thailand for the use of the USAF in operations in central Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

One of these bases was actually a base for the Thai Navy at a place called Mueang Nakhon Phanom. This is the largest town in Nakhon Phanom province and is on the Mekong River with Laos on the other side. The river is patrolled by the Thai navy. There was no real airbase there until we turned up and built one. The 40th Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Helicopter Squadron was based there to rescue bomber pilots down in Laos.

I was involved in helping to support the ground defence for US forces in Thailand by have our own small boat operation on the Mekong River. The boats were Navy designation PBR for Patrol Boat, Riverine. These were powerful boats with a fibreglass hull, water jet drive, and heavily armed. Each boat had two 50 calibre machines in an armored tub forward and medium machine guns on each side and aft, plus a grenade launcher, in addition to sundry small arms.

The boats were noisy and could be heard coming. We were attacked occasionally and return fire 10 times more than what we got, but I am not sure that we killed anyone. We could use speed and manoeuvrability to avoid any shot after the first we took, but sometimes that was deadly.

This is not fear so much as frustration. This was the war in Vietnam, including Laos and Cambodia and Thailand – you are fighting an invisible enemy that is happy to take one kill and then drop to take heavy fire, only to pop up again as if all that ordnance accounted for nothing.

But what really annoyed me was the way we treated the Thai people including their soldiers.

I said that Thailand joined the war to fight of communism, but they did not see it that way. Thais are Buddhists and this is a true religion of peace. But Communism would root out all religious belief and instead have its followers commit to a lifetime of war and bloodshed in support of some ill-thought out idea. In Thailand there was popular support for the war – perhaps more than any other country involved.

Thai soldiers were brave and fierce, and there was none better than Colonel Tangkon Sebanarat.

Tang headed a battalion known as the Red Pythons who served alongside me and other Marine unit commanders operating on the Mekong out of Mueang Nakhon Phanom. People may not be aware that outside the US armed forces and some from South Korea under US command, Thailand provided more foreign servicemen on our side in the Vietnam War than any other country. That incudes Australia and New Zealand and other regular US allies.

The Red Pythons were not even included in that count. Because they were not under US Command or based in Vietnam itself, they were treated as just fighting insurgency in their own country, despite them standing shoulder to shoulder with me and my comrades and taking on an enemy in Laos and Cambodia.

And we did fight shoulder to shoulder. Only a soldier will understand the bonds that develop between military men under fire, in particular when you are cut off. While I normally commanded three boats and Tang nine, we had gone in just one boat each to investigate reports of escaped prisoners up a feeder river inside Laos. It was false information leading us into a trap. Both of our boats were sunk but luckily we had been able to bring ashore some of our heavier weapons and ammunition and a few supplies. We needed them. The ambush location left little room for cover and the shooting was intense. Our men were able to find or dig shallow holes where some could return fire and prevent us from being overrun.

Tang and I had a position together from where he could shout orders to his men, and I to mine. We were pinned down but able to communicate with everybody and organize watches and counts for ammunition and limited food and water. But it was just the two of us in such a small space that we were almost in an embrace. But it was not like two men finding cover under fire, it was like two people finding something else.

Maybe there was a hand in the wrong place? I felt him respond. And then there was an exchange of glances as the light of that day began to fade. We both knew that this was something else, something that even gunfire and exploding grenades could not destroy.

I honestly thought that I was a normal heterosexual, right up until I fell in love with that man.

They say that the presence of imminent death teaches you a lot about yourself, but what I learned about myself as we saw through that night, and the day and night after that. I learned that sex under stress is not only possible, but exciting. And I learned that sometimes love is blind to physical reality, and sometimes it is reality that needs to change.

After those tow nights and the better part of three days under attack, my other boats appeared and used blanket fire and mortars to clear the enemy and rescue all of us.

As we sped back to safety still so close to Tang, I could sense that everybody knew about us. Had we been to noisy? Was it the way we looked at one another? I did not care. I was ready to kiss Tang in front of my men, or better yet have him take me and kiss me. Tang was shorter than me, but stronger physically and mentally.

We had become more that comrades – we had become lovers. But is as comrades that I felt that I owed him for all that he had done. That sense of obligation would lead to my exile, but I still cannot ever believe that it was wrong.

Further operations up the feeder river had been planned by my superior but while the Airforce operated above Laos every day, the present political climate meant that the US could not be involved in ground operations. It seemed to me that Tang and his men were going to be used as cannon fodder for an upcoming operation. It was wrong, and I said so. My C.O. calmly informed me that “these Thai gooks are still gooks – they are expendable”.

The first thing you learn in the marines is that there is only one response to any order, not matter how horrendous, and that is “aye aye”.

It was particularly galling considering that the US pull back of troops in Vietnam was in full swing, and we only stayed to keep open escape routes for American downed pilots and prisoners of war. I can go further to talk about the political situation and the cynical disregard of the legitimacy of the democratic process which ousted the dictatorship in Thailand. But the truth is that to disclose to Tang the intended fate of the Red Pythons was regarded as treasonous.

I for one felt that it was my duty to warn the man I had fought beside. I discussed it with my men, and it was only then that my relationship with Tang was brought up by one of them. I did not deny it. How could I?

I told them what I was going to do, but they could deny they ever heard it. For their own protection they should distance themselves from me. Despite the knowledge of a homosexual liaison between their lieutenant and a Thai colonel they respected my need to run.

In any event, there was a warrant for my arrest, and I was not ready to suffer that after all I have given for the Corps and for my country.

I am no coward, but I am a deserter.

Nowadays Thailand is never remembered for being our greatest ally in Southeast Asia, and rarely remembered for it’s region known as the Golden Triangle and the drugs from there that flooded into the States. In these modern times people thing of Bangkok and they think of the sex capital of the world, and they think of ladyboys, or as the Thai people call them “kathoey”.

What I did not understand was that in the villages of Thailand, kathoey is a tradition. Young boys are often identified early as being effeminate, and if they are not the only boy in the family they might be encouraged to go through life as something other than male.

I was not effeminate – at least not then. But I was the submissive one in my relationship with Tang. I became dependent on him and his family to hide me as the US forces had permission from the Thai Government to find me and capture me. It seemed that Tang’s proud family disapproved of their son being in a homosexual relationship. I could be accepted into the family as his kathoey girlfriend, but not as a man. I was ready to be what I needed to be, for him.

People will say that no marine could accept this kind of dishonor, but it was not like that. I went to live in his village and I was given a role in that community, and I was keen to learn how to behave. I did what was expected of me, so that the changes in me seemed gradual.

Even back in the seventies the ladyboys of Thailand knew all about hormones. Initially I was horrified but when Tang came home on leave, he explored my changing body with his hands ad his lips and he approved - it seemed to me that was all I wanted.

With the collapse of South Vietnam and the new Government in Thailand engaging with its own internal insurgents, Tang was transferred to the giant military base at Udon Thadi north of Bangkok. He wanted me to come with him and live as his wife.

I could not believe that this was possible. I had trouble coming to grips with my own homosexuality (if you can call it that given that I was only ever attracted to one man) but living as a woman seemed a step too far. But he pointed out that I was living as one in his village.

By that time my hair was long, and was the only hair on my body except shaped eyebrows. My body was definitely no longer male, and I wore clothes that concealed my feminine chest – clothes that a Thai woman would wear.

Udon Thadi had been built by US forces during the war and a contingent of the US Air Force stayed on. That meant the base had US supplies and that the city serviced servicemen off base. As a woman I would not be branded as a deserter. No women had deserted. All I needed was to be entirely successful in the role. So I set about being that.

The art of being kathoey had taught me something of feminine behavior, which seems similar across all cultures, but I needed to work on my voice and add feminine affectations that were unique to American women. Everywhere in Thailand there are US movies so there was no shortage of examples. It is in my nature to apply myself and it appeared to me that I should do that, not so much to escape attention but to honor the man that I had given up so much for.

Udon Thadi City also had the largest concentration of US servicemen who had “stayed on” in Southeast Asia after the war. Of course unlike me they went home to leave the armed forces, and some tried to make things work Stateside, but for these people that could not work. They packed up and chose to live not in Vietnam itself, or Cambodia or Laos, but the secure nation of Thailand.

These were men with Thai wives, whereas I was the American wife of a Thai man. Still, I knew the language and the ways of these people and I could become a slightly different part of this ex-pat community.

If the Thai wives knew that I was kathoey then it seemed that they never told their husbands. I was useful to them and understanding, and I was also known as the wife of now General Tangkon Sebanarat, a war hero and a man of unblemished reputation.

At army parties Tang would be proud to have me on his arm, even if I towered over him in heels. I was not much taller than him without as he was tall for a Thai, but other Thai men seemed very short. He said that I was his American wife, shining like the Statue of Liberty. I loved that man.

It seems the strangest of outcomes for me. I sent a Christmas card to my parents from Bangkok every year, but I gave no address. I could imagine that my father would be shamed by my desertion more than any sexual allegation. I just hoped that he would somehow learn the truth and understand what I did and why. I still don’t know if he ever did. I learned of the deaths of my parents only years after they had passed when I set about tracking them down over the internet after that kicked off.

My husband died of a heart attack in 2008 aged only 60. It shocked everybody. He seemed strong and fit but there was some weakness in his heart that had lain dormant throughout all his physical trials. It was quick, so I had little time to say goodbye.

My American friends asked if I planned to return to the USA. They knew nothing of who I was and why I could not. Draft dodgers had been pardoned in 1977 but “**deserters** and others who've committed crimes against military law or civilian law” were not pardoned. In fact only a year before Tang died a man who had been convicted of desertion who had been living in Canada for 40 years was arrested and imprisoned.

I am just not sure if I even want to go back. Thailand is my home now.

I am not eligible to receive a pension as Tang’s widow but he left we well provided for. I am still an ex-pat but I also go to Bangkok once a week to help to counsel a clinic there. It was the clinic where Tang arranged for my sex change surgery all those years ago, so that he could finally take me as his wife as he always wanted, and so I could receive him as my husband as I had come to crave.

It seems that Thailand has become a destination for this kind of surgery. Thailand has a good health system and skilful surgeons. The clinic has lots of American clients. To them I am like the grand old lady of GCS as we call it these days. It is strange because they all talk to me about having their desire to change sex from the earliest age, and I simply nod, but that is not my story. My story is somewhat more involved, but I like to think of it as a story of bravery, honor, loyalty and love.

What do you think?

The End

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