LOVE'S IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

MEKONG BELLE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mekong Belle: Love's Impossible Choice is a love story…

THERE ARE PLENTY OF EXCELLENT war stories written by Vietnam veterans. This is not a war story. Nor is it a memoir about my experience as a naval officer with the Riverine Forces in the Mekong Delta, or an account of my return to Vietnam fifty years later as a visitor.

All those things influenced the story, but are not what inspired it. Love did. The sweet and irrepressible people of Vietnam did. And perhaps, most of all, music, and the people who play it, did.

Those of us who served in Vietnam brought our favorite music with us and played it on portable record players, recorders, and the radio. If we brought guitars, we played for whoever would listen. Music was present in every barracks, mess hall, tent, bunker, hooch, and foxhole.

When I returned to Vietnam decades later, everything had changed, except the music, and the sweet and welcoming nature of the Vietnamese people, who for the most part, seem to have forgiven us in our misguided attempt to inject ourselves into their civil war.

Their welcome and the fact that the music we brought with us back then was still there with them, both in its original form and infinite updated variations, gave me a warm feeling. Perhaps something good was accomplished after all.

After I returned home, the feeling remained. The writer in me struggled with how to express it. When the inspiration finally came, I was watching a musical review in the middle of a vineyard in my home town.

Sonoma Valley, Jack London's famous "Valley of the Moon," where I'm fortunate to live and work, is not only the birthplace of California's wine industry, it is where Broadway intersects with the wine country. In 2011, a group of seasoned Broadway actors, singers, and dancers established Transcendence Theatre Company in the remains of the old stone winery at Sonoma's Jack London State Park. And it was at one of their shows, in the middle of a song from the musical "South Pacific," that an idea popped into my head. "My Vietnam tale should be a love story set to music."

I've always been a sucker for good love stories, sappy romantic comedies and musicals, including those, like *South Pacific*, set in World War II. Why not one set in Vietnam? With the exception of *Good Morning Vietnam,* all the rest are war stories. Even the Korean War had *Sayonara*, definitely a love story.

Driving home later, I realized I had one really big problem – I was remembering those examples as they appeared on film or stage. I was neither a composer nor a screenwriter. I'm a journalist, with thousands of news stories, and columns plus two history books on my resume. None of it prepared me to write a love story, let alone a musical.

Still, I couldn't get the idea out of my head. So, as scenes played out in my mind, I wrote them down. The more I wrote, the more the story unfolded before me. I couldn't compose music, but had plenty in my memory. The soundtrack from *American Graffiti*, or any one of a half-dozen "Golden Oldie" albums from the 1950s and '60s, provided all that was needed.

The plot is all fiction, bordering on fantasy. There were no Navy ships serving as showboats in Vietnam, nor were there sailors

assigned to perform musicals. The characters, except for some historical political figures, are all fictional.

What I believe is true, is the love that actors, dancers and musicians express when they perform. It is that love I tried to bring out in the characters who were the performers in this story.

I also relied on old memories, saved letters I wrote to home, and a journal I kept while in Vietnam to illustrate some of the combat and naval action. None of it should be regarded as precise or accurate enough to be a true account of my specific Vietnam War experience.

Nor did I fall in love with a beautiful Vietnamese woman, although many American GI's and sailors did. That part of my story can be attributed to the fact that I am a hopeless romantic with an active imagination and a fondness for love stories, including those where characters, like Romeo and Juliet, face nearly impossible choices.

A choice, volunteer or be drafted, was how most of us ended up in Vietnam. We were the children of the greatest generation. They saved the world from fascist tyrants. We were imprinted with their sense of duty. Without the draft, most of us wouldn't have chosen to join the military, but neither could we choose the other alternative and run away. We chose to serve. And thus, we found ourselves in a country we knew little about, engaged in a fight we did not understand, with a people with whom we had no quarrel.

The characters in my story are, for the most part, a reflection of the Americans with whom I served, and the Vietnamese I got to know – good people making the best of a situation in which they were forced to make impossible choices, or had no choice at all. I chose to remember what they did for love.

1

Vung Tau, Vietnam, November 1967

THE ANCIENT WOODEN PIER, REEKING of fish guts and smoke, vibrated from the beat of a thousand feet. Men and women stood or rested on their haunches haggling over all manner of meats, fish, rice, fruits, and vegetables. Their words were foreign, but there was no mistaking their intent. I'd landed in the middle of a Vietnamese market.

I scanned the crowded waterfront and listened to the murmur of voices, tingle of bells on carts, cries of gulls, and coughs from one-lunger motors on weathered sampans and wondered if this was the normal way people did business here. Like most young Americans sent to Vietnam, I knew little about the country, its history, culture, and people.

The scene before me reinforced the odd feeling I'd had ever since reporting to my Navy ship that I'd passed through a time portal into a weird Asian "Brigadoon" on a wartime mission to the twilight zone.

The ship, built for amphibious landings during WWII, was undergoing an unusual transformation. It would become the Navy's only "showboat," its mission to bring live musical shows to troops stationed upriver in the jungles of the Mekong Delta.

It sounded crazy to me at first, but the plan was well underway when I reported to our ship and met her captain, Lieutenant (Lt.) Baillier, during a rehearsal with the crew. They were incredibly talented. The message was clear. The USS *Bell County*, LST 888, was going to be a showboat and, as one of its officers, I was expected to get with the program.

Everyone on board was involved in some way. Band and chorale practices were held daily. Music played over the ship's P.A. from reveille to midnight. We became accustomed to performing our routine duties while singing.

By the time I took my first steps ashore in Southeast Asia, I almost expected the people there to provide background music. Instead, a man in tattered pajamas, his lean, weathered face shadowed by a conical hat, shouted at me from the seat of his bicycle rickshaw. "Mister! You like ride. Real cheap."

I hesitated a second to see if he and the people on the dock would break out in song. They didn't. So I asked for directions.

"Can you tell me where I can find a bookstore?"

He scrunched his face in thought for a few seconds, then grinned. "Maybe Saigon," he said.

Wouldn't you know that the first Vietnamese person I met was a wise guy? I smiled, but didn't say anything. Then, he nodded his head in the direction of the waterfront and added, "Try Rue de Paris. Some French stores there."

"Can you take me?"

"Not now. Market in way. Too many peoples. You walk that way." He pointed toward a gap between buildings along the wharf.

"Thank you."

"Okay, Joe. Maybe later you need ride to good place to eat."

I'd taken the ship's shuttle boat to the pier in hopes of finding a place to buy an English/Vietnamese dictionary and a map of the village.

I waved thanks and headed in the direction he pointed. My time was limited. I had to be back at the ship in less than three hours. I assumed somewhere in the bustling little port town there'd be a store or newsstand selling books and maps.

Vung Tau was going to be our homeport for the better part of a year. Learning as much as I could about it seemed like a good idea. I'd also promised my Aunt Celie that I would send regular reports to her. It was an obligation I could not ignore. Celie adopted me after my parents died in a car crash when I was twelve. She never married but applied herself to parenting me with the same determination and energy she put into running her newspaper. The one unique thing she required of me that no other kid had to do was to write a daily "news story" about something that happened around me each day It didn't have to be long, but the lead had to include the five w's and h (who, what, when, where, why and how). It was her way of training me to become a journalist.

Celie also played the piano, loved musical theater, and bought tickets for us to Broadway shows that passed through San Francisco. Music was the medium through which she expressed her love. But when she tried to teach me piano, I rebelled and chose the guitar. As a peace offering, I learned the chords to most of her favorite show tunes so I could accompany her when she played them on her piano. What a strange coincidence it was that I ended up on the only ship in the Navy assigned to produce a musical show.

The Navy and Vietnam had not been in the plan for my future. She wanted me to study journalism and take over the family newspaper. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and chose the beachside campus of UCSB, where I majored in English (and minored in surfing,) while remaining undecided about a career.

The draft hung over the head of every American male approaching eighteen. College could delay it, but short of running away to Canada, there was no way to avoid it. When the time came, I chose

the Navy. The Navy made me an officer, postponing my need to decide on a civilian career for at least three and a half years.

My aunt continued to demand reports from wherever I was stationed. She said she wanted to run them in the newspaper.

"Auntie, I'm a naval officer, not a war correspondent."

"We get enough news about the war. Tell us about the things we don't usually see on TV– the people, the country, what it feels like being in the middle of it all. Make it personal," she said.

Personal it was. The transition from college to military was sudden and life-changing in every way imaginable

One day I was on "Campus Beach" at UCSB free as a bird and the next I was on a ship where my entire life was controlled by the Navy. Our leaders in Washington said it was to help the people of South Vietnam fend off Communists. But not a single minute of OCS was dedicated to Vietnamese history, culture or language. I wondered, "How can we be partners with people we did not know, whose language we can't speak and whose culture and history we do not understand?" In my case at least, it appeared that I would be making music, not war.

Nevertheless, I wanted to learn as much as I could about Vietnam and its people during my tour. The shore excursion was the first step toward that goal.

Dodging dockworkers wheeling carts filled with live chickens, dead fish, green vegetables, bags of rice and other consumables, I moved along the waterfront toward the gap pointed out by the rickshaw driver. The way was crowded with vendors squatting in tin-sided shacks under makeshift awnings, haggling mostly with old women, many already burdened with heavy sacks of rice and other commodities.

The gap was at the intersection where a narrow street led away from the wharf.

I let myself be carried along with the natural flow of shoppers away from the water. Adapting to the pace of the crowd, I was

able to pull off to the side, check out the wares and then rejoin the movement. Nothing resembling books or maps were offered.

As some people peeled off onto other alleys, I continued walking until my street intersected with a much wider one so different from that which I'd exited that I was momentarily disoriented.

It was a wide, Parisian-style boulevard, nearly deserted, and shaded by large trees planted along a well-kept sidewalk. I saw no street sign, but assumed it must be Rue de Paris. Many storefront names were in French, reminding me that this country had once been part of French Indochina.

Relieved to be out of the claustrophobic confines of the alley, I strolled along the sidewalk looking into windows. Most of the buildings were locked, their spaces and shelves empty. If the French ever did business on the street, they were long gone.

I saw a woman with long, straight dark hair wearing an ao dai, a traditional Vietnamese dress, enter a store a half block ahead of me. I quickened my pace to follow her through the door.

"Bonjour monsieur," a Vietnamese woman behind the counter said as I entered.

"*Bonjour, Madame*," I replied.

It appeared to be a gift and stationary shop, but the shelves were nearly bare and the merchandise looked dated and worn.

"*Puis-je vous aider?*" She was asking me something in French, but I didn't understand.

"I'm sorry. I don't speak French or Vietnamese," I said, then added, "I am looking for a book. A dictionary."

"Ah, *un dictionnaire*, *oui*."

She walked over to the shelf on the far wall, grabbed a small red book and brought it to me. It was a French-Vietnamese dictionary.

"Yes. *Oui*. But, I need this in English. *Anglais*."

"Perhaps, I can help." A British-accented voice appeared to

come from an apparition in white standing near the store's large front window. It was the woman who had preceded me into the store, but backlit as she was, I could only see her eyes. They were large, beautiful, and locked on mine.

She stepped out of the light and touched the book in my hands. "You want to buy a Vietnamese/English dictionary. Is that right?"

Still beguiled, I managed to stammer a reply. "Ah, oui, yes, that is exactly what I'm looking for. Thank you. Oh, and if she has a map of the city for sale, I would like to buy that too."

She turned toward the store clerk and spoke in Vietnamese. The clerk replied and shook her head.

"She has a city map, but it is in French. She doesn't have the English dictionary in stock, but knows where she might get one. Can you come back tomorrow?"

"Yes, and the map, even in French, would be helpful. Thank you. And, yes I think I can come back tomorrow. My ship is here for a while. I'm American."

She smiled that I had stated the obvious.

"I know you are not French."

"I guess my accent gave me away. My French is limited to a few words. I studied Spanish in school, but can't speak that very well either. But, if you don't mind me saying so, you speak English better than me." I knew I was babbling like an idiot, but wanted to prolong our conversation for as long as possible.

"Thank you, but your good manners, not your accent, gave you away. You speak respectfully. It is a quality that we do not always see in French men here."

I knew there was a story behind the edge to her voice, but decided it wasn't the time or place to request more information.

"My name is Rob. Rob Allen. It is very kind of you to help me, Miss…"

"Marquis. I am Melanie Marquis," she said.

"Mademoiselle Marquis, *merci*. Without your help, I was destined to wander the city searching for something I might never have found."

"Do you need the dictionary for your job?" She asked.

"Yes, sort of. I'm a Navy officer. The dictionary is to help me understand Vietnam and its people. I want to learn some Vietnamese words and phrases and try to talk to people. I write news releases for my ship and my aunt has requested that I write home about Vietnam, its culture and people."

"Your aunt wants to know about our culture and people. Is she a teacher?"

"No. She's a journalist. She wants to run my reports in the local newspaper to give readers more than the usual war coverage they see on television."

Melanie's beautiful eyes widened with interest when I mentioned the newspaper.

"So you are a journalist?"

"Not a professional like my aunt. I've studied journalism and worked at the newspaper while I was in college. But the war and the Navy interrupted my career plans."

Just then the store clerk said something to Melanie, who then turned back to me.

"I'm sorry. She says she wants to close for lunch now. And I am late to work. I have to go too. It was nice meeting you Rob."

"It was my pleasure, Melanie. Thank you for helping me."

She nodded and said, "*A bientot*."

"Wait," I whispered, but she'd already turned and started out the door. I wanted to chase after her to ask where she worked, but feared it would make me as rude as the French men she so clearly despised.

The clerk's voice startled me, breaking the spell. "*A demain*?" (tomorrow), she asked.

"*Oui*. But the map, can I buy the map?"

She looked confused. Then I remembered the words. "*Le plan de la ville?*"

"*Oui. Voilà*," she said, handing me a piece of paper folded several times.

"*Merci. Combo? Combien*?"

"*Non, non. Monsieur. C'est gratuit.*" (Free)

"*Merci. Merci beaucoup*, *Madame*."

"*De rien Monsieur, a demain*."

I nodded."*Oui, Madame. A demain*, merci."

It was the most French I spoken since I bid adieu to Louiselle, the French Canadian nurse I'd met in Newport months before. She did her best to teach me French during our brief time together. I left the store thinking she would be proud of how well I managed.

I looked at my watch. There was just enough time to find my way back to the waterfront and catch the next shuttle back to the ship. The throng of shoppers had thinned so that I could examine my surroundings.

It helped me understand why my first impression was so disorienting.

The nearly abandoned boulevard on which I discovered the little French boutique and the narrow street leading back to the wharf were worlds (and decades) apart. It was as though Vung Tau existed on two planes, one ancient, another a fading shadow of French occupation, neither acknowledging the civil war fought with modern weapons just beyond the horizon. The best the residents could hope for was to be unimportant enough to be ignored and bypassed by all sides. Americans like me, sent there to help, really didn't have a clue how.

I wondered how our crew of misfits, as musically inclined as we might be, could do any good. An optimist by nature, I hoped my chance encounter with Melanie might shed light on that question. In a way, she rescued me that first day. Hers was the welcoming

smile in a city of strangers. I knew nothing about her, except that she had the most captivating eyes and spoke three languages.

Would I ever see her again?

When we parted, she said *"A bientot,"* not *"au revoir."*

The first meant, "see you soon," the latter, "goodbye." On that difference I pinned my hopes.

Waiting for my ship's shuttle boat to arrive, I was determined to find the time the next day to pick up the dictionary and also persuade the store clerk to tell me where she worked.

Unfortunately, my time was not my own. It belonged to the Navy. It was the first lesson I learned when I reported my ship, the *Bell County* at the naval base, Subic Bay, Philippines, one month before.

She was tied to a broken-down wharf at the far end of the base. Unlike a sleek destroyer, she looked like a dumpy cargo vessel. An industrial-grade crane was chained to her long, flat, main deck. A four-story superstructure rose from the stern.

I'd seen ships like her on old WWII newsreels of the D-Day landings. One paragraph in my naval history manual revealed that LSTs were built by the hundreds during World War II. Nearly as long as a football field and sixty feet wide, they had large, hollow interiors designed to carry tanks, trucks, and other equipment, and could sail all the way to shore during amphibious landings. There, the bow doors could open and the vehicles could drive off.

Those features made them perfect for transiting the rivers of Vietnam, where they supported the mission of the U.S. riverine forces. It meant I would be sailing muddy rivers rather than the deep blue sea.

A hard rain was falling the day I arrived in Subic Bay. I teetered on the rotted pier boards, wiping the water out of my eyes and squinting through the mist trying to figure out where I was supposed to board. My once clean, starched, tropical white uniform clung to my skin. There was a stain near the crotch where I'd spilled coffee.

I was dead tired, swaying on my feet after more than thirty-six hours on airplanes and buses. I needed sleep.

I was startled by a voice from behind. "Excuse me, sir."

A short, thin young man with dark hair and light brown complexion smiled as I turned toward him. He was in civilian clothes and holding an umbrella.

"Are you looking for the *Bell County*?" he asked.

"I think I found it," I said nodding toward bow where the numbers 888 were painted.

"Yes, sir. You must be Mr. Allen. I'm Reyes, steward third class. Let me help you get aboard."

He picked up my duffel and guitar case and walked toward a gangway that rose at a 45-degree angle toward *Bell County*'s main deck fifteen feet above us. A sailor wearing a rain slicker and standing under a makeshift shelter snapped to attention and gave me a sharp salute.

"Ensign Allen reporting for duty. Request permission to come aboard," I said returning his salute.

"Permission granted, sir. Welcome to the *Bell County*. I'm Adkins, ship's quartermaster."

"Thank you, Adkins. I'm glad to finally get here."

"Yes, sir. The Captain (Capt.) and XO are off the ship. But the duty officer, Mr. Walton, is in the wardroom. Reyes can take you to him."

We entered a hatch in the ship's superstructure and walked down a steel passageway to a curtain-covered doorway. Reyes knocked on the outside wall, pushed back the curtain, and entered.

"Mr. Walton, our new officer, Ensign Allen, has arrived," he said.

Ensign John Walton looked up from a paperback copy of James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific.* When he put his book down and stood up, he had to duck to avoid hitting the ceiling. Low overheads didn't trouble me, but John was well over six feet tall.

"Welcome. I'm John, John Walton." His eyes focused on me for a few seconds. "What happened? You look like you've been dragged through the swamps or something."

I extended my hand.

"Hi John. I'm Rob. And yes, I not only look like shit, I feel like it, too."

I gave him a summary of my thirty-six hour journey – the plane delays, spilled coffee in my lap, rain, unintentional mud puddle baths, and so forth.

"I stink. I need a shower. Then, I want a bunk where I can catch some z's."

"Sorry. The Captain told me to have you report to him at the Pink Palace as soon as you get in."

"The Pink Palace? Whatever or wherever it is, I can't show up looking and smelling like this, and I need some time to catch up on my sleep."

"No sweat. We can fake it for a few hours. He just went over there about an hour ago, and it is probably going to be a long night. So, we're just going to say that you arrived three hours from now. That'll give you time for a shower and a few hours of shuteye. Reyes can drive you over after that."

"Jesus. that's not enough time. I need more than a couple of hours. I haven't slept for two days."

"Get used to it. The Navy owns your time, including how much you sleep."

He headed out the wardroom door. "C'mon, I'll show you your quarters, the head, and the shower."

Officer's country barely covered 800 square feet, including the corridor and wardroom, which also served as the officer's mess. There was a compact communal head with one shower, two sinks, two urinals and two toilets. The stateroom had just enough room for a bunk, a built-in desk, and a locker in which we could hang

our uniforms. A small porthole was the only source of outside air or light. They'd managed to squeeze in a second bunk. I realized I would be sharing that tiny space with another officer.

Tight quarters or not, all I wanted was to take a shower, crawl into that bunk, and stay there for a day or two.

My head hit the pillow thirty seconds after my shower. I was dreaming that I was cuddled up with Louiselle, my French Canadian girlfriend, when she began poking me with her finger.

"Not now, *ma cherie*. *"Je suis trop fatigué,"* I muttered. The poking continued.

"Mr. Allen. Mr. Allen. We got to go see the Captain." The voice didn't belong to Louiselle.

"Go away. I just got to sleep a few minutes ago."

"I can't, sir. It's been almost three hours and we've got to get going now."

Reyes finally came into focus, and I remembered something about meeting the Captain at a pink place.

"O.K. I'll get up, but my duffel is still packed and my uniforms probably need ironing. It's going to take a while for me to get ready."

"No sweat, sir. Your bags are unpacked and your uniforms are ironed. But, you don't need them now. We wear civvies in Olongapo."

"Huh?"

"Olongapo City. It's the town next to the base. That's where the Pink Palace is. When we go off base, we're allowed to wear civilian clothes."

I understood that Reyes was just doing his job. He was a steward, and his duties, like mine, were rigidly bound by traditions that dated back to the Revolutionary War. We all had to know our place and behave accordingly. He was informing me of where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to wear. He also ironed my uniforms and put out my civilian clothes.

He was one of two stewards assigned to serve the ship's seven officers, doing everything from serving our meals and washing our clothes, to making up our bunks and cleaning our staterooms. He was also a fighting sailor. At general quarters (battle stations) he was part of the gun crew. And, as I would soon learn, he was assigned to our ship because of his amazing contra-tenor voice.

Reyes had laid out my only aloha shirt and a pair of khaki cotton slacks.

"This is what I'm wearing to report to the Captain?"

"Yes, sir. It's what we wear off base."

I had no reason to doubt him and was dressed and ready to go in ten minutes.

"Oh, and the Captain wants you to bring your guitar." He picked up the case and headed toward the main deck.

"My guitar? What is it with this Captain and my guitar?"

I followed Reyes off the and the pier toward a Navy gray 1959 Ford Crown Victoria parked just beyond the broken chain link gate.

2

Subic Bay, Philippines

REYES WAS CARRYING MY GUITAR for the same reason I'd carried it halfway across the globe – because the Captain had ordered it so.

His order was in a message I received following my graduation from Officer Candidate School. It read:

> *Congratulations on your commission. Welcome to the Bell County. Upon completion of your training, proceed to our ship. Bring your guitar.*
>
> —Lt. E.W. Baillier, Commanding Officer

Getting to the ship had been a long, sleepless, trans-continental/trans-Pacific, ordeal for me and my guitar. What use the Navy had for either of us, I still didn't know.

Now I was in a car riding through Olongapo City, a corrugated tin and plywood ramshackle town of titty bars catering to sailors.

Four blocks outside the base entrance, Reyes stopped in front of a knockoff of a New Orleans brothel. I followed him through the front door. The dimly lit, hazy interior could have been any number of music clubs I'd seen on Frenchmen Street in New Orleans. But this was Olongapo City, far, far away from the Big Easy.

On a small, elevated stage in the far corner, a pianist was pounding out Fats Domino's "I'm Walking," accompanied by a drummer and a big, heavy-set, bearded guy on stand-up bass.

A tall man with salt and pepper hair appeared to be polishing glasses while dancing behind a bar that ran the length of the wall on my left. The center of the room was filled with small cafe tables and chairs arrayed on a dark bare wood floor. Except for two young women seated closed to the stage, the tables were empty.

Reyes waved to the bartender and walked toward the stage.

The pianist ended the song with a flourish and stood up.

"Reyes!" he shouted. "Are you and the girls ready for your number?"

"Yes, sir. We are. But I brought your new officer with me."

In that instant, I realized the guy with a voice like Fats Domino was Captain Baillier.

"Rob Allen, the guitar playing surfer from sunny Santa Barbara? Well, it's about time," he declared, stepping off the stage and walking toward me.

I panicked, not remembering the rules regarding saluting while in civilian clothes, so I just stood there at attention. He solved my dilemma by smiling and offering his hand. "Welcome to our crew and lovely Olongapo."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." It was all I could manage to say, nearly struck dumb by how far this was from my imagined first meeting with my commanding officer.

"Relax, Rob. We're all Navy aboard ship. Here, not so much." He paused, then added, "But just to keep things comfortable, you can still call me Captain."

I understood that although he used the word "can," he meant "will."

I always called him Captain.

No more than 5'8", Capt. Baillier was about my height and

slightly built. He had closely cropped dark hair, green eyes, a dark, almost golden brown, complexion and a warm smile. His accent, straight out of the bayous of southern Louisiana, suggested he was French Cajun, but I would learn later that he proudly cited Native and African Americans as part of his family tree.

It was hard to tell his age, but when he smiled the lines around his mouth and eyes told me he was well into his thirties. He was dressed even more casually than I in blue jeans and white tee shirt, over which he wore an unbuttoned, short-sleeved floral patterned shirt.

While he was speaking, the drummer came down from the stage and walked up next to him. The Captained turned toward him and said, "This is Lt. Lewis Luccero, our XO, sometimes known as 'Triple Lew.'"

The XO was gaunt, a half-foot taller than the Captain and at least five years older. His thinning blondish hair was streaked with gray. Although not as effusive in his welcome, his soft smile and friendly light blue eyes suggested they belonged to a kind person.

"Welcome, Rob," he said extending his hand. "How about a drink?"

Before I could respond, the Captain clapped his hands

"OK. Let's take a break. Reyes, you're up in fifteen." He joined the XO in walking me toward the bar.

The huge bear of man who'd been strumming the bass fiddle was already standing there with a beer in each hand. He offered one to me as I walked up.

With a thick black beard, a full head of curly black hair and dark eyes, magnified by thick, rimless glasses, he looked like a mad scientist turned backwoods moonshiner. He was as tall as the XO but outweighed him by 100 pounds.

"Welcome to our Pink Palace, surfer boy. I'm Harry Haggert and this is San Miguel, our fine local brew."

"Harry is the ship's engineering officer," the XO said.

I guessed he was also the ship's jester.

The Captain and XO ordered bourbon straight.

With drink in hand, the Captain nodded toward the bartender. "The distinguished gentleman behind the bar is Master Chief Clem Graham, now retired, who, along with his beautiful wife, Cecile, are the proud owners of the Palace."

Gesturing toward me, he added, "Chief, this is Ensign Robert Allen, the newest member of our crew."

Retired Chief Clem Graham was a strikingly handsome black man with a smile that could melt an iceberg. He may have been retired, but didn't look like he was much past forty.

"Hello, Rob, welcome to the Palace." He extended a hand so huge that it literally engulfed mine. His soft voice belied his size.

I could not have imagined a more exotic setting for my induction into the crew of my ship. Dozens of questions rattled around in my sleep-deprived brain as I shared the first of many drinks with the men who would be my closest companions for at least the next twelve months.

"Did I walk in on some kind of rehearsal?" I asked the XO.

"You didn't get my letter?"

"No, sir."

"That's military mail for you. After the Captain sent you a message telling you where to meet us, and asking you to bring your guitar, I decided you needed more information. I sent a longer letter telling you more about our mission."

"I'm still curious why he mentioned my guitar," I said.

"As you can probably tell, music is a big deal with the Captain. He's from New Orleans. To him, music goes with life on the water like chili peppers go with food. So, since he took command of the ship six months ago, he's been rebuilding her crew with the idea of taking it on a special mission – bringing live music and good food to our troops in the war zone."

"Wow! And the Navy is letting him do that?"

"Not exactly. At least not yet." He glanced at the Captain.

"Go ahead, Lew, I think you understand the whole picture better than I do. I'm just the talent." He walked over to Reyes and the two girls and left the XO to finish the story.

"Let's go to one of those tables. I'll explain what we're trying to do."

Nodding toward his boss, the XO, continued, "The Captain is being modest. He's the most talented musician I've ever known and this is his plan all the way. His biggest fan is Admiral Kirkpatrick, commander of all the amphibious ships in the Pacific. The Admiral was his CO back when they were both Navy divers. They're still good friends. The Admiral has a thing about making his brown-water Navy as well-respected as the blue-water."

I didn't understand the reference – "brown-water Navy."

"In this war there is a 'blue-water Navy,' the carriers, destroyers, cruisers, and others who do their work from miles offshore. Ships like ours spend most of their time much closer to the fighting, in the rivers where the water is brown. We're part of a big fleet of small boats all manned by U.S. sailors."

I nodded that I understood.

"Brown-water sailors and their craft get the low end of the stick and all the worst berths in port. We're ignored for most of everything else that you might consider a perk over here. The blue-water boys get whatever goodies there are. When Bob Hope and his entourage come around, he plays for the blue-water crews. We're lucky to hear the show on Armed Forces Radio. Admiral Kirkpatrick wants to do something special for the sailors under his command to let them know they're appreciated." He paused and took a sip of his bourbon.

"One more thing, the Admiral plays the saxophone and he's a huge New Orleans jazz fan."

I smiled at the image of a Navy admiral playing the sax in some smoke-filled nightclub.

"One night several months ago, when he and the Captain were jamming right here at the Palace, Clem shouts over to them, 'You guys are great, you should take your show on the road.'"

"It was said in jest, but the Admiral looked over and shouted back, 'Chief. You're absolutely right.' That night, Admiral Kirkpatrick and Captain Baillier hatched a plan to bring their show to the long-neglected sailors of the brown water navy in Vietnam."

"So the Admiral and the Captain formed a band to take to Vietnam?"

"More than that. The Admiral asked Captain Baillier to put together an entire show, a musical review to be performed by the ship's officers and crew. He also wants the ship to serve good, hot food during their show to troops that have been eating nothing but cold C-rations for weeks."

"It's amazing that the Pentagon agreed to that," I said.

"It hasn't, he replied. "At least, not yet."

Leaning forward in his chair and lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, he added, "The trick was to figure out a way to fit the show and chow into our military mission. And that's where Captain Baillier's idea of finding officers and enlisted men who were musicians came in."

He paused, went over to the bar, and returned with another bourbon, plus a bottle of San Miguel for me.

"The plan was to find crew members who could play music, then produce a show that we could bring to remote bases. Of course, there are still some details being worked out," he said.

I was growing increasingly alarmed as I realized what the XO's explanation implied.

"So you're telling me that the Admiral approved this idea?"

"Not only that, he also wants to sneak in and play with the band whenever he's in country," the XO answered.

The reason for the guitar request was suddenly clear. I realized I was way out of my league. "Oh shit! Captain Baillier thinks I'm a musician," I blurted out.

"Is that a problem?"

"Yes! Huge! Awful! You're going to be pissed." I grabbed the beer bottle and took a long swig, then gasped out a hasty confession. "I'm not a musician; at least not a good one; nowhere close to the Captain, or you, or Harry. I played rhythm guitar in a pick-up fraternity band. I can't even read music. I know some chords, but I couldn't play a real song to save my soul."

"Relax. We know."

His response was not what I expected.

"How? How could you know something like that?"

"Simple. Every officer needs a security clearance. You must pass a thorough background check. The Navy actually sends agents to your hometown and your former schools to talk to teachers, friends – anyone who knows you. We just added some questions."

"So you know I'm not a real musician. Yet the Captain asked me to bring my guitar. I'm confused."

"All will be revealed in time. Our ship has at least four guitarists in its crew, including two that are very good. We don't need you to play in the shows. The fact that you play the guitar is a plus. You understand and enjoy music. You will appreciate what we are trying to do."

"Yes, sir, I do. I'm just trying to figure out how I'm going to fit in."

"You're a writer, a journalist. You've written song lyrics. You managed your college band and organized events and shows. Your creative writing professor at UCSB said you have a vivid imagination. We need that kind of talent too, because no Navy ship has

ever done what we're trying to do and we're not quite sure yet how we're going to do it. We need you to help us tell our story."

Just then, the Captain clapped his hands. "Okay. Break's over. Let's get back to work."

Reyes, along with the two young women I'd seen at the tables, were the next act and did a perfect rendition of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," written by Don Raye and Hughie Prince and made famous by the Andrews Sisters. I wondered how the women figured into the ship's mission. As far as I knew, Navy ships had all-male crews. That was just another in a long list of questions rattling around in my head after the conversation with the XO.

For the next two hours a variety of singers and musicians from the crew arrived, performed, and then joined a growing audience drinking San Miguel. The level of talent surprised me. These were not sailors who happened to play music, but musicians who happened to be sailors.

"How in the hell did the Captain find these guys?" I was still pondering that question when the lack of sleep got to me and I nodded off.

"Wake up, surfer boy. It's show time." Harry was shaking my chair. Most of the crew was gone and Clem was wiping down the bar.

"Looks like the show is over," I said.

The Captain was playing something on my guitar. He stopped, stood, and handed it to me.

"Your turn, Rob."

This was my audition. Sober, I'd have been terrified of exposing my mediocre talent to an audience of accomplished musicians. But the San Miguel did its job. I made my way through "The House of the Rising Sun." Nobody gagged.

My performance didn't secure a spot on the stage, but apparently earned me a yet-to-be-determined supporting role.

That first night with my shipmates in a smoky saloon in

Olongapo City, I learned that making music would be our mission above all else. We were in uncharted waters. There was no manual on how to turn a Navy ship into a showboat. But, as tired and confused as I was, I contributed to our mission by suggesting our ship's show business handle, which all present unanimously approved. She would be known as the *Mekong Belle*.

By the time we dropped anchor in Vung Tau Bay, the *Mekong Belle's* transformation into something resembling an old-time Mississippi River showboat was well underway.