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FOUR

THIRTY

An American-Korean Battle

After lunch the wounded were put aboard the plane and made the flight to the air base at Cam Ranh. From there we were driven to an Army hospital located directly on the beach of the bay. This hospital complex was a group of the old type, wooden barracks, each with only one floor, standing side by side, with a paved road passing by the front, and the pure white sand of the beach directly out the back doors.

If it wasn't for the war, this would certainly qualify as one of the most beautiful locations in the world. The first time I walked out the back door of my building and stood on the plank walkway, which prevented patients from having to walk directly in the sand, I was taken aback by the breath-taking scenery.

The waters of the bay gently lapped the shore only about fifty yards from where I was standing and were the beautiful, clear aquamarine color of a built in swimming pool. Out in the center of the bay there was a small, uninhabited island, with high, volcanic cliffs, covered by a tall stand of what looked like weathered evergreen trees.

Looking down to my left, the white beach curved around the shore of the bay and out toward the open sea. In the distance, and just back from the shore, the mountain range I'd seen when I first arrived in-country rose majestically like a massive backdrop behind the beach. The mountains and most of the land in front of them, with the exception of the beach proper, were covered with lush, green jungle and palm trees, giving the scene a gorgeous postcard appearance.

In the other direction, to my right, the hospital buildings obscured most of the view. The plank walkway went down along the backs of the buildings to an officers club where it ended. The officers club was surrounded by a high privacy fence with two palm trees in large pots at the entrance. Beyond that building I could see life guards sitting on their high chairs, keeping an eye on bathers who were mostly off duty military personnel and patients.

Once again I felt the tremendous heat of the tropical sun beating down, just as I had when I first arrived, but now, partly because there was an on-shore breeze and partly because I'd grown accustomed to the heat, it didn't feel nearly as oppressive.

I'd spend about a month at this facility, each day going for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon for physical therapy. The therapist was a stocky woman in her middle to late thirties who also happened to be a major in the Army. She told me that when the bullet went through my elbow, it partially severed what is called the ulnar nerve. She explained that new nerve tissue was growing from my hand toward my elbow and that the same was happening from my shoulder down. The amount of use I would eventually have of the hand would depend on how well the nerve endings met when they reached the elbow.

For therapy I had to squeeze a rubber ball as hard and as many times as I could until the hour was up. Actually, I didn't mind going for these treatments, not only because they were good for my recovery, but because the therapy building was air-conditioned. I really looked forward to that welcomed break from the heat.

After several weeks, believe it or not, I found myself getting extremely bored with the daily routine of the hospital. I appreciated the fact that each day spent here meant one less I'd have to do in the field, but even with that knowledge, there was very little to keep one occupied.

Each evening, at just about dusk, a movie was shown at a bowl shaped structure built right on the beach, and there was usually a USO show on weekends, mainly with entertainers from either Taiwan or the Philippines. Other than that, however, there was virtually nothing but hanging around.

Though this area was considered to be fairly safe, one evening, while we patients were sitting in the bleachers watching a movie, a sniper managed to position himself in the low hills across the road from the front of the hospital. He fired several shots in at us but, fortunately, no one was hit, and the MPs went up there to flush him out. This incident just went to show that there really wasn't anywhere in this country that could be considered really "safe".

I was one of those watching the movie when the shots were fired and scrambled down off the bleachers with all the other patients dressed only in our blue pajamas. None of us carried any weapons and it suddenly struck us how vulnerable we were without our M-16s in hand.

In the field, a man became accustomed to knowing exactly where his weapon was at all times, even while he was asleep. There'd been more than one occasion when I was awakened during the night and dropped my hand straight down to my side to land directly on the handgrip of my rifle. It became like a trusted companion that you could always count on. Now, under fire, and without it, I felt more naked than I would have without any clothing.

On another occasion I watched as a tremendous fight broke out between the American and Korean patients here. The Koreans had a section of the complex all to themselves and a completely different recovery procedure than we Americans.

For one thing, and it was the one thing that brought about the fight, the Koreans were allowed to have their wives live with them, at the hospital, while they recuperated. It was common knowledge that Korean men were extremely protective of their wives and families. Since that fact was so well known, it would seem an asinine act on the part of anyone to try and get an affair going with one of the Korean wives,...but that's what happened.

Suddenly, one evening, just before the movie was about to begin, about thirty American and twenty Korean patients met in the middle of the beach and began slugging it out. If it wasn't so dangerous it would have been comical to see all those men in blue pajamas going at one another. There were even a few crutches swinging around in there.

Though the Koreans were outnumbered, they were a tough lot and appeared to get the upper hand almost immediately.

It wasn't unusual that there were no MPs around to break it up. No one really expected a bunch of hospital patients to get into a brawl.

The fight came to an abrupt end, however, when one Korean, in the middle of the fracas, raised a heavy stone, about the size of a basketball, over his head. An American lay on the ground, in a fetal position, at his feet, his arms covering his head. Everyone stopped, in almost the exact positions they were when the Korean lifted the stone, and stared in his direction. For several tense seconds he stood poised with it over his head, the silence thick as a blanket. He had an intense look of concentration on his face as he stared down at the helpless man at his feet. Then, he appeared to think about what he was about to do and let the stone fall harmlessly off to one side. That magnanimous gesture seemed to make all the others realize the foolishness of what they were doing and they began shaking hands. The man who'd held the stone gave the man at his feet a hand up and they too shook hands. By the time the MPs did arrive there was nothing to break up and the incident was forgotten.

It made me feel really good to see that these two allies could so easily put their differences aside and remain fast friends.