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McShane: Minefield

MINEFIELD

Peter K. McShane



Claymore mines and concertina wire lined the perimeter of our camp. The territory beyond that was littered with old mines, buried by the French years before. We cleared what we could when we built our camp, but there were still leftovers. Every so often, someone would wander off the road and trip on one of them. We'd get the casualties at the dispensary. Most were DOA.

It was a day in early spring, hot and humid. The sun blazed and sand burned my feet as it crept into the open pores of my jungle boots. The sweet smell of the salt air breeze off the South China Sea was tinged by the acrid scent of cooking fires from our mercenary encampment across the road from the A-Camp. At the French hotel down the beach, the smell of its flower garden and kitchen gave way to reality on the ground; there was no escape.

After a morning spent in the dispensary, I was on my way back from the mess hooch when Tran, our senior Vietnamese medic, ran up to me, out of breath and anxious.

"Bac Si, there's a little boy from our camp wandering in the minefield across the road."

"How the hell did that happen? Where was his mother?"

"I don't know, Bac Si. The child strayed off chasing a cat and ran into the minefield after it. His older brother just ran into the dispensary to tell me."

Tran and I jumped into a Jeep and raced out of the compound. About two clicks down

the road, I could see a woman at the edge of a field of sea grass waving her arms, and a four-year-old boy standing in a patch of sand about a hundred meters off the road. She was frantic.

"Tran, what is the woman saying?"

"Bac Si, she is telling the boy to come back to the road."

"No...No...No! Tran, tell her to make him stay where he is!"

All I could visualize was the boy running toward us, tripping one of those mines, and his body atomized in front of us. We jumped out of the Jeep and ran over to the woman. She was shaking, sobbing uncontrollably.

Afraid for my life, I didn't know what to do. I could leave and hope that he didn't blow himself up, or go and get him. Hesitating a moment, I took another look at the child's desperate mother and decided that I had to go after him.

"Tran, tell her that I'm going to get the boy. Have her tell him to stay where he is: Do-Not-Move."

"Bac Si, you shouldn't go into the minefield."

"What would you do Tran, wait for the boy to trip a mine and watch him blow up in our faces? It's too late to back out now. I have to do this."

I frantically tried to remember what I learned in training classes. Put your feet one in front of the other in measured steps, touching the ground first with the ball of your

foot, lowering it to your heel, slowly shifting your weight to the ball of the other foot. Scan the ground in front of you for trip wires or prongs. Look for things that appear to be growing out of the ground that look unnatural.

“Tran, ask her the boy’s name.”

“Bac Si, it is Loi.”

Terrified, I slowly took steps toward the child, praying that he would not become frightened and run from me, or worse, toward me. He was only a hundred meters away, but it seemed like a kilometer. I took one step after another, scanning the ground for signs of a mine. Visions of chunks of my body floating through space consumed my thoughts, but prongs sticking up just a meter in front of me quickly brought me back to reality. “As long as I can see the wires or prongs, I’ll be Okay,” I thought. The field was beach sand, with alternate windswept mounds held together with sea grass, and valleys of bare patches where you could see the mines plain as day. I stayed off of the mounds where prongs or trip wires might be buried. I figured that my chances were better in the valleys where I could at least see signs of the ordinance.

It must have taken me twenty minutes to reach the boy. All I could think about was him running and blowing us both to bits. He was just standing there, with a mischievous look, not sure why his mother was so upset. Thank God he recognized me from the dispensary and didn’t try to run away.

“Loi...Bac Si want to take you to your mother. Stay there,” I said in a calm voice, while my body shook under my tiger fatigues. Then he playfully turned away to goad me into a chase, and began running toward the sea, about three hundred meters away. I knew I only had one chance to grab him, so I lunged and snagged the sleeve of his shirt. He fell backward toward me. I lost my footing and landed in the

sand on top of him. For a few seconds there was silence. Then he burst into giggles.

“Bac Si...more, more!”

I lay there trembling, clutching the little boy in my arms and fighting back the tears. Scanning the ground, I saw a trip wire sticking out of the sand just an arm’s length away from us. I hugged the boy as hard as I could, and as I did, he began laughing, tears of pleasure running down his face. My body was wracked with the pain of fear, but his joy soothed me. Get control of yourself, I thought. You still have to make it back to the road. I told Loi that we would play again once we got back to the

road. With the boy in my arms, I started to backtrack, desperately trying to concentrate on what I had to do.

I don’t remember much about the trip back. Somehow we made it back and I delivered the little boy into his mother’s arms. I was exhausted and relieved.

That afternoon, Tran, Loan, our nurse, and I took a Jeep across the road to the encampment to hold a MEDCAP, or sick call. We did this once a week when I was in camp. Sometimes the Cambodes were too sick to come to the dispensary. Other times, they didn’t want to bother us, mostly out of ignorance. Most of them had never received a doctor’s check-up before signing on as our mercenaries. It was easier for them if we went there, sort of like making house calls. We’d walk the aisles of their hooches, all joined together in a common hallway, and look in on their lives. This day was different. When our Jeep approached the entryway to the compound, we were swarmed by hundreds of people.

“Bac Si...Bac Si...Bac Si!”

The crowd was yelling at us. I was concerned for our safety. They didn’t seem angry, but they were agitated for some reason.

“Hesitating a moment, I took another look at the child’s desperate mother, and decided that I had to go after him.”

“What’s going on Tran; what are they saying?”

“Bac Si, they’re praising you; they’re thanking you for saving that little boy.”

From the back of the crowd came Noh, a Cambodian elder and the self-appointed mayor of the encampment. He walked up to my side of the Jeep and grabbed my arm.

“Bac Si, we are happy that you saved Loi,” he said in broken English.

“You faced great danger to save him and we are happy for you.”

I didn’t know what to say. Women and men swarmed the Jeep, touching me and bowing. Noh reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded white cloth and a small gold and ivory Buddha amulet on a chain. Almost every one of our mercenaries had one of these icons hanging around his neck. Superstitious or not, they felt safe in the Buddha’s presence. He opened the white cloth to reveal a prayer cloth, a half meter square made out of linen. It was hand-printed with an intricate array of icons and prayers in Khmer. I remember one of our mercenaries showing me one that he carried.

“Bac Si, you carry this prayer cloth and the Buddha with you. It protect you from harm.”

I thought about how the Cambodes put those amulets in their mouths during firefights, and wondered if there was anything to it.

When Top Sergeant Brown found out about my foray into the minefield, he was livid.

“McShane, what the fuck were you thinking,



going out into a minefield to rescue a gook.”

“Top, I just did my job.”

“McShane, your job is to protect the Americans, not risk your life saving some Cambodian kid.”

“But they’re our mercenaries; they’re family. I did what I thought was right.”

“They aren’t your family; they’re not our family. You risked your life needlessly. It’s hard enough staying alive on our operations. You don’t need to risk it here in camp. Don’t go near the minefield again.”

“Okay Top.”

That wasn’t the last time I got chewed out for doing what I thought was the right thing. Everybody has his or her own definition. I suppose that Top was right. Shit, he had survived two tours and was still alive to dress me down.

I didn’t give much thought to the presentation ceremony that afternoon, but I did put that Buddha amulet around my neck and the prayer cloth in my left breast pocket. I’m not superstitious, but I thought it would help me bond with our mercenaries. I had no inkling that those icons might save my life.