
THIRTY THREE**Almost Japan**

After being moved out of intensive care, I spent another week at the Da Nang medical facility. During that time two incidents occurred which had an extremely depressing affect on me. The first came as a result of my meeting a pretty American Red Cross girl named Kathy.

There were two or three Red Cross girls stationed here who visited regularly with the patients at their bedsides. They wheeled around carts full of magazines and just generally brightened up the men's spirits by their very presence. Some of these men hadn't seen an American girl for months, so just the chance to talk with one did wonders for their morale.

The girls also maintained a small recreation room where those patients not bedridden could go and watch TV, play ping pong, or just sit at a table and read a book.

I met Kathy on her regular rounds when she stopped by my bed and struck up a conversation. While we were talking, I happened to mention that I'd played guitar for quite a few years back home. It was nothing professional, or anything like that. I just liked to play for myself.

"Do you think you'd like to give it a try if I brought you one of the guitars from the rec room?" She asked.

This was the first time I'd given much thought to the fact that I couldn't feel anything in the two outside fingers of my left hand. Not only could I not feel them, I couldn't even move them! They remained curled up toward the palm.

“I don’t know,” I answered, looking down at my apparently useless hand, “Maybe I’ll give it a try.”

“Good, I’ll bring one back when I get through with my rounds.”

Kathy later returned with the guitar and I tried wrapping my hand around the neck, a function that had come as naturally as breathing before. I found that even the simplest chords were impossible to form. The sudden realization that I might never be able to do something I’d always enjoyed so thoroughly struck home and must have been easily discernable in my facial expression. Kathy, who was sitting on the edge of the bed next to me, put a hand on my shoulder and spoke softly.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it will come back in time.”

I nodded and smiled half-heartedly.

“Listen, I’ve got to go and finish my rounds. Why don’t I leave the guitar here and you can bring it back to the rec room later?”

I answered as she stood to go, “Sure,...no problem.”

When she was gone I sat and stared at my hand for a long time. Up until a few moments ago the wound to my elbow had seemed a blessed relief, in that it had gotten me out of the field for awhile. Now the thought that I might never regain the use of my hand had turned those feelings all around.

The other incident occurred when I met the same man I’d seen brought into intensive care a couple of days earlier with malaria. It happened that he was given the bed next to mine in the recovery tent. The two of us hit it off right away, though the other man, John, was still pretty weak from his recent bout with the disease. Since John wasn’t able to get up, and I really had nowhere to go, we spent a lot of time talking. On the second day he was here, just before suppertime, our conversation got around to

my wound. When I explained what had happened, and the fact that my hand was partially paralyzed, John, feeling much better, sat up on the edge of his bed.

“Let me take a look at that hand.”

I held it out, thinking this a rather unusual request from another patient. He spread my fingers apart and examined them in a very skillful manner, which was even more puzzling.

“Let’s see if you can move those fingers at all on your own.”

Try as I might, I couldn’t make the slightest movement. That was when he hit me with a bombshell.

“Listen,...I can get you to Japan with that hand.”

For a moment I just stared at him, not knowing whether he was serious or just trying to be funny. Then I let my breath out in a mild scoff.

“Japan,...yeah, right.”

The cynicism in my tone wasn’t hard to hear.

John smiled and laid back down with his hands folded under his head.

“I’m not kidding. I’m a doctor.”

“A doctor!”, I almost choked on the words.

I had just naturally taken it for granted that he’d been brought in from the field. It never even dawned on me that the people in the rear were just as susceptible to diseases as the men in the field.

“What rank are you?” I ask somewhat dismayed.

“I’m a captain.”

Again I was stunned. I’d never had such a friendly relationship with an officer before.

John looked over and smiled, sensing my surprise.

“Tomorrow morning I’ll talk to the surgeon who worked on your arm. I’m sure there’ll be no problem getting you a flight out.”

I rested back on my own bed and stared up at the canvas ceiling of the tent. There’s no way to describe the sudden elation I was feeling. One moment I was facing the depressing possibility of a useless hand for the rest of my life, and the next, that same hand was about to get me a trip to the safety and comfort of Japan!

I knew for a fact that most wounded, who managed to get to Japan, never came back to Vietnam. Even if they got well they usually finished their tour over there and went directly back to the States. The thought that I might not have to spend any more time in this God-forsaken war took precedence over all my other emotions.

All through supper I felt like I was walking on a cloud. Everything seemed to take on a new look, once again as if I was only a tourist here who would soon be leaving.

After eating, I returned to the recovery tent and lay on my bed again. John wasn’t anywhere around, but, since he was an officer, and was feeling so much better the last time I saw him, I figured he must have gone out to visit with some of the other officers stationed here.

I fell asleep before he came back and didn’t realize that anything was amiss until I awoke the next morning to see that his bed hadn’t been slept in. When one of the medics came into the tent, I inquired about John.

“Oh, you mean the captain who was here with malaria? He received orders just awhile ago to be flown out to Japan.”

Suddenly, my world turned upside down again, “You mean he’s gone?”

“Far as I know. ...They didn’t give him any warning. He had to get his stuff together in a hurry.”

Suddenly my stomach felt like it had just dropped twenty feet.

“Do you know if his plane has left yet?”

“No, I don’t. I’m not even sure if he might still be around the area somewhere.”

Before the medic knew what had happened, I was up and out of the tent like a shot. If the plane hadn’t left yet, there might still be a chance John could talk to the doctors before he left.

I looked everywhere, but it seemed that wherever I went, the captain had been there just ahead of me and gone. Eventually it became clear that my search was in vain. I ended up leaning against a wooden post, at the end of the plank walk that stopped at the beach, staring out toward the ocean. John’s flight was well on its way and there was nothing I could do but ache over just how close I’d come to getting away from this miserable war.

During the last couple of days I spent at Da Nang, I became resigned to the fact that fate had dealt me a hard blow. I would have to remain here in-country. Oddly enough, I felt no ill will toward John because, in the brief time I’d known him, I got the distinct impression he wasn’t the type who’d have said what he did unless he meant it. It was just my misfortune that even a captain had to obey orders when he was shipped out,...and there was some small consolation in the news that I was being transferred to the medical facilities at Cam Ranh Bay for my recovery. Cam Ranh was probably the safest place in the country.

On the morning of the flight out, I and a whole group of patients were put on a medical bus for the airport. When we got there, we learned that the plane to Cam Ranh wasn't ready yet, so we were temporarily taken to a nearby Air Force hospital.

I can honestly say that I was truly amazed at the difference between this hospital and those of the Army. This building had three floors and looked like any modern hospital back in the States. At lunchtime an excellent meal of roast beef, mashed potatoes, a vegetable, and dessert was served from trays taken off stainless steel carts by American Air Force nurses. From this higher standard, it was readily apparent why so many people preferred to enlist for four years in the Air Force rather than taking the chance of being drafted into the Army.