

UP RIVER

By George J. Condon

With a bump and a squeal of tires, the Hercules troop transport plane landed in Seattle at a little past midnight. After I retrieved my luggage from the conveyor, it didn't take me long to get through US Immigration. Airport security didn't really exist in October of 1966.

I'd never been to Seattle before and had no clue about the local hotels. I found a yellow and black taxi parked outside the air terminal and climbed in while the driver stowed my luggage in the trunk. My military pay was meager and the cab driver seemed friendly, so I asked him to recommend a decent hotel that had cheap rates. It didn't seem important that the driver was black.

The cabbie took me to The Hudson, a hotel that had been built during the Big Band Era and since fallen on harder times. I tipped the driver and took my luggage inside. It seemed just a coincidence that the desk clerk was black too.

The Hudson looked as though the staff kept it clean and the room rates were within my price range, so I signed for a single on the second floor, then went upstairs and tried to get some sleep.

Around eleven the next morning, I crawled out of bed and stumbled down to the hotel's coffee shop. I walked in bleary eyed from sleeping in an unfamiliar bed. Even in my dozy state, I noticed that the restaurant staff and the four patrons who were already in the place were all African Americans. Suddenly, I realized I was a Canadian white kid in the middle of Seattle's black ghetto.

I found a table along one wall and sat down to wait for service. The other customers tried not to stare at me, but I caught them looking up from their food when they thought I wasn't watching. Mine was probably the only white face they'd ever seen in the place.

A young waitress came over with a menu and I ordered scrambled eggs, toast and coffee. The girl looked at me in the same way the others did, as though I wasn't quite right in the head. White people didn't hang out in black neighborhoods. To the locals, I must have seemed as though I'd just stepped out of a flying saucer.

The food arrived quickly and I was savoring a mouthful of coffee when I sensed somebody standing next to my table. I looked up and saw the black man who'd been eating pancakes at a nearby table when I'd walked in. He appeared to be in his thirties, slim with close cropped hair and steel rimmed eyeglasses. His navy blue windbreaker was open over a red T-shirt and he wore gray wool pants.

"All right if I sit down?" he asked.

I'd traveled enough to recognize a hustler when I met one, but this guy didn't seem the type.

"Sure," I said.

The slim man sat down across the table from me, then held out his right hand.

"Name's Jim," he said.

We shook hands while Jim looked at me with obvious amusement.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"Canada."

"What y'all doin' in Seattle?"

"I had some leave coming and I heard a transport was flying down here, so I deadheaded on it. I've got a friend who works at Boeing."

"You in the military then?" Jim asked.

"Air Force."

Jim nodded as though I'd revealed some important truth.

"I'm in the merchant marine myself," he said.

Jim didn't look like any sailor I'd ever met, but I let that slide.

"You must see a lot of places," I said.

"You got that right. Been all over. Lately, I been crewing on a cargo barge in 'Nam. We been running army supplies up the Mekong Delta."

In my mind, I groaned. Here was another guy telling bullshit war stories. The Vietnam War was grinding on that year and it seemed everybody I met claimed to have been to 'Nam.

"Must be dangerous," I said, trying to think of a way to change the subject.

"The Mekong is a motherfucker, Man," Jim said. "Some places, the water is so shallow you can run aground if you ain't careful. Other places, the riverbanks are so close you can throw a beer can and hit land. That's where the Cong like to set up ambushes. On those slow moving barges, we're sitting ducks."

If Jim was spinning a story, he was good at it.

"Bad enough when we bring in food or spare parts," Jim said. "Last trip, we had a barge load of gasoline."

Now I knew Jim was lying. Nobody would be crazy enough to go up river, under hostile fire, riding a floating napalm bomb.

Jim leaned forward and lowered his voice as though revealing a secret.

"Only protection we had was a fifty caliber mounted on deck," he said. "It was one of those mornings you get in 'Nam when it's so hot it fries your brain. I was up on deck, checking out the fifty, making sure it had a full ammo belt that wouldn't jam coming out of the box. I heard a whooshing noise and knew it was an incoming mortar round. I figured we were all dead."

Jim paused long enough to let me imagine a mortar shell hitting a barge loaded with tens of thousands of gallons of gasoline.

"First shell landed in the river, about a hundred yards to port," Jim said. "Few seconds later, a second one hit the water, less than fifty yards to starboard. Charlie was finding the range. I had to do something fast."

"What could you do?" I asked.

"I saw something move on the river bank. Looked like somebody in those black pajamas the Cong wear. I opened up with the fifty and

raked the bank, all around where I saw that movement. The mortar fire stopped."

"Sounds like a close call," I said, not believing a word.

"The bosun came on deck," Jim said. "When I told him what happened, he checked the river bank with his binoculars, then gave them to me."

Jim leaned in, even closer. I saw the horror in his eyes and I realized he wasn't making up anything.

"There were three of them," Jim said. "Just kids. Didn't look no more than thirteen or fourteen. The slugs from the fifty caliber just tore them apart."

"You couldn't have known," I said.

Jim sat up straight and looked at me, as though just returning from some other place.

"Didn't matter whether I knew or not," he said. "Those mothers was trying to blow us to Hell. Well, I gotta run along. You enjoy your stay in Seattle now. Y'hear?"

Before I could say anything, Jim stood up and walked to the cash register. I saw him give some money to the manager, then he was gone. I finished my breakfast, wondering what made Jim come over and talk to me. After I got my bill from the waitress, I took it to the cash register, but the manager waved it aside.

"Been taken care of," he said. "Your friend paid for your breakfast when he paid for his."

I left the coffee shop feeling a little dazed. Who was Jim and why did he pay for my meal? Maybe he was just grateful for the chance to talk to somebody about the demons that haunted him. I'd never know for sure.

I saw a pay phone in the hotel lobby and called Tony Dean. He offered to come right down and meet me at the hotel. I heard Tony gasp when I gave him the address.

"Wait outside," Tony said in his English accent. "Helen and I will be right there."

I was standing at the curb along with my bags when the Deans drove up. Tony threw my luggage into the trunk of his black sedan,

then we drove off as though escaping from a bank robbery.

"How in Hell did you wind up in this neighborhood?" Tony asked.

I told him about asking the taxi driver to take me to a hotel.

"You're lucky to be alive," Tony said. "These people down here will kill you for pocket change."

I knew just what color Tony meant when he said "these people". Before I lectured him about prejudice, I remembered black civil rights marchers attacked with dogs and fire hoses, then the race riots in Watts, just a year earlier. Enraged black mobs had savagely beaten any white people they found on the streets. I'd forgotten I was in America. How naive I'd been with my white Canadian liberalism! Then, I remembered Jim's kindness.

As Tony's car sped out to the lily white suburbs, I looked out at the streets of Seattle without seeing them. Instead, I saw dark river water and the lush jungle vegetation of river banks where death lay in wait.

I sometimes wonder whether Jim survived his tours in Viet Nam and about what happened to him later. Since that trip to Seattle, I've had rough spots in my own life and I've come to understand one thing. Just like Jim, we're all moving up river the best way we know how.

The End