



Thai Moon Saloon

by
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Prologue

Penn Gwinn, code named Penguin, halted his group and took cover amid the jungle. He listened intently to the voices of the enemy soldiers bustling along the trail. They were laughing and joking, being unusually casual for their purpose, not concerned with the clanking and rattling of their mess gear, their rifles, and other trappings of war.

Penn and his group had completed their mission, but they were still less than a 100 yards from the enemy training camp. Slowly, carefully, Penn pushed aside a giant fern to peer at the soldiers as they approached. He was puzzled. They weren't Viet Cong soldiers, but the nearby training camp was a V.C. facility.

Jim Starret, code named Starman, stepped up beside Penn. He was Penn's field operations partner. He, too, cautiously peered at the soldiers. "What the hell?" he whispered. "Who are those guys?"

"You're asking me?" Penn responded. "You're the expert on Asian affairs, remember?" He turned to their Laotian guide. "Lunao?" he whispered. "Who are they?"

Lunao studied the group less than twenty yards away. "I no know," he whispered at length. "They Burma, maybe. Maybe Shan State."

"Burmese?" James 'Madman' Moran whispered, nearly too loud for safety, as he crept forward to take a peek. "What're they doing here?" He stepped back behind a jungle tree. "They're not going to believe this in Washington. I better get some photos." He drew his camera out of his field pack and prepared it.

That was when the sergeant, the leader of the Special Forces escort for the Defense Intelligence Agency mission, got restless. "Hey, you guys," he forcibly whispered. "Shut the fuck up! The problem with you spy types is no combat training. You want to see Charlie up close? Just keep up your chatter!"

Penn ignored the warning. "Starman," he whispered to his partner. "Did you get your C-4 set around the buildings in that camp?"

"Set, and ready," Starret replied. "But, damn it," he added, "tell me you're not going to blow up the place already. It took a hell of a lot of effort to get those bugs in place. We at least ought to give them a chance to work. There could be a lot of intelligence gathered from that place."

Penn had to agree. After all, their mission was to plant those bugs. That's what they were

trained for as American Defense Intelligence Agency Field Operatives. They were agents who didn't officially exist. The D.I.A. wasn't sanctioned for field agent operations, but they couldn't trust the C.I.A., so they trained their own field operatives for the placement of concealed covert listening devices in enemy facilities. Field Operative was a noble name for a sometimes otherwise very dirty job.

Explosives were added to the devices during placement for protection of the mission if the bugs were discovered. He hoped these bugs weren't going to be discovered so soon, or that there wouldn't be some other emergency that necessitated their destruction.

Suddenly, one of the soldiers shouted an alarm. He was shouting in a Chinese dialect, but one of his words was unmistakable: "Yankees!"

A short grouping of rifle shots followed. It was soon accompanied by automatic weapons fire, then by more yelling, as the voices became more animated.

Bullets whizzed past the intelligence group. They penetrated the jungle, breaking branches, tearing up the foliage.

"Jesus!" the sergeant shouted. "I told you this would happen with all your yapping."

The 'chunk' of a mortar being fired punctured the silence between the automatic weapons firing. An explosion demolished a tree thirty yards away.

Penn frowned as he pulled the remote trigger from his pack. His group was discovered, and that meant the commander of the training camp would end up searching the entire area for electronic bugs. He couldn't let them be found.

"Damn!" Starret swore. There was no longer a need for whispering. Penn armed the remote trigger. He sighed, pushed the button, and the buildings in the training camp blew apart.

The ammunition dump ignited first. Mortar shells, cannon shells, a string of loose rifle rounds, all went off, near simultaneously, sending flares, lead, and pieces of buildings everywhere.

"Jesus!" the sergeant exclaimed in awe as flames rocketed skyward. "A God damn Fourth of July show!"

"Yeah," Penn shouted, "but I think we better let someone else enjoy the sparklers. It's time we got the hell out of here!"

Starret stuck his head out from behind the tree and snapped some pictures for the records. "So much for this mission," he shouted over the roar.

The sergeant signaled his squad, but the six Green Berets were already returning fire with their automatic rifles. They were joined by Penn, Starret, Madman, and Lunao, each with their standard issue .45 caliber automatics.

Penn glanced at Starret, then suddenly fired in Starret's direction.

"What the hell?" Starret shouted in dismay.

One of the enemy fell a few feet behind him.

"Jesus, Penguin," he shouted with relief. "You keep that up and I'll end up owing you."

"We go now, Penguin!" Lunao shouted, eyeing the advancing soldiers.

"We go now," Penn affirmed.

The Green Berets began their slow retreat. They provided covering fire as the intelligence agents ran past them in full retreat.

And the enemy began their chase.

It took less than a few minutes for the intelligence officers to get separated from their

Green Beret escort, and they were forced to cover their retreat by themselves. They fired behind them as they ran through the jungle, with the branches and vines tearing at them, and with three of the enemy in hot pursuit.

Madman stopped long enough to take aim at the closest pursuer, but that was a mistake. The soldier fired an automatic weapon, and it spewed out bullets faster than Madman's .45 pistol could. Madman fell when three slugs blew open his stomach.

The enemy soldier raced up to Madman. He took aim at Madman's head, and fired.

Penn fired three quick shots at the soldier with his .45 automatic. At such a short distance his aim was good. The soldier fell with the front of his head missing.

Lunao screamed. Blood spurted out of his shoulder. He grabbed his shoulder, staggered, stumbled, then fell against a tree.

Starret's .45 blasted away the leg of another of the enemy, as he and Penn grabbed Lunao by the arms. They tried to half carry, half drag him on their continued retreat.

The last of the enemy soldiers drew back, not sure he wanted to continue the chase.

Less than ten minutes later Penn and Starret, still dragging the conscious Lunao, reached a clearing. They stopped and stared across the empty field.

"Where's the fucking chopper?" Starret yelled, as they sat Lunao on the ground, propping him up against the trunk of a tree.

"Yelling isn't going to help," Penn said with surprising calm for the circumstances. "What time is it?"

"Fourteen fucking forty!" Starret said, checking his watch, his voice still full of anxiety. "They're already ten minutes late!"

Rifle shots erupted from the other side of the clearing. Half a dozen soldiers broke out of the jungle and ran across the clearing towards them. Half of them were Viet Cong, but the other half wore the same unidentifiable uniforms as those in the training camp.

"That's what happened to your God damn chopper," Penn said, now feeling the urge to shout. "Let's get the hell out of here!" He reached down to retrieve Lunao.

Lunao screamed in pain. "No!" he shouted. "Let go! God Damn!" he screamed. "No! You go. Now! I cover you!"

Penn and Starret exchanged glances.

"God damn! I not make it," Lunao persisted. "I stay here, cover you!" he shouted. "Get away, G.I.!"

Penn and Starret again exchanged glances. There was no time for argument. They tossed their hand grenades to Lunao, and raced back into the jungle.

Lunao's shooting was heard until they ran several hundred yards. The shooting was followed by several grenade blasts, the results of Lunao's final efforts in covering their retreat.

They continued for another twenty minutes, running, jumping over fallen logs, pushing through brush, trying to follow the merest semblance of a barely passable jungle trail. When the jungle ended abruptly, it wasn't at the edge of another clearing. It was on the edge of a cliff, a wide chasm with sides too steep to climb down.

"Well?" Starret asked, nervously glancing back down the trail. "Ain't this just ducky? Now what?"

"One damn good question, old buddy", Penn responded..

They stared at the obstacle. Below them, at the bottom of the gorge, was a slow flowing river. Behind them the trail would be filled with the enemy Lunao couldn't stop. There was no place to go.

"Damn it, anyway!" Starret shouted.

Rifle firing penetrated the jungle beside them. The Viet Cong were carefully making their way down the trail, shooting at anything that might be their enemy.

"Great," Starret complained. "Now what?"

"You already asked that, " Penn responded, studying the river in the bottom of the gorge.

"It don't look too good, do it?" Starret added in grim humor.

Again they turned back to the jungle, but some of the enemy were already visible on the trail. They jumped behind a nearby tree for protection, firing around the tree trunk without bothering to aim.

Then the thunderous pounding of fifty caliber machine guns erupted from overhead, and the enemy stopped firing.

"Now what?" Starret complained.

The chop-chop-chop of helicopter blades flooded the air amid the machine gun bursts, as a military EVAC helicopter sped swiftly up the canyon, paralleling the cliff edge, firing at the enemy's movement through the jungle.

The enemy soldiers jumped for cover. Some covered behind the trees that weren't already blown apart. Others ran as hard as they could away from the canyon, but they couldn't outrun the machine gun.

The chopper slowly pivoted back and forth with its forward guns blasting the jungle. A round of rockets were added for support, and the jungle exploded with fury.

"Holy Christ!" Starret shouted against the noise.

The chopper turned sideways to put the loading door near the cliff edge. The co-pilot looked through the side window at Penn and Starret. He mouthed the word: "Jump!"

A burst of automatic weapons fire surged from the enemy. Bullets pierced the side of the chopper, and the co-pilot lurched forward, dead.

More shots came from the enemy. They regrouped when the chopper stopped firing at them, and were again on the offensive.

Starret peered at the distance between the chopper and the edge of the gorge. "It's a helluva jump!" he shouted.

The tree beside the two agents was torn apart by more automatic weapons fire from the enemy.

"Time to get the hell out of here!" Penguin shouted. "That chopper's our only choice! Come on! Well jump for it!" He quickly took a few steps back, glanced back at the enemy once more, then ran for the chopper.

"You're crazy, Man!" Starret shouted. But he followed.

They lunged for the open helicopter doors as another burst of weapons firing erupted behind them.

Without warning the chopper lurched forward and up. It pulled away from them while they were in mid-air, halfway to the choppers side door.

Penn glimpsed the pilot struggling to gain control of the wildly gyrating machine. It pulled

away, then smashed into the cliff on the other side of the gorge.

The fireball from the exploding fuel tanks singed Penn's hair as he and Starret fell into the gorge, splashing into the river fifty feet below.

Ten minutes later, after dodging the falling chopper parts and flaming fuel, after fighting the current, after bouncing over a few rocks, and after being swiftly carried around the bend out of range of their pursuers, Penn and Starret managed to climb out of the river where the gorge lessened into a broad jungle plain. They wearily plopped down on a short stretch muddy river bank.

"I knew it," Starret finally said. "I knew it from the first day I worked with you, Man. He shook his head. You're God damn crazy!"

"Now what are you complaining about?" Penn retorted. He took off his shirt and wrung it out. "At least you're not full of holes," he added with a grin. "It looks like I saved your ass again."

"Yeah?" Starret replied with a sardonic grin. "Just don't make it a habit, okay?"