

# **SING ME NO SAD SONGS**

by

Gary Younglove

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*For my wife, Donna,  
and my two sons, Gregory and Geoffrey,  
who survived both my tour in Laos  
and the long hours without me  
as I recorded these events.*

*When I am dead my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree;  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet,  
And if thou wilt, remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget.  
I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not feel the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on as if in pain;  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember  
And haply may forget.*

*Song By: Christina G. Rossetti*

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feelings which thinks that nothing is worth war is far worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing he cares about more than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.

John Stuart Mill

CHAPTER ONE



*Saturday - August 11, 1973 - Afternoon*

Sammy Sing had been squatting on the limestone mountain ledge all day. He used his hands to shade his brown, almost black, eyes against the late afternoon brightness as he stared into the small clearing in the Laos jungle below him. His legs were cramped. He fought the impulse to move. He knew if he stood up to stretch his painful muscles or just shifted his weight, they would see him. So, he refused his desire for comfort and vowed he would remain in this crouched position until dark, if necessary. Then he would slip safely into the dense, damp jungle and return to his village undetected.

Less than a hundred yards away and below Sammy Sing, a young Pathet Lao soldier emerged into the brightness of the clearing and scurried across. The soldier carried a heavy military pack on his back. His feet slipped on the wetness of the trail. He also carried a Chinese AK-47 automatic rifle on a sling over his shoulder. The rifle nearly dragged on the ground. This young man, like most of the others Sammy Sing had seen during the past three days, also carried packs of ammunition.

Sammy Sing had been watching this day's movement of men and equipment and supplies since it began at noon. Another soldier broke into the clearing and trotted for the other side. The soldier wore the same black, pajama-like clothing of the other communist led Pathet Lao. This one made one hundred seventy-five. It pleased Sammy Sing that he would have such significant intelligence to report. His excitement at this first success as a minor agent for the United States Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, coursed through his breast. He made two more marks on the small sheet of lined notebook paper near his feet.

Still another Pathet Lao broke into the clearing and scurried for the concealment of the jungle. One hundred seventy-six –

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another mark. This one carried six, 82 millimeter mortars strapped to the top of his pack. One hundred eighty-six mortars, Sammy Sing counted. The soldier disappeared beneath the canopy of the jungle as quietly and as quickly as he had appeared.

“Son a bitch,” Sammy muttered. “No-good son a bitch.” It was one of the many American phrases he had learned and come to love.

Another pajama clad Pathet Lao, or PL, crossed the clearing. One more mark on the ragged piece of notebook paper.

Sammy Sing wished it would end. His impatience was strong and the desire to return to his village was mounting like a lump at the base of his throat. He found it difficult to understand why the Pathet Lao wanted to be so secretive. The truce had been signed months ago. Everyone knew the Pathet Lao were here. The laboriously slow pace did not conceal their presence. And he was now tempted again to move – wanted to move desperately.

A Pathet Lao officer emerged into the clearing and stopped. He carried no pack, but held an American-made M-16 automatic rifle by the barrel, resting it up side down on his shoulder. The officer turned and looked back into the jungle and after only a moment's pause resumed his stalking progress. He scanned the mountainside and the cliff. He stopped. The first mistake Sammy Sing was to make on this mission (and he would ultimately make three) was that he had begun to move, happy to be finally on his way before dusk, knowing all the soldiers had passed because of the presence of this officer. Now Sammy Sing froze too, half standing, half crouching. The officer continued to scan the side of the mountain and the lone shelf where Sammy Sing half-stood motionless. The officer moved his eyes toward the jungle. He spat on the ground. Sammy Sing held his breath and fought the terrible pain in his legs. Soon the officer turned and faded into the jungle. Sammy Sing relaxed and his buckling knees collapsed.

He rested only a moment. Warmth from his racing blood flowed into his legs. His mission now was to reach the village and report to his brother, Khamsouk, what he had seen these past three days – three groups of fully equipped Pathet Lao and North

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Vietnamese soldiers. More than three hundred marks on his sheet of paper.

“Son a bitch,” he said aloud. “Son a bitch.”

As he was thinking of moving now, but before the movement began, there was motion at the edge of the clearing. It startled Sammy Sing because he believed the company to be passed. It was unnatural for there to be more movement. Before the mental command to his weary legs could cause them to move, Sammy Sing canceled the command. A white man stumbled into the clearing, followed by two young Pathet Lao who each alternately used the muzzles of their rifles to prod the man forward.

The man's hands were bound tightly behind his back and the rope that constricted them dropped to form crude shackles on his ankles. He was barefooted. His tan, two-piece safari suit with its patch pockets was matted with dark splotches of sweat and smeared with mud. His gaunt face was bruised and a blood-encrusted gash ran from his left ear to his chin, partly hidden by a bushy moustache. The two guards seemed to enjoy their duty behind their captive. Each step he took was evidence of his pain as he limped on his right foot along the trail.

Sammy Sing thought he would explode with his excitement. His heart beat wildly. He breathed in short gasps. He scrambled recklessly for his sheet of paper and made a special mark beside all the others – *I U.S.A.* When he looked down at the clearing again, the jungle's denseness was capturing the trio. Finally, an officer, one who usually followed the end of a march and the one Sammy Sing had thought he had seen earlier, entered the clearing. The American stumbled out of sight with his two antagonists. The officer followed them proudly, as if he were responsible for it all. It was over. Sammy Sing could go now.

So Sammy Sing stood and climbed deftly from the ledge into the darkness of the jungle. He was comfortable here and quickly found the faint but visible path created by his frequent trips to this spot. He followed the path in his haste to report his first discovery, only vaguely alert to the possibility of his own discovery by any one of the soldiers he had counted in the past three days. This lack of attention, this rookie weakness on his part, was Sammy Sing's

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second mistake; the third was yet to come suddenly and unknowing.

Like all Meo tribesmen in Laos, Sammy Sing was short, but he possessed amazing strength and endurance. Distances were measured in terms of days or hours and not in terms of kilometers. Although he ran, he appeared only to be loping slowly through the jungle. He made his way effortlessly through the trackless and nearly impenetrable wilderness. His bare feet made no sound as he ran through the wet undergrowth. In a short time he neared his village and began to walk. He did not want anyone to know he had been running. There would be too many questions, and in the excitement of his discovery of the American prisoner he might give away his secrecy. Then, he would have failed. It was not often that a young agent could return with such valuable information and he did not want to fail, to ruin his future usefulness.

Sammy Sing made his third and final mistake when he stopped and squatted on a hill that overlooked his village. To a visitor, the thatched huts would have looked oddly out of place near the smooth dirt landing strip the Americans had built there six years earlier as an emergency landing field. There was a peaceful calm in the village and he was happy to be home. Three days had become a long time. He was hungry. He was tired. Yet, he told himself he must not hurry.

He was on his feet when it happened. It was so quick he did not have time to learn what happened. As he began to fall to the ground, he thought he could see his brother, Khamsouk, come out of a hut in the village; but he couldn't be certain in his shock. He tried to call out, but all he could hear was a strange gurgling sound that came from nowhere.

He tried to call again, but, in the persistent quietness, even the silent sounds began to fade. He rammed hard against the ground and swam in a darkening void. Something was terribly wrong. Something had happened to him. He couldn't understand and he became frightened. Then the searing pain at his neck began to grow vividly. It roared in on him quickly, smothering him with torment. He tried to call out once more – and failed. And in his

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agony his hand clenched tightly around a small piece of paper, hiding it in his fist.

A Pathet Lao soldier stood above him. He wiped his knife with a large leaf. He watched the small river of blood pumping from Sammy Sing's neck. He shoved the knife back into its sheath and turned to his companion.

"He was young."

"*Bopinyan*. It doesn't matter. He was a spy."

"It was necessary."

The one with the knife pushed at Sammy Sing with his foot. "I don't like killing my own people," he said. "Even if he is Meo, he is Lao. But it was a necessary thing to do. He was a spy. It was necessary."

"Do you think he was able to tell anyone?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"But it will be important. The Captain will want to know."

The one with the knife kicked at Sammy Sing again. "Yes, I know. We must tell him something."

"We must agree. What do you think? Did he pass any messages?"

"*Baw*. No. I don't think so. How could he? We will tell the Captain no. The answer is no."

**CHAPTER TWO**



*Friday - August 10, 1973 - Afternoon*

The two young Pathet Lao soldiers standing over Sammy Sing's now lifeless body failed to understand the determination of this rookie spy at their feet. They were unaware of the hatred he had for them and how, in his dying moments, he managed to crumple that little piece of paper with *I U.S.A.* written on it in his clenched fist. This last act of the youthful patriot would eventually lead to major consequences both in Laos and in Washington, D.C. Because, the American Sammy Sing had seen was Scotty Winfield, a Forward Air Controller (FAC), on secret duty in Laos during the last days of the Vietnam war and who put the wheels in motion twenty-four hours earlier in Vientiane, Laos.

In Laos, the military called the FACs *Ravens*. The Ravens, like their counterparts in Vietnam and Cambodia – known there as Covey, Nail, Rash, Gimpy – were among the most brazen and hedonistic of men in any war – not just this secret war. They were Air Force officers clad in beige or green colored safari suits and sporting handlebar moustaches among other things. They disregarded the normal rules of discipline in favor of their own peer-established set of rules.

Operating under the umbrella of secrecy, they flew lonely, dangerous missions from scattered sites throughout Laos, got shot down often, and could rely on no one for rescue or comfort when the going got rough. A lousy situation, but accepted as a necessary evil. They had now become accustomed to a war that knew no weekends and they fought in their own way to survive. Their only goal was to maintain some of the pure excitement known only to the few who have entered the valley of death and come out alive.

Because of the cease-fire, the FACs had no mission but to loiter around Vientiane in case they were suddenly needed. So, to avoid a growing morale problem among the Ravens, Colonel

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Thomas Overbey, the senior Air Force officer assigned to the U.S. Defense Attaché Office in charge of all U.S. Air Force personnel in Laos, authorized the FACs to fly various communication and supply flights throughout Laos. In typical FAC fashion, however, they deviated from their flight plans and flew over suspected Pathet Lao positions and reported their sightings to the small cadre of intelligence people still operating in Vientiane. It was something to do as long as they had nothing else to do but wait.

The day of Scotty's last flight in Laos was typically monsoon wet and gray. It was a scuddy day with clouds rolling like waves down the mountains. There was no premonition that soon generals, ambassadors, even congressmen would be involved in his fate. The routine courier flight he was to fly began at Vientiane with stops at Long Tieng and Luang Prabang. He would return before dark. Scotty, like all the other civilian clad U.S. Air Force Raven FACs in Laos, had flown this mission many times since the February cease-fire. It remained the only semiofficial diversion they had in the wait-and-see existence American politics had forced on them. The FACs competed for the opportunity to make this trip, as well as similar round trip flights from Vientiane to Paksane, Thakhet, Savannakhet and Pakse to the South. They flew on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays complementing the many regular runs made by Air America and USAID aircraft.

Scotty left Vientiane's Wattay airport in an O-IE, a single engine Cessna Bird Dog converted to military use in a conventional, yet not so conventional war. The aircraft had patches on its wings and fuselage where Pathet Lao bullets had pierced its frail skin during missions flown before the cease-fire. All of the Raven FACs had flown this particular aircraft in combat at least once. Gone were the F-4 Phantoms from Thailand to be led by the FACs in skirmishes between the Royal Lao and Pathet Lao – skirmishes that continued even when Scotty began his routine run to Long Tieng and Luang Prabang. Gone was the blood pumping excitement as the F-4 pilots reported over their radios, "Tally on the FAC" or received their briefings from Ravens flying only a few feet above the trees "alpha, 270, 1+30, right PL, 600." Gone was the understanding that the attack's success was very much

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dependent on the FAC's directional accuracy and his Willy-Pete – a smoke rocket used to mark the target.

Brian Marshall, a Raven FAC on his second tour of duty in Laos, was the last to see Scotty before his shoot down. He was one of Scotty's closest friends and would soon be involved with the generals, ambassadors, and congressmen in his fate. Brian gave Scotty the thumbs up sign as the 0-1E rolled down the runway and lifted off toward the solid ceiling of wetness. Once airborne, Scotty reached behind his seat and removed a pearl handled Colt .45 from its hiding place and worked the belt and holster into position around his waist. He banked toward the north and adjusted his radio so he could monitor the Royal Lao Air Force traffic. He trimmed the airplane and flew just beneath the clouds toward Long Tieng. The light Cessna Bird Dog bounced gently in the moving air and Scotty studied the land below him, ever alert for any movement not natural in a jungle landscape. It was much cooler at his altitude and the abandonment that intoxicates all fliers lulled him into a peaceful sensation of freedom and total comfort. As trips like this usually went, it could have been routinely uneventful except for something that happened on the ground – was happening even when he left Vientiane.

His first indication that this might be other than a routine communications flight was an increase in the radio chatter and the urgency it expressed. Squawking Lao voices pierced his cabin and although he could not make out every word, he knew there was a firefight somewhere near his route. It could have been one of the many minor violations of the cease-fire that had occurred since February; intelligence had logged an average of four a week during the past month, more than two hundred since the cease-fire. And Scotty could have skimmed the tree tops near the battle site, seen what there was to see, then continued to Long Tieng as planned. But this time it was more. His interest grew to fascination as he picked up on the dialogue and knew that two of the T-28s, the World War II attack aircraft that made up the Royal Lao Air Force at Vientiane, were being launched to provide air support for a beleaguered Royal Lao Army battalion. He began scanning the

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horizon now, flying lazy circles, his heart beating faster, his grip on the controls becoming tighter. He had not been that long out of combat to forget the indescribable exhilaration and muted fear when combat was close. He felt that same excitement regardless of the comfort and safety of a cease-fire and the pure joy of flying an unarmed and unplanned reconnaissance mission behind two T-28s.

Then he saw them. Two dark spots on the gray horizon, wingtip to wingtip, soaring toward him. As they approached, he could see the bombs hanging from their wings. They flitted along just beneath the clouds, sometimes piercing the scattered patches that looked like blunt arms reaching toward earth, then exploding into view larger than before. He descended to avoid their flight altitude and began a sweeping turn that would put him on course with them. Although they would outdistance him with their greater speed, he had copied the coordinates and would arrive at the scene of battle before they could finish their deadly work. They came on – silently to him in his cockpit, but at full military power – until they loomed in full view just over his right wing. He was flying parallel with them now. And he flew after them just below their wash until they disappeared in the clouds and did not reappear. Five minutes later he saw the yellow-orange burst of a bomb exploding in the jungle and he followed the invisible line of flight the airplane would have had to fly to drop the bomb. He sighted the T-28 struggling smoothly for altitude. For the first time in six months, Scotty was in a battle zone. But now he had nothing he could do but watch.

He had a good view of the battle. A Pathet Lao company of mixed regulars in their faded green fatigue uniforms and irregulars in black pajamas were pitched against a company of Royal Lao soldiers. The battle seemed senseless – neither side would gain more than experience and each would suffer casualties. The cease-fire and eventual new Lao government would alter any victory either side would make in this fight. The battle itself was a mockery of the cease-fire heralded in Vientiane as the end of a long and bitter conflict.

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One of the T-28 Skyraiders dove at the Pathet Lao position again and released another bomb. The yellow-orange explosion spurted above the jungle canopy and as quickly disappeared. It was the last bomb and it was wide of its mark. The remaining Skyraider, already devoid of armament, was orbiting away from the battle area. The two then rejoined and took a course toward Vientiane.

“Strafe, you bastards,” Scotty shouted. “Strafe.” But he was not transmitting so they couldn’t hear. Even if they could, their course was set and having completed the minimum requirement to qualify them for another month of combat pay, they fled. “No-good chicken shit goons,” Scotty mumbled.

He itched to be fighting now, knowing the pounding the Royal Lao were taking. Regardless of who was right in this nonwar he was convinced the Pathet Lao had ambushed this company of Royal Lao. He wanted to be loaded with Willie-Petes at least, the explosive smoke markers the FACs used to mark a target for the jets from Thailand. If he could drop a couple of them on the Pathet Lao it might be enough to disperse the attackers – give them a reason to think the U.S. Air Force was coming. Instead, all he could do was circle in a slow figure eight and try to make out what was happening below.

Then the first sign of trouble erupted to his left. He was under attack by small arms fire and a bullet pierced the skin of the wing. He banked sharply, turning away from the area. He was at first surprised that they would shoot at him but instantly recognized why – they were accusing him of the T-28 attack. And just as quickly he cursed himself for his stupidity in getting so close. He knew the Pathet Lao would draw this conclusion. He was in a tight bank when the next bullet smashed through the cabin, drilling through the window to his right. He tried to swallow with his dry throat. Another bullet nipped the tip of his high wing and still another glanced off the cowling of the engine.

“Jesus H. Christ. I’m doing better than any ten Willy-Petes,” he muttered. And he visualized the entire Pathet Lao company with rifles pointed skyward at this small, troublesome mosquito trying to escape.

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He was nearly through the bank now, reaching for the safety of the clouds which seemed close enough to touch. And the engine raced to help him, steady, strong. Then it coughed. It was a subtle hiccup but Scotty's trained ears heard it as a loud detonation that signaled disaster.

"Shit," he yelled. "Oh shit."

The engine coughed again. And again. It shuddered as though attempting to clear its throat. The coughing became more rapid and violent.

Overbey will be really pissed now, he thought. He struggled with the throttle to find the best mix to sustain power, but the shuddering continued, vibrating the entire plane. He wondered if this would qualify him for the two combat bail out rule – you didn't have to fly over enemy territory again if you got shot down twice. It had happened before, but that was when the war was a war – and when the rescue choppers were available to pick you up.

"Oh shit. Oh dear," he yelled. The engine sputtered to silence. The propeller stood erect as though it was a pointer or the sight pip on a short pistol.

"May Day. May Day."

Then he realized he was not transmitting, had not changed the frequency to that of the attaché operations in Vientiane. He turned the dial.

"May Day. May Day." And he shouted out his location.

There was an uncanny, frightening silence. Then: "Christ man. What are you doing *there*?"

"I'm on my way to terra firma. Engine's dead. I see a hole about ten clicks east of 20 Alternate. Will try to set down there."

"Copy. What's the problem?"

"Like I said, engine died."

He was beginning to lose altitude rapidly and he coaxed the aircraft into a long, gentle slope. He had no doubts that he could make the clearing. What he really wanted to make was 20 Alternate – Long Tieng, the safety of Americans and the pleasure of a cold beer. The clearing was Pathet Lao country.

"Two thousand true now and dropping like a rock. Can you talk to me?"

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“Copy. What would you like us to say? Stay put when you're down. We'll try to get you.”

Scotty smiled. What could they say? They were already doing all they could. “Just keep the channel open. When I get this thing stopped, I've got a helluva good joke to tell you.”

“Bet you do.”

It was clear now he could not make Long Tieng. So he studied his small clearing for the safest landing. As he sailed over the last of the trees and came upon the tall grasses of the clearing, he muttered a short prayer he had learned years before:

*Stay with me, God. The night is dark.*

*The night is cold: My little spark*

*of courage dies. The night is long;*

*Be with me, God, and make me strong.*

He tore into the grass and felt its drag attempt to wrench the aircraft from him. He touched the ground and ricocheted into the air, coming down again harder. The aircraft jolted from side to side and he fought to keep control. The grass-covered ground raced by him. Won't it ever slow down, he thought? And at that same moment, the propeller dug into the ground and, acting as a pivot, flipped the aircraft wildly onto its back. It stopped quickly now, shearing its rudder on the hard surface and spinning twice like a top. When it came to rest, Scotty was hanging, unharmed, from his seatbelt.

“Can you guys read me?”

“Copy.”

“I'm on the ground. But inverted. I'm getting out to take a leak.”

“Stay close by. And check in again. We'll get a chopper to you.”

“Copy,” Scotty said, laconically.

He worked at the straps holding him to his seat and after some difficulty managed to loosen them and lower himself to the top of the cabin. The door on his side was jammed so he threw his weight against it springing it open and painfully bruising his shoulder with the blow. He had to crawl from the cabin onto the underside of the wing, around the wing support onto the ground.

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With a sigh of relief and an overwhelming sense of good fortune he stood and rubbed his left shoulder with his hand.

The sound of a bullet whacked against the cowling of the engine. The crack of the rifle that sent the bullet on its way followed. Then another and another rifle sounded from the bushes at the edge of the clearing.

They won't even let a guy take a leak in peace, he thought briefly. Then the panic that comes with the realization that you are in a helpless situation flooded into full awareness. He instinctively dropped to the ground. The firing continued, a few more rounds ramming into the aircraft. Scotty fumbled for his revolver and scrambled to the far side of the airplane. He looked around the front of the plane toward the sound of the firing and could see the Pathet Lao coming. "God have mercy," he whispered, taking deliberate aim at the first Pathet Lao soldier he saw. The Lao was running wildly through the grass holding a Chinese rifle at his hip and firing indiscriminately. There were more coming behind him. Scotty waited until he was certain he would hit his mark. "You LFBs are going to pay to get at me," he muttered. "No Little Fucking Bastard is going to walk up to me while I hold my hands in the air."

The pistol jolted his entire arm and he saw the soldier fall as though tripped, arms flailing and the rifle thrown forward. The others came, apparently not yet aware of Scotty's counterattack. He cocked the pistol again. I can get six of you, he thought. Only five more. Which of you SOBs is next. He fired again and a second soldier fell. The others now crouched close to the ground and slowed their advance. But Scotty sighted in on still another and dropped him screaming to the ground.

"Come and get me you no-good sons of bitches," he yelled. His voice cracked with dryness and rage. Thoughts of the idiocy of the entire scene raced through his mind. The fear was gone now, replaced by the super human desire to survive. He recalled vividly the jungle survival school axiom his instructors had pounded into his head: *The will to survive is paramount to the downed airman.* But we can't guarantee you'll have the edge, he added. His captors were less than twenty yards away now,

approaching cautiously. He aimed his fourth shot and it went wild. "Damn." But the fifth shot straightened one of the attackers to full height before toppling him over backwards.

As Scotty cocked the hammer for the last shot, a bullet slammed his arm back and the force of the movement flung his pistol clear. The lead slug ripped through the fleshiest part of his right forearm and spun Scotty out and away from the protection of the aircraft. As he pulled himself to his knees, a crushing blow to the back of his neck sprawled him on the ground. He could hear the excited chatter of his captors as they formed a circle around him. He tried to move. He ached all over and the searing pain of another blow to his back forced him to the ground. Someone yanked his arms behind his back and he felt the pain in his bloody arm. He groaned and in his agony could interpret the pleasure this gave his captors by the increase in their talking. Soon he felt a rope tighten around his wrists.

"Bastards," he yelled. "Why don't you just shoot and get it over with?" Yet, he didn't want that really. At least there was a chance he could escape. As long as he was alive there would always be that chance. Maybe they'll return me to Vientiane, he thought. After all it is a cease-fire.

He was yanked to his feet by a strong pull on the rope tied around his wrists. The pain was nearly unbearable. The Pathet Lao were chattering excitedly among themselves and poking at him with their rifles. There were at least twenty of them drawn into a tight olive green circle around him. When he finally found his balance and stood looking at the shuffling mass of small, brown skinned men crowding him, Scotty took a deep breath and spat on the nearest one. He barely felt the rifle butt smash against the back of his skull. In the disorientation of his waning consciousness, as he fell, Scotty cried out: "I'll kill you bastards."

"No," he heard one of them say. "*Baw*. No kill."

And as his coherency faded toward blackness he heard another voice within his soul respond to his despair. "No, Scotty. You haven't done anything wrong. You have done the right thing."

**CHAPTER THREE**

*Tuesday - August 14, 1973 - Afternoon  
(Washington, D.C.)*



Four days after Scotty was shot down, the generals, ambassadors, and congressmen began their descent into chaos during and following a hearing concerning military assigned to Laos before the Personnel Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee.

“Yes! That's exactly what I'm asking you.” The naturally resonant voice boomed from the walls in the small chamber, helped by the polished chrome-like microphone almost touching the speaker's tight lips. It sounded hollow, echoing, while not really echoing, from the pale green concrete block walls. “But to make it easier to understand, General, I'll rephrase it for you. Why do we still have military men in Laos?”

“I believe that's a matter of national policy and the State Department could answer it better than I,” Major General Howard Rable said into his own polished, chrome-like, microphone, his weary voice also seeming to echo from the dead walls.

“I'm not asking the State Department.”

“Sir?”

“If I haven't been deluding myself, this line of questioning has been directed to you. The State Department is not here.”

“Our military presence in Laos is a policy matter, sir. I do not. . . .”

“I am aware of the politics of who does what to whom in and out of this country,” Congressman Paul Tillot bellowed. Then he paused as the silence met him, his hands clenched into tight little fists. In a softer tone he said: “I merely want to hear from *your* lips the why.”

“And I am merely trying to tell you that I deal in the how – not the why.”

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General Rable returned Tillot's heated stare – calculated, unimpressed. He was tired. He wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere there appeared to be at least some sanity to life. Tillot had been probing for any juicy tidbit of information that would support his preconceived idea of what was really going on. He had glossed over basic facts and circumstances in pursuit of those less meaningful, yet, more spectacular items that made news and assured popularity. His efforts were obvious and boring and taxed General Rable's patience.

“Will you give us the pleasure of your views then? This is a closed session and any classified information will be protected – that is if what you have to say *is* classified.” Tillot wiped his lips dry with a folded white handkerchief then immediately licked them wet.

“I don't believe the accepted position of the State Department falls in that category. Nor would my opinions of it. As I understand it, we are to withdraw all unauthorized personnel from Laos within sixty days of the formation of the Provisional Government of National Union. That is: all military personnel since you seem most interested in that aspect. Until then we are to maintain the capability to commence military activities should the Neo Lao Hak Sat or the North Vietnamese violate the terms of the February cease-fire. My job. . . .”

“The Neo Lao what?”

“Neo Lao Hak Sat. The communist Pathet Lao organization.”

“You're geared up to go to war with the Pathet Lao?”

“We never really geared down.”

“Yet the cease-fire was signed in February, five months ago? My God, General, what are you doing over there now?”

“Waiting – and watching.”

It was a mistake and he knew it as soon as it echoed – this time thundering – back on him. There had been too much recent talk about illegal spy activities. And this slip of the tongue, this wrong choice of words, was an invitation for misinterpretation. But he did not flinch because he could not. His training kept him calm. He did not give any sign that he knew the significance of his blunder.