

"The Dragon Lady Makes an Offer"

by

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(117th and 124th Trans Cos and HHD, 11th Trans Bn, 1966-67)

In the spring of 1971, the US news media were in a feeding frenzy over the criminal conduct of a few American officers and senior NCOS caught up in an enormous scandal that involved skimming cash, payoffs, and kickbacks associated with the officer/NCO club system in Viet Nam. The Senate conducted a probing investigation that resulted in at least one brigadier general, Earl F. Cole, losing his star, and in the criminal indictment of Sergeant Major of the Army William O. Woolridge and other senior NCOS. In the course of Senate testimony regarding contracts and the club system on Long Binh Post, a name frequently mentioned was Madame Phuong, otherwise known as the "Dragon Lady." Madame Phuong was a Chinese entrepreneur from the Cholon area of Saigon who had many highly placed friends in the American armed forces in Viet Nam and who used those friendships to build a small empire of bars, barbershops, steambaths, and other facilities providing "personal services" to US personnel. Her "flagship" facility was the steambath she was permitted to build on Long Binh Post in 1968-69 that employed some 400 women: 200 masseuses and 200 girls to sit around in a dark room and "drink Cokes" with lonely GIs. COL Edmund Castle, the Long Binh Post commander

at the time, later testified to the Senate about the problems he faced in trying to control the infamous establishment (including the removal of two large nude statues from its entrance). Obviously, the steambath was there only because Madame Phuong had many "friends."

Of course, Madame Phuong was not the only "Dragon Lady" in Viet Nam. The most famous person to bear that nickname was the wife of South Viet Nam's President Ngo Dinh Diem, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, a woman of strong personality and many "interests." The original "Dragon Lady" was a character in the 1930s-1950s cartoon strip "Terry and the Pirates" by Milton Caniff. Looking back, it seems that every region in Viet Nam at some time during the Viet Nam War had its own version of the "Dragon Lady."

As the Adjutant of the 11th Transportation Battalion (Terminal) at Cat Lai in early 1967, I had my very own "up close and personal" encounter with the infamous "Dragon Lady" Madame Phuong in the days when she was rapidly building up her dubious empire. The circumstances were these. At Cat Lai was a small barbershop manned by two Vietnamese barbers and a "manicure" girl (whose function appeared to be purely "decorative" in that not many stevedores were in the market for a manicure). The barbershop came under my purview as the Battalion Adjutant, and it was not infrequently the cause of complaint by patrons.

At one point the barbershop became a cause of high concern to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hoy, the battalion commander. One day Colonel Hoy decided he needed a haircut and trotted down to the shop around 1330 hours. The shop closed daily for "siesta" from 1200 to 1400 or so, but Colonel Hoy wasn't paying too much attention to the time. He flung open the door to the barbershop only to gaze upon a scene that would have put the illustrated versions of the *Kama Sutra* to shame. He had interrupted a "nooner" involving one of the barbers and the manicurist, who were thus caught *in flagrante delicto* as the lawyers say, entwined in a most intimate (and difficult to achieve) position atop the barber's chair. Colonel Hoy's entrance precipitated a classic scramble involving elbows and various other body parts, many of which had been recently in heavy use. The colonel did a pretty good imitation of Christ cleansing the temple and drove the barbers (the second barber seems to have been an "innocent" bystander) and manicurist out into the street. A few minutes later, I, as the Battalion Adjutant and officer responsible for the barbershop, got a scorching critique of my supervisory skills from the battalion commander as well as instructions to "fire, depose, run off, get rid of, etc.," the two barbers and the manicure girl.

After the dust had settled a bit, I managed to convince Colonel Hoy that the illustrious 11th Trans Bn needed barbers lest we all come to resemble hippies or

backwoods trappers. He did relent on the barbers but insisted that the manicurist had to go. She went (but later returned with a different name, I think).

This brings us to the Dragon Lady. About the same time, perhaps just after the incident described above, I was sitting behind my desk in the battalion headquarters one morning happily shuffling papers when a new model, rather fancy, American sedan pulled up outside my office. A large and impressive driver emerged, one who in retrospect can be described as looking sort of like the "Odd Job" character in the later James Bond movies. This personality opened the rear door of the sedan from which stepped a middle-aged, but rather well-preserved and not unattractive, Vietnamese woman dressed exquisitely. She was accompanied by what can only be described as two angels—perfect visions of loveliness unsurpassed in the III Corps Tactical Zone. Both were tall, willowy creatures of great beauty and admirable physique dressed in the sexiest of *ao dais* (the classic Vietnamese silky trouser and jumper outfit).

This entourage quickly entered my office and circled my desk before I could even stand to greet them. The Dragon Lady, for indeed it was Madame Phuong herself who confronted me, took a seat facing my desk, while the two lovelies posted themselves on either side of my chair, definitely within touching range. Meanwhile, Odd Job lingered in a somewhat threatening manner near the door.

Madame then began her spiel, the essence of which was that she was there to receive from me authorization to take over and "manage" our scruffy barbershop and turn it into a palace of tonsorial excellence and delightful repose for all the brave but weary soldiers of the world-famous 11th Transportation Battalion. This announcement was accompanied by repeated invitations to visit her other facilities in nearby Saigon along with multiple assurances of the cleanliness of her establishments, the health of her employees, and the safety and joy she could provide to all concerned. She suggested that the two lovelies posted on either side of me might be willing to show me around and provide whatever personal services I might desire. Although not explicitly mentioned, it was also implied that should I accede to her request, I might find myself the proud possessor of large quantities of *dong* and MPCs.

Being, of course, a happily married, clean-cut American boy, I struggled to explain to Madame Phuong that I could not possibly take her up on any of her many offers (the lovelies moved in an inch or two); that I did not have the authority to transfer the barbershop to her control (the lovelies moved away an inch or two); and that she might perhaps have more success by dealing with the PX authorities in Saigon who actually controlled the barbershop concessions (the lovelies moved even farther away). All of this earned me a dark frown from the Dragon Lady, some

sympathetic noises from the lovelies, and stares of a remarkably frightening nature from Odd Job.

The Dragon Lady did not become rich and famous by giving up easily. Thus, the same scenario was replayed several times before she rose, turned on her heel, and stomped out of my office muttering, "You Numba 10 GI," or words to that effect. She and the lovelies clambered back into the sedan, Odd Job jumped into the driver's seat, and off they roared to try and corrupt some other poor American junior officer.

This all happened in the spring of 1967, about a year before the Dragon Lady's clout was made obvious by her building the steambath on Long Binh Post. Strangely enough, she never did get control of the little Cat Lai barbershop, at least not while I was there, but she certainly expanded her empire. I often wondered what would have happened if I had been able to make a deal. Would Cat Lai have had its own Loon Foon Restaurant and Steambath long before one was built on Long Binh Post? Would my military career have prospered? Would I have found my wallet full of cash? More likely, I would have gotten a rash and a ten-year vacation in the Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth!!