

The Diver

Even with three rotating fans, I was coated with sweat. Unable to sleep, I climbed down from his bunk, careful not to wake my snoring watch partners, and went out on the starboard railing.

For a moment it was peaceful, just the channel, darkened hills and a distant moon breaking through the clouds. Then a flare shimmered into the night sky and burst, evoking small arms fire.

The war, I thought, turning to go back inside.

Then I saw him: a boy of 14 or 15, so skinny his rib cage pressed against his bare chest, dripping with water from Vung Tau Bay.

We were both clad in shorts: me in white boxers, the Vietnamese boy in black swimming trunks. That's where the resemblance stopped.

Slung over the boy's shoulder was a canvas satchel charge. I knew immediately he was a Viet Cong diver chosen for his size to scale and not break the rubber cord attaching to the lamp above the water to reveal enemy divers -- then throw the charge into the open cargo hold of our freighter and explode the still-unloaded pallets of 750 pound bombs.

Sent to blow our ship to kingdom come, the boy was now trapped, as I was trapped, staring at me on the darkened deck, as I started back at him.

Something had to be done or we would be frozen inside our stand-off until one of the South Vietnamese soldiers patrolling the deck spotted the driver and either shot the boy before he could pull the fuse and hurled the satchel charge into the hold, or fired too late to keep him from killing us all.

Someone had to move first.

I took a step back.

For a moment, nothing, no reaction from the Viet Cong diver -- then the boy shifted enough for me to see he had moved.

I took another step toward the open hatch behind me; in turn, the boy inched toward the railing.

Soon we were imitating each other, moving back, foot by foot, toward the railing and the hatchway.

The moment of supreme trust arrived.

I had to step inside the ship and out of sight -- not knowing once I did if he would hurl the charge into the hold, dive into the bay and swim away before the ship exploded.

And the boy, he didn't know if once he dropped over the side, if the American man wouldn't turn to call soldiers to throw concussion grenades into the water, and kill him.

Enemies, we had to risk everything and make peace for one moment.

I look one last look at the diver, turned, and stepped into the ship's house, walked down the passageway, entered my forecastle, climbed up on my bunk and pulled both pillows over my head.

Either I would wake in the morning, or...

The End