

MacDonald and the Jungle Monk

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“WHERE CAN I FIND Captain Vernon Endicott?” Captain John MacDonald asked one of a cluster of clerks in the 9th Cavalry’s regimental headquarters.

“Oh, oh,” the clerk said, looking at the rubber-mat floor behind MacDonald. He jumped out of his chair and grabbed a mop, then began cleaning. “The sergeant major blows a gasket whenever anyone gets his floor wet.” It was raining hard outside, and MacDonald had left glistening

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footprints across the black mat. Looking relieved, the clerk sat back down and said, "Captain Endicott's with Charlie Troop. They're on an op near An Lao, sir."

"When's he coming in?" MacDonald asked.

"Not soon, sir. They've been finding beaucoup NVA out there."

Disappointment trickled through MacDonald. He'd just returned from the States, from his mother's funeral, and had looked forward to visiting with Endicott. After more than twenty-four hours of air travel back from his hometown, he felt tired and unkempt in his wrinkled khaki uniform.

"Sir?" the clerk asked with an edge of hesitation.

"Yes?"

"Could you do something for me?"

"What?"

"I've got to run a file over to 7th's HQ. Could you sit in for me until I get back? I'm supposed to be waiting for some sort of VIP to show. The sergeant major wants me to meet the guy and tell 'im to hang tight 'til S-3 gets in."

"Take off."

"Thank you, sir."

Captain MacDonald sat down in the clerk's chair and closed his eyes. The sounds of typewriters, office chatter, and a radio faded into incoherent buzzing behind MacDonald. He felt himself drift into a light sleep.

"Sir? Excuse me, sir."

MacDonald opened his eyes and saw a soldier standing in front of the clerk's desk. The soldier's face was smeared with camouflage paint, and he was wearing a poncho and helmet. He held an M-16 in his right hand. The poncho was dripping wet.

"Your weapon have a round chambered?" Captain MacDonald looked at the soldier's rifle.

"I cleared it out front, sir."

The soldier's boots were caked with red-clay mud. Behind him a trail of mud and water led across the room's black rubber mat.

"Sir, why am I here?"

MacDonald shook his head. "You tell me."

"I was told to report here, sir. That's all I know. They helicoptered me out of the field this morning."

MacDonald pointed to a chair next to the desk. "The clerk'll be back mo-skosh. Have a seat."

The soldier laid his M-16 down carefully, then took off his helmet and put it beside the rifle. Slipping his poncho over his head, he folded it neatly and placed it under the chair. He had on a rucksack and web gear. Two fragmentation grenades hung from the web straps.

Captain MacDonald watched silently as the soldier removed his rucksack, grenades, and web belt. There was about the man's movements a weary grace, an athletic self-confidence that suggested to MacDonald that the man was a competent soldier.

"Who you with?" MacDonald asked after the soldier had sat down.

"Third platoon, Charlie Troop, sir."

"Endicott's unit?"

The soldier's eyes widened. "You know Captain Endicott, sir?"

MacDonald nodded. "We were platoon leaders together at Fort Lewis."

"He's a fine officer, sir."

"People used to get us mixed up. Whenever someone called us to the orderly room over the P.A. system, we both had to go see who they really wanted." MacDonald paused. Talking about Endicott made him feel good. "That was before I went to Korea."

"You kind of look like him, sir." The soldier hesitated for a moment, then smiled. "I've been to Korea."

"What unit?"

"No unit, sir. I was on a Mormon mission there."

"You don't look old enough to be a minister."

"The LDS Church doesn't have ministers, sir. We have bishops who are like ministers. I was nineteen when I went. That's the normal age."

"You speak Korean?"

"*Ji gohri mahnkum ahmnida.*"

Captain MacDonald smiled. "What does that mean? It's almost two years since I've heard any Korean. I led a recon platoon and had an interpreter, a kid who'd gone to the Defense Language Institute."

"It's an idiom for 'I know a rat-tail's worth,' sir. I spent two and a half years in Korea on my mission. Then went back to teach English for a year before the draft called me."

MacDonald nodded. "What's your rank?"

"PFC, sir."

"How long have you been in the country?"

"Nearly eight months. I'm thinking of extending here so I can get out of the army early."

"Have you thought about OCS?"

"No, sir. No offense, but I want to get on with life, sir." He shifted his weight and leaned to one side to pull a wallet out of a thigh pocket. He had a photograph wrapped in cellophane. Taking the picture from the wallet, he looked at it for a moment then handed it to Captain MacDonald.

MacDonald looked at the photo. It was of a Korean woman with long, black, straight hair and a serious look on her face.

"Her name's Haeryun, sir. I baptized her, and then we started dating while I taught Korean. We're going to get married when I'm out."

A vague uneasiness cut into MacDonald's exhaustion. He'd had a girlfriend at the time he'd joined the army. Seven years ago. A blonde with short, wavy hair and piercing green eyes and milk-white skin. Her name was Alicia, and she played a violin in the city's symphony orchestra. When he had enlisted, she screamed at him and cried and beat her fists against his chest until he left her standing alone in the dark on the front porch of her house. That seemed a hundred years ago. He had seen her a week ago at his mother's funeral. She had long kinky hair and smelled of pot. He was wearing his uniform, and she had told him the war in Vietnam was immoral. He had shaken his head and walked away.

Handing the photograph back, MacDonald noticed that the soldier squared his shoulders and sat up straight as he reached out for the picture. He could have been a drill instructor.

"Ever been to Hong Ch'on?" MacDonald said. His father had died in Korea, near Hong Ch'on, in a Wyoming National Guard armored unit, in April 1953. A Chinese night attack. Two years ago, before he flew to Vietnam, MacDonald took his interpreter to Hong Ch'on to look for his father's battle site.

"No, sir. I was down in Pusan and Taegu mostly. My fiancée's from Kimhae."

MacDonald remembered the feeling he'd had when he visited the place his father died. It was an abandoned rice field. Quiet. At the edge of a steep-sloped, pine forest-covered mountain. The remains of a deserted, thatched-roof hut stood nearby. Dark, thick, early-spring rain clouds hung over the area. Standing in the vacant field, MacDonald had felt alone and

uneasy. He'd seen a fox run from the crumbling hootch into the trees beyond.

MacDonald realized that the soldier in the wet poncho was staring at him.

"You all right, sir?"

"Jet lag."

"What company are you with, sir?"

"No unit, really. I work with the Bru, you know, a group of Montagnards, up in the Highlands."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm an advisor. There's six of us, and we train the Bru to use M-16s, and things like small unit tactics. We take them out a lot on recon patrols."

"What's it like where you're at, sir?"

MacDonald was silent for a moment before answering, "Remote." He pictured heavy fog moving through deep, triple-canopied forests and steep-walled mountain slopes that swallowed the lonely sounds of outgoing helicopters. Then he continued, "You wouldn't believe the place. Some of the trees are three hundred feet tall, and the people . . .," he paused looking directly into the PFC's eyes. "The people. They walk around naked a lot, and prefer bows and arrows to our weapons. Before they go on recon, they kill a chicken to see if their gods favor the mission. Sometimes we can't get them to budge."

"I think I'd rather be back in Korea, sir. Do you think Captain Endicott would like the Highlands?"

MacDonald nodded. "Without a doubt. But his goal in the army has always been to command a rifle company."

"Captain Endicott thrives in the jungle, sir." The soldier looked down at his muddy boots. "Once when my squad came in from a night ambush position, sir, he called me 'the jungle monk.' I had my poncho on, and he said I looked like a medieval monk lost in some ancient rain forest."

"Does he know you're Mormon?"

"Yes, sir, and he kids me about it. When I told him about baptizing Haeryun, he said it sounded like I was trying to drown her. He told me in his church they only sprinkled water on his head."

MacDonald felt a sudden surprise. He thought he'd known a lot about Endicott. "What's his church?"

"Presbyterian, sir." The soldier turned toward a radio that was on top of a nearby file cabinet. "Listen, sir," he said in a low voice.

"To what?" MacDonald asked.

"The music, sir."

MacDonald hadn't been paying attention to the radio. Now he listened. AFVN was playing Martin Denny's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind."

The soldier had a serene look on his face. His eyes were shut. His brown, matted hair hung in ringlets over his forehead.

MacDonald studied the soldier's camouflaged face. He liked Endicott's calling him "the jungle monk," and it made sense that Endicott belonged to a church. Once, during an FTX at Fort Lewis, Endicott had called MacDonald "Prester John." It was on a very cold night while rain sounded like a waterfall as it cascaded down through the trees. As MacDonald led his men through Endicott's platoon, Endicott shouted above the roar of rain, "Look! Prester John, dressed in battle array, goes forth into this night of Egyptian darkness." Thereafter MacDonald's radio call sign had become "Prester John." He still used it in the Highlands.

When "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" was over, the soldier opened his eyes and spoke quietly, "That was one of my favorite songs in high school."

MacDonald nodded. He, too, had heard "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" in high school as a senior. He was seventeen years old and anxious to graduate so he could join the army. He was determined to be a soldier, like his father, but his mother had been extremely upset when he brought the recruiter's papers home for her to sign. So he'd put off enlisting for nearly a year, until he could no longer resist the desire to join. He looked at the soldier across from him and smiled again.

A sergeant major suddenly burst into the room. He was tall and heavy, as big as a football lineman, and stood in the doorway, looking down.

"Who on God's damned earth defecated on my floor?" he shouted.

The room became silent. No talking. No typing. Someone quickly turned off the radio.

Glaring at the PFC's muddy boots, the sergeant major shouted, "You! You dirt bag piece of whale dung, clear the hell out of my orderly room. Now! Move it, meathead."

The soldier stood up without saying a word. MacDonald noticed he

was as tall as the huge soldier and calm. Quietly the man began putting on his gear. His web belt first, then his rucksack. After slipping into his poncho, he picked up his helmet and rifle, and, looking at MacDonald, said softly, "Have a good day, sir."

The sergeant major stood with hands on hips until Endicott's man had left. Then he demanded of MacDonald, "Where's my clerk?"

MacDonald shrugged.

Screaming at no one in particular, the sergeant major ordered, "Get this floor cleaned up. ASAP."

Several clerks jumped to their feet. A folding chair tipped over backwards and crashed against the floor.

In a calmer voice the sergeant major addressed MacDonald. "Damn, captain, it's been a screwed-up day. Weather's so bad I can't get resupply out to the bush. The old man's got a wild hair up his ass about a fragging we had at oh-three hundred. And now I gotta puke me a god-damned Korean talker for S-3. They got some liaison work going with the ROKs today."

A tired, perplexed look crossed the man's face. "Where the devil's my clerk?"

MacDonald looked at him eye-to-eye and stated in a low, steady voice, "You just ran your Korean linguist off, sergeant major."

The huge soldier looked toward the door he'd just come through and whispered, "I'll be go to hell."

Endicott's soldier was standing a short distance from the headquarters building in the rain, his back to the orderly-room door. The sergeant major walked outside. MacDonald couldn't hear what was being said, but he watched the sergeant major gesturing with both arms. The PFC did not speak as he listened. His poncho glistened from the water streaming down it.

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Captain MacDonald had to wait two days for the weather to clear enough for a Huey to fly him up-country to his Montagnard village. He left without seeing Endicott.

Six weeks later Endicott sent MacDonald a note, scrawled in pencil on a piece of cardboard from a C-ration box. "PFC Pratt told me he met you, Prester. Said we look alike."

"Thought you should know," the note went on, "Pratt's on his way to Camp Zama. Lost his right leg."

Endicott ended his message, "Keep faith, Prester. The war goes badly, but we must remain the priesthood of true believers."

MacDonald folded the note, wrapped it in cellophane and put it in the wallet he kept in a thigh pocket.

Two months after receiving Endicott's note, MacDonald flew out of the mountains to his unit's base camp at Nha Trang to extend his tour another year to stay with the Bru. Sitting in the camp's administrative office while a clerk typed his extension papers, he picked up a recent *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. On the front page was an article about a battalion of the 9th Cavalry's suffering heavy casualties during a series of fierce firefights in the A Shau Valley. MacDonald felt a sickening, dizzy sensation even before he looked at the 9th's casualty list. He knew Endicott's name would be among those killed in action.

The article ended by stating that the 9th Cav was one of the combat units selected to return to the United States at the end of the year. President Richard Nixon had started his Vietnamization program.

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The monsoons flood the Highlands with as much as 160 inches of water a season, and often, at moments during nights when the rains flailed the earth so hard they seemed to be trying to destroy the forests, MacDonald would put on a poncho and walk out to stand alone in a jungle clearing. There he'd think about Endicott's PFC draped in his glistening poncho, and he'd whisper his radio call sign before shouting Endicott's name into the night as the stinging rain washed down his face and drowned out his voice. Then he'd leave the clearing to make his way back through the Egyptian darkness to his thatched hut among the Bru.