

War Heroes

from *Particivision and other stories*

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Phan Ling completed the one remaining calculation, neatly printed '47.12' onto the large sheet fixed on her drafting table, then carefully set down her pencil. She stretched, leaned back with her arms crossed behind her head, and looked out the window of her fifth floor office. The usual feeling of triumph--or at least satisfaction--was not forthcoming. She was puzzled: she had been working on this assignment for months.

Well, she realized, she hadn't been too excited about it in the first place. It was the design of a fission trigger which would initiate the fusion reaction of a thermonuclear weapon. But, she knew she couldn't pick and choose her assignments--no one in R and D could. No one in *any* department could. You can't just accept parts of your job, the stuff you liked, and refuse the rest. A company can't function if it can't trust its employees to do what they were asked to do--she knew that. She understood that.

And it wasn't as if all of her assignments had to do with nuclear weapons. In fact, this was the first. She knew the company itself wasn't comfortable with this particular contract--but, well, it had saved them from bankruptcy.

No. generally speaking, she liked her job, she liked the challenge of her work. So she wasn't about to get radical and become an activist over this one assignment. It wasn't in her nature. It wasn't in her background. When her parents' parents became frustrated at the lack of opportunity at home for a university education for their children, they didn't take to the streets shouting and waving banners, demanding more universities, and condemning the government's complacency with the rampant under-the-table bribery that went on for the few spaces at the existing universities. They simply sold a family heirloom, withdrew their savings, and sent their youngest and brightest here, to Canada. They simply saw an alternative and quietly took it.

Then when her own parents discovered the persistent disadvantage of their poorly spoken English, they didn't cry 'discrimination!' and call for meetings with the student unions, they just decided to switch majors, from anthropology and psychology to engineering and physics, fields in which the disadvantage would be minimalized. Like them, Phan believed that you could get what you more or less wanted *within* the confines of laws and regulations. with a little intelligence and a lot of hard work.

That's why the news this morning--ah! There's the reason! She had heard on the news this morning that the arms talk had failed. *That* was why she didn't feel very good about her successfully completed assignment. By themselves, one or the other wouldn't have upset her. But timing can create such a juxtaposition--

Of course it wasn't the first arms talk. And it wasn't the first arms talk that had failed. The U.S. had begun testing in 1945. The Soviet Union, in '49, and the UK, in '52, Six years later, thirteen years after the atomic bomb, negotiations began for a ban on testing. The three countries actually agreed then to stop it, for two years. But before those two years were over, the U.S. walked out on further negotiations. France began testing in 1960, the USSR and the U.S. resumed in 1961. By that time, the Intercontinental Bomber, the hydrogen bomb, the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, the man-made satellite in orbit for targeting and surveillance, and the submarine launched ballistic missile had been successfully

developed.

Over the next fifteen or sixteen years, a mere four treaties were established. All were limited in scope, all were 'partial'. Then in 1977, the three countries got together again and talked about a comprehensive test ban treaty; two years later, the U.S. and the USSR signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement, the one known as Salt II, but the U.S. Senate didn't ratify it, and in 1980 the U.S. refused to continue negotiations. In 1985, the USSR declared a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing; they even extended it four times, until 1987. But no one else joined in; and they started testing again. In the meantime, the multiple warhead, the Antibalistic Missile, the Multiple Independent Targeted Warhead, and long range cruise missiles had been developed. And testing was taking place in China and India as well.

She began to lose track then as every talk became enmeshed in a complex web of ifs, ands, and buts. How many SS-20s equal how many Pershing IIs? Then denials and declarations began that put even 'the facts' in question. Maybe the U.S. didn't discontinue negotiations, maybe the USSR didn't maintain a moratorium. Were the warheads withdrawn as promised? Did the freeze occur at the level agreed to?

Who would ever know what had happened in the past--certainly the present state of affairs was muddy. And the future was--well, invisible. Were egos blocking the vision? Was it that too much was invested to turn back now? She didn't know why the talks had failed.

She knew only that negotiations weren't working. She thought for a moment, then she picked up her pencil, erased '47.12', and printed '47.22'. Now the triggers wouldn't work either. She stretched and leaned back in her chair again--smiling with pride at a job well done.

Karl Nyovsky worked in a place that looked like an old military base, except that it had shiny barn-like buildings. It was in fact an industrial facility, a metalworking factory. The metal used was plutonium. The plutonium was melted, then poured through a tantalum funnel in to a graphite mold. The resulting ingots came down the line to Karl, to be machined into the proper shape. He was a tool-and-die maker by trade. Here he made nuclear triggers.

Almost every factory worker knew someone who had lost a finger somehow somewhere, and Karl was no exception. Yes, he was very aware of accidents; in fact if he had another skill, he'd find another job. However, from behind a stainless steel enclosure, with lead glass windows, lead shielding, and lead oxide in the rubber gloves he wore, Karl wasn't thinking of losing a finger.

He was thinking of accidents he'd read about. Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl. (In fact, if the money weren't so good, he'd find another job.) But Karl didn't read just the *Sun* or the *Star* or the *Globe*. He also read the other newspapers, the small alternative, almost underground, newsletters and pamphlets that came his way, sometimes by subscription, sometimes by random outreach. It was a habit he had brought with him from home.

So as he worked, Karl was also thinking of the B-52 carrying four nuclear bombs that crashed in Greenland in 1968, spreading 16 kg of plutonium over

acres and acres of tundra. More than 230,000 cubic feet of ice and debris were scraped up and disposed. Where, Karl wondered, as he lined up the next ingot, where was it disposed to? He also thought of the Russian airplane carrying a nuclear weapon that crashed in the Sea of Japan. He thought of the U.S. subs carrying nuclear missiles that have collided with Russian ships, the *George Washington* that ran right into a Japanese ship back in '81, and the *Scorpion* and the *Thresher*, two nuclear attack submarines that just sank into the ocean and no one knows why. He checked the setting readouts above the four knobs, '1.18', '47.22', '15.6', and '7.64', and thought of the nuclear weapon that fell out of a strategic bomber in the late '70s and landed in Carolina in a swamp. He thought of the failure in 1979 of a 46¢ computer part that produced a false signal showing Russian missiles on the way to the U.S., and of the missile that was accidentally fired from Arkansas in '81 because a mechanic dropped a wrench. Oh yes, he knew, accidents happen, people make mistakes.

The chance of a nuclear war starting by accident was, to his mind, phenomenal. He thought of the four plutonium bombs dropped on Spain by mistake--fortunately they didn't explode. He thought of the crash in '61 of a plane carrying a 24 megaton bomb over North Carolina--on impact, five of the six interlocking mechanisms on the bomb failed, so that only one switch prevented an explosion equivalent to 1,000 Nagasakis. One switch had made the difference. Chances are, he thought, adjusting the precision controls, this one will also be fired by mistake. He turned one of the knobs just a few more degrees. But chances are, he smiled, it won't go off.

Claude Tremblay was lying awake in bed at 5:00 a.m. He was on his back, staring at the ceiling. He was trying to decide whether or not to call in sick.

He was scheduled for what the guys called a 'nuke run'. Transporting something or other--they never knew just what--in those canisters marked with that radioactive symbol, always to or from some military base. The runs paid sometimes five times a regular run--which is why a lot of guys put in special requests for them. But for exactly the same reason they paid so much, a lot of guys didn't like them--the personal risk. What happened if your rig got in an accident? Well, no one really knew for sure--they said it was safe enough and talked a lot about the construction of the canisters--but well, Claude didn't always believe what he was told.

However, that wasn't what was really bothering him. Every time he saw one of those symbols, he saw people running, on fire, their skin hanging in strips. He saw schools, hospitals, buildings of all kinds, blasted to bits, the steel, concrete, and glass shards flying into people's bodies. He saw people lying everywhere injured, dying. He saw others walk by, unable to help, but with nowhere to go.

He saw people with radiation sickness, throwing up, their hair falling out, just waiting to die. He saw hundreds of dull and empty eyes, suffering acute stress, bereavement, and depression. He saw people living in a cold and barren wasteland, desperate with survival instinct, looting and killing for a bottle of water, a can of beans. He saw the survivors sprouting cancers, gradually

malfunctioning.

When he told the guys once, they looked at him like he was some kind of wimp. It was okay to consider the risk to yourself, but it wasn't cool to think about others. He didn't understand. Then some new guy got on his high horse and refused all nuke runs, saying it was our duty to our children to resist, etc., etc. Claude tried to figure it--duty was okay but care wasn't? It was okay to care about others only if the others were your kids? Well, if your kids are merely extensions of your self, he saw their logic in that--he noticed that a lot of people suddenly became concerned citizens when they became parents. The new guy was suspended--they were trying to decide if they could fire him.

Claude didn't want to be suspended too--or fired. He liked--well, yeah, he liked his job: he liked being in the driver's seat, he was his own boss more or less, he made his own decisions--didn't have to ask no floor super if he could go to the can. The bed creaked as he shifted his position. Well then be your own boss, *make* your own decisions.

Still--what's one trip? He stared at the ceiling. and saw that damn symbol. And then saw again all the people-- what he saw made him sick. He picked up the phone.

Alabua Achebe was pacing outside the assembly building at the base, waiting anxiously for the truck. She looked again toward the gate. It was an hour and a half late. Where was the damn thing? She had to have the trigger installed by five o'clock today.

Tons of money poured into this whole business and still it's a mess! (It was income tax time and money was uppermost in her mind.) Fifteen percent of my taxes go to the Department of Defence, she thought, fifteen percent! She had been thinking about withholding that fifteen percent. Redirecting it to the Peace Tax Fund. Well half of it anyway. She wasn't one of the naive who were *totally* anti-military. She wouldn't be here if she were. No. Alabua admired much of what the military did. She had joined mainly for the educational opportunities and for the peace-keeping and rescue aspects of the job. But then she was transferred. And transferred again. As Junior personnel it was hard to say no because who knew then if you'd ever see a raise or a promotion again. But it was hard as senior personnel too because the expectations of loyalty were so great. And of course the transfers were always temporary. Yet with each transfer, she became a little more disillusioned. But what was she to do. Just say no? Quit? Walk away from a job that had given her a university degree, not to mention a great dental/medical plan, life and disability insurance, and a fantastic pension to boot? It had occurred to her. It had become harder and harder to defend against the 'little boys with big toys' accusation of her non-military friends. And the money, the expense, was certainly one part of it. She discovered that the old joke about \$20 for a manually-operable torque device--a screwdriver--was true. She always wondered where the difference between \$20 and \$4.99 went. Not into *her* pocket. (Though she had no complaints.) In the States, the profits made by arms manufacturers exceed those made in civilian industry by twenty to thirty percent. It was something to think about. At the edge of the building she turned with

impatience and walked the other way.

So was fifteen percent. And she realized that that didn't include things like the \$13 million subsidy the federal government had given to Litton to manufacture the guidance system for the cruise missile. That \$13 million came out of the other 85% of my taxes, she figured. How many more such subsidies were there?

No one had been charged or sent to jail for redirecting taxes, as long as the test case, the one with Dr. Prior, was unsettled. But as soon as she lost, people were being hauled in left, right, and center, to pay for their conscientious objection. More and more every year.

It was no wonder, Alabua thought, as she turned and walked back again. The military industry produces fewer jobs per dollar than any other sector, everyone knew that by now. It created 75 jobs where construction created 100, health care 138, and education 187. And what had she read the other day? That the global arms race was costing the world \$2 million a minute? (It was expensive to go nuclear--especially when you buy 25,000 warheads where 200 would do--she knew the requirements for deterrence.) And that to provide adequate food, clean water, education, health care, and housing for everyone on the planet would cost \$17 billion a year--that's, she turned again as she did the arithmetic, that's a little over six days: less than one week, one week's military spending out of fifty-two, would take care of the world's basic needs. She stopped. It was incredible. What are we, she wondered, crazy? She turned slowly and started walking again, toward the gate. and through it.

Bill Lancaster set his pencil and management textbook onto the bare table in front of him--he was half way through chapter nine. He looked at the clock--lots of time yet. He yawned and glanced around. This was why he liked this assignment, why he had volunteered for missile duty. Twenty-four hours in a capsule with virtually dick-all to do. At the rate he was going, he'd have his MBA by winter, fall maybe. He stood up to stretch and walked around checking the many indicator meters. A lot of guys brought correspondence coursework with them. Except Fisco--she moonlighted as an accountant and brought her clients' books to work on. And Dubb--he didn't bring anything--and usually fell asleep after eight or ten hours. He finished his check, everything was as it should be. He turned back to chapter nine, fiddling absently with the 'combat' pin on the lapel of his neatly pressed uniform.

After a few hours, he took another break before launching into the chapter's questions. It was six o'clock, the controls would be switched to missile two now, the one with the newly installed trigger. He poured himself a cup of coffee, offered one to his partner in the adjoining capsule, then sat down to go through his mail--one could not live on coursework alone.

A few bills he tucked inside his wallet. A letter from his foster-child in Peru he read with some delight and put into his pocket--it would get taped to his fridge. Some junk mail--a record club offer he *could* refuse, a plea from the cancer society, and something from an anti-nuclear group. He flung that last one onto the table. He was sure they had a separate mailing list, some kind of hit list,

of all DND employees.

Yes he knew that between the soot and dust from the explosion that would darken the planet and absorb the heat, causing the surface temperature to decrease, and the radioactive fallout that would contaminate soil and water wherever it drifted--yes one thing leads to another, the face of the earth would be changed: it would no longer sustain life as we know it. Yes he knew that. It was so well-publicized, you'd have to be an idiot not to know. Or a psychopath--was that the name for people who blocked out certain aspects of reality?

But that would never happen, didn't they know that? This was all a charade, a scare tactic. That's what this country's military strategy was based on: *threat*, the *potential* for devastating attack or retaliation. And even though it was the mere threat that was important, it couldn't be an empty threat, they had to actually have all the missiles they said they did. Granted, it wasn't the best military strategy in the world, but a battlefield of nuclear weapons wasn't your best military scenario either. You had to deal with the facts, and the fact was nuclear weapons existed, but it would never happen.

And if it did--well--he'd do as he'd been trained, he'd follow orders, he'd act-- No, he'd *react*. He was like a rat: the light goes on, you do a little trick, and you get a pellet. He glanced at the envelope from the nuclear group. No, you get killed. It wasn't the best military strategy in the world.

Suddenly the alarm in the capsule went off. Bill jumped to the control panel, seeing the red light flashing. He began to go through his routine: one--off, yes; two--on, yes; three--over ten, yes; four--switch up, yes; five--key turn five--key turn --no.