

THE *Silver*  
BRACELET

*The Bracelet*

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# Author's Note

This novel was written in 1974, when the Vietnam War was near its end. Although the theme of *The Silver Bracelet* takes place in that awful period in our country's history, and is about a hero, the novel – as I choose to define it – is a Love Story.

The manuscript has been sitting in a box in the garage or in my den since it was written. In the seventies the war was something very few people wanted to read about, fiction or not. So the manuscript gathered dust while I worked a career and raised a family.

I created *The Silver Bracelet* while I lived in Hong Kong, inspired by the birth of my son, Kevin, who was born there and about when this novel was born.

I dedicate *The Silver Bracelet* to Kevin.



*Chapter 1*

# So Many Lives Ago...

As my captors and I lifted off the crude runway I stared down at North Vietnam and the squares of dikes below, the checkerboards of water reflecting shards of sunbursts darting up at me as if images rebounding from the past. The dikes looked the same as they had when I splashed down into a darker one over a year ago. It seemed a hundred years and a thousand nightmares ago. Still, I retain the faded memories, see the kind face, hear the faint voice of Chaplain Gilbert Perez's solemn direction to bow our heads in prayer that black night before we took off from Udon Air Base in Bangkok. Supposedly, just another mission to bomb the hell out of Charlie and his pals hiding by day in the jungles around Tuyen Quang and training at night for their raids south. So long ago...so many lives ago...



“Watch over our boys O’Lord, while they are in your skies today with only You to protect them,” said the chaplain, dismissing us.

On my way out of the briefing room I’d penciled into my personal log: Captain Simon Stilwell - Mission Number Eighteen (since taking over Julia, my stratobomber).

“Closest to China yet,” commented my co-pilot, Mitch Gerwert.

“Yeah. Let’s get the time synchro’d.”

We both synchronized. “Zero, one, and seven minutes...now.”

Too damn early in the pitch-black morning to be going out to destroy an enemy. I much preferred my killings after a full night’s sleep. It never worked that way though, never.

My eight-man crew (normal is only six) was already in checkout when Mitch and I climbed up into Julia. We strapped in and connected umbilicals and coaxials, then Mitch began reviewing the pre-flight tech data. I knew it by heart, but tracked him step-by-step. Power supplies; environmental

controls; life support systems; pyrotechnics; communication; gyros calibrated; automatic redundancies functional; hydraulic pressure; fuel; munitions activated; crew medicals.

“And bombs certified.” Ready to kill.

All set to activate Julia’s seventeen thousand pound Pratt and Whitney TF33 turbos. She was in super heat.

“Ready to put this whore in the air?” I asked.

“No. I really don’t think I want to go,” smiled Mitch.

“Switch on.” I chattered into my mouthpiece. “Julia ready to hit the streets in search of a sucker.”

“Clear runway three, Julia. Don’t bring back the clap with you, just money.” And scalps.

“Roger. You pimps are all alike.”

I poured it hard to Julia and she pumped back fiercely, her pulsing four hundred and eighty thousand pound, giant body passionately taking us up into the black heavens with her. It was always like a love affair between Julia and me; each take-off simulating the thrust of me into her; the long dark flights over the Mekong were like the quiet exploring of a groaning woman’s own delta regions; finding my targets in the enemy’s Red River valleys was just as if satisfying my mate’s clutches with her in orgasm; releasing the bombs from Julia’s heaving belly was synonymous to my own climax. I agreed with Hanoi’s newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, which said we were mere rapists. I know my mind is getting sicker by the day when I fantasize making love to a woman as equal to dropping bombs on people. But, are not all rapists sick?

As we cruised along at four hundred nauts in the thick darkness, my lover, Julia, and I...I thought that my wife Selina would like to, well, experience what Julia does so well. I think I can only remember a very few times when I could tell that she’d actually released. I could always tell with Julia; it was every time I opened her bombay doors and pulled the trigger, and it was every time, and she always let me know it was a direct hit. With Selina I’d wondered for a long time if there was something wrong with me, but now I know better. Julia never complains. I know there is nothing wrong with me physically, but mentally...since the bombing began, well...Just before I had shipped out to Nam, it had been coming out in the open with Selina,

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her moods, the obvious feelings and signals of chill within her, within us, the coldness...

“Rita says she prays for each of us,” Mitch said, folding a letter back into his flight jacket. “Says she saw Selina last month and she looks fine and beautiful. Must be something else to have such a beautiful wife. Rita’s so damn ugly. Ah well, some guys have all the luck, right buddy?”

“Yeah.” Selina *is* a gorgeous woman, I thought, and cold, and Mitch was right about his wife being ugly. He’s the lucky one. “Yeah, some guys have all the luck. Tell Rita thanks for the prayers.”

Selina would prefer that I also pray for my own safety on these missions, as I’m sure she does regularly for me, but despite her anguish and disappointment in me, I just can’t do it.

We were less than an hour out when the crackle of Swanson, the radar tech, came into my headset. “Escorts ahead, six each, at five clicks.”

I always felt more secure when the F-105 Super Sabres came along. Those boys were the only things that could keep the MIG-17s off my back. Of course there isn’t anything but luck protecting Julia’s bare bottom from the heavy ground fire we’ll get. I’d never be able to convince Father Fisher’s daughter, sweet Selina, that God had yet to protect us from the hot metal. We’d been hit six times in seventeen missions so far, but luckily never in her vital organs.

“*The Stars and Stripes* says Namath was protected like the Pope on Sunday,” Mitch informed.

“Italians can’t play football anyway,” I replied. “Especially old mackerel-snappers.”

“Hey, careful there, I’m a Catholic too.”

“Sorry.”

If I had a son I’d teach him to play football, not waste his time in Sunday school. Of course I’d have to battle Selina, but so what. Father Willie Fisher, my father-in-law, the great evangelist, was quite an athlete in his day, and I suspect it’s all just bullshit when he tries to play down the violence of football and stress the virtues of religion instead. His problem is he never had a son. All he ever had was Selina, our beautiful church songbird. And all she and I have ever had are problems, no son. A child might have...Hell, I’d

better concentrate on flying this bitch; she's more important to me now.

I'd spent the next few minutes reviewing map coordinates and the diversionary route of our flight plan. We're heading for Hanoi, giving that as our intended target. Fifteen miles from Hanoi we'd do a ninety and head for the train yards at Yen Bai, then up to Tuyen Quang, if there are no problems over Yen Bai. I studied the target data, but I knew it all by heart and found myself just going through the motions, so I checked on all instrumentation and weapons inventory.

"Enemy territory, Skipper," Mitch said. I'd also picked up the tiny lights of the anti-aircraft sending flashes of hot metal streaking up at us. We were way too high to be in danger, but they never failed to go after us anyway, almost as if to warn us not to come down too close.

Other than the little balls of fire floating up at us, the delta was blacked-out. Three nights ago we were somewhere around here just prowling for a target. It was blacked-out then except we caught a convoy of trucks – at least twenty – at a river dock waiting to board a ferry. The trucks, ferry and dock were mostly blacked-out, but for their own needs, they had a few lights on. The next day the photos showed all of them destroyed by a direct hit, the dock splintered and the ferry sunk, the trucks charcoal. That was a good night's work. I wondered how young the youngest soldier was who died...probably just a kid.

A hint of light on the far horizon signaled the morning sun about to burst in on us. I hope we live to see it set.

"Enemy aircraft, sir! Dead ahead at ten clicks. Looks like six-seven-eight...eight each."

"Roger." Those would be the MIG-17s. "Good luck, gentlemen," I told our escort service as they were breaking off to discourage or engage the MIGs. "Radio silence," I ordered, then cut power and tweaked the stick to bring us onto our real course and away from Hanoi.

Fifteen minutes later we leveled the railway yards at Yen Bai with no problems. We saw a lot of flak and maybe some got us, but nothing vital. Julia would get a few days off back at Udon to get her holes patched.

On to our next target, Tuyen Quang, to drop the rest of our bombs and kill some enemy.

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We were eleven miles out and going down for Tuyen Quang when Julia jerked violently, then screamed. *Hit!* We'd picked up a heavy one and I knew instantly – so did Mitch from the look on his face – that we'd had it.

“Fire in the tail, sir!” came Frank Metaxis' frantic cry from the rear guns. I could tell it was over for Julia with one look at her instruments. Red flashes all over the boards, warning bells sounding. Fire emergency, fuel leaking, hydraulics bleeding. The stick fought me for control as Julia writhed in pain.

Mitch was on the radio instantly. “May Day! May Day! Foxtrot Zulu Romeo one-four-one. Coordinates Alpha twelve, Delta three. May Day! May Day!”

I didn't think there was any use. I knew there were only a few Ranger units working up here who were probably too smart to come out of hiding to try and rescue a doomed bomber crew. There were no choppers that could survive a run into these zones, and the F-105s had their own problems. We were in deep shit.

I looked at Mitch. He knew it too.

“Missile, or flak?” he asked. Wonder what even made him care. Whichever it was, it was terminal.

“Out, Mitch!” I yelled. “Get back there and get everybody the hell out, fast! Fast, before the tanks go!”

Mitch looked like he would cry. Then he swallowed his fright and ordered into his headset, “Abandon ship! Repeat: all crew rig chutes and abandon ship!”

“Bring me a pack before you jump, Mitch. I'm gonna make a last run, but I'm not going down with this bitch.” *Sorry, Julia.*

“Simon, put her on auto and get out!”

“Get the hell out, Mitch! Good luck!”

He was back in a few seconds with the chute. He looked at me in his pale shock. “Simon, see you down there. We'll fight again.”

“Get the hell out!”

The stick and pedals shuddered, moaned and shrieked dying breaths. Julia's power was failing, almost out of my control. Fire emergency lights were going crazy. I loosed two cluster bombs to stir up some action in the jungle below in hopes of getting Charley's attention away from my crew.

Then I spotted Tuyen Quang. The stick fought my adjustments viciously. I barely had pitch and yaw left but got her nose headed for my secondary target.

“Come on, baby, let’s get a few of those pricks who just stuck you.” Julia groaned and shook. I popped open the trigger guards and flipped toggle switches to arm my last four bombs. Julia limped and crawled her way dead over the city. I hit the switches. I was so low I could almost feel the heat from the bombs shattering Tuyen Quang below and behind me. Or maybe that was just Julia’s own fire creeping in on me. I activated the time delay switch that would turn Julia and all her information into flames and melted scrap in ten minutes.

Time to break up with Julia.

As I floated down towards the green carpet of forest below, I didn’t even think of praying. I just hoped I had ample luck left to have confused them with my bombs and Julia’s antics long enough to buy me time to hide in the jungle not far away. Julia thundered into the earth less than five miles from me and almost immediately exploded, tremendous columns of fire rising from the rice paddy she’d chosen for a grave.

I stared below me in horror. Dozens of bantam dots could be seen scurrying through the brush and over the dikes in a race to get to my landing before me. If they were the V.C., and this territory is V.C. controlled, then I’d be better off to turn the forty-five strapped to my chest on myself and pull the trigger now.

I decided I might have enough time left to do it on the ground if I could identify them as V.C. Maybe even take one or two of them with me.

I felt the ground creeping up quickly and closed my eyes in fear, half expecting to have a bullet crash into my skull before I even landed.

But I didn’t hear any weapons fire. I opened my eyes and was surprised to see myself heading for the edge of a clearing with glassy reflections of a rice paddy at its rim. Then I wasn’t sure which area would be best to hit. In the forest I could get hung up in the trees and I’d be a trapped sitting duck. But in the paddy I’d be exposed, with nowhere to hide. It didn’t matter – no choice; the rice paddy it would be. Now I could even hear groups of excited voices yelling as my welcoming party closed in.

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I flopped into the murky water and cracked the tranquility of the shallow paddy. I struggled frantically with the nylon harnesses and finally unclipped the connectors and scrambled to my feet. Voices closer! Brush and twigs cracking all around. I'd better get my ass in gear and make for the cover of that jungle. I whipped the heavy pistol from its holster and, despite the fact that I'd seldom fired it, found it quick to release the safety. I swear I don't have the courage to turn it on myself, but I'm not going to make it easy for them if they're the Cong.

I bolted three or four quick leaps toward the jungle, then froze. There they were, suddenly breaking into the open right in front of me. They jammed to an instant halt, too, and their chatter vanished as they also stiffened to just stand there and gape at me and the piece in my trembling hand. I had just a few moments now to decide to send a bullet into my crippled brain, or kill as many of them as possible before they finish me.

About a dozen more of the slower ones arrived and joined our silent face-to-face. There they stood with their weapons. Two teenage militia girls with nervously readied rifles, old men with rocks, some boys with bamboo clubs, a young girl with a hoe, and a fiery-eyed boy of ten or so armed with a large wooden spoon.

I threw the pistol and it thudded into the muddy bank next to them, then I raised my hands high and stood up as straight and tall as I could. The sudden wetness in my pants added to the discomfort.

*Captured! Oh Selina, do pray for me now, if you really care...*

Each member of their war party had to touch me lightly with their weapons so they could tell the stories of how they were in on the seizure. I was surprised to see so little anger. I'd expected to be bludgeoned, but all held their temper. Within moments a patrol of government troops arrived, and they clubbed me a bit.

But nobody killed me.