

Happy Birthday AnniePart 1

Lieutenant Mary Anne Riordan slapped the alarm clock off and dreaded getting up. She only had 117 days to go in Vietnam. She was two thirds of the way through. It was downhill from here. Once she got past today.

Today was the day she dreaded the most all year long. Her Birthday. The Nurses would make a fuss. They and the Corpsmen would all give little gifts. Many touching. A few jokes. They all did it for each other.

She felt she had practiced all her "Ooohs" and "Aaaaahs" and "isn't that sweets" for so many years that they no longer sounded real to her. Even when she meant it, which was most all the time.

For someone who was very uncomfortable with attention she sure got a lot of it. The worst was when she was named Homecoming Queen when she was only a sophomore. There was no way to say no without appearing rude and stuck up which is the kiss of death in a small town. Things snowballed from there. All these older guys starting asking her out. Some of them even grown men. My God, married men would flirt with her when she was fourteen.

Being a round-eye in Vietnam was even worse. Doctors, patients, pilots, soldiers, constantly hitting on you. Sometimes it is sweet. Most of the time it's a pain in the butt.

She never even thought she was that pretty. She was too skinny and her nose was too long and her lips too big. She always attributed what happened mainly to the fact that her breasts started growing early. They were a few inches bigger than the other girls. For this people fall all over you. At least in Vietnam all the nurses got harassed pretty much equally. Somehow that made it easier to take.

Part of the training she gave the new girls was not to fall in love in Vietnam. It never worked. Never. She had spent too many nights with crying nurses after their special soldier got killed, or worse.

"Be professional," is what she told them. "Deliver the best care possible. These men are heroes who deserve our last ounce of strength. They are wonderful, sweet, wholesome guys who are smart and charming and funny and sexy and they will destroy you."

Helicopter pilots were the worst. They had the life expectancy of a mayfly.

They all needed love. Most of them died calling out for their mothers or sweethearts. Ninety-nine percent of them are worthy of any nurse's, any woman's, love.

If you gave each of them even a little piece of your heart, soon be there would be nothing left. The littlest piece would eventually blow up and damage the rest. She'd seen it happen too many times.

The good part about having your birthday in this unit was that, unless there are mass casualties, she would have the day off. That's the part that got her up and dressed.

She was going to see the kids today. She was really looking forward to it and really dreading it all at the same time. Sometimes it was great and she came back feeling all clean and refreshed. Sometimes she cried for days. The kids got a piece of her heart no matter how hard she tried.

She got most of her presents at breakfast. Lipsticks, compacts, stockings, all manner of girly stuff from the nurses. The corpsmen had taken up a collection for the orphanage and had come up with over a hundred and twenty dollars and a really sweet card. From some of the lowest paid guys in the Army it was pretty touching.

After breakfast Annie checked with the Head Nurse that there were no big Ops going on that might generate mass casualties. Intel said no worries. Intel said a lot of things that turned out wrong. Today everything really did seem quiet.

She was on her way to rustle up a jeep when all of a sudden this giant Chinook is hovering over the Evac Apron. These are helicopters that they use to move wrecked fighter jets and all manner of things. It was about 100 feet long, twenty feet high and sixty feet wide. It was like four Greyhound Buses welded together. It had a huge rotor in both the front and the back. The backwash from the rotors knocked her back.

A crowd of doctors and nurses came out of the hospital to see what all the commotion was about.

Slung under the Chinook was a big green box the size of a doublewide mobile home. The helicopter lowered it gently to the edge of the apron. Cables were released and the helicopter flew away.

Everybody walked over to the box. It had no windows. There was a door on each end with an air conditioner over each door.

The doors weren't locked. One of the surgeons, a Captain, entered. They heard a loud, "Wahoo." The Captain came out with an ear-to-ear grin, "It's a mobile X-Ray and Blood Unit."

Everybody cheered. They only had a twenty-year-old X-Ray machine and a little room to do blood work. It was the bottleneck when there were mass casualties. This was going to make things a lot better.

The Head Nurse asked, "Where is it from?"

The Captain looked at the papers on the clipboard he had found inside. "The paperwork is from MACV I Corp."

The Head Nurse looked triumphant. She knew how the military worked. She gave Lt. Riordan an 'I told you so' smile and turned back inside.

The surgeon came over to Mary Anne. He was one of the nicer guys at the hospital. He treated the nurses and the corpsmen like people. It might not sound like much but it was rare and appreciated. "I didn't want to say anything in front of everybody but there was an envelope for you."

He handed her a greeting card size envelope addressed to Lt. Riordan.

She opened the card, thinking it was probably another proposition from the General. The card was a picture of a

single red rose. She opened it and read "Happy Birthday Annie." It wasn't signed.

She could feel herself blushing.

The doc looked at her. He was full of concern.

"Lieutenant, I want you to know I have the greatest respect for you. This is going to save hundreds of lives. If you had to sleep with some fat three star to get this, I want you to know I respect you all the more."

"What? I didn't sleep with anybody. I'm not going to sleep with anybody. Are we clear about that, sir?"

"Sorry Lieutenant. I was way out of line. Your love life is your business." He walked back to the hospital.

She wanted to scream at him. The gall of the man. What an arrogant ass. My love life is not a business. My love life will never be a business.

People's love lives were treated as common gossip when you all lived so close together. She told everyone she had a Doctor fiancé at home. A Neurosurgeon, no less. She even had an imitation diamond ring that she had bought for herself.

She never went drinking at the Officer's Club. She never dated. She knew a few of the doctors thought she was a lesbian. That, of course, was the only reason they could

imagine why she didn't sleep around. How else would she resist them, fiancé or not?

She knew the younger girls called her Mother Mary behind her back. Younger girls? She was at most two years older than them.

She wasn't a particularly vain woman but she had noticed an awful lot of aging in the past 248 days. Mostly it was around her eyes. She was really tired most of the time and she had lost a lot of weight, at least for someone skinny to start with. She stopped looking closely months ago.

The day started out nice. Something nice happened and she was mad as hell. She didn't use to be like that.