

A MEMORABLE SONG

Ray Heins

LYRICS: "DETROIT CITY" – Mel Tillis, 1963
Recorded by Bobby Bare

I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh Lord, I want to go home,

Last night I went to sleep in Detroit city,
And I dreamed about those cotton fields and home,
I dreamed about my mother,
dear old papa, sister and brother,
And I dreamed about that girl,
whose been waitin' for so long,

I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh Lord, I want to go home,

Home folks think I'm big in Detroit city,
From the letters that I write they think I'm fine,
But by day I make the cars,
by night I make the bars,
If only they could read between the lines,

I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh Lord, I want to go home,

I rode a freight train north to Detroit city,
After all these years I've been wasting my time,
I'll take my foolish pride,
on a southbound freight and ride,
Go on back to the ones,
I've left waitin' so far behind,

I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh Lord, I want to go home.

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"Oh Lord, I want to go home!" It wasn't the first time I'd heard the song, but it struck a particular resonance when I heard it in Saigon.

It was summer, 1968. I'd been married since January, in Vietnam since March. My duties involved 30-to-45 day deployments from Fleet Command HQ, on the Saigon River, to coastal patrol zones. I was the only American on a Vietnamese navy gunboat – HQ-611 – as the advisor to the commanding officer.

I found the Vietnamese language very difficult. Despite a five-week, 200 hour immersion course with native speakers, I could do little more than say hello, and tell a taxi driver to drive straight, turn left, or turn right.

Between deployments, I had daily contact with other advisors at the Fleet Command headquarters. On patrol, however, I felt quite alone. No wonder Captain Quynh once observed to me that “You seem very melancholy.”

There were many bars in Saigon, but they were sketchy, expensive, and not very appealing to me as a newly-wed. The officer’s club, on the rooftop deck of the Hotel Rex, was a lot more like it. The crowd there frequently numbered close to a hundred; security was such that everyone was able (and required) to remove their personal weapons at the entry (still on the roof level, but outside the bar). On occasion, they had musical groups – usually Korean, for reasons unknown to me – who performed American songs, reportedly learned completely phonetically. They had very convincing twangs, and could have been readily accepted in Nashville, but apparently understood nothing of what they were singing.

The most popular song they did was “Detroit City”, with its “I want to go home” refrain. When we sang along with it, which was almost always, we really meant it!

Having grown up in Nashville, country music had seeped into my blood, even during the years when country wasn’t cool. The accents and the phrases were similar to those I heard from family, friends, school mates.

The “want to go home” theme certainly captured a longing shared by every American in Vietnam. Even the volunteers (yes, there were many of us) were frequently lonely, and fully aware of the anti-war sentiment among the population back home. Sometimes it seemed the chaos back in the states was equal to that in-country. While in Saigon between patrols, I read of the assassinations, first of Martin Luther King, then of Bobby Kennedy, in the Armed Forces newspaper “Stars and Stripes”. It seemed surreal; “How can this be?” we thought, and we asked each other. (No one I knew favored Kennedy; indeed we feared he would immediately abandon the Vietnamese we had come to admire; but murder was far beyond the pale; who would be next???)

Early on in my year in Vietnam, I purchased a portable radio/cassette recorder. This I took with me on patrols. Sometimes at night, as the gunboat patrolled offshore, I brought the radio up on deck, and listened to music programs broadcast over the AFRTS – Armed Forces Radio and Television Network. This is where I really felt alone, and the homely refrain of “Detroit City” expressed my feelings very well indeed. (I don’t remember hearing Robin Williams’ character from “Good Morning, Vietnam”, but I did listen to his radio station.)

Now the same music transports me back to those melancholy days when I was just 28. I’ve long since made it back home, but somewhere along the way, lost my youth. From here, it doesn’t seem quite so bad back there in Detroit City. There were moments

of adventure, and unparalleled opportunity to see very foreign places. The people were generally friendly, and happy to have us there defending them. I walked alone (wearing a six-gun with cowboy-style gun belt) in villages far from Saigon, and children gathered as to a magnet. On many occasions, I relaxed with other advisors, over dinner, or beers, or over coffee. While in Saigon, I had virtually no duties, so many hours were spent playing board games in the Fleet Command building.

Still, there was that constant desire to “go home”. Every serviceman was given a “DEROS” upon arrival – his Date of Estimated Return from Overseas. The tour was twelve months – no more, no less (unless you were a marine – 13 months – or something unfortunate happened). We kept that in mind always. When we heard the song, and sang along with it, I think everyone felt less alone – united, ironically, by the desire to be somewhere else!

