

### Merry Christmas!

#### HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

by Jack McCabe

In July 1971 I had been in Vietnam for nine months and had requested to extend my tour for another six. My hope was for an early out when my tour was up. It wasn't that I didn't like the Army. I was just ready to move on. I did not know it at the time, but things wouldn't work out that way.

One of the benefits about extending was a free 30-day leave. With careful planning using my finely honed math skills I figured I could be home for Christmas. But the Army had other ideas. It seems I could only delay my leave for a month past my normal DEROS which was on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. That would leave me short a couple days.

I would be 19 when I left for my leave and would turn 20 while at home. I decided to try a fast one. I walked over to battalion headquarters and asked to see the personnel sergeant. I explained to him that I lost my I.D. card and needed another for my leave. He took my photo and started to type a new card when I subtly asked him to change my birth date one year to 1950 so I could buy a drink when home. He looked at me for a moment and then said, "Nice try." At least I had a new photo on my I.D. I destroyed the old card.

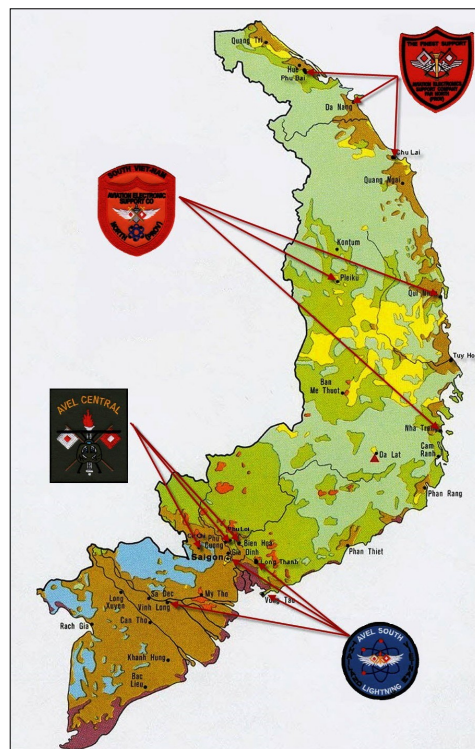
My orders finally came through on 19 October with the leave to begin on 21 November and reporting to Ft. Dix for my return to Vietnam on December 21st. December 21st? Four days before Christmas? You must be kidding me. I sat on my bunk dismayed that I was slated to return to Vietnam just four days before Christmas. What the hell was I thinking when I extended?

On Friday, the 19<sup>th</sup> of November I was driven to Long Binh by one of our Staff Sergeants, I cannot recall his name, but I remember him as being in a perpetually crabby mood. The trip was uneventful and, there was not a lot of conversation. It was a typical sunny day, hot and dry. We passed through small villages and rice paddies in complete silence. Finally, I was unceremoniously dropped off at the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Bn. for my trip home. No "good luck" or "have fun on leave." He just stopped the jeep and sat there while I grabbed my gear and jumped out. I wasn't out of that jeep for 5 seconds before he sped off in a cloud of dust. "Asshole" I quietly said.

I processed through and was assigned a barracks to wait for my flight. But first I had to visit the *Pee House of the August Moon*. This was where I would have to submit a urine sample to check my system for drugs. This was the final humiliation the Army put you through before you went home. I entered the room to get my sample and was surprised to find about five or six urinals surrounded by mirrors. A very miserable soldier was sitting on an elevated perch watching you take out your johnson and fill the container with pee.

My bladder doesn't like to work when I am being closely watched to make sure I don't fill my jar from a hidden container with someone else's drug-free urine. Of course, I couldn't give the sample. I was instructed by the pervert on the perch to go have a beer and try again.

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Well after three or four beers my bladder was ready to explode. I went back in and tried again. I strained and squeezed and moaned. It was a long time coming but I did fill the cup. Proud of myself I took it into the next room to be tested. I handed it to the sergeant who held it up and examined it like he was checking the quality of a diamond. "Too light" he said. "What? What? What do you mean too light?" "It's too light, you need to do it over." "Come on sarge, you have to be shitting me!" "Nope, has to be darker for an accurate test. Go get a burger and beer and try again. You can't go home until you pass this test."

Two burgers and three or four more beers later I staggered back in to see if I could get a better sample. The peep was still there on his perch staring at everyone's penis as they peed. I wonder to this day what he told his family he did in the war. This time I was able to get an acceptable sample. I found my barracks and passed out.



There was excitement in the air early on Sunday, the 21<sup>st</sup>. Buses had pulled up in front of the barracks and we all eagerly boarded them for the short ride to Tan Son Nhut and the flight back to the World. Typical of the Army or maybe Air Force for that matter we sat around on those unforgettable blue chairs for several hours waiting. It took me ten minutes to smoke a cigarette and ten minutes until the next one marked the time. Finally, it came my time board the beautiful Flying Tiger Airline for the flight out of here. Once again, I asked myself why the hell I extended.

Beautiful round-eyed stewardesses greeted us as we boarded the plane. God they were beautiful! At last we all belted in and we began to taxi toward our runway. We all sat silently in anticipation for our departure. Then, we began to speed down the runway and soon we were in the air looking down at Vietnam. Sun glistening off the rice paddies below, lush green jungle then the blue waters of the South China Sea. There was no cheering as we left. It was dead quiet as if it was a dream. Then, slowly quiet chatter filled the plane.

It was a long flight, but it seemed to fly by. We stopped at Yakota, Japan and Anchorage, Alaska for fuel then on to Travis Air Force Base. After countless hours in the air we touched down and gathered our gear to deplane. As the door opened a blast of cold 55-degree air hit us! Fortunately, I had brought my field jacket and threw it on over my khaki's. I froze my ass off! We were herded on to waiting buses for the ride to Oakland. As our buses arrived at Oakland, we were met by protestors carrying signs calling us baby killers, murderers, and various other niceties. It wasn't a shock as we were familiar with the protests back home, but it was very disconcerting and unsettling. WTF?



When my dad came through Oakland at the end of World War Two, he was given a steak dinner and a beer. I never was offered that, but I was offered a new set of dress greens. In my rush to get home I passed on that, processed, and caught a bus to San Francisco airport for the flight home. I figured that when I came home the final time, I would get new greens but that didn't work out either. I continued to freeze in my khaki's.

I called home, told my folks I was on the way and caught a flight to Chicago. The plane had a lounge in the rear. An actual bar. Holy crap, I was still 19 but they served me whatever I wanted. I sat back, sipped my scotch and relaxed, kind of in a daze that all of this happened too fast, still jet lagged and over-tired. It was confusing and disorienting. I was approached by two men, one white and one black who asked me if I was coming home from Vietnam. I guess the tan and ribbons gave me away. I told them that yes, I was coming home. They never asked me about what was happening there but tried to drag me into a conversation about race relations in Vietnam. I avoided their questions and had a few more scotches.

We landed at about 10:00PM. The night was clear and as we approached the city, I could see the lights of small towns dotting the landscape. We came in over the western suburbs and then there was the city! The sight took my breath away. The lights were spectacular. It looked like magic to me. I could see the clearly laid out grid of Chicago streets. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen.

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I left the plane and entered the terminal. There was my brother, mom, and dad. I do not remember a lot of hugging. We did not show a lot of affection in my family. Handshakes and a brief hug from my mom. We went out to the car for the short ride home. It was cold as hell. Snow everywhere. I was freezing! It was all so alien. So many cars, snow, and lights. I was beside myself. Tired, confused and feeling out of place.

I could not sleep for a couple days. My timing and the shock of change were too much for me, I guess. But I was home for Thanksgiving and that was spent at my grandmothers which was our family tradition. It was good to see everyone and they seemed happy to see me. I never wore the uniform when home and no one ever asked me about Vietnam. It was like it never happened and I had just been out of town a couple weeks.

I reconnected with my old high school friends who had sporadically written to me over the last year. My most fond memory of that is of a buddy's mother whose husband had served in the Marines during World War Two. We were sitting at her kitchen table and she took my hands in hers. She looked me in the eyes and sincerely asked me "Are you OK, Jack?" I told her I was fine. God bless her.

But the connection with my high school friends was gone. I was never comfortable with them. They were just like they were in high school. Nothing changed. No one and I mean no one ever asked me about Vietnam.



My sister, Judy was engaged to be married and decided to delay the wedding until I came home. The big day was on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December. It was a cool, crisp, clear day, perfect for a wedding. Her husband Tom was a great guy, and they would spend 30 wonderful years together until her death in 2002.

Christmas with the family was great but I was getting restless. I was already a couple days AWOL but that wasn't it. I knew my time at home was short and I felt ready to go back. Go back to my buddies. It was time for me to move on.

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, my dad drove me to the airport for the flight to Ft. Dix, New Jersey and then back to Vietnam. Fort Dix? Why in the hell would they send me to Fort Dix for transport back to Vietnam? Flying from Dix to Anchorage we probably flew right over Chicago and Ft Lewis! I guess the Army, in its infinite wisdom thought that was best.

As I flew east to New Jersey I looked out the window at the frozen snow-covered terrain below knowing how drastically the scene would change in a few short days. Both had their own beauty but 180 degrees different. The thought of going back was both depressing and exhilarating.

Upon my arrival I caught a bus to Ft. Dix and the in-processing center for movement overseas. There were very few people there, probably because of the Christmas holiday. I proceeded to the Captain in charge to check in. He looked at my orders and said, "You're AWOL son." I looked him square in the eye and said "So, what are you going to do, Captain? Send me to Vietnam?"

The Captain sat back in his chair with a sigh studying me. "You have an attitude problem, soldier." "Captain" I said, "I spent last Christmas in Vietnam and I am going back. There is no way I was going back four days before Christmas."

He continued to silently study me and then he slowly picked up my orders and read them again. He reached across the desk and picked up his stamp to check me in. He looked up and gave me one long look then changed the date on the stamp to December 22<sup>nd</sup>. He stamped my orders and said "I spent a Christmas over there too. Your flight leaves here on January 1<sup>st</sup>. You better be on it." "Yes sir, Captain" I said. I smartly saluted him then left his office, grabbed a cab, went back to the airport, and flew home. It was like a reprieve or a stay of execution. I don't know which.

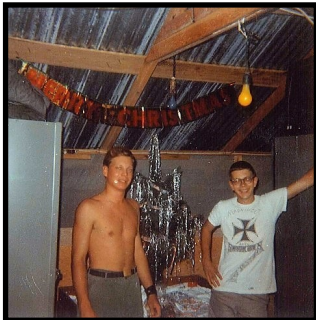
New Year's Eve was spent on an airplane flying back to Fort Dix. At midnight, the pilot came over the intercom and wished us a Happy New Year! A cheer went up throughout the plane. 1972. What would the year hold? Who knows? Fate would direct it where it would.



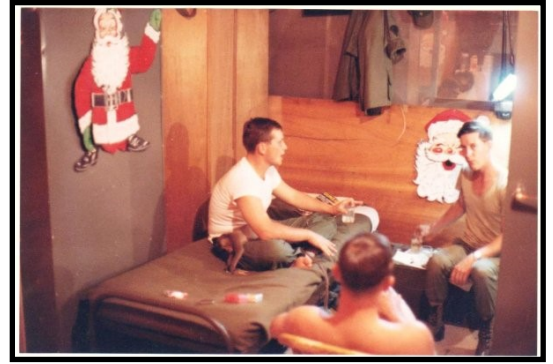
As I was getting ready to board the flight back to beautiful Phu Loi I happened to see the Captain. I walked over to him, saluted, and told him "Thank you, sir." He returned my salute and held out his hand. We shook hands and he simply said: "Good luck."

As the plane full of GI's made its way across the country and then the Pacific I thought about Christmas and the next five months I would spend in Vietnam.

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## Veteran Suicide

The holidays can be warm, fun and a wonderful time to get together with family and friends. But, for those suffering from PTSD, loneliness and depression it can be horrible. Remember that we lose 22 veterans a day to suicide. In actuality we lose more than that as some are categorized as automobile accidents, etc.

**If you know a veteran who is suffering call them. Just be yourself and let them know someone is thinking of them. If they seem at risk of harming themselves take action. Don't let our fellow veterans become a statistic.**



1-800-273-8255 **PRESS 1**

Confidential crisis chat at **VeteransCrisisLine.net**  
or text to **838255**

### RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF SUICIDE RISK

- Thinking about hurting or killing yourself
- Looking for ways to kill yourself
- Talking about death, dying or suicide
- Self-destructive behavior such as drug abuse, weapons, etc.
- Hopelessness, feeling like there's no way out
- Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, mood swings
- Feeling like there is no reason to live
- Rage or anger
- Engaging in risky activities without thinking
- Increasing alcohol or drug abuse
- Withdrawing from family and friends

**The presence of these signs requires immediate attention.**

**Call us if you experience any of these warning signs.**

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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## NEW AVEL, AVIONICS AND VIETNAM VETERAN REGISTEREES

**Medico, Bob (SP4)**

420 Fox Haven Dr, Apt 3203

Naples Fl. 34104

617-268-7314

*263rd Maintenance Co. (LEM), Red Beach, Danang: March 1969 to March 1970*

[bem25@aol.com](mailto:bem25@aol.com)

Comments: First time on site, brought back great memories, and saw some guys I would like to get in touch with.

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## TAPS

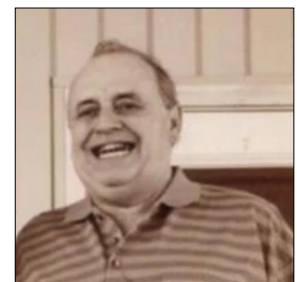
**Bill Dunkelberger**

Aviation Electronics Support Company, South (AESCS). 2nd Platoon

Tan Son Nhut and Long Thanh 1967-1968.

He passed away on 18 October 2020

He was 73 years old



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## PHOTOS

None Submitted

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## CHANGE OF ADDRESS/EMAIL

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None Submitted

Submit changes to Jack McCabe so you can continue receiving updates and Newsletters.

[www.avelvietnam.com](http://www.avelvietnam.com)

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*Deck the Halls with Belts of Ammo!*

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**MERRY CHRISTMAS  
and  
HAPPY NEW YEAR**

**to all of our AVEL Brothers, Donut Dollies,  
and the Flight Attendants who brought us home.  
Have a happy and healthy 2021! STAY SAFE!**

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**AVEL  
VIETNAM**



**December 2020 Newsletter**

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