

# AVEL VIETNAM

Newsletter - January/February 2021

## The Army's Only Ship

by Pete Poirier

Pete enlisted in the Army in 1967 and was trained at Fort Gordon as an Avionics Navigation and Flight Control Repairer, MOS 35M20. Upon graduation from the course he received orders for Vietnam.

Pete's experiences are described below.

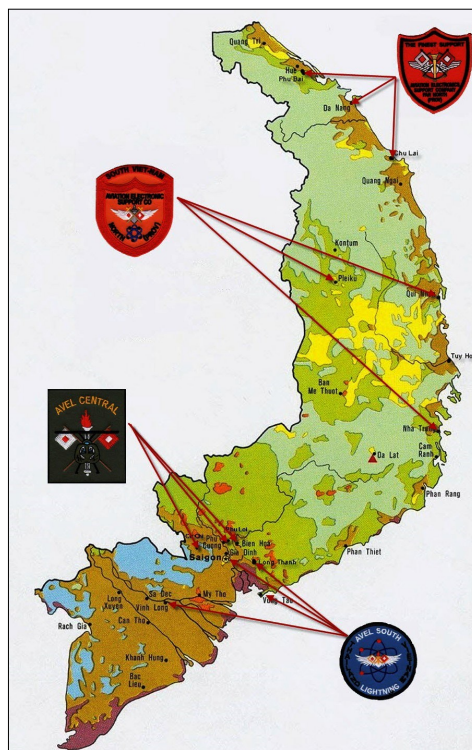
*I spent my second tour of duty in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970 aboard the Army's only ship called the USNS Corpus Christi Bay. Originally, the Corpus Christi Bay was a Navy seaplane tender named the USS Albemarle (AV-5). The Albemarle served in the Atlantic Fleet though out most of the war. It was about 597 feet long and about 69 feet wide and was laid down in 1939. It was re-designed to be a floating aircraft maintenance facility (FAMF), a one-of-a-kind in-theater helicopter complete re-build shop.*

*As a USNS ship it was crewed by 128 merchant marines serving in the MSC (Military Sealift Command) and captained by a civilian Master. There were usually around 300 GI's working on board doing airframe and power plant repairs, fabrication and rebuilds, component repairs and electronic maintenance and repair of communication, navigation and identification friend or foe equipment.*

*The electronic specialists on board all had been through the Signal School at Fort Gordon and, in addition, worked at the world's largest helicopter repair facility in Corpus Christi, Texas. Recall that Vietnam was the first ever helicopter war and that the total number of choppers used in Vietnam was between 11,000 and 12,000. In addition to combat damage and accidents each of those units had routine heavy maintenance schedules that required them to be sent to Texas then returned to service in Vietnam. The turn around time was a matter of months because of the trans-oceanic transit time in addition to the time required to prepare each unit for transport.*

*The mission of the Corpus Christi Bay was to replicate the work done in Texas without all that transit time. Turn around was reduced to just over two weeks. That savings in shipping costs and the addition of in-country flight time made the project a significant contribution to the war effort.*

*That second tour was much different than my first in 1967 and 1968. The first time overseas I was sent to Chu Lai and assigned to AVEL which, at that time was Avel North, fourth platoon. I got there in time to settle in just before the Tet Offensive. Tet was a thriller. Chu Lai came under an all out attack partially due to the fact that it was headquarters for the 23rd Infantry, the Americal Division. In addition to rockets, mortars and ground attacks, the ammo dump was hit causing an immense explosion. The first Counter Offensive Campaign involved shifting field operations further north. In support of that effort, AVEL moved to a position northwest of Da Nang at Red Beach known as Camp Viking.*



USS Albemarle in WW2

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*Our contingent was reformed as First Platoon, AVEL Far North and we were attached to the 58th Transportation Battalion. We built an electronics shop from bartered lumber and vans while living in tents set up in the sand. We took turns manning the shop and the green line that defined our perimeter. That's where I learned to use an M-60 air cooled, gas operated, 6.72 mm, tripod mounted machine gun and how to set up claymores with "this side facing the enemy". The Viet Cong threw lots of 122 's and mortars at us and from time-to-time would try to get through our perimeter.*

*After a few months, we made a midnight run to the Navy docks in Da Nang and traded some AK-47's for a deuce and a half load of plywood and dimension lumber which we used to build raised floors for our tents. Right outside each tent we built bunkers out of corrugated steel half pipe covered with sand bags. I hoped I would never again have to fill so many sand bags.*

*My second time around I landed at Tan Son Nhut and went directly to the control tower where I asked the first controller I saw to call the Corpus Christi Bay, which was anchored off Vung Tau, and have them send a chopper to pick me up. The controller looked at my spec 5 patches and snorted "Who do you think you are, CIA?" I knew of course that everyone who landed there went through personnel and had their orders changed to what ever the current needs were so I wasn't offended when the controller told me to go back downstairs and wait for orders along with everyone else. I just showed him a copy of my orders which had bold face red lettering across the bottom saying these orders cannot be changed. "Make the call" I said perhaps a little sternly, so he did - probably expecting to be told that someone must be pulling his leg. Imagine his surprise when he heard a voice over the radio telling him to advise the specialist that we will pick him up ASAP. I heard the second controller whisper "He is CIA". That is how I got to the Army's ship. The men of the First Transportation Battalion - Seaborne (The First and the Finest ) were like so many others who were assigned one by one. Consequently, there was a constant turnover of personnel. I made a few good friends and I never met anyone that I didn't like but I never made any lasting relationships*

*Life on board was nothing like life on the beach. The bench work was the same; hours and hours of multi meter testing and o-scope troubleshooting and soldering components followed by final performance tests. That went on 12 hours a day, seven days a week but we were never interrupted by mortars or rockets and we had no guard duty. We did have a mess hall that served high quality meals made to order and served around the clock. That was a good thing because I got assigned to second shift where I had lunch from 2400 to 0100 and dinner at 0800. During the day I slept in a canvas rack with a comfortable, clean mattress which was a far cry from the wooden hooches in Chu Lai or the tent in Red Beach. The nicest amenity was the private shower with endless hot water. We had no shower when we first arrived at Red Beach. After a while, the 58th put up a wooden shower with a water bag warmed by sunlight. The most difficult thing for me was how restricted we were on the ship. There was literally no where to go. There were some 430 people on board most of whom were enlisted men in crowded living quarters and most of the ship was divided into shop areas or tons of ballast holds. When the Albemarle was converted into a FAMF, it became very top heavy because two landing pads had been added to the superstructure - one fore and one aft. The rear pad also had two large cranes for lifting choppers and a heavy duty elevator for lowering choppers into the shops bay area. Therefore many of the areas below decks were filled with concrete to keep the ship upright.*

*Working second shift on the Corpus Christi Bay had its benefits. I was the senior E-5 on nights so I received and logged in all the equipment that came from shore and placed all the tested units back into stock. I soon learned that much of the stuff that came to us was battle damaged. Any thing that had bullet holes in it or crash damage that came in on a single work order I broke down into modules. Then I wrote new work orders on the modules that I thought were fixable and threw the rest overboard into Cam Ranh Bay.*



*Second shift in the radio shop was also a great time and place for music, loud rock and roll music. We heard a lot of Jimi Hendrix, Creedence Clearwater, Stones and Eric Clapton. We also got a lot of work done. Our productivity numbers grew rapidly largely due to the new way that I handled incoming repairs. Producing good productivity numbers helped us qualify for shore leave. Getting ashore was very important because even if you never were assigned to a military ship, you probably know that the two worst rules at sea are no booze/ no women. The Navy has since changed that latter rule and the former rule always was subject to a Captain's store which he would allocate for rare celebrations. But, in the pre-1970 culture those opportunities were limited to shore. Several times we were permitted ashore in small groups. We made the round trip in WW II type landing crafts while officers went by chopper. Once, I had the great privilege of being invited to an AVEL beach party. Many steaks were grilled, and many more beers were consumed. I even got advice from one of the old heads on where I could meet some humans with two X chromosomes. Another advantage of shore leave was that I was able to ship a couple of bottles of bourbon to the radio shop in boxes labeled electronic equipment which was convenient because (as I mentioned) I was the specialist who received those shipments.*

*Recently, I got a visit from one of my old shipmates. We got to reminisce a bit and tell tales on each other to our wives. It also brought back memories of taking .45cal target practice off the ship's fantail and playing drums deep in one of the below sea level holds where no one could hear our amateurish efforts. However, I can report that all-in-all, with the exception of personal safety, I much preferred being on the beach. I also owe a nod to my friend Lonnie, the one who came to visit recently. Lonnie got a Bronze Star while we were assigned to the Corpus Christi Bay. He had been a certified dive instructor as a civilian. We learned near the end of our tour that somehow or other a line had become fouled in one of the two screws that propelled the ship. So tightly fouled that when the ship's Master tried to get the ship under way, the screw became bent. A call went out for experienced divers and Lonnie answered the call. He and two other divers were able to free the tangled line. However, in the process Lonnie sustained a gash on his left thigh in shark filled waters.*

*The Corpus Christi Bay was taken out of service in 1973 and berthed in ready reserve status at Corpus Christi, Texas. It was struck from the Naval Vessel Register on 31 December 1974. On 17 July 1975 the ship was sold to Brownsville (Texas) Steel and Salvage, Inc. for scrapping. The ship is long gone but the memories and the spirit of the men who served so closely together live on.*

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### **Wreaths Across America**

This past December 19 hundreds of volunteers placed thousands of wreaths on the headstones of veterans in honor of their service. Their aim is to ensure that every veteran is remembered and that their contributions are never forgotten. The organization behind that effort is Wreaths Across America. Their mission is described as: Remember; Honor; Teach. That last mission, the teaching part, is a generational effort to ingrain in society the value of freedom, to hold as necessary the belief that freedom is not free and that the cost of freedom is measured by the time, effort and lives of those who have served in the military. A Christmas wreath seems particularly poignant when you think of how many Christmas Holidays veterans have spent away from home especially those veterans who lived one or more Christmas Days in a combat zone, in harms way, on a day that is meant to celebrate peace on earth.

“Welcome Home!” That is the way that Vietnam veterans greet each other. Every one of them knows the feeling of being away from home at Christmas and of not being honored for their service; at least not until much later in life. Remember \* Honor \* Teach is a mission that can erase that feeling.

Remembering those who are gone and honoring their memory is something to which every veteran is duty-bound. Granted, each veteran does that in his or her own way. Planting wreaths on headstones is only one way to remember and honor veterans but it is a powerful way because it directly involves volunteer activity, it involves corporate participation, it involves visible signs and it leads by example.



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There is an additional facet to Wreaths Across America. One part of their effort includes “pairing”. That is when someone donates a wreath for a volunteer to place in a veterans’ cemetery they are able also to dedicate a wreath in honor of a living veteran. A living veteran who receives such a wreath is notified of the name(s) of those who sent them the wreath along with a message like “...thank you for your service”. All by itself that message can sometimes sound overused but when there is something tangible attached to it, suddenly it becomes more important, more personal, and more welcome. So, if by chance, you were to receive a Christmas wreath next year festooned with your service flag and the American flag, you may find your chest fill with pride at the thought of your own service to country and your heart may swell with the gratitude of knowing that your countrymen and women do remember, they do respect you and they do want you to know that you are welcome home.

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### **Neil Sheehan Dies at 84; Author and Times Reporter on the Pentagon Papers**

His exhaustive coverage of the Vietnam War also led to the book “A Bright Shining Lie,” which won a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

Neil Sheehan, the Vietnam War correspondent and Pulitzer Prize-winning author who obtained the Pentagon Papers for The New York Times, leading the government for the first time in American history to get a judge to block publication of an article on grounds of national security, died on Thursday at his home in Washington. He was 84.

Susan Sheehan, his wife, said the cause was complications of Parkinson’s disease.

Mr. Sheehan, who covered the war from 1962 to 1966 for United Press International and The Times, was also the author of “A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam,” which won a National Book Award and a Pulitzer in 1989. Reviewing it in the Times, Ronald Steel wrote, “If there is one book that captures the Vietnam War in the sheer Homeric scale of its passion and folly, this book is it.”

Intense and driven, Mr. Sheehan arrived in Vietnam at age 25, a believer in the American mission. He left, four years later, disillusioned and anguished. He later spent what he described as a grim and monastic 16 years on “A Bright Shining Lie,” in the hope that the book would move Americans finally to come to grips with the war.



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“I simply cannot help worrying that, in the process of waging this war, we are corrupting ourselves,” he wrote in The New York Times Magazine in 1966. “I wonder, when I look at the bombed-out peasant hamlets, the orphans begging and stealing on the streets of Saigon and the women and children with napalm burns lying on the hospital cots, whether the United States or any nation has the right to inflict this suffering and degradation on another people for its own ends.”

Mr. Sheehan’s readiness to entertain the notion that Americans might have committed war crimes prompted Daniel Ellsberg, a former Defense Department analyst who had turned against the war, to leak the Pentagon Papers, a secret government history of American decision-making on Vietnam, to him in 1971. The papers revealed that successive administrations had expanded U.S. involvement in the war and intensified attacks on North Vietnam while obscuring their doubts about the likelihood of success.

At 7,000 pages, the leak was the largest disclosure of classified documents in American history up to that point. After the third day of The Times’s coverage, the Nixon administration got a temporary injunction blocking further publication. The Supreme Court’s ruling 17 days later allowing publication to resume has been seen as a statement that prior restraint on freedom of the press is rarely justified. The Times won a Pulitzer, for public service, for its coverage by Mr. Sheehan and others.

## THE SILENCE

I remember a Silence, once,  
When the guns ceased to roar...  
But, alas, that silence had  
nothing to do with the  
ending of a war.

It was but a brief cease fire,  
a traditional holiday truce,  
while we sang Ancient Songs  
of Peace...

and decorated a spruce.

The next day, the guns were  
back in full-throated thunder;  
the peace celebrating a Sacred Birth  
was gone – completely ripped asunder.

No more blessed Silence, Old Son,  
no more gentle talk of love.  
Death stalked gleefully on every side,  
and swooped down from above.

You know it don’t mean nuthin’  
My Man, so saddle up and be brave...  
The only Silence that lasts long here  
is the Silence of the Grave.

September 14, 2007 by Thurman P. Woodfork

IN-COUNTRY



SHEDDING A LITTLE LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT!

IN-COUNTRY



GETTING THE “PICK OF THE LITTER!”

## ALL AVEL REUNION 2021

Join us at LZ Virginia Beach!

THE REUNION IS ON!

The dates have not been decided yet. Your input is appreciated.  
It will be in September or October. Same venue that was planned for 2020

*Reservation info to follow*

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## NEW AVEL, AVIONICS AND VIETNAM VETERANS REGISTERED

**Detering, Steven (SP4)**

23620 RD H SW

Mattawa, WA. 99349

509-840-4901

*185th Maintenance Contact Team, Phu Loi: 1971-1972*

[detering@smwireless.net](mailto:detering@smwireless.net)

MOS: Heavy Equipment Maintenance

Comments: Our shop was at the south east end of the runway on the east side.

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### TAPS

None Submitted

Have you or anyone in your family had COVID?

Let us know you had it and how you are doing.

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### PHOTOS

The following have submitted photos in the Non-Avel section

Gene Brinson: 34th General Support Group

Roseann Johnson: Donut Dollie

Steve Detering: 185th Maintenance, Phu Loi

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### CHANGE OF ADDRESS/EMAIL/PHONE

Phil Lilley (Avel Central): New address, 13844 Greenfield Ave., #354, Maugansville, MD 21767

Bob Medico (Avel Far North) corrected email: [bem125@aol.com](mailto:bem125@aol.com)

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#### Avel Central Golf Shirts

Several people have expressed an interest in these shirts.

I will be re-ordering.

They cost about \$15.00 plus postage.

If you are interested let me know,

I will send you info on colors.

[jmccabe51@gmail.com](mailto:jmccabe51@gmail.com)

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