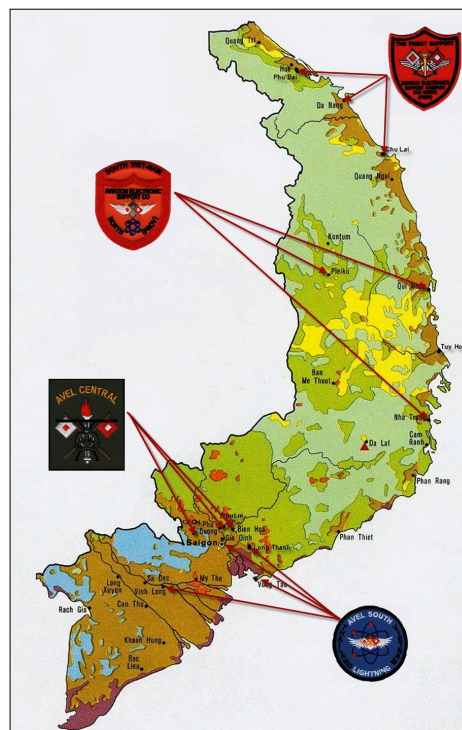


AVEL VIETNAM

Newsletter - June/July 2020

Coming Home



HELEN TENNANT HEGELHEIMER In 1966 and '67 she was a flight attendant for World Airways, one of the civilian airliners that ferried U.S. troops in and out of Vietnam. (*From the book PATRIOTS: The Vietnam War remembered by all sides by Christian G. Appy*)

I don't remember any of the guys on the Vietnam flights ever giving me a bad time. They were very respectful. Our real job was to distract them at all costs, to get their mind away from where they were going. If that meant flirting with them a little bit, so what? It never did go over the line. But the captain could get away with just about anything. For instance, we were required to wear girdles, so if the captain came up behind me and slapped me on the butt he'd say, "Girdle check." Most of the pilots were World War II or Korean War veterans. I thought they were ancient and didn't want anything to do with them.

Going over, there were usually two legs—Travis Air Force Base to Japan, and Japan to Vietnam. From California to Japan the troops did a lot of letter writing. Guys would ask me, "Is this a good letter? If you received this, would you wait for me?" At first I read the letters, but they really pulled at your heart, so after a while I would just pretend to read them and say they were perfect. There were always some chatty guys who wanted to talk and if we had any special unit guys—Green Berets or Airborne Rangers—there was a lot of bravado. They spoke proudly of their training, how difficult it was for them not to get "washed out." Over time I realized they weren't really trying to impress me as much as they were trying to convince themselves their training would help them. These were boys destined for combat and they had been told in training what their expected mortality rate was. I remember an air force Blue Beret actually told me they were trained to die. He didn't expect to ever go home.

But most of the guys were really pretty quiet. They asked us for alcohol and we said, "If the military wanted you to have that they would have put it in the contract." Since the war I've had a lot of vets tell me they were served alcohol, but I don't think so. Maybe the policy changed later in the war, but sometimes people's memories do strange things.

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Don't forget to join us on Facebook. Search for the group: AVEL Vietnam.



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When we got to Yokota Air Force Base in Japan we had a crew change. So after a layover, I'd get on another plane with a group of guys I hadn't met who had already been on the plane for twelve hours. We had to kind of feel out the mood. By then they were usually very quiet. It was five hours to Vietnam and five hours back. We called this the Vietnam turnaround. We'd go in and out with minimal ground time. Sometimes we had F-4 Phantoms escort us in. All of a sudden they'd just appear, right on our wingtips, and come all the way down with us. It was an absolutely gorgeous sight. We'd touch down and they'd pull up. But they didn't escort us every time so you wondered what was going on down there to make them appear. The guys would always ask and we'd just tell them the F-4 pilots wanted to show off.

I especially remember when we came in at night. That's when you saw the tracer rounds [chemically treated to emit a bright color when fired]. I was so naive I didn't realize tracers were live rounds. I don't know what I thought I was seeing—maybe target practice or fireworks. Who knows? Only years later did some veteran tell me I'd been witnessing actual firefights, that the red tracers were ours and the green tracers were theirs. I said, "Who in this world sits down and says, you're going to have this color and you're going to have that color?"



It was the senior stew's position to be at the top of the ramp when the men got off in Vietnam. But when we were about two hours out she would usually ask for a volunteer to take the forward door. All you had to do is stand at the door and say good-bye, but nobody wanted that job. It's nothing disparaging about the other gals, but many just couldn't do it. I'd always take the forward door and I was good at it. I never said "good-bye" or "good luck." I would shake their hand, look them in the eye, smile, and say, "See you later." Sometimes I'd say, "See you in twelve months." They really wanted somebody to look at them.

At the top of the ramp was the world, at the bottom of the ramp was the war. I saw eyes full of fear, some with real terror. And maybe this sounds crazy, but I saw death in some of those eyes. At that moment, at the top of the ramp, I was their wife, their sister, their girlfriend, and for those troops who had no one else—and there were many—I was their mother. That was the most important thing I've ever done. I can't imagine doing anything more important than to nudge a troop into war. If he wasn't lucky, I was nudging him to his death with the best "It will be okay" smile I could conjure up. I don't think there was one of us who did not want to keep them on the plane. That's why some of the girls were back in the bathrooms crying. They couldn't stand to watch them leave. We were very aware we were sending them to war and that some would never come back. Therein lies the guilt. I've spent a lot of time wondering if instead of distracting them I should have warned them. I've been assured by veterans that there was nothing I could have said. I mean, imagine some stewardess saying, "Hey you guys, listen, this is really going to be rough." For a long time I felt guilty, but I still think it's the best thing I've ever done, the most unselfish. I just thought they deserved to have someone from home stand there and be as strong as they were.

We never showed any emotion in front of the troops but we sure drank a lot when we got back to Japan. We substituted booze for crying. There were an awful lot of guys who said, "I don't have anybody to write to. Will you write to me?" You could pretty much tell whether they were pulling your leg or not, so my roommate and I wrote to a lot of them. We'd also go to the local liquor store when the new issue of Playboy arrived and buy up the entire supply. Then we'd have this mass mailing night sending Playboy magazines to these guys in Vietnam.

I've heard stories about guys cheering when the plane took off from Vietnam, but I don't remember any cheering. When the plane lifted off, I could see right down the aisle from a seat in the back. There might be one or two hands that reached across the aisle to shake hands. But it was quiet. Pretty soon the captain came on and said, "Gentlemen, we've just cleared Vietnam airspace." It still gets to me. So then it was as if everyone on the plane exhaled. But they still didn't cheer.

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On the way back we walked down the aisle looking to see which ones might want to talk and which ones you ought to leave alone. You'd just started by asking, "Where you from?" But we never asked them anything about what they did in Vietnam and I don't remember anybody ever saying anything to me about it. I clearly remember thinking, these guys are not going home to their girlfriend and that '55 Chevy they had been working on. Their youth was gone and it showed. You absolutely saw a different look in their eyes on the way home.



There were guys who came up to me and said, "I need to talk because I want to practice. I'm afraid I'm going to swear in front of my mother when I get home." So they'd talk and every other word was a swear. I wouldn't flinch. I'd just say, "Don't worry, you'll be okay." "No," they said, "I can just see me sitting down to dinner and the first word out of mouth is fuckin' this or goddamn that." These boys grew up the same way I did in the fifties. We attended church, we understood right from wrong. I believe they did things in Vietnam that were totally against everything they were brought up with and I'm not really talking about the killing. I'm thinking about those other things that happen to young men in a war—drinking, and maybe drugs, and contact with girls. So they weren't just afraid of swearing in front of their mothers; they were afraid their mothers would be able to tell everything they had done in Vietnam. I think this was a big reason why so many veterans just shut down and wouldn't talk about the war to anyone except someone else that had been there.

They came home to a world that was very different, even just twelve months later. Flying in, some guys asked, "How bad are the antiwar demonstrations?" That's the hardest question I've had to answer in my life. I'd say, "They're bad." There were often protesters at the gates outside Travis. I had to tell these boys that had just served their country to get out of their country's uniform as soon as they could. If they weren't wearing their uniform then maybe they wouldn't be targeted by the protesters. I didn't like the antiwar movement then and I haven't changed my mind today. It just seemed like the protest movement targeted the soldiers more than they did the policy makers—making it seem as if all the soldiers had gotten together one afternoon in a bar and decided to go commit some sort of crime against the people of Vietnam.

They came home so quickly, they had no time to adjust. Some men had just gotten out of combat a few hours before they got on the plane. Before a meal service, we'd make sure everyone was awake. We always had to be very careful about waking these guys. If you touched them, they'd wake up defending themselves—arms flying all over the place. We managed to hold them down until they realized where they were. It only took a second and we always smiled. They always apologized. "Oh ma'am, I'm sorry, I didn't hurt you, did I?" We'd try not to make a big deal out of it.

Every time we arrived at Travis Air Force Base I was disappointed. I had grown up with World War II movies and everybody had a band or something to welcome them home. At Travis there was absolutely nothing. It was just me at the bottom of the ramp. An ungrateful nation let some twenty-three-year-old stewardess welcome these guys home. That was their only greeting.



Warrant Officer confuses unit by showing up for PT

(I apologize to all our Warrant Officers but I found this funny)

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Members of the 470th Military Intelligence Brigade at Fort Sam Houston have expressed concern and confusion following an event early Thursday morning. A newly assigned warrant officer showed up for PT and worked out with the troops. Later that same day, the same warrant officer could be found working at his desk.

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"I was pretty confused when I noticed him standing behind the formation," said First Sgt. Michael Johnson, Headquarters Company First Sergeant. "He followed the commands and fell in with the rest of the unit for PT."

The enlisted soldiers weren't the only ones to take notice of this strange behavior; several other warrants also assigned to the 470th MI BDE engaged with the soldier, Chief Warrant Officer-3 Jerry Mickhead, to express their concerns. By the end of the day, they had issued Mickhead a letter of reprimand for "Continuously showing up to work, each and every day, and for showing up to morning formations." The letter was entered into his official record and will remain there until he can go into his file and remove it at his leisure.

"It's strange to go looking for Chief and find him at his desk," said Sergeant Taylor Lewis, a military intelligence analyst who works with Mickhead. "He's usually working, and often looks busy. He even stopped what he was doing one time and showed me how to knock out some good Army training before helping me finish my task for the day."

"That's when I knew something was wrong."

When Mickhead was asked for comment at his desk after 1600, he shrugged and said he needed to get back to work. Shortly after he was contacted, Mickhead was taken in for study at the Warrant Officer Candidate School at Fort Rucker, AL, where he once again showed up for formation and did PT with his unit the following day.

Perrin AFB Museum opens new Vietnam exhibit



DENISON, Texas (KTEN) — The Perrin Air Force Base Historical Museum reopened this week, highlighting a new exhibit to memorialize the Vietnam War.

Museum volunteer Mel Carruth said it's one of the largest displays they've ever put together. "This is a tribute to the fighting soldiers, airmen, Marines, and sailors that were there," added Vietnam vet and volunteer Dale Howard. "They were unsung. It was a shame what those people went through."

An immense amount of emotion is poured into a display that volunteers said is meant to take people back to that point in history.

"We want people to come out and see it and relive what it was like," Howard said. "You're in a little small space that shows what it was like in the Vietnam War."

Army Sgt. Jimmy Burchfield, who died during his first patrol, was a Whitewright, Texas, native. His family heard about the display and donated his uniform. Howard dedicated the memorial to Burchfield and other Grayson County residents who lost their lives in Vietnam.

Any veterans of the conflict who visit the museum get to sign their name and leave their mark on the map.

The Perrin Air Force Base Historical Museum is located at North Texas Regional Airport in Denison. It's open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

ALL AVEL REUNION 2020

Virginia Beach, Virginia

THE REUNION HAS BEEN CANCELLED THIS YEAR.
We will hopefully be back next year in Virginia Beach.

Many thanks to Pete Poirier who put in so much work planning this reunion.

NEW AVEL, AVIONICS AND VIETNAM VETERANS REGISTERED

Teague, Rich (SSG)

7380 Quiet Dr.

Anderson, CA, 96007

HHC 11th Combat Avn. Bn, 12th Avn. Group, Phu

Loi: 4 April 1968 to 4 April 1969

richteague@digitalpath.net

MOS: 35P40

Comments: I was transferred to Vietnam, from Germany where I was a Sgt. E-5, in charge of the radio operators and radio repair. I was assigned to HHC 11th Combat Avn Bn, 12th Avn Gp, 1st Avn Bde in Phu Loi as their Communication Chief, My responsibility was to supervise the Commo Center.

Cooper, Rob (SP5)

121 Pheasant Rdg.

Peachtree City, GA 30269

Avel Central, Bien Hoa & Phu Loi: Feb 1970-Nov. 1970

rrcoop@comcast.net

MOS: 35K20

Also served with: 203rd RAC

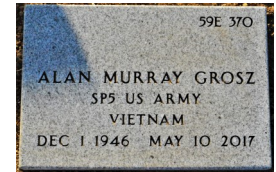
TAPS

Alan Grosz

AVEL South

Alan died on 10 May 2017

He was 70 years old



WEBSITE CHANGES

I have finally updated the AVEL VIETNAM website. Here are the changes:

Rosters: I updated all the rosters with new people and those we have lost

In Memoriam slide show/video: It has been updated and posted

Non-Avel Vietnam Photos: The Non-Avel Personnel button has a link to these photos

When We Came Home: A button was added in a shameful self-promotion of my book

Newsletters: A button was added featuring all the Newsletter I have done over the years

PHOTOS

Rich Teague submitted photos of his time at Phu Loi. *See Non-Avel Vietnam photos*

Chuck James also submitted some photos of his time at Phu Loi. *See Non-Avel Vietnam photos*

Pete Biancalana submitted a photo of his Signal School class photo. *See Signal School AIT Photos*

CHANGE OF ADDRESS/EMAIL/PHONE

Dennis Siebelt: (Avel Central)

New Address: 2016 SW 47 Ter., Cape Coral, Fl. 33914. 708-297-5971 siebelt@sbcglobal.net

Don Cook: 198th LIB Aviation Section

New Phone: (803) 543-8108

John Peacock: (Avel North)

New Address: 6957 Toland Drive, Melbourne, Fl 32940

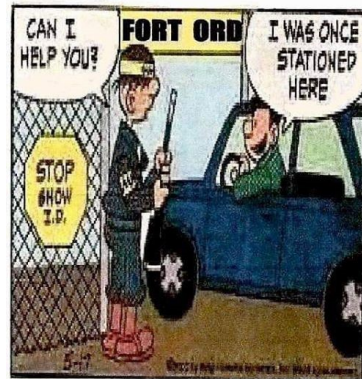
New Home Phone: (Land-Line) is: 1-321-735-8186. Cell Phone # 1-850-736-0931

Frank Anzaldua: (Avel Central)

New Address: 3905 Castle Valley Dr., Corpus Christi, TX 78410

Send your change of address and email to jmccabe51@gmail.com

Beetle Bailey



MORT WALKER



IN-COUNTRY



THE LAST NIGHT IN-COUNTRY JITTERS!"

IN-COUNTRY



WELL...THERE'S BEEN A CHANGE OF PLANS...



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