WINTER 2021

VBCMagazine

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HOW I BECAME AN ARMY INTERPRETER IN IRAQ

MY LIFE IN THE WWII ALLIGATOR NAVY

PACKING FOR A FIVE-DAY PATROL IN VIETNAM

REMEMBERING THE GIRL WHO SAVED MY LIFE

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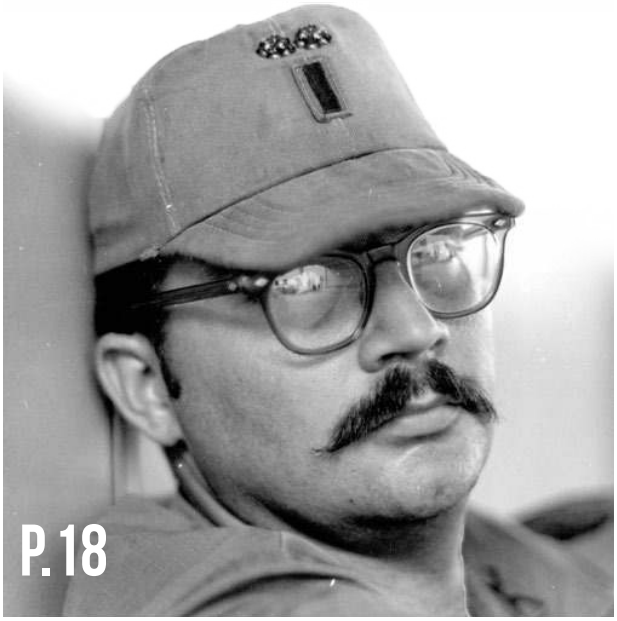

Cover: Ehab Al Akwari, Al Anbar, Iraq, after morning patrol, January 2008 (courtesy Ehab Al Akwari)

VBC Magazine is published quarterly by
The Veterans Breakfast Club, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that harnesses the power of storytelling in order to connect, educate, heal, and inspire.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Earlier this year, we realized the online programming we developed in response to COVID-19 could be used to expand the VBC's storytelling mission beyond the Pittsburgh region where we were born. Last month, we got word from the Pritzker Military Foundation on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library in Chicago that they wanted to support this effort with a two-part grant (see p. 23). We gratefully signed the grant agreement and, in doing so, converted an ambition into a promise. We're now committed, formally and in writing, to executing a national expansion strategy that had previously existed in concept only. Our plan includes hosting occasional in-person events in other cities and continuing to promote our online programs across social media. We also plan to hold in-person events in the Pittsburgh area that can be enjoyed and attended remotely by people across the country. As our Board President and Navy veteran, Mike Cherock, recently said, "The magic of VBC is the people. Everyone at a VBC event has the opportunity to participate and to connect, learn, heal and inspire. It's a community for veterans, but also for all citizens looking to celebrate and honor stories of service." Whether you join us online or in-person, in Pittsburgh or across the country, the VBC is life-changing.

Todd

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IN-PERSON PROGRAMS

All events begin at 8:30am ET. Free to attend. Charge for breakfast.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20: Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009) $15 with breakfast

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4: Comfort Inn (699 Rodi Rd, Pittsburgh, PA 15235) $20 with breakfast

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7: Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park 15102) $15 with breakfast

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15: Christ Church at Grove Farm (Event Barn) (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143) $15 with breakfast

ONLINE PROGRAMS

Check out upcoming guests and topics at veteransbreakfastclub.org/events

VBC HAPPY HOUR Monday nights at 7pm ET on Zoom; simulcasted to Facebook and YouTube. BYOB(everage). Veterans stories, conversations, special topics, and guests.

GREATEST GENERATION LIVE WWII ROUNDTABLE One Tuesday a month at 7pm ET; simulcasted to Facebook and YouTube. Conversations about all things WWII, including the stories of WWII veterans.

A VETERAN'S STORY WITH PETE MECCA
One Thursday a month at 7pm Eastern on Zoom; simulcasted to Facebook and YouTube. In-depth interviews with remarkable veterans of all eras, branches, and backgrounds.

COMING JAN. 5: VBC COFFEE HOUR
Wednesdays at 9am ET on Zoom; simulcasted to Facebook and YouTube. Just like our usual veterans storytelling breakfasts, but made virtual!
BYOB(reakfast)!

THE SCUTTLEBUTT

UNDERSTANDING MILITARY CULTURE

Hosted by Shaun Hall, a non-veteran learning about military culture from people who've lived it. Every week, veterans of different backgrounds join Shaun to talk about why they joined, where they served, and what they think about the military and their service now. Along the way, they discuss PTSD, the VA, military operations past and present, and take occasional forays into pop culture. Nothing is off limits, and no topic is too obscure.

You can download The Scuttlebutt wherever you get your podcasts or check us out on YouTube. It's easy to find us simply by visiting VBC's website: www.veteransbreakfastclub.org/scuttlebutt. Be sure to leave us a review or comment, and like, share, subscribe. You can contact Shaun at shaun@veteransbreakfastclub.org.

INTRODUCING VBC MEMBERSHIP!

Become a member of the Veterans Breakfast Club and help support our mission of sharing veterans' stories.

During our Vet-A-Thon celebration on November 11, we made an exciting announcement-- **we now offer VBC Membership!** This is a first for us. Since 2008, we've avoided a membership model in order to emphasize our openness to all, veterans and non-veterans of all ages and backgrounds.

We remain committed to such openness, but we've also been overwhelmed over the last year by the enthusiastic support we've received from so many who attend our events, read our magazine and email bulletins, and donate to our mission. **We want to acknowledge that support and create incentives for others to join our remarkable community**. Membership will help us sustain and broaden our programming, so we can schedule more events and share more content with more people.

Become a member today! Learn more p. 24

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SUPORT OUR MISSION

Help us continue to create communities of listening around veterans and their stories by donating to the Veterans Breakfast Club.

veteransbreakfastclub.org/donate.

HOW I BECAME AN ARMY INTERPRETER IN IRAQ

by Ehab Al Akrawi

Ehab Al Akrawi has shared his remarkable story with the VBC in-person at our breakfasts, as well as online on our *VBC Happy Hour* and, most recently, *The Scuttlebutt* podcast. Ehab served as a Linguist and Cultural Advisor to the US Army in Iraq from 2003 to 2012, when he came to the US on a Special Immigration Visa program. He then served six years as an infantry soldier in the PA National Guard and continues to advise the Department of Defense on Mideast matters. He earned an engineering degree from Robert Morris University and now works as a project manager for a Pittsburgh-based transportation company. Below is the story of how he got mixed up with the Army back in 2003.

Ehab in 2008 in the back of a military vehicle heading for a mission, Al-Anbar province

I was fifteen years old living with my family in Baghdad on the eve of the American invasion in March 2003. I wanted to join the Iraqi Army in the worst way, but my parents wouldn't let me. I was just old enough to remember Desert Storm in 1991, when we had escaped to my family's farm in Najaf, the ancient Shia capital 100 miles south of Baghdad. I stood agog on the roof with my father as the airplanes zoomed by, the bombs fell, and the cruise missiles whistled across the sky. We had only one TV channel, state-run, which thundered daily about the evil American enemy wanting to kill Iraqi children. I didn't question it and knew nothing about the world outside of Iraq.

But I did know American cars. My uncle had a garage that serviced them, and I became obsessed with these powerful-looking machines. Foreign magazines were forbidden, but I bought them on the black market just for the car ads. I cut out the pictures and threw the rest away. I knew all the classic sports car models, the 1964 GTO, the 1968 Shelby, the 1970 Chevelle, you name it.

These vintage cars were my gateway to American culture. I began watching black market American movies and started to pick up some English. I didn't study the language itself. But I was fascinated with the tone and swagger of American slang. Action heroes like Bruce Lee and Arnold Schwarzenegger, tough guys like Jack Nicholson and Nicholas Cage—they were my teachers.

I wanted to speak like they did. I practiced in our bathroom before our antique mirror. But I was never an action hero in my fantasies. Rather, I was a 45-year-old American businessman, flush with success.

Before the bombs started falling on March 19, 2003, my family took off for Najaf, as we had in 1991. Relatives soon began joining us unannounced. With no land lines, cell phones, or email, there was no way for them to let us know they were coming. Cars just began showing up. Soon, we had sixty-five men and dozens of women and children sheltering on our farm, many in makeshift shelters made from palms.

As the invasion took hold and the bombardments increased, crowds of people began fleeing Baghdad with no particular destination in mind. As they made their way down Highway 8, they'd see the cars and palm shelters on our property and figure, "Oh, this looks like a good place to stop."

We'd wake up in the morning to five more cars and stolen military trucks out our window. Before we knew it, a village of refugees had sprung up on our farm. There were hundreds upon hundreds of people. We couldn't turn them away, but we ran out of palm trees for building shelters.

The American 1st Armored and 101st Airborne Divisions captured Najaf on April 4, five days before Baghdad fell. I went with family members to the abandoned Iraqi military post nearby to seize supplies for our growing refugee camp. We grab some military tents, as well as food, kerosine tanks, gasoline, and other necessities.

Two days after setting up the tents, the US Army, thinking our farm was a resistance hub, sent helicopters to assault our camp. They didn't hurt anyone, but the rotor blades blew the tents apart. Pretty funny, in retrospect.

Then, some American soldiers arrived. I stared at them in awe. Iraqi soldiers looked like skeletons compared to these behemoths. I had never seen giants like these with bulging chests, big goggles, and tanks on their backs with hoses that reached to their mouths. One of the soldiers spit a strange brown mass on the ground. "What are these creatures?" I wondered. They looked like aliens.

Only later did I learn those muscles were Kevlar vests, the tanks camelbacks for hydration, and the wad of spit chewing tobacco.

I wanted to see more of these aliens, so my precocious friend Omar and I decided to venture into liberated Baghdad. It was a

An aerial view of the Al Salam Pressidential Palace in Baghdad, 2003

lawless place with no police, not yet violent but plenty of looting. For the first time, people were free. Saddam and his henchmen were gone. You could do anything. We wandered through Saddam's empty palace, which no one could ever go near when Saddam was in charge. For teenagers like Omar and me, it was exhilarating.

Americans swarmed the city and collected at checkpoints. We saw one and decided to approach. I was drawn to these aliens, but also terrified. I wanted to see them up close, but would they shoot me?

A friendly American soldier asked me if I could speak English. "Little," I said, trying to keep my Hollywood cool. We helped him translate as he talked with other Iraqis, and the soldier liked that. I eventually screwed up the courage to ask him what car he drove.

"A Honda Civic," he answered.

"Seriously?" I responded, thinking he was joking. I was sure he had a Camaro or Thunderbird. No, he said, it's a Honda. He even opened his wallet and showed a picture of it. This guy had three photos in his wallet: wife, child, and car. These Americans, I decided, had the right priorities.

Omar and I translated at the checkpoint until it started to get dark. I was ready to go home, but the soldier asked if we wanted to go for a ride in their Humvee. Once again, I was scared, but I couldn't turn down the invitation. The Humvee was a colossus the likes of which I had never seen nor imagined. Omar and I rode in the back atop some duffel bags like celebrities as we paraded through Baghdad's dusty markets. People gawked at us as we went by.

They drove us to another one of Saddam's palaces.

"Take what you want," they said. Omar and I couldn't believe it. We spotted a gold-plated toilet. "Not for us," we said.

Instead, I grabbed a camouflage net and took it outside. There was a small man-made pond with huge fish the size of my leg swimming in the shallow water. Omar and I tossed in the net and pulled out four of the fish, enough to feed several families in our neighborhood in Baghdad.

Before we left, a Sergeant said, "Hey, thanks for helping us. Would you like a job? We can pay you."

"Umm, I don't know," I stammered.

Omar pulled me aside and said sternly in Arabic, "No, no, no, no. We are going to work for them."

"But what will my parents say?" I asked. "I'm not sure they will allow it."

"Why do they need to know?" responded Omar. "Don't tell them. There's no school, nothing else to do, and these Americans have a lot of money. I'm a great negotiator, and I'll make sure we get some of that money for ourselves."

I trusted Omar and gave him the go-ahead to begin negotiations.

"We can work for you," he announced to the Sergeant, "but we don't want to be paid hourly. We want a flat rate. Daily."

I had no idea what that meant.

The Sergeant smiled and said, "Ok, how much do you want?"

"Five," proclaimed Omar. "Five bucks a day."

And the Sergeant laughed, "You got it. You got the job." He couldn't stop laughing.

To us, five American dollars was a lot of money. You could change it for thousands of dinar and buy a lot of goods. But, now, I had second thoughts.

"Omar," I whispered in Arabic, "maybe we should have asked for seven."

We continued working informally for the Sergeant for a couple days until he approached us with some bad news.

"I can't hire you as official contractors of the United States Department of Defense because you are minors," he said.

"How old do you have to be?" I asked.

"Eighteen years old," he said.

"Well, I am eighteen," I affirmed.

The Sergeant squinted skeptically. "Didn't you say you were fifteen?"

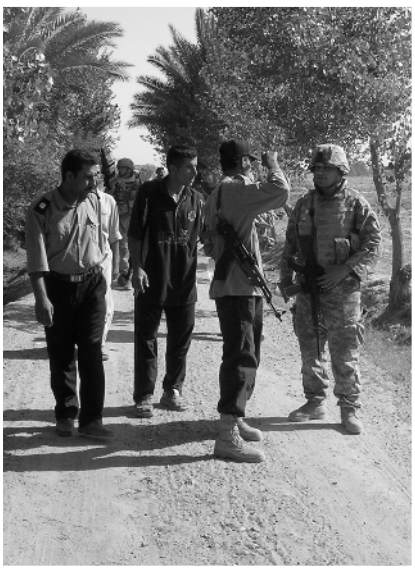
"No!" I asserted with as much umbrage as I could muster. "Here, take a look at this," I said, pulling out my Iraqi ID card.

"I can't read Arabic," said the Sergeant, glancing at the card.

"Well," I assured him, "it says I'm eighteen."

A smile appeared on his face. He looked at the card again. "Yeah," he confirmed, "it says eighteen."

After our first day of work as bona fide Cultural Advisors and Interpreters for the US Army, Omar and I went to a Baghdad market and bought fake IDs, just to make it official.



Ehab, far right, with tribal militia, Sons of Iraq, 2007, Al-Anbar province.

In Gratitude

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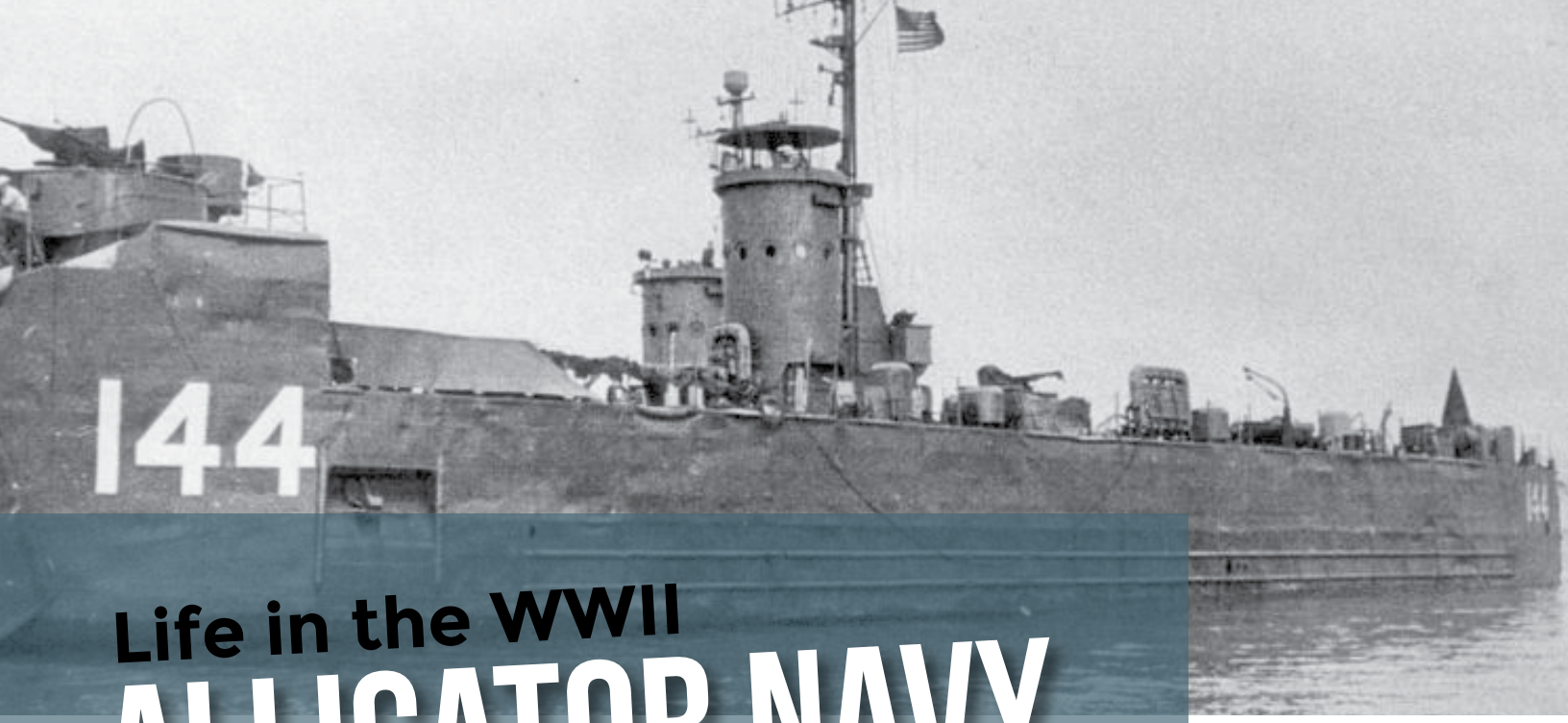

Life in the WWII ALLIGATOR NAVY

by Jim Kehl

To roll back Japan's Pacific island empire in World War II, the United States mass produced special ships to deliver troops to enemy-held beaches. This new amphibious fleet, an "alligator Navy," featured small, simple vessels with flat bottoms that could slide on and retract from sand, mud, and coral. Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) were the first and largest of these. The lesser-known Landing Ship Medium (LSM) was the LST's little sister. The US produced over 500 LSMs in the last two years of the war, and manned them with 35,000 officers and enlisted men. Jim Kehl served as an Ensign aboard the *LSM-144*. He wrote about his experiences in a masterful memoir, *When Civilians Manned the Ships: Life in the Amphibious Fleet During World War II*. Below is an edited excerpt about that life at sea—and at war—on a flat-bottomed ship.

Those who served in the Navy's new amphibious fleet during World War II were almost exclusively volunteers with no Navy background. Most of us had never been aboard a ship. Many had never seen the ocean.

I was among the volunteers assigned to an LSM, a ship about two-thirds the length of a football field (203.5 ft). Much smaller than an LST (by 125 ft.), the LSM was much faster, with a top speed of twelve knots unless assisted by a strong tail wind. Despite this modest rate of progress over the waves, it possessed the most powerful engines in the amphibious fleet. Designed with the same diesels as the destroyer escort, the LSM could never achieve the same speed because of its flat bottom, a condition necessary to facilitate beach landings.

Drawing only three feet at the bow and six and a half feet aft when empty, an LSM was a veritable cork unleashed to ply the oceans of the world. This shallow draft, although designed to facilitate landings, also served as part of an LSM's defense at sea. It was impossible to set a torpedo shallow enough to hit an LSM, but that did not stop the Japanese from trying. Several ships reported such attacks, with the torpedo passing underneath and harmlessly out to sea. A submarine offered a more serious threat if it surfaced. Its greater firepower permitted it to stand out of range of our guns, with the possibility of ultimately destroying us if it dared to remain exposed on the surface long enough to do so. Instructed in how to respond if surprised by a surfaced sub, we were advised to head toward it, ram it if possible. An enemy sub for an LSM was regarded as a good exchange.

Monumental casualties on the coral reefs of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands in late 1943 had been the determining factor in the Navy push for a new type of amphibious assault ship, one that in appearance suggested a deformed hybrid of all previous designs. This "ugly duckling" had a range of 8,000 miles without refueling, an ability to sustain both the crew and fifty assault troops for at least three weeks, and a tight turning circle.

Not emerging as a tested reality until after D-Day in Europe, the LSM became a uniquely Pacific phenomenon. It was an integral part of the strategy that landed ships on every major beachhead (Leyte, Luzon, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa) and that anticipated the invasion of the Japanese home islands.

The LSM's most distinctive feature—and object of much ridicule--was its cylindrical superstructure placed asymmetrically on the main deck starboard side amidships. One LSM sailor described his ship as a shoe box with a can mounted on it. More picturesque was the nickname given by sailors on another LSM: "Floating Shit House." Carrying that designation a step further, they designed a logo that was tastefully painted on the conning tower. It pictured a bathtub adorned by an outhouse and a miniature cannon.

To me, our ship looked like an oversized, old-fashioned bathtub submerged slightly above the feet with a periscope sticking up. The stern was squared off like the end of a tub that contains the fixtures. The bow, comparable to the curved back of its bathtub predecessor, was constructed with two hydraulic doors that swung open to expose a sturdy, steel ramp that could be lowered to land men and vehicles from the main tank deck onto the beach.

This awkwardly shaped, though highly functional, ship was the antithesis of what most of us expected when we joined the Navy. It defied the aesthetic, trim-lined image of Navy vessels pictured in our grade school history books.

Almost everyone assigned to LSMs suffered an inferiority complex to some degree. The smallness of the ship and the fact that few of us had been to sea before were major factors in shaping this attitude.

When most of us had enlisted, our understanding of the Navy was limited to books and movies that had exaggerated the role of the battle fleet—where we had expected to serve. Once assigned to the amphibious force, we lived in the shadow of the big ship Navy that we thought we had joined. The closest I came to that Navy was when I saw a single battleship, the New Jersey, under a full head of steam, passing the *144* off the coast of Samar. The sight was majestic and awesome—like a portable fortress gracefully plying a path before our eyes toward an unknown rendezvous. Afterward I could only reflect on our less glamorous duty.

Unlike larger ships, those of the amphibious fleet didn't even have names—only numbers. If the term "identity crisis" had been in vogue at the time, a therapist would undoubtedly have diagnosed me with having a terminal case.

Ensign James Kehl

Although personnel on landing ships enjoyed many advantages not shared by those pulling duty on larger ones, our morale was acutely affected by the lack of certain amenities. We did not possess a single Coke machine, were issued no movie projector, and could boast of no full-scale Small Stores (where clothing, candy, tobacco products, and toiletries could be purchased).

For the most part, we were at the mercy of Navy bases and larger ships for such conveniences. When invited aboard big ships, men from amphibious ships such as ours tended to raid the Small Stores until they resembled Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard. To preserve goodies for their own crews, large ships were sometimes reluctant to entertain predators like us aboard. When they shut the door to us, rumblings of second-class citizenship temporarily echoed through our ship until our attention was drawn to something more substantive.

Eventually, we realized that other sailors had it even worse. We learned, for example, that PT Boats didn't even have galleys and that their personnel were at the mercy of other ships for all hot meals. Inviting a PT crew to a hot meal aboard the *144* was good for our morale. When we complained about being deprived of a Small Stores outlet, we could recall that PTs lacked our dining facilities.

A deficiency that was particularly vexing to me was the absence of a motorized small boat to reach the shore from the distant anchorage where we were invariably assigned in almost every port. Our oar-powered wherry was almost useless. The distances that we had to travel in most harbors were generally far beyond the range of a rowboat. Picking up mail or supplies or sending the crew on liberty always placed us at the mercy of the seemingly random schedules followed by the boats servicing the harbor. Nothing seemed to be a greater waste of time than waiting for the harbor boats, but the Navy brass probably thought we had nothing more constructive to do at that time, and they were right.

Thus, with their uncomely appearance, logistical warts and all, LSMs came to dot Pacific harbors and beaches and, along with other amphib units, helped to push the war ever closer to the Japanese homeland, but it was one rough ride all the way.

* * *

LSM-144's most relentless enemy was the sea. At the outset, we lacked confidence in our ocean-going cork's ability to stay afloat as normal corks always do. We doubted that it could withstand the punishment that the sea was capable of meting out. With every tempest, the battle was joined anew, and on every such occasion throughout its twenty-one months of naval service, the *144* rose to the challenge by refusing to surrender to the worst storms the ocean could brew.

During our first voyage (from Charleston to Norfolk), the LSM proved that it was a worthy combatant for the boisterous waves that crashed across its bow.

A more crucial question was: Could the crew survive the duel between ship and sea? That first trip served notice that we had not embarked on a tranquil cruise, because repeatedly the two went toe-to-toe, and members of the crew absorbed body blow after blow in the struggle to retain control of both the ship and our physical well-being. Gradually we bowed to the evidence that the ride was destined to be rough, but our worst projections did not hint that we would be compelled to fight the weather for a large portion of our 50,000-mile pilgrimage at sea.

Engineering calculations revealed that an LSM was constructed to roll left and right through a larger arc than any other ship of the fleet and not capsize. At times our hope of survival rested squarely on faith in that statistic. Confronted with no tangible proof that the next wave would not cast us into Davy Jones's locker, we were little more than hostages when the Goliath of the sea and our technological cork squared off in their periodic duels. In typhoons, ship-handling was almost an exercise in futility because the sea dictated course and speed. Although no one was measuring, the LSM rolled through a thirty-degree arc, but those experiencing the ride swore that range was closer to sixty-eighty degrees. To make the ride even more jarring, the LSM was engineered with a snap roll—meaning that in high seas the ship moved from an extreme right to an extreme left position and back every eight to ten seconds. That jerked the crew to and fro with sickening regularity for as much as five continuous days—an effective, but not prescribed, means of promoting weight loss for the unwilling participants.

When I arrived in the Chesapeake from Charleston, I thought that I had already lived three days longer than my stomach. On the return trip south from Norfolk, we encountered an even more punishing storm. From the continuous pounding that the ship absorbed from the waves, it sprung a leak between a fuel tank and the fresh water supply, and we couldn't pump water for drinking or for galley use without the taint of oil. At noon the next day the green beans that had been cooked in that water glistened with droplets of oil on every particle.

We all came to accept the premise that an LSM would stay afloat under the most hazardous conditions, but our faith wasn't strong enough to prevent us from backsliding from time to time. When Pacific winds blew with gale-like conviction, our faith was once again shaken to its foundations. The most vivid instance of my personal recanting occurred during a violent storm in which one of the normally cool-headed signalmen asked, "Mr. Kehl, do we jump clear the next time it rolls right?"

"Hold it," I advised, but I wasn't at all certain that the next roll was not going to be the ship's last.

On that fateful trip to Norfolk, we discovered that seasickness was the standard condition—as much a part of amphibious life as bow doors, flat bottoms, and beachings. In retrospect, I have concluded that the sufferers could be categorized according to three major stages: 1) fish-feeders 2) dry-heavers, and 3) old sea dogs.

On our ship, only the captain and the steward's mate qualified for old sea dog status. Violent seas brought behavior modification even to them, but they resisted vomiting more effectively. When the ship rolled violently, the captain became noticeably less talkative. The steward's mate, on the other hand, formed large sweat beads dotting his forehead. Otherwise, these two registered no outward ill effects.

Most of us advanced from the fish-feeding stage to dry-heavers over time. This apparently was a necessary stop before reaching the old sea dog plateau. We had a few who never progressed. In rough seas, one carried a bucket over his arm as he checked gauges and read meters throughout his four-hour watches. Determined to conquer the seasickness, he never complained, but others feared that his health would break if he continued to take the punishment. When the captain ordered his transfer to shore duty, he cried because he wanted to remain with the friends he had made aboard the *144*.

The dry-heaves stage was physical torture. The body retches but nothing is ejected. If an examination in later years had revealed that I had lost a kidney, lung, or two tonsils, I would have known immediately that the loss came during my months in the Pacific.

We all learned that the two most comfortable positions during a storm were on watch (out in the air) or lying flat in our bunks. Sailors would often go off watch, undress on deck, tuck their clothes under an arm, dash down two levels, and hope to hit their bunks before seasickness set in. The sea was so rough that, when they arrived, they had to tie themselves in with straps across the upper and lower parts of their bodies to prevent being tossed out by the ship's snap roll.

I can vividly recall lying in that position where my eyes could not escape the lettering on the pipes that traversed the compartment. On LSMs all exposed pipes were labeled (e.g., diesel fuel, fresh water, salt water), but the stencil used to identify the diesel fuel was in error. Diesel was spelled d-e-i-s-e-l, not only above my bunk, but also at approximately fifty locations throughout the ship. Having seen that blunder several thousand times, it became an ingrained image that proved difficult to erase. I venture to add that the same stencil compounded the same mistake on all fifty pipes of each of the more than one hundred LSMs commissioned at Charleston.

Our struggle to combat the sea peaked in 1945 when five typhoons struck the Okinawan area alone. We rode through them all. Fifty to sixty-five foot waves broke across our bow while seventy to ninety mile per hour winds whirled overhead. Going to and from the bridge under these conditions was a perilous venture that necessitated gripping the railing with both hands to prevent being tossed overboard by the winds.

Because of its flat bottom, an LSM lacked the power to cut through the waves. The alternative was to ride up each succeeding wave, with the bow actually rising out of the water until the ship lost its balance and slapped with a thud into the trough only to be picked up by the next wave. This procedure, repeated every couple of minutes with uninterrupted monotony until the storm abated, was accompanied by two distinct sounds: the splat of the flat bottom hitting the water after the ship lost its balance and the roar of the engines as the propellers spun free for the brief period that they were out of the water as the ship took a header into the next trough.

In a typhoon, even larger vessels were no match for the sea. Forced into such a challenge, the cruiser USS Pittsburgh had a 100-foot section of its bow sheared off. When calm returned, another ship sighted this section floating in the China Sea where it constituted a navigational hazard. Aware of this floating danger, that captain was able to secure a tow line to it and, in a clever moment, radioed his superior to report the accomplishment. His message read: "Sighted suburb of Pittsburgh; took same in tow." When we reached Guam, that "suburb" was lying on the dock, a graphic reminder that, rough as it was to ride, the LSM was a survivor, a sea-going cork that was not about to be sliced in half like less stormproof vessels.

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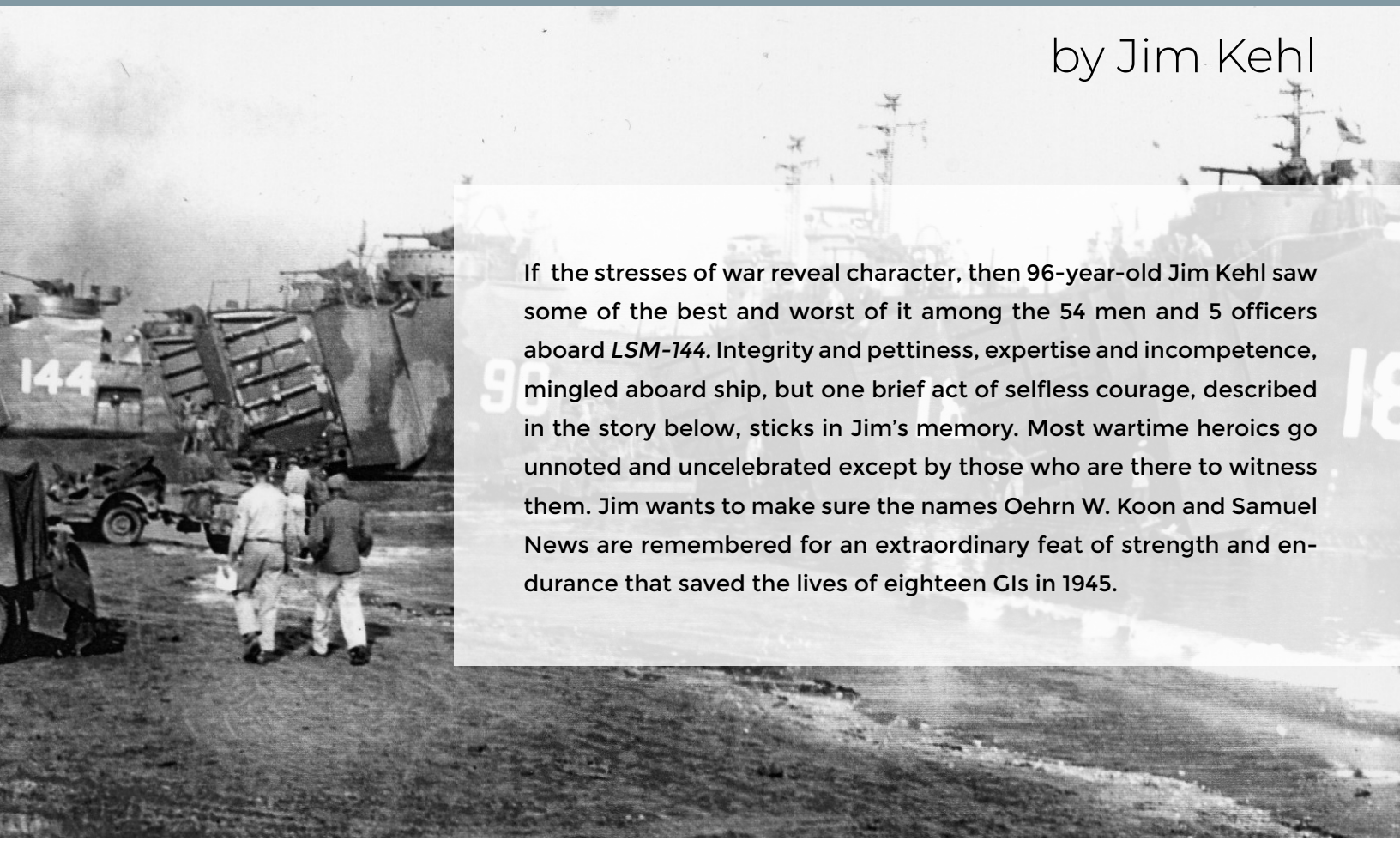
UNHERALDED HEROES OF *LSM-144*

by Jim Kehl



If the stresses of war reveal character, then 96-year-old Jim Kehl saw some of the best and worst of it among the 54 men and 5 officers aboard *LSM-144*. Integrity and pettiness, expertise and incompetence, mingled aboard ship, but one brief act of selfless courage, described in the story below, sticks in Jim's memory. Most wartime heroics go unnoted and uncelebrated except by those who are there to witness them. Jim wants to make sure the names Oehrn W. Koon and Samuel News are remembered for an extraordinary feat of strength and endurance that saved the lives of eighteen GIs in 1945.

On January 9, 1945, our *LSM-144* hit the beach as part of the first wave of the Invasion of Lingayen Gulf, an operation that landed 68,000 troops with General Walter Krueger's 6th Army in the northern Philippines. The landing was unopposed. Our little ship dropped off 5 tanks, 2 jeeps, 2 piper cubs, and 1 bulldozer, plus the 35 personnel to man this equipment.

For the remainder of D-Day, the *144* lightered cargoes and Army personnel from transport ships, anchored two to three miles offshore, to the beach. The next day our ship systematically continued its routine ship-to-shore service.

During that process all ships were notified of a Japanese retaliation to our presence. On the previous night Japanese "frogmen" swam out to American ships on the anchorage perimeter and attached explosive devices to ships' propellers. The devices were not powerful enough to damage the ships but did knock the propellers out of line and disabled the ships in the water.

As a result of the swimmers' attack, every commanding officer was instructed to station guards on all sides of his ship throughout the following night. The instructions ordered all guards to shoot anything (person, box, or other object) that moved in the water. Before the *144* could arrange for this special nighttime duty, it was summoned to make a late afternoon transfer of drums of fuel from a transport to the beach.

As soon as our ship was tied up alongside the transport, its booms began lowering 55-gallon drums of high-octane fuel onto our tank (main) deck. Less than an hour was required to cover the deck with 100 to 125 drums. At that point the transport's first mate asked if 100 to 125 infantrymen could be boarded to sit on the drums for the short trip to the beach.

With our captain's approval the GIs climbed down the rope netting on the side of the transport to take their seats on the fuel drums. They didn't expect to find their families' recliners, but the drum labels added an emotional discomfort to their physical inconvenience. This loading process proceeded smoothly. *LSM-144* was underway for the supposed 20-minute run to the beach, but almost immediately the ship's radio alerted us to an imminent Japanese air strike.

Navy procedure stated that all ships underway should anchor and not be caught on the beach under such dangerous conditions. The *144* anchored and waited for an all-clear signal before continuing to its destination. That signal was delayed for hours and remained in effect after nightfall.

All ships were ordered to make smoke. The process was simple: Oil was sucked from a drum via a rubber hose into a generator that converted the oil into a vapor. The vapor, in turn, was blown into the air at a rapid rate. The purpose of this technique was to create a blanket of fog over all vessels in the area so that individual targets were not detectable from the sky.

As darkness descended, our generator sputtered, and its engine turned menacingly red. Our passengers became duly anxious because they had been taught by their mothers to read the labels. Thus, they understood the potential contained in the fuel drums.

My battle station was at the stern, the location of the smoke generator. I called the bridge over our "party-line" phone system, that connected all critical points (e.g., bridge, engine room, stern, major guns), and requested permission to shut the engine down. The captain angrily rejected my request: "When I want smoke, I want smoke. I don't want excuses. I want smoke."

Without further comment the generator remained running. The captain was unaware of the magnitude of the conflagration he was risking. The fact that all of the oil was not being atomized caused the problem. Only part of the oil was coming out of the nozzle as fog. The remainder was blown into the air as an oily mist.

A light rain was falling at the time, and the wind was blowing the vapor across the stern where three of us were standing. In such a heavy atmosphere, the oily mist didn't rise, but sprayed a film on the deck, railings, stanchions (posts), on the equipment, and on our garments.

Under these conditions the engine sparked and exploded, creating a fiery cloud probably 40 feet in diameter. In the dark it appeared much larger to the GIs and sailors on deck.

Our Navy group was standing within the fire ball, and the film on our clothes was singed off as efficiently as lint could be brushed from a jacket. The oil on the metal surfaces burned off in 30 seconds. Two sailors were standing by with a pressurized fire hose and extinguished all flames within two minutes.

But those two minutes were a terrifying eternity. With no foxholes to dive into, some of the GIs on board accepted a watery option and jumped overboard. The GIs were unaware of the Navy directive for the night—to shoot anything that moved in the water.

To protect those who sought safety overboard, the captain immediately broadcast a message to all ships. Without resorting to any code, he stated that *LSM-144* had "survivors" in the water. As we later learned, a Japanese observation plane intercepted the captain's message and reported the sinking of *LSM-144* back to Tokyo. US monitors, in turn, picked up the Japanese report and, by the next day, a few of our sailors' families on the West Coast were told that their loved ones' ship was at the bottom of the sea.

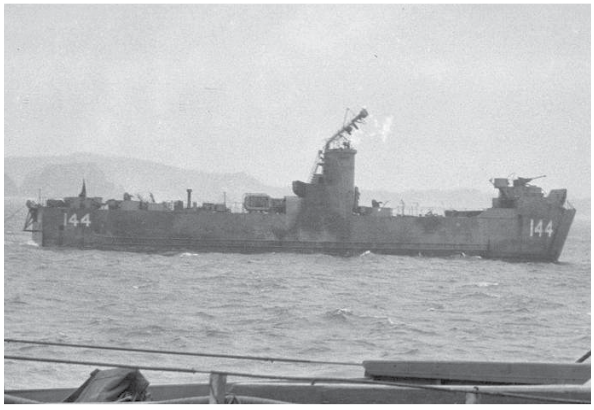
Meanwhile, back aboard the still-floating *144*, we scrambled to rescue the soldiers in the water. Recovery proved both tedious and strenuous. Our crew launched a life raft and tossed life preservers and ropes to those in distress. The GIs proved adept at making contact with these lifesaving aids. Those who grabbed the ropes and rings were readily pulled aboard. About a dozen others climbed into the raft or clung, dangling from its sides.

This group found it difficult to locate the oars. When they realized that the oars were under their feet, the soldiers were still unable to manipulate them. Not able to cope with the current, they drifted farther and farther from the ship into the black abyss.

We tried to drift with them by playing out our anchor cable to get closer to the raft. The captain hesitated to start the ship's engines to move more quickly. In the darkness he feared that one or more of the swimmers may have been close enough to be pulled under by the turning propellers. The current continued to control the men's destiny by carrying the raft farther away.

A second attempt to retrieve the group called for the use of our rowboat.

Rowboats were an anomaly in World War II. Thousands of motorized metal and wooden craft plied the waters in every port and on every beach the United States chose to occupy. But rowboats were almost nonexistent. One was assigned to our *LSM-144* at commissioning without a stated purpose. It was used only twice. The first time was the day before the Lingayen Gulf invasion. Two inexperienced sailors, Oehrn Koon from Point Marion, PA, and Sam News from Chester, PA, had rowed out to get a doctor from another ship to operate on one of our men who needed an appendectomy.



LSM-144 *in the Lingayen Gulf. Note the bent mast from a carrier collision.*

The same two seamen stepped forward again. Their plan was to row out to the GIs and instruct them on how to use the oars.

Darkness, current, and inexperience conspired against a simple rescue. The soldiers could not combat the current, not matter how good Oehrn and Sam's instructions were. The sailors did not give up. They attached a rope to the raft, ladened with at least a ton—literally—of wet GIs, and undertook the Herculean task of physically rowing this burden against the current, back to the ship.

The two sailors conquered the sea one foot at a time. The distance rowed is unknown, but any headway against the rushing waters was a miracle. Unable to relax for a moment lest the current take control, Oehrn and Sam arrived at the ship completely exhausted. Gripping the oars so tightly caused blisters to form and burst on their hands. Twisting on the seat while rowing so rigorously similarly blistered their backsides. Weighted down by a grateful ton of humanity, they had persevered for more than 30 minutes in their incredible effort against the forces of nature.

Two waterlogged Army officers, who were among those AWOL in the water, took a muster count back onboard. All 18 jumpers were present and accounted for.

LSM-144 treated the traumatized GIs to a shower, coffee, and clean underwear while their outer garments dried. They took our racks for the partial night that remained. In the morning, we served them breakfast.

Our captain, officious and petty by nature, was furious at the Army officers for jumping overboard without his, the captain's, order to do so. He insisted they be court-martialed, reasoning that the enlisted men wouldn't have jumped if they hadn't seen the officers do it. Ultimately, the captain realized he exercised no control over Army personnel and settled for simply being nasty to the men during their final hours aboard.

When we got our orders to land our cargo and personnel ashore, our GI guests were understandably happy to bid adieu to *LSM-144*. But that eventful night was remembered by both Army and Navy participants as long as they lived.

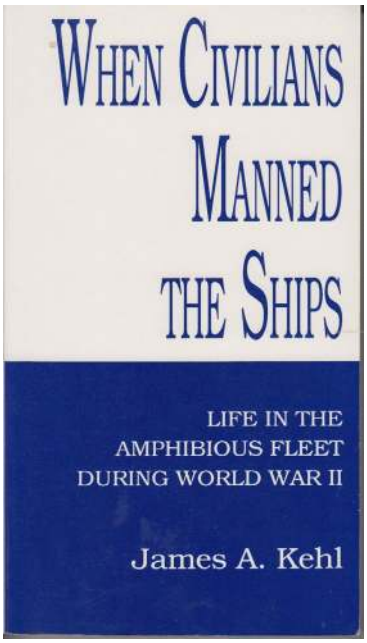
The heroes of the hour, Oehrn W. Koon and Samuel News, expected no official recognition and received none. Our captain failed to submit any documentation for citations. Each man served out the war dutifully (Sam was wounded off Okinawa) and returned home. They both lived long and good lives before dying in 2009.

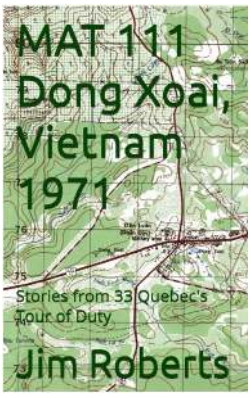
Oehrn used the GI Bill of Rights to go to school for masonry, electricity, and carpentry. During that education, he was recalled by the Navy for a brief deployment during the Korean War. Back home again, he became a master craftsman in his hometown of Point Marion, PA.

When I visited him years later, I discovered that he had also become a beekeeper. I left his home with a jar of "Koon's Pure Natural Honey." I've tapped it on several occasions for sore throats, and the jar remains in my refrigerator as a reminder of an admirable American life.

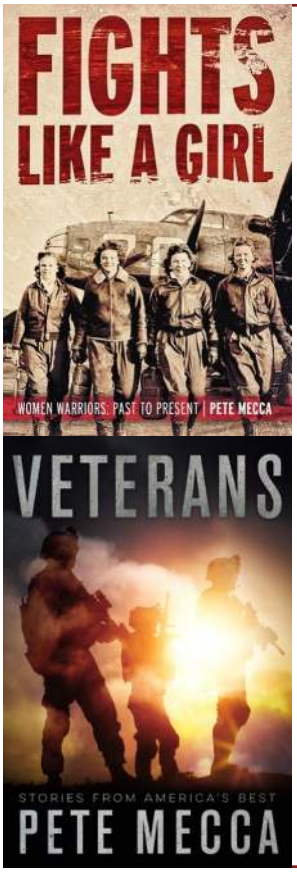
Sam News enjoyed an illustrious career with the Sun Oil Company before retiring to Florida where he became an active member of the VFW. Spending two years as chaplain of his local post, he drove disabled veterans to VA and doctor appointments and organized funeral honor guards.

Proud of his Navy service, Sam bought a special leather jacket with the words "*USS LSM-144*" embroidered in gold on the left side. Before he died, he told his wife that he wanted me to have the prized jacket. I now wear it with the same pride that Sam did. With the jacket and honey, I hold vivid remembrances that Oehrn and Sam left an unheralded legacy of which any American should be proud.





Jim Roberts served as the assistant team leader of Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) 111 in Vietnam. His memoir, *MAT 111 Dong Xoai, Vietnam 1971,* tells the up-close-and-personal story of his year fighting a war with the South Vietnamese. You can order the book through our website or through Amazon.com.



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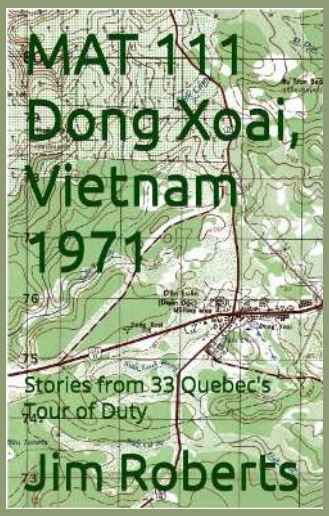
PACKING FOR A FIVE-DAY PATROL IN VIETNAM

by Jim Roberts

Jim Roberts served as the assistant team leader of Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) 111 in Vietnam. The adapted excerpt below is from his excellent memoir, *MAT 111 Dong Xoai, Vietnam 1971*. Jim titled this section "The Things We Carried (with apologies to Tim O'Brien)."



My first patrol in Vietnam was five-day trudge in the jungle along the Cambodian border in search of the Viet Cong who had attacked our base earlier. We didn't find any VC, but we did encounter continuous, driving rain, difficult terrain, thick jungle vegetation, plenty of leeches, and evidence of enemy presence here and there. It was a "training wheels" mission for me, an entrance exam to the Brotherhood of Combat. SFC L J Turner, my NCO and I worked with our Vietnamese counterparts, Captain Ky, a Regional Forces (RF) company commander and his XO. Our job was to act as liaison for any US support the RF might need: artillery fire, helicopter gunship support, and evacuation of wounded.

Captain Ky, his XO, SFC Turner, and I planned the operation. Critical to preparation is the packing of supplies. We had to pack and carry everything needed for Day 5 on Day 1. Resupply was not possible during the operation.

What follows is a description of what we carried on that operation, from the inside out.

Upon arrival in Vietnam, every advisor was issued five sets of olive drab boxer shorts and tee shirts. Most GIs in the jungle never wore the underwear because of "Jungle Rot," a horrible rash that develops in damp climates. Rot could also affect your feet. I doused my socks with Army issued foot power that was laced with fungicide before the operation.

My dog tags hung on a chain around my neck. Early in the war, GIs taped their tags together to keep them from rattling and giving away their positions. The Army solved the noise problem by issuing clear tubing for the chain and two rubber rings into which each tag could fit.

By the end of my tour, the inside of the tubing covering the chain holding my dog tags was green from some life form thriving in that environment. Also on the chain was my P-38, the standard issue can opener for C-Rations.

Jungle fatigues were the standard uniform – loose fitting trousers and jacket or blouse.

The telltale sign of a combat soldier in Vietnam was the color and wear of his fatigues. In Saigon at MACV Headquarters, soldiers walked around in fresh, often starched and pressed, deep green fatigues that hadn't been bleached by the sun. In the bush, fatigues rotted by the day, fading quickly to a light olive drab.

The theme of jungle fatigues was pockets. Pockets were everywhere, in the usual places, on the side of each thigh, and four on the jacket or blouse. The breast pockets were slanted for quick access by either hand. I carried my compass in the left breast pocket.

Figure 22. Wearing lightweight (nylon) load-carrying equipment.

The cord attached to it went around my neck. I carried my "whiz wheel" (a circular encryption table on a disc) with a cord that ran through the button hole of the pocket flap in my right breast pocket. In this same pocket I had a plastic bag that had the current SOI (Signals Operating Instructions), unused whiz wheel sheets, a small tablet, a lead pencil and a grease pencil, a signal mirror, a picture of my wife, and my Geneva Convention Identification Card.

Mosquito repellent and iodine tablets for treating drinking water were carried in my pants pockets.

A plastic laminated topographic map rested in the outer thigh pocket on my right side. A sheath knife was on the belt that held up my trousers.

Next came a bandolier with four magazines for my M-16. Each magazine, designed to carry twenty rounds of ammunition, only had eighteen. Experience dictated that putting twenty rounds into the magazine could weaken the spring that fed the bullets into the chamber causing the last round to improperly feed, jamming the weapon – something you did not want when you really needed that last bullet.

A bandolier was made from olive green cotton and initially carried bullets in reloading clips that allowed them to be quickly shoved into a magazine. Once they were removed, the bandoliers were used for many things. Each bandolier had a circular strap and a large strong black safety pin. I used it to pin the middle of the strap to the middle of the bandolier making something resembling a bra. I put the straps over my shoulders with the magazines against my chest. If, for some reason, I had to drop my pack and web gear, I would always have these four magazines with me.

What we called "web gear," the Army called a "TA-50." It consisted of a pistol belt with multiple brass ringed holes for attaching other items. Connected to the belt was a pair of suspenders with various attachment points that shifted the weight of the equipment carried on the belt to my shoulders. A small pouch with a snap was attached at shoulder level. This carried a camouflage green field dressing – a large bandage with long strips for securing the bandage over a wound. The pouch was upside down so when the pouch was opened, the dressing would fall out for immediate use.

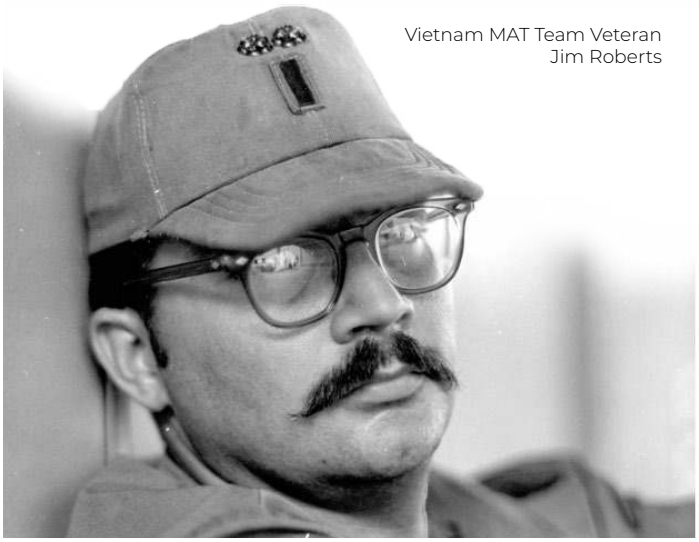
On the pistol belt were two canteen covers. These were positioned near my kidneys. Inside each cover was an aluminum canteen cup and a plastic canteen. The cups were used for heating water and C-Rations and sharing food with the Vietnamese. On the front of the belt were two magazine pouches. Each pouch carried three M-16 magazines and two fragmentation hand grenades. The last item on the side of the belt was the scabbard for my bayonet.

Everything else went into or on the rucksack. The rucksack consisted of a metal frame with a nylon bag. The bag had a large main compartment and two smaller ones outside. Packing this was detailed and critical. Both the weight and importance of each item had to be carefully considered. Heavy items carried better near the top of the pack, but C-rations cans, which were heavy, did not have an "immediate need," and therefore would be stowed nearer the bottom. Items used together had to be packed next to each other.

The bottom layer had spare socks, extra mosquito and leech repellent, iodine tablets, and a survival kit that included amphetamine tablets to keep us awake, if needed. On top of this layer was a hammock, poncho, and poncho liner. The poncho was used as a ground cloth or to cover the hammock during the night when it was raining. We never wore the poncho. The poncho liner provided some warmth at night.

Next layer was the food. After winnowing the rations down to something that was almost reasonable to carry, I put the cans into a couple of socks and tied knots at the top. This kept them together and prevented them from rattling. Then came the flashlight, a cleaning kit for my M-16, and a small metal container with a package of morphine syrettes.

The Army issued each of us a small battery-powered strobe light to mark our position at night for air rescue. The strobe flashed a bright white light at timed intervals. The idea was to point it up at a passing helicopter. The problem was that early helicopter crews saw the flashes as enemy fire and returning it with their door mounted machine guns. Bright flashes also revealed your location to the enemy. So, the Army issued a plastic tube to put over the strobe. The sides were black so it would not readily reveal your position, and the blue cover filtered the flash so it would not resemble enemy fire. It was a nice try, but the strobe was now much dimmer and had to be pointed directly at the helicopter to be seen. We chose to leave the strobes in camp.

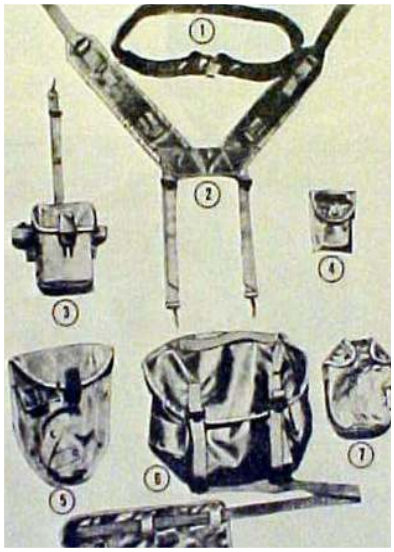


Vietnam MAT Team Veteran
Jim Roberts

My NCO and I made a list of other equipment we thought we would need on the mission. Once we finalized the list, we divided the items between us keeping the weight as close to even as possible. Some of the items included:

- Batteries for the radio. Batteries lasted one day and weighed three pounds each and we needed five. We carried two each, our interpreter, one.
- C-4 plastic explosive, blasting caps, fuses, and igniters. The C-4 was more stable than the blasting caps so SFC Turner carried the C-4, and I carried the caps, fuses, and igniters. The C-4 was heavier.
- Ten-foot-long extension antenna for the radio.
- Smoke grenades, four colored and two white. The colored smoke grenades could mark our location for helicopters. The white grenades could hide our movement.
- Two Star Clusters, hand-held aerial flares for marking our location, especially at night.
- Machete. Carried but rarely used.
- Two entrenching tools (collapsible shovels).
- Two lengths of nylon cord.
- Several thin nylon boot laces and a small spool of trip wire. Both had many uses.

These items, along with others, were packed on top of the main compartment and in the two outside pockets for quick access.



On the outside of the pack, we each carried a 2 1/2-quart collapsible canteen. Even though it was rainy season, good water could be difficult to find and dehydration was a problem to be avoided at all costs. In this instance, the cost was five additional pounds. The collapsibility eliminated the sloshing sound of a partially filled canteen. At the start of the mission, with all the food and canteens, the pack weighed seventy or eighty pounds. It was put on last over the web gear and the bandolier bra. The pack had two quick releases on the shoulder straps, so it could be dropped in an emergency. Even without the pack, I'd still have my magazines and fragmentation grenades on my web gear. And if my web gear was off (such as while sleeping) I kept four magazines in the bandolier on my chest.

1 Individual equipment belt
2 Suspenders
3 Small arms ammunition case
4 First aid packet or compass case
5 Intrenching tool carrier
6 Combat field pack
7 Canteen cover
8 Sleeping equipment carrier

Figure 22. Components of lightweight load-carrying equipment.

Next, my M-16 with a 30 round magazine carrying 28 rounds. I started every mission with exactly 208 rounds of ammunition. No reason to carry more. Unless ambushed or ambushing, I would not be firing my rifle. My job would be to observe and advise. Our Regional Forces counterparts would do the shooting. If I had to fire my weapon, we were in serious trouble. Besides, the M-16 had a reputation for jamming from carbon buildup after 200 rounds, so 208 bullets were probably more than I needed.

Some things can be mentioned in brief or not at all. Toilet paper, for example. Each C-Ration meal came with three sheets of green toilet paper. That was it. Enough said...

I never shaved on operations. Our packs were heavy enough, and I didn't want to risk a nick that could be infected. After one mission, the Major, my boss, wasn't pleased with this breech of grooming. "If you can carry what you need to brush your teeth, you should be able to carry a razor," he said. My Sergeant, half way through his third combat tour and soon to retire, retorted: "Sir, LT carries the toothpaste, and I carry the toothbrush." We did our best to stifle our laughter, as the Major turned on his heel and walked away.

Topping off our cargo load was a floppy "boonie" hat and a green towel. Floppy hats were better than rigid caps, which had a shape that stood out as unnatural in the jungle. As for the towel, it had many uses.

All told, the things we carried on operations totaled 80-100 pounds. Such is the way of the infantry.

KELCEY LIVERPOOL

Founder and Executive Director of **Kids Rank**
KidsRank.org

Back in April, Kelcey Liverpool joined our VBC Happy Hour to talk about Kids Rank, a Chicago-based non-profit she founded to empower military children emotionally and socially through community-building activities. Children in military families face unique challenges that the civilian world doesn't always understand. Below, Kelcey shares some of her background and why she founded Kids Rank.

> **"Military children will say goodbye to more significant people by age 18 than most people will in their lifetime."**

At heart, I've always been a diplomat. As a biracial child, I learned to navigate many different worlds. My mom said I always went into social situations looking to reduce conflict and make things ok for everyone. I learned not to judge but to accept others' perspectives and experiences, no matter how different from my own.

This respectful attitude toward difference helped when I married into the Navy and began dealing with the many transitions and cultural diversity of military life. Being accepting doesn't mean being weak. It means cultivating the inner strength and personal growth needed to thrive in any situation.

As a military spouse for 17 years, I saw first-hand how military children needed that same kind of empowerment, as well as a place of their own to belong.

My two girls are now 18 and 20 years old, and they've lived all over. They've spent their lives adjusting to new places and to their dad being away at sea or working crazy long hours. They've had to adjust also to not living near family and, sadly, to their parents' divorce. (Marriage is often a casualty to the military way of life.) In one year alone, during Kindergarten and 2nd grade, my girls attended three different schools in Japan and Illinois!

Kids Rank was born directly from these experiences as a way to give children like mine a place where they could connect with other kids who understood.

Kids Rank is a 501c(3) service-based organization developed specifically for military children. Through the formation of local clubs called, Prides, Kids Rank engages children in hands-on, skill building projects and volunteer opportunities designed to encourage resilience through our core pillars of CONNECT, LEAD and SERVE. Our military children serve their communities just as their parents serve (or have served) our country. The program is open to school-aged military children from all branches of service including active duty, reservists, retirees and Families of the Fallen.

The organization was formed to address the lack of ongoing, continuous programming focused on the needs of military children and their families. Most outreach to military families is isolated and episodic—a workshop here, a "family day" there. Such well-meaning efforts do little to enhance a child's social and emotional growth amidst the dizzying transitions of military life. Kids Rank bridges the existing gap in services by dealing directly with children of military families in and around the installations and communities they call home. Providing consistent weekly programming designed just for the kids sets Kids Rank apart and brings value to the families.

Military-connected youth are found in every zip code across the United States and in many countries around the world. About 70 percent of them don't live on a base, and 80 percent attend public schools. Military families are embedded in our civilian communities, yet at the same time are disconnected from them. The average child of an Active Duty Service Member attends six to eight schools before turning 18, moving every two to three years. Each transition takes its toll, as children adjust to new environments, new schools, and new care providers, often with little or no guidance. These kids often get lost in policy initiatives and discussions that focus on the Service Member or spouse.

Over half of those serving today are children of veterans. Today's military children will grow up to fill the ranks of our Service Branches. We want them to be prepared for that service. We want confident, resilient, and compassionate leaders defending our nation's future security.

I am proud that we are able to offer military children high-quality programs and events that provide them experiences they won't forget. For example, the Kids Rank Ball is a military-style event for whole families, both military and civilian.

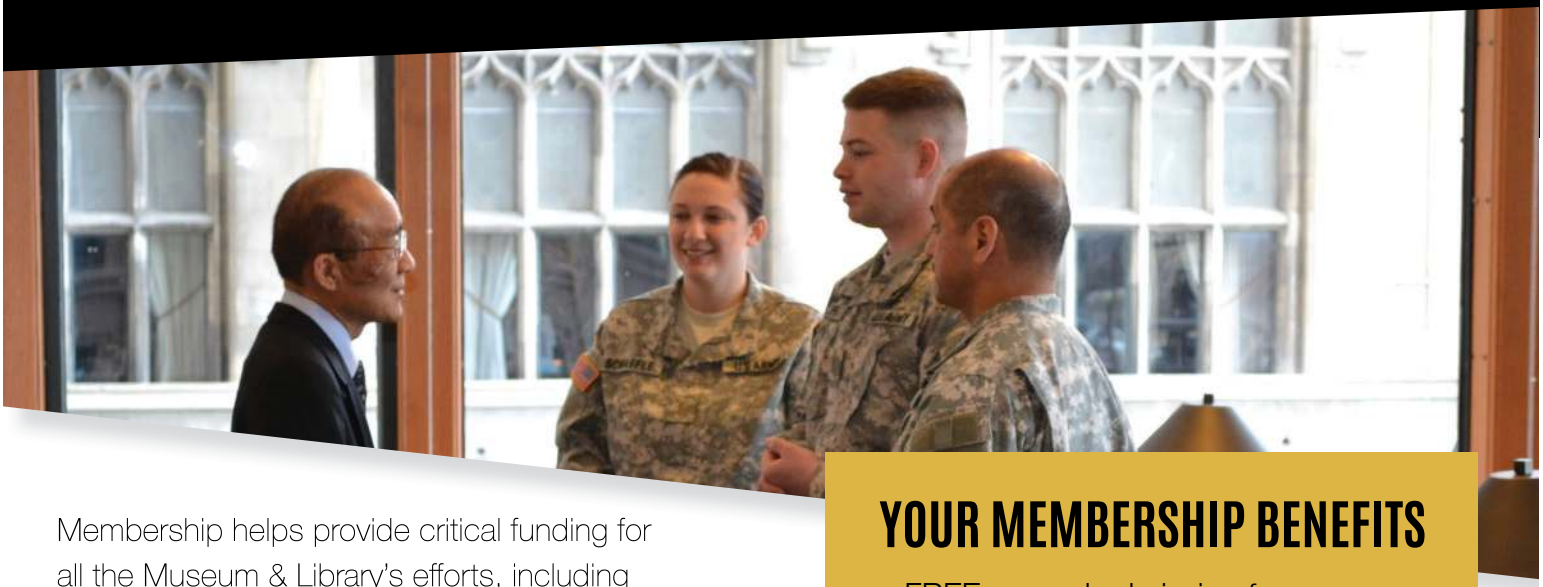
Our programs evolve over time and vary from place to place, but our mission has remained the same: to empower military children and encourage them to recognize their strengths within.

You can learn more about Kids Rank and supporting military children and families by visiting www.kidsrank.org. And watch Kelcey's feature on VBC Happy Hour by visiting youtube.com/veteransbreakfastclub.

kids ★ rank

Images from kidsrank.org

MEMBERSHIP THAT CELEBRATES VETS, JOIN TODAY!



Membership helps provide critical funding for all the Museum & Library's efforts, including everything from book and artifact preservation to the collection of oral histories to the production of education resources – like our latest exhibition, *Drawn to Combat: Bill Mauldin & The Art of War.* Take pride in knowing your support ensures that the Museum & Library can continue as a national public information and research center that focuses on the stories, sacrifices, and values of the citizen soldier.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

- FREE general admission for one year
- FREE access to online catalog of programs, e-books and research tools
- Book borrowing privileges
- Subscription to Frontline newsletter
- FREE admission to exhibit openings & special member events (select member levels)
- 10% discount on all gift shop items (select member levels)
- FREE or reduced admission to online programs and events

BECOME A MEMBER TODAY!

pritzkermilitary.org

PRITZKER MILITARY
MUSEUM & LIBRARY

News

VETERANS BREAKFAST CLUB AWARDED GRANT FROM PRITZKER MILITARY FOUNDATION

Grant Will Aid the Nonprofit's National Expansion to Support Veterans Through the Power of Storytelling

The Pritzker Military Foundation, on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, has awarded a grant to aid the VBC's national expansion and its ongoing mission to create communities of listening around veterans of every generation.

VBC officially announced national expansion in January, and the grant will boost the nonprofit's unique virtual programming on a national scale, where they bring together veterans and civilians of all generations to share their stories, preserve military history and provide a place for connection and healing.

"We are thrilled to receive this incredible opportunity from the Pritzker Military Foundation on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library," said Todd DePastino, executive director and founder of VBC. "At VBC, we believe in the power of storytelling, and we share a common goal of preserving the living history of our veterans. This grant allows us to build upon the work we've done thus far, and continue to welcome veterans from across the country into our growing community of connection, healing and understanding."

In addition to the grant, the Pritzker Military Foundation will match any private donations made by any new donors, sponsors or foundations up to $25,000 for one full year.

"We are proud to partner with Veterans Breakfast Club in its unique mission to preserve history through storytelling and provide an important sense of belonging for veterans of every generation," said Susan Rifkin, Chief Operating Officer of Philanthropic Activities of Pritzker Military Museum & Library. "We're looking forward to supporting VBC as they continue to expand on a national scale, reaching more veterans and growing a national community that listens to their stories and honors their service."

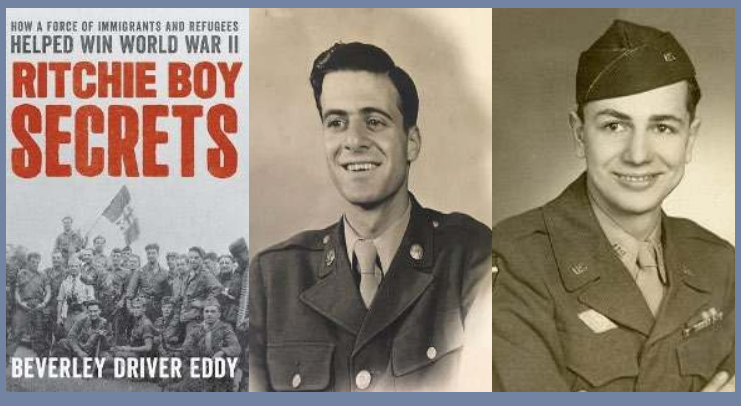
About Pritzker Military Foundation

The Pritzker Military Foundation seeks to support the work of both the Pritzker Military Museum & Library—and similar nonprofit organizations—to preserve American military history, restore historic military artifacts and make them accessible to the public, and provide services and essential resources to active duty military, veterans and families of service members in all branches of the United States Armed Forces. To learn more, visit www.pritzkermilitaryfoundation.org.

About Pritzker Military Museum & Library

The Pritzker Military Museum & Library aims to increase the public's understanding of military history, military affairs and national security by providing a forum for the study and exploration of our military - past, present, and future - with a specific focus on their stories, sacrifices, and values. With national and global reach, these spaces and events aim to share the stories of those who served and their contributions as citizen soldiers, helping citizens everywhere appreciate the relationship between the armed forces and the civilians whose freedoms they protect. A non-governmental, non-partisan organization, the Museum & Library features diverse collections, scholarly initiatives, and public programs from its flagship center in downtown Chicago to its world-class research center and park currently under construction in Somers, Wisconsin.

PRITZKER MILITARY
MUSEUM & LIBRARY



CATCH UP ON OUR RECENT PROGRAMS!

Watch our recent event with **author Beverley Driver Eddy and WWII Ritchie Boys Paul Fairbrook and Max Lerner.**
youtube.com/veteransbreakfastclub

INTRODUCING: VBC MEMBERSHIP

Become a member of the Veterans Breakfast Club and help support our mission of sharing veterans' stories.
$36/year

FAQs

WHAT DO I GET AS A VBC MEMBER?
VBC members are entitled to access to members-only virtual events (such as film screenings, VIP guest lectures, and more!). Members also receive a 10% discount on VBC trips & travel opportunities, 10% discount on VBC merchandise, and a welcome letter & gift.

HOW DO I BECOME A VBC MEMBER?
Sign up for a VBC Membership at our website, veteransbreakfastclub.org/membership. We'll direct you to our partner platform, JoinIt, where we will sign you up and securely process your payment. Or, send us a check in the mail made out to "Veterans Breakfast Club" to 200 Magnolia Pl, Pittsburgh, PA, 15228. Please include "VBC Membership" in the memo line.

CAN I STILL ATTEND VBC EVENTS WITHOUT BEING A MEMBER?
Absolutely! Our events, both in-person and virtual, are open to everyone, whether you're a veteran or a civilian. We hold some special events, approximately one per month, that will be open to members only.

HOW MUCH DOES VBC MEMBERSHIP COST?
A VBC Membership is $36/year, paid annually.

CAN ANYONE BE A VBC MEMBER?
Yes, VBC Memberships are open to everyone, not just veterans!

CAN I GIFT A VETERAN WITH A VBC MEMBERSHIP?
Yes! Head to veteransbreakfastclub.org/membership and click "Gift a VBC Membership."

Have a question not answered here?
Email ellie@veteransbreakfastclub.org or head to veteransbreakfastclub.org/membership to learn more.

Final Salute

TO THOSE WHO RECENTLY PASSED, WE SALUTE YOU.

Gene Bowser, WWII Navy

Frank Cava, WWII Navy

Dave Coate, Cold War Army

Alex De La Cruz, Korea/Vietnam Navy

Dan Gimiliano, WWII Army

Joe Mavero, Vietnam Navy

Kenneth Menke, WWII Air Corps

Donald E. Rogers, WWII Army

Nick Samila, Jr. WWII Air Corps
(125th Liaison Squadron)

Carsten Stigers, Cold War Navy

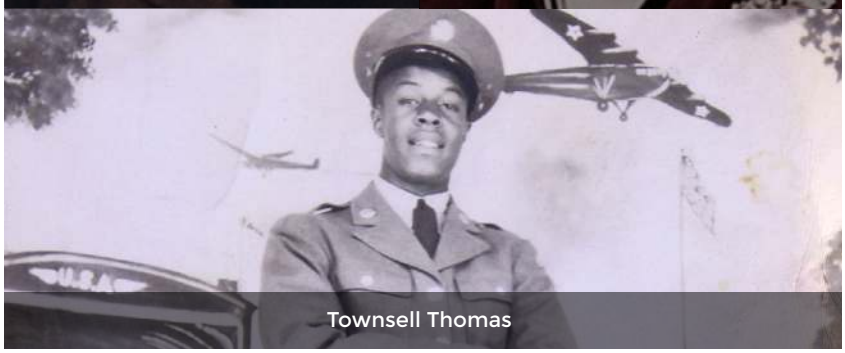
Townsell Thomas, WWII Air Corps

Charles Wiggins, WWII Navy

Alex Yawor, WWII Marines

Dan Gimiliano

Carsten Stigers



Townsell Thomas

VETERAN CHAMPIONS ARE NEEDED EVERYWHERE, EVERY DAY

by Kathy Gallowitz

Kathy Gallowitz is author of Beyond "Thank You for Your Service": The Veteran Cham-pion Handbook for Civilians *and founder of Veteran Vanguard, which equips civilian "Veteran Champions" to strengthen our workforce and community in ways that benefit us all.*

The other day I met a Veteran Champion named Katie while getting my eyes exam-ined. She was working at my optometrist's office. As part of my new patient assess-ment, she asked me if I was employed.

"Yes, I have my own business. I equip civilians to become Veteran Champions. I am a career retired Air Force Veteran - this work is my life's calling." I gave her my card.

"Thank you for your Service," she said, as I expected she would.

Then came the unexpected. "My brother is a Veteran," she said. "He served Iraq. The GI Bill paid for him to go to the Golf Academy. Now he's a golf pro and doing well. He's always been good at shooting at things."

She explained her brother was a Sniper and MP in the Army. "I have a tough time talk-ing with him about it."

"You're not alone," I shared. "My husband is a combat Veteran doesn't talk to me about his experiences. I knew a minister whose nephew was struggling and not until his wife threatened to leave him was he willing to get some help. Does your brother have friends who are combat Veterans?"

"He does now, yes. But a few years ago, he attempted suicide. Those were dark times for our family. But now, he's remarried and has lots of battle buddies."

I congratulated her on her brother's progress and went on to explain how important Veteran Champions are - people like her - who take special interest in and understand how to support Veterans.

She mentioned that she's active in her church. I encouraged her to consider creating a Military and Veterans ministry with members of her congregation and community.

"You're exactly the kind of person who can make a huge difference for other Veterans and their families who struggle post-military service. You don't have to be a Veteran to support someone feeling disconnected or isolated. That's a universal feeling we all experience at some point. When you add in prayer and the hope that spirituality brings, we can create a sense of belonging and promote emotional healing of military-connected people inside places of worship. You would be great at this."

You should have seen the joy in her eyes. It's as if she realized helping others would be a great way to turn her brother's and her family's suffering into something positive.

My experience that day reminded me how important civilian Veteran Champions are. It's easy to assume that Veterans and their families have all the help they need. But, sadly, that isn't so.

Veterans - and their family members - who need help are all around us. We just need to be curious, listen, and engage. Equipped Veteran Champions make a big differeence.

You can find and purchase Beyond "Thank You For Your Service": The Veteran Champion Handbook for Civilians *on Amazon by going to: https://bit.ly/BeyondThankYouForYourService. You can learn more about the Veteran Champion movement at the Vanguard Veteran website, https://vanguardveteran.com, or by emailing Kathy at kathy@VanguardVeteran.com And, watch Kathy talk with Shaun Hall about Veteran Champions on the VBC Scuttlebutt podcast: https://youtu.be/7wcAhLbtjdk*

98-year-old Paul Fairbrook joined VBC Happy Hour on October 4 to talk about his experiences as a "Ritchie Boy" in World War II. Paul fled Nazi Germany with his Jewish family in 1938 and, like our other 98-year-old guest that night, Max Lerner, joined the US Army to exact their revenge against Hitler. Both men trained at the top-secret Camp Ritchie in Maryland, where they learned counterintelligence, interrogation, and psychological warfare. Their stories of espionage and intelligence operations held us spellbound (and can be viewed on our VBC YouTube channel: youtube.com/veteransbreakfastclub

During the program, Paul noticed that WWII Navy WAVE veteran Julia Parsons was in the Zoom room. He then read a poem to her he had written while at Camp Ritchie in 1943.

OH RITCHIE, OH RITCHIE

(written April 21, 1943)

Arabs dressed in zoot suits, a trio of balloons
Bag pipes in the morning to wake us with their tunes
Supervised instructions in getting lost at night
And how to gauge out eyes and teeth in rough and tumble fight.

Tell me what it is, that this Camp Ritchie lacks?
A hundred WAVES, a hundred SPARS, a regiment of WACS.

Poets on a detail, privates who can speak
Polish and Romanian, Portuguese and Greek.
Mimeographed directive on how not to pet the dogs
A score of idle pigeons and the world's most lasting fogs.
Every possible improvement, every single blessing . . . save-
The presence of a WAC, a SPAR, or of a WAVE!

The splendid training films we see, what edifying plays
With lectures, demonstrations we while away our days.
Orders supersede old orders. Rumors fly about
Each day we move, each day it rains, each day the lights go out.

Confusion and variety, how fortunate we are–
But can't we share our happiness with a WAC, a WAVE, or SPAR?

Pvt. Paul Fairbrook
MITC, Camp Ritchie, Md.

RECORD YOUR STORY!

We're proud to announce a new **VBC Veterans History Project** that pairs volunteer interviewers with military veterans for one-on-one oral history interviews over Zoom. There's no charge for an interview, and the recording is the veteran's to keep.

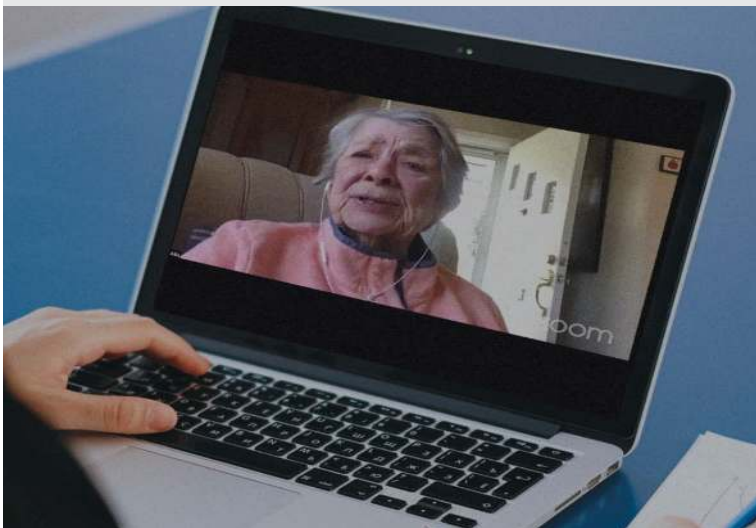
Maybe you're a veteran interested in telling your story. Or the spouse, child, grandchild, or neighbor of a veteran whose memories should be shared while they can. Or maybe you just love history and veterans' stories and would like to conduct interviews. If any of these sound like you, let us know!

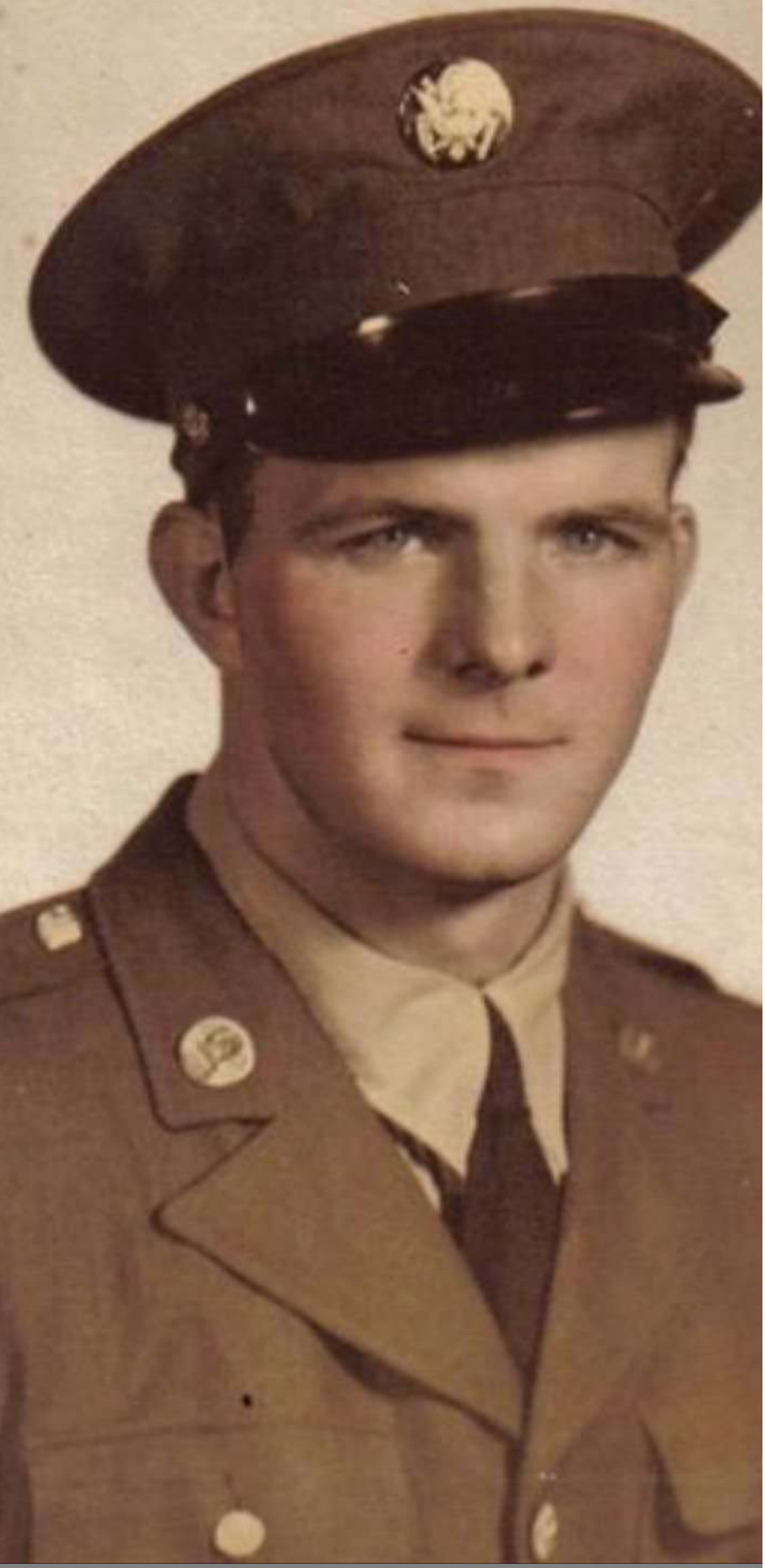
FOR VETERANS
If you are a military Veteran, no matter your branch or era of service, please consider recording your story with us. Did you volunteer or were you drafted? Where did you go and what did you see? What did you like and what did you hate? We want to hear it all.

FOR FAMILY & LOVED ONES
Do you have a loved one who is a military veteran? Be sure their story isn't forgotten by recording it through the VBC Veterans History Project. You can choose to keep the recording private for family use only, or you can allow the VBC to share the recording with the public.

FOR INTERVIEWERS
If you are someone with an interest in oral history and a passion for preserving veterans stories, we want to hear from you. We will connect you with a veteran for a 45-60 minute recorded Zoom interview. Sign up to interview at our website!

veteransbreakfastclub.org/historyproject





JOHN F. VITOUS
1919 - 1944

War Letters from D-DAY

WWII veteran Don Vitous vividly recalled his mother Anna's reaction as they listened to the radio after church in their Trafford, Pennsylvania, home on the afternoon of December 7, 1941. "She said, 'Oh, my God, another World War!'"

"My mother had lived through World War I," Don explained. "She knew all the tragedies that occured. She predicted a lot of men would die."

Anna Vitous feared that one of those men would be her son, either Don or his older brother, John.

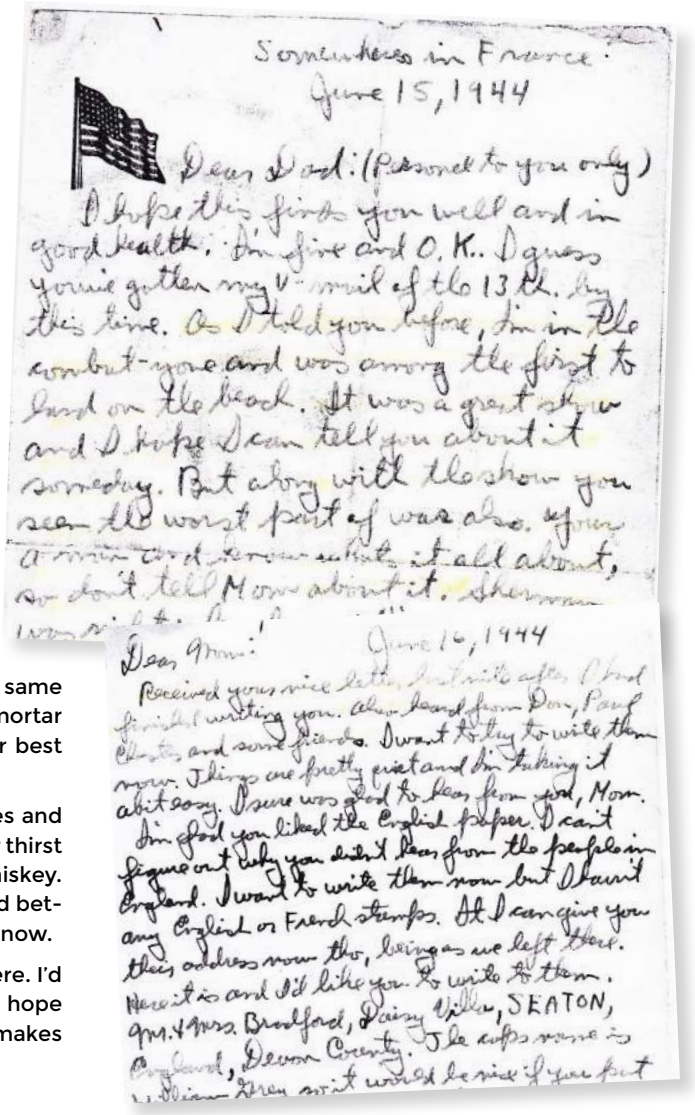
John was the first to enter the military, drafted into the 4th Infantry Division less than two months after Pearl Harbor. Before he shipped overseas in 1943, he warned Don to stay out of the Infantry. It was too hard a life, too dangerous, he said. Don volunteered instead for the Coast Guard and spent the war patrolling the Gulf Coast.

John would go on to land on Utah Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944—his 25th birthday. As a member of the 8th Infantry Regiment, he was among the very first men to assault the beaches. Over the next three months, John took part in the breakout from Normandy, the liberation of Paris, the push through Belgium, and the initial assaults on the Siegfried Line, Hitler's formidable string of fortifications on Germany's western border.

It was there, on September 17, 1944, that Anna Vitous's grim premonition on Pearl Harbor Day struck home. Her son John was killed in action. Anna never got over it, and she died not long after the war.

What follows are excerpts from letters John wrote to his mom and dad during his first rest after landing on Utah Beach. You hear in them the voice of a young man already hardened by combat, but not demoralized by it. He fights the enemy, but doesn't hate them, and he dreams of the day he can come home to his car, his job, and his family.

Until Don's passing last year at age 98, we made it a custom every year at a breakfast to read from these letters close to the anniversary of John F. Vitous's death. Don would pay tribute to his beloved older brother and, betraying the gentle soul that John suspected would have made Don a bad fit for the Infantry, give thanks for our beautiful morning together remembering those who are gone.


Somewhere in France
June 15, 1944

Dear Dad: (Personal to you only)

I hope this finds you well and in good health. I'm fine and O.K. . . . As I told you before I'm in the combat-zone and was among the first to land on the beach. It was a great show and I hope I can tell you about it someday. But along with the show, you see the worst part of war also. You're a man and know what it's all about, so don't tell Mom about it. Sherman was right when he said "War is hell" and I don't care who knows it. One gets used to it though and you have to harden yourself to it. It's no fun seeing your buddies getting killed or wounded and it scares you a bit. Everyone's that way.

We have no use for the Germans and they're as tricky as the papers say they are. They don't like close fighting and give up when they're licked that way. . . . I've had some close calls so far, same as everyone has had. I've learned how or when to duck an 88 or mortar shell tho Mother Earth is your best friend and the slit-trench your best protection.

The French people are pretty nice and I pity them for their homes and property being wrecked. We get plenty of bitter cider to quench our thirst and some good wine. Some fellows even got some very good whiskey. We lived on K-rations and chocolate bars at first, but now we've had better rations in a rest area. I've shaved, washed and feel much better now.

Dad, don't kick about going to work as you're doing your share there. I'd never kick about working in a steel-mill again if I get there again. I hope your car is running O.K. I made P.F.C. today, or Private First Class. It makes no difference to me.

Your Loving Son,
Johnny

Somewhere in France
June 15 & 16, 1944

Dear Mom,

Things are pretty quiet and I'm taking it a bit easy. It was sure good to hear from you, Mom. . . . Don said he's still enjoying Mobile. I'm so glad he's not in the Army or the Infantry. I see younger fellows than he here, and I pity them. Maybe that's a good idea if he could sell his car in Mobile. We could get a swell car after the war then. I'd really appreciate a car then, and home life. Yes, we've lost our best years in the Army and I never thought I'd be gone from home this long. But now we're getting a chance to end the war so we can all get home. I can see now why it takes so long as the Germans are so stubborn.

So, there's German P.W.s working on the R.R. now [back in Pittsburgh]. They are lucky to be prisoners and in the U.S.A. . . .

I'm O.K. and safe, so don't worry about me. . . . The villages here look like the ones you've seen in the movies of World War I. The Germans are ruthless and don't care what they destroy. . . . We dislike the Germans very much, but I can't say I hate them all the time. I guess I'm too soft. Well Mom, I'll close now and write me soon. I always say a prayer for you at home and hope to see you soon. Don't worry about me.

Your Loving Son,
Johnny


Don Vitous read from his father's letters at a breakfast every year until his passing last year at 98.

1942'S "WHITE CHRISTMAS" REMAINS THE BEST-SELLING RECORD OF ALL-TIME

by Todd DePastino

"I'll be home for Christmas" is the optimistic refrain of soldiers and sailors heading off to war.

When war begins, few can imagine it being anything but swift and decisive. It's only after initial encounters with the enemy that confidence and bravado start to give way to ambivalence and grim determination. Folks back home begin to yearn for days of old and secretly wonder when it will all end. As Carl Sandburg wrote on the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor, "We have learned to be a little sad and a little lonesome."

In the fall of 1943, as Americans prepared for their third Christmas at war, Bing Crosby released his recording of a new song, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," written by Buck Ram, Kim Gannon, and Walter Kent. It captures this sense of sadness and loneliness in its final line: "if only in my dreams." This song of yearning was Decca Records' attempt to capitalize on Crosby's enormous hit from the year before, "White Christmas."

Written poolside in Arizona (according to one account) by a Jewish immigrant (Irving Berlin), "White Christmas" is the best-selling record of all-time. "We know the song so well, we barely know it at all," writes the song's biographer, Jody Rosen.

When Bing Crosby first sang "White Christmas" eighteen days after Pearl Harbor, few people took note of it. It didn't capture the mood of a nation just gearing up for war. We didn't yet have ears to hear it.

It was a year later, when Crosby recorded it for Decca and sang it in the movie Holiday Inn, when the song become a hit. Even then, it wasn't the homefront audience demanding it. Rather, soldiers overseas heard the song on the radio and at USO shows and began requesting it.

It's hard to believe, but "White Christmas"--recorded decades before Elvis, The Beatles, or Beyonce--remains the best-selling single of all-time, with over 50 million copies sold worldwide. If you add the 500+ cover versions, sales of the song exceed 100 million. No other song comes close, not even digital singles.

"Its unorthodox, melancholy melody—and mere 54 words, expressing the simple yearning for a return to happier times—sounded instantly familiar when sung by America's favorite crooner," says Roy J. Harris, Jr., in a *Wall Street Journal* article on the song. Rob Kapilow, interviewed for the article, discusses how the song breaks from tradition by dispensing with a bridge and sticking with the wistful melodic pattern. "Berlin's opening bars 'take you up the scale of yearning in their chords,' and repeating them immediately heightens the impact. 'Hear the minor chords for 'listen' and 'glisten'?' asks Mr. Kapilow. 'It's heartbreaking.'"

Heartbreak entered our Christmas-season consciousness during the war, and, thanks to "White Christmas," it is with us still.

REMEMBERING THE GIRL WHO SAVED MY LIFE

by George Milman

George Milman served on the Army Mobile Advisory Team 43 in the village of Duc My in the Mekong Delta in 1971. Life in Duc My had slower pace than it had in George's previous assignment with an artillery unit attached to the 1st Air Cavalry Division. In Duc My, he got to know the people. And that made all the difference.

In Duc My, village life started at dawn as people made their way out to the rice paddies and ended when darkness fell. The exception to all this activity occurred during the middle of the day starting about 1130 with lunch followed by a two-to-three hour rest period during the heat of the day. Old hands on the team quickly adjusted and took advantage of the mid-day respite to write letters, weekly reports or just nap. I had a hard time with this mid-day break. Activity in the village literally shut down. The village administrative offices closed their doors and desks were converted to napping platforms. Foot traffic on the single dirt track through the village was quiet.

The only ones out were the village children under the age of ten. They became my captive audience. They tried to teach me Vietnamese words with me reciprocating in English. One little eight-year-old named Loi was always the first to seek me out after lunch with the ulterior motive of trying to trade me out of my watch.

The watch was indeed unique in that it had a chiming alarm that fascinated Loi. She made me demonstrate it for her each time we met. Several times each week she would show up with some purloined trade items which she would offer to exchange for that watch. The most unique offer was a gunny sack of spent smoke grenades which she was convinced would close the deal. Each time I turned her down.

It was well after the harvest, and the rice paddies were hard gray cracked fallow ground waiting for the next cycle of the monsoon rain to bring them back to life. Our base camp was a small rectangular grouping of mud walled tin roofed huts along the dirt track which separated the village and the river from the rice fields.

One of the boys in the group brought a homemade kite to me and explained through hand gestures that he could not get it to fly. The kite was skillfully made from thinly split pieces of bamboo for the frame and covered with a colorful pasted together patchwork of paper. The kite had been properly bowed with twine but lacked a tail for stability in the wind. Using another piece of twine, we fashioned a functional tail, and we set out for the rice paddies as a group to give the kite a try.

The day was hot and humid with only a light wind. After several unsuccessful runs the boy was still unable to get the kite to fly, and he handed the string to me suggesting I give it a try.

Taking the string in hand, I started off across the rice paddy towards the distant tree line. My attention was focused over my shoulder on the reluctant kite and the gaggle of kids running with me shouting encouragement. The kite started to fly, but I noticed that most of the kids, with the exception of Loi had stopped running with me.

Loi continued to shout as I ran. The further I ran, and the higher the kite got, the louder her cries became. She alone was running beside me frantically pointing ahead. I took her gesture to mean "keep running."

In mid-stride, Loi threw herself in front of me, tripped me, and we both landed in a heap on the hard gray ground of the rice paddy.

I was pissed. She was hysterically crying with tears streaked down her dusty face. I was all ready to give her a good smack when I looked in the direction of her frantic pointing. There, not three steps in direct line of where I had been running was a live grenade trap stretched across the top of one of the paddy dikes. Had she waited just one more step to trip me, I would have fallen into the trap and we would have both been history.

It took me a few minutes to center myself and flush away the close call that gripped me. When I came back to myself, I did my best to both thank and comfort her, but I didn't have the words.

So, I took off my watch and put it on her wrist. I picked us both up and headed back toward our compound. I have no idea whatever happened to the kite.

The team finished our training duties in Duc My and, three months later, departed for another village. I never saw Loi again.

I often wonder where she is today and if she remembers flying the kite. I remember her.

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