

# The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

A Memorial to the American Experience in Vietnam



#### **JULY 2015**

#### FROM THE PRESIDENT

I want to thank you again for the honor and privilege to be your President of the TSNA.

I am excited and ready to do the best job I can to help us grow and expand. My challenge to myself is to sign up another 25 and to bring 5 newbies to our reunion next year. I also am asking you all to sign up 1 new member this year also. Remember we are a unique group being mainly from Tan Son Nhut. We have limited group from 1959 to 1975! We take any one from Vietnam also.

I am up for it and ready to hit the ground running. We have great group of directors to help me in the transition.

Put it on your calendar for September 2016 in Huntsville, Al.

You can reach me by email at: browncigar1965@yahoo.com Phone: 765-330-4054

The Best to All.

Randall





#### **CHAPLAIN'S CORNER**

We loaded our suitcases and freezer chest on a Sunday afternoon and after a moment of thought and prayer we started our mileage away from Pigeon Forge and the TSNA annual meeting somewhat reluctantly.

A publication for June had an article that prompted this "Corner"!! The title "Benefits in small..." highlighted by John Mellencamp's song "Small Town" describes the benefits of growing up in a place where he knew everyone, was loved and learned about Jesus". For the Chaplain this triggered some feeling.

Take a look at Larry's great Revetment 2015 Reunion issue. It also fits for those "Small Town" thoughts. Yes the article is about churches. Not every church member is in attendance every meeting but are definitely a part of the "knowing everyone, loving and learning". The same is true with the TSNA!

Not a sermon---just This time: Happy Thoughts and Memories.

Chaplain Bob Chaffee

TSNA Leadership and **Documentation Update** 

By: Dale Bryan, TSNA Secretary

Some events occurred over the past month and have impacted the makeup of your Board of Directors. One of the changes made it necessary to make a minor amendment to the TSNA By-

During the annual meeting of the Board of Directors on May 30, Charles Penley resigned as Director of Communications and member of the board. He will, however, continue as

the Association's webmaster. The change is nearly invisible to the individual TSNA member who will observe no differences when accessing our website. Gary Fields, who had been serving as Director at Large since being elected to the board in 2014 has assumed the position of Director of Communications with the webmaster being immediately accountable to him.

Article VII, Section 2 of the TSNA Bylaws, as previously written, reflected that the Director of Communications and webmaster responsibilities reside in the same person. That section has been amended to specify that either way of staffing is permissible. It also allows for the webmaster function to be performed under contract should there ever be a time when there is no TSNA member to perform the webmaster function.

The following events, in adherence with Article V, Section 1d of the bylaws, occurred. President Randall Brown and I accepted, on behalf of the Board, Charles Penley's written resignation with regret. That left a vacancy on the Board. That vacancy was filled by unanimous vote of the Board to appoint Andy Csordas to fill the remainder of the director term that expires in 2017. Andy is now Director at Large of TSNA, and we are all certain that he will perform with distinction.

#### **CHECK ON THE WEBSITE!**

To help your Board and fellow veterans, please check and update your information on the "Members" tab on the TSNA website, especially your information on unit assigned to and vears at TSN.

Joe Kricho Director of Veteran Services **TSNA** 

## 40th Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon

#### By: Susie Ahrens TSNA Member

Today marks the 40th anniversary of the day I left VN under a terrifying situation, but because of the humanity of many Americans from all sort of lives and groups, I am here living a good life and for that, I want to express my gratitude which is not thought about or mentioned enough in the daily life.

I want to start with the courageous Marines who guarded the MACV/ DAO compound where hundreds of Vietnamese came to try to be airlifted out, the last day when things did not go as planned, and the area was under attack. They stayed to protect us while other Marine pilots landed helicopters in the parking lot while being shot at. These Marines flew us out to the sea. I never forgot the very young soldier who sat by the door with the machine gun, his face was tense and ready for combat. All these years I had never thought about his fear. I felt safe because I took it for granted that he would fight to his last breath to protect us.

I want to thank the Sailors of the USS Hancock who gave up their quarters so we could have their beds. The Sailors who sacrificed their rations so we could have food as the ship was overloaded with an unexpected amount of refugees. The three days on the ship, these sailors took care of us with kindness and compassion, until we reached the Philippines.

I want to thank the Navy personnel and volunteers on Grande Island, PI who welcomed us, provided linens, clothing, personal hygiene items, food, shelter .... Later, when my adoptive mother was sick and was taken to the Naval hospital in Subic Bay, the hospital staff was wonderful and caring, not just to my mother, but to all other refugees who were ill or wounded. And when my mother passed away, the hospital arranged a decent burial

at Clark AFB. This gesture was the greatest consolation during a time when human lives seemed so small and unimportant. I can never forget the Chaplain who came to the hospital to comfort me in the middle of the night after my mother's passing. I was numb and couldn't comprehend a word he said, but his kind and soothing voice was warm and somehow made me feel like I was not all alone in the world.

I want to thank the Air Force personnel at Clark AFB for flying and taking care of us on the Medivac flight to the US. It was the longest flight of my life, from Clark AFB, PI to Harrisburg, PA, with several layovers in Hawaii, Calif, Arkansas, Florida. The nurses, corpsmen etc., were attentive and kind.

I want to thank all the Army folks at Indiantown Gap refugee camp. We were provided with everything. They processed our paperwork, made us legal residents, found sponsors, arranged transportation. A month at this camp was like an R & R after a long journey.

Lastly, but not least, all the VN veterans who came to VN to fight and to help defending So Vietnam, the ones who lost their lives and the ones who made it back. As I get older, I understand your feelings and appreciate your service more and more.

I was overwhelmed with emotions when I set foot on the American soil. It was like being reborn. I knew I was saved and safe, even with the uncertain future, I was not worried. The government found us sponsors, paid for our flights to get to each destination. During the 40 years in the US. I have been given every right, every opportunity, and the most precious gift of all, the freedom. I shudder every time I think being caught and left behind in VN, I feel bad for my relatives and friends and others who were at risk who could not get out. I have a deep love, respect and gratitude for this country. I am still Vietnamese at heart but this is my home now and I

will never stop being grateful.

#### **An Interview with Kerry**

From an article that appeared in the Redstone Arsenal newspaper, the "Rocket".

They have been doing articles on Viet Nam Veterans for quite some time now.

The following is excerpted from that article written by SKIP VAUGHN, the Rocket editor.

Kerry Nivens of Huntsville served as a sergeant with the Air Force in Tan Son Nhut, South Vietnam, from December 1966 to December 1967.

A fellow veteran gave a card to Kerry.

Kerry still keeps the card he received from the fellow veteran in Branson, Missouri, last November the weekend after Veterans Day.



"Thank you for your service and dedication to our country!" reads the message on front.



"Dear American hero," begins the message on the card's back. "I am not certain as to how to express my gratitude for all you have done to secure my freedom. Please accept this simple card as a small token of my appreciation -- A grateful American citizen."

Likewise, Nivens does his part to ensure veterans receive the appreciation they deserve. He is a Board member of the Tan Son Nhut Association and a lifetime member of the Vietnam Veterans Association of America, Huntsville Chapter 1067.

Nivens was a petroleum/oils/lubricants fuel specialist with the 377th Supply which was part of the 377th Combat Support Group. The first four months or so of his tour, his mission was distribution which meant refueling the aircraft assigned to that base or any arriving aircraft that needed fueling. He spent the rest of his year's tour with the "Bladder Bird Division," flying on C-123s and C-130s to carry fuel to Army and Marine bases throughout South Vietnam. They provided fuel to those bases which had helicopters.

"All in all, it was not a bad tour," Nivens said of his year in Vietnam. "We had very little attacks. We had a few minor but nothing really bad. The bladder birds, when we were flying, it was not unusual to pick up some small arms fire when we were landing or taking off. They did some damage but nothing serious. Some (of these missions) were a little more interesting than others."





#### **SAIGON - THEN AND NOW**

BY: Susie Ahrens TSNA Member

This is not my first trip to VN but when the plane started to descend upon Tan Son Nhut International Airport, I looked out the window, trying to find anything, any building that looks familiar of the TSN in the old days. I did spot one building with the orange roof in a short distance that looked somewhat like the VNAF Officers Club (Huynh Huu Bac Club), I wished I could see it up close.

The new and improved TSN Airport was big and modern with lots of nice gift shops, restaurants, comparable to most international airports in SE Asia, a big change from the one of 40 years ago. But after we were out of the immigration area, the old familiar scene outside has not changed at all, I swear the people waiting for their relatives were the same ones from many previous trips, along with the same noises, the same mixed smell of pollution and sweat, and the same humidity that hit me like a ton of bricks.

My brother had arranged a place for us to stay in a nearby neighborhood. It's a 4 story building with several small rooms that they consider "mini hotel". The building is supposedly 10 years old, but nothing is working properly, from the air conditioner to the drain in the shower, broken hinges on closet door, water marks on ceiling. But my sister had scouted the area, and it was the best one, and we paid a whopping \$15.00 a night, guess we could not exactly expect the Hilton, or even Motel 6.

It was OK though. Every morning, we'd get up, get dressed and go over to my brother's house and stayed there until bed time. It was a perfect solution for us to have a chance to visit with families, and to spend time with my 96 year old mother who was amazingly in good shape, except for signs of dementia. Every night, my younger sister and my 10 year old

nephew would walk us back to the hotel and say good night. At least our room was air-conditioned. It always amazed me how we could sleep with all the noises from the construction of the street, music from the coffee shops, motorcycles that seemed endless thru the night.

The first few days I was anxious to go downtown. We took the bus (for fun) since we already knew the route. Buses were cheap, about 30 cents anywhere in town. air-conditioned and safe, as far as being in traffic, and we both liked to be among all sorts of people, who would look at us with curious eyes, school kids were eager to say "hello" to Glen in English, but of course, like many other big cities, you have to guard your wallet from pocket pickers. After all, Glen did get his camera stolen on a bus during our last Walking downtown trip. alwavs brought back many memories all the way to childhood. I immigrated to Saigon in 1954 with my adoptive parents and grew up here in the South. Any time we walked by the neighborhood where my uncle lived and we staved with them when we first came to Saigon, I could see how much it has changed, the buildings were still there, but the street became an open market. I remember the theater which showed nothing but Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis movies. They were the main entertainment for me and a bunch of cousins back in the days. We would sneak in once in a while since the attendant was a relative and would look the other way. I could barely read the subtitle, but the goofy expressions of Jerry's face and his crosseyes were the biggest laughs for us kids. Comedy, like music has always been the universal language.

The theater is still there, but very run down and sad looking and no longer showing American movies. The whole neighborhood was once the prime real estate of downtown. It has become a ghetto area, and I was told the government has had an eye on the land so people would not do anything to upgrade their homes, with fear that

they would be forced to sell any time.

Saigon traffic has not changed in the past 20 years, if anything, the population has increased by each year. I have been back several times and have always been amazed at the amount of people and motorcycles in the city. VN has enough land for people to spread out, but then it was explained to me that because of economy, people had to move to Saigon to find work. The traffic was, therefore, busy at all hours of the day, and the traffic laws didn't apply much to anybody since they needed to get to their destinations. Crossing the streets was a real trick. You are in the sea of vehicles, it's best to just walk and they would avoid you. You could hold your breath and said a prayer while crossing. After every trip, I felt like wearing a t-shirt that says "I survived traffic in Saigon". I did notice, there were more expensive imported cars than the last time. I often thought "shouldn't people be at work, and shouldn't kids be at schools? Why were everybody out on the streets? Later on, my relatives told me, they were out making a living !!! Saigon has added many more high rise buildings, the newest structure looked similar to the ones in Singapore, with a helipad on top. They charged 200,000 dong (equal \$10.00) to ride the elevator up to the top for a short tour. They had also demolished the two landmark shopping centers (the Eden and Tax shopping center, both were built by the French and were the jewels of Saigon) and built two new high-end malls which caused quite a controversy and created lot of criticisms and anger among the South Vietnamese. These new malls have high end stores that sell brand names like Prada. Luis Vuitton stuff that none of the locals can even afford to look at, let alone buying them. People would whisper and mock the highranking, corrupted officials who patron these places and spend \$5000.00 for a purse, while poverty is still wide spread. It seemed like there are only two classes of people in VN, the filthy rich and the very poor.

During this trip, I noticed they have re painted the City Hall and the main Post office, but while all the main buildings were getting a make-over, and more high-rise buildings to show off, the sidewalks seemed to be forgotten. Le Loi street is one of the most walked on streets by ALL tourists, since it's right in the heart of town and the most shopping attraction, but the side walk has never been fixed in the past 40 years that I know of. I would walk on this street every trip to VN and have noticed every time. It's like a face of a beautiful made-up woman with very crooked teeth. I mentioned to a friend, who shook her head and whispered "it's this government for you, they don't do anything logical, highway 1 (main highway that connects VN from North to South) has been in bad shape in the last 40 years, bridges needed to be built or repaired in many parts of the countries, one town in particular, the kids needed to cross a river to get to school, some had drowned when the water was high, but these projects were not on the government's list.

The tour to the Presidential Palace was very emotional for me. I had never been there before and had tried to avoid it during my previous trips, but my sisters suggested it one day when we passed by and I gave in mostly out of curiosity. The palace is now a tourist attraction that draws many, many people. While moving from room to room I had an eerie feeling and almost saw images of President Thieu, his cabinet and other dignitaries when they were here working, meeting, socializing etc... I don't know how authentic the furniture and decorations were, rumors had it that all the precious national treasure had been stolen and moved to North VN to private residents of the high ranked officials. For today's standard, the palace was nice but it lacked the elegance and fanciness of a place where leader of a country lived and worked. The place still displayed piece of shrapnel from a bomb on the helipad with a plaque of the "hero" who dropped the bomb during an attempt coup years ago. I

thought about President Thieu and his family, who were well liked and respected by the So Vietnamese and was viewed as a true patriot. What a tough job it must have been for him at the time, with pressure of the aggressions of the Vietcong, and with the American government in Washington. During the 40 years, more truths have come out about the VN war, and it's so pitiful that our country suffered so much, both the North and the South. My birth family lived in the North and from their stories, it was worse than any prison. The people suffered from starvation, bombing and worse, the real dictatorship from the Communist government. The government controlled their everyday lives, dictated how much they could eat, where they could go, what they could do. Their land and properties could be seized anytime without a legitimate reason. The North government focused on invading the South using propaganda that South VN had to be liberated because people were starving and mistreated by the American imperialists. South Vietnam, on the other hand, had a democracy government, free enterprises and was bountiful with rice fields, produce, people were prosperous and content. However, with the invasion escalating every year, all resources were used to cope with the war and weakened the country and became the biggest problem for the leaders.

I guess a part of my mix feelings was because I could no longer recognize many neighborhoods where I grew up, where I went to schools, especially the TSN base where I had my first job and transitioned from a teenager to adulthood, had first set of real friends and many fun memories. 40 years is a long time between me and So VN, things have changed inevitably, people have changed, even the Vietnamese language, many new lingos have been added that I didn't understand. Living in the US for 20 years longer than living in VN, I think and act more like an American but with a Vietnamese heart, it's hard to balance sometimes. I still love Saigon, love to walk in the city and watch different kinds of people, vendors with different goods,. It still has the same heat, the same smell, the same noise of a hustle, bustle city, and my feelings have softened some because the new generation is not so "communist" but more westernized with their thinking. I just hope that they will be the ones who will change VN for the better, but the biggest change for me was the loss of all "sense of belonging". I was not home anymore, I felt like a tourist and I was definitely treated like one.

However, I guess the one landmark of Saigon that I could still feel comfortable and took refuge for my soul was the Cathedral of Notre Dame, right by the main Post Office. Both were built by the French many decades ago and lovingly called "The Notre Dame Square". At least efforts have been made to maintain these historic sites as they have always been the pride and joy of the city. To me, this square has had special memories, from the time when I was five, my mother and I were downtown when a gun fight broke out between the newly elected government's (President Diem) army and the last rebel group, I remember she took my hand and we ran inside the cathedral; to the time growing up in the city, it was my meeting place with friends as we spent hours in various coffee shops in the park across the street chatting and watching people.

Since it was the first part of April, the city was getting ready for their Apr 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary big celebration and it was hard to try to tune out their red flags and banners everywhere. The government proudly announced that they will spend millions (of dollars) for this celebration. Being there reminded me more of the historical and painful day when I desperately tried to get out of Vietnam. Never in my life have I felt so close to death, but was willing to die than to live under their rulings.

I have had a different life in the US in the past 40 years, a life with freedom and opportunities, I've always felt the anguish for Vietnam and the people and have never stopped wishing for a big change for Vietnam. I have high hope that the younger generations would be the ones who make that change for the country and the generations to come so Vietnam can once again have freedom, democracy and can compete with the world.

I left Saigon with heavy heart because of the awful mixed emotions. I still want to come back to this city, even though the traveling took a big toll on me physically, with long flights and layovers, and the heat, the humidity and lack of comforts. But I guess I missed the Saigon then with memories of childhood, families and friends and the democracy we had (even with all its flaws). The Saigon now feels superficial and I couldn't help feeling bitter and angry at the communist leaders who have become corrupted and cared about nothing but their own





welfare.

### NOTATIONS FROM APPLICATIONS

I arrived in Viet Nam on May 15, 1967. I was assigned to Detachment 1 - 45th TAC Recon Squadron. I was to become an RF101C Crew Chief. I was assigned to RF101C #166 and later #129. I think there were 16 of these aircraft in operation.

I was an Airman First Class at the time and later that rank was changed to Sgt. I stayed Sgt. until my term ended on August 30, 1968.

Our maintenance shack as it was called was building #2031, 2032, and another 2032A. The 45 barracks where I lived was building #1219 and 1220.

I do recall the TET offensive as it was starting. I recall sitting up beside the RF101 revetment at the end being able to see across the runways looking out to vacant fields beyond the runway. Just smoking and talking with another member of the crew when we noticed a bright flash of light way beyond the runway area. Then came another. Then a swoosh and another swoosh right over our heads. We followed the sounds and light and then a big Kaboom and then another. We knew then it was time to vacate and head for the bunkers.

The next few days as I recall were just as chaotic. We stayed alert. At night we saw lots of strafing with tracer bullets behind our revetment. Also heard lots of B-52's dropping their bombs which seemed endless.

After all quieted down some of us took a ride down the runway area and saw some of the VC that were taken out from the strafing. We also surveyed the damage done in and around our area. It quieted down after a couple of weeks and we got back to a normal routine.

I left in early April due to emergency leave so I missed the other action that took place in May.

Michael R. Miranda, Jr.

#### **TSNA AT THE WALL, MEMORIAL DAY 2015**

By Carol Bessette TSNA Treasurer

#### (Photos by John Bessette, and Genia Blades)

TSNA has been invited to participate in Veterans Day ceremonies at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial for a number of years, and a number of our members have been able to take part in these ceremonies.

This year, for the first time, TSNA was invited to participate in Memorial Day ceremonies, and three Washington-area representatives were able to lay a wreath in the name of TSNA: Larry Blades and his wife, Genia; Carol Bessette and her husband, John, and Russ Clark--who is not a TSNA member, but spent time there, as well as many other locations in-country.

The annual Memorial Day ceremony is hosted jointly by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and the National Park Service. This ceremony was unusual in that it hosted a dozen Medal of Honor recipients. It was noted that 258 Medals of Honor were awarded during the Vietnam War; 162 of these were awarded posthumously. (Two Medals of Honor were awarded to Vietnam veterans in September 2014, one of them posthumously.)

The emphasis on the Medal of Honor at this ceremony was due to the fact that a special set of postage stamps honoring Vietnam Medal of Honor recipients was presented by a representative of the US Postal Service. The stamps contain images of the three versions of the Medal, and are bordered by portraits of recipients. The sheet also lists all 258 recipients.

The Washington Post article on the ceremony (May 26, 2015) discussed one recipient, 1Lt. Brian Thacker, who received the Medal for actions on March 31, 1971. He talked about the nine men killed that day whose names are on The Wall, and how "This was the day we remember the other nine." Lt. Thacker's photo will not be featured on the stamp booklet, partly because of his embarrassment over a 45+ year photo (understandable!), but also because he does not believe the medal should be about him. As quoted in the Washington Post, he said, "One picture does not communicate the 'we."

As Larry Blades wrote later, I must say I was indeed in awe today with meeting no less than 10 individuals who won the CMH, Congressional Metal of Honor. It was an honor for me to shake their hands; where can you ever meet such fine people as that in one gathering?

We expect that TSNA will be invited to participate in the Veterans Day ceremonies in November; this is not just a

ceremony for DC-area TSNA members. We hope that others will continue to join us from around the country--mark vour calendars!



(Larry Blades, Carol Bessette, and Russ Clark, Representing Tan Son Nhut Air Base at The Wall Memorial Day, 2015)



(Russ, Carol, and Larry, presenting our Wreath)



(Unveiling the new Medal of Honor stamps)

## Spooky AC-47D 'Spooky' Gunships 4th Special Operations Sq. DaNang

I was on AC-47s from August to December 1969.

We covered the northern areas of South Vietnam. On rare occasions, we deviated as situations developed.

The mission was mainly major base, hamlet, fire base and other camp defense.

We would fly one bird on "Airborne Alert" with another crew on 'Ground Alert'.

Each aircraft had three MXU - 470 mini-guns that fired 3,000 or 6,000 rounds per minute depending on the target. We would normally have two guns "On line" with one in reserve. This would allow us to reload a gun without losing firepower.

We carried 21,000 rounds on each mission. We also carried the Mk 24, Mod 3 flares for target and camp illumination.

I am including one of our "Business Cards" that we would give to units that we worked. The Army or Marine Units would, on occasion, send a helicopter to DaNang to coordinate missions or to take some of us to visit their camps.

The Spooky Brotherhood placed a bench at the AF Museum in 2013, dedicated to the 3rd and 4th Special Operations Sqdns.

Garry Arndt USAF MSgt (Ret) Loadmaster

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#### SPOOKY

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To help in combat on an urgent call, The guns will fire and the flares will fall.

The men on the ground who know her well, Hear her engines and give out a yell.

The flares are yellow and the tracers red, Just doing a duty in the sky overhead.

When anyone needs her she'll always be there, Giving close air support with a gun and a flare.

Garry Arndt 4th Special Operations Sq Da Nang 1969



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Click here: The Price of Freedom: Printable Exhibition

http://amhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/printable/section.asp?id=12.

I have been playing around with the web site of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History-getting ready for a specialized tour I have to do.

And I found this web site, related to their "Price of Freedom" exhibit (AKA: America at War.)

You can click on any of the photos--and after you finish the Vietnam section, you can also go back to the basic timeline and look up any of the other wars that may interest you.

Carol Bessette, TSNA Treasurer

## Tan Son Nhut Association P. O. Box 236 Penryn PA 17564

Revetments is an official publication of the

Tan Son Nhut Association, Inc.

P.O. Box 236, Penryn, PA 17564-0236

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Five Year Membership: \$80.00
Life Membership: \$180.00



Wow!! I flinched with the shock!

Our thanks once again to John Bowen for his illustration.



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