



# REVETMENTS

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

A Memorial to the American Experience in Vietnam



MAY 2021

## Having a Bad Day? Andy Csordas, Associate Chaplain

For many it has been a rough time over the last twelve months. We have been in lock down, afraid to catch the virus, been sick and some friends have died. In addition the inability to travel, and meet with friends and family has been very difficult. It is much worse for people with family members, especially spouses, when they have not been able to meet with them or even hold the hand of a lifetime partner when they are in a hospital or other types of medical care facilities.

Things are always much more acute when we are affected personally as we can sort of detach ourselves from other's troubles and sicknesses. We know it is really a big deal for them, but it does not affect us the same way as if it was our family member.

So who in history has really suffered? Lots of people you say, people affected by wars, natural disasters, cancer, strokes, etc. This list can go on and on. Most of you have heard of Job in the scriptures. The book of Job can be a slow, tough read, but it has insights for our lives.

Job is the crowning example of the question, why do bad things happen to good people? Job's friends were not exactly encouraging to hugely understate the obvious. They indicated that he, Job, must have done something wrong and God was punishing him. His wife was not much help either; she said to him, *"Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die."* Job 2:9.

Job replied *"You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?"* In Job 2:10, it continues *"In all of this, Job did not sin in what he said."* As discussed above we can read this and it sounds terrible, but it hits much closer to home when it is one of ours suffering.

A wise man wrote that as we struggle with our own suffering and the suffering of others it is important to balance our honest questions with humility and a reverence for God. (p 734, Archeological Study Bible) Psalm 33:22 says, *"May your unfailing love be with us Lord, even as we put our hope in you."* It is very hard sometimes to put our unfailing hope in others, or even God, but in the end trust God to take care of everything, even if I do not understand what is going on and worried about what is to come.

So what happened to Job in the end? After a long period of festering sores, losing all his children and possessions, dealing with his non encouraging know it all friends; he still trusted God, did not curse or blame God and was rewarded many times over for his faith and actions. In the past I personally had times that I thought there was no hope for the future. I was truly wrong in that assumption

and am truly blessed by God today.

Again this is hard while we are in the middle of trying times, but just remember what Job said in chapter 19, verses 25-27, *"I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another."*

We can have confidence in the future if we truly know and believe our Redeemer lives; I trust you know your Redeemer as well. If not seek Him out, he will show you His unfailing love as well. We will all meet God one day, be ready.

## Call for Nominations

Our reunion, for the second year in a row, may be cancelled because of the Coronavirus Pandemic, but your board of directors must continue to function to keep our association viable and plan for more great reunions in the future.

The terms for Treasurer, Director of Marketing, Director for Reunion Planning, and Director for Membership Development expire this year. Incumbents are eligible and encouraged to run for reelection, but we always seek qualified candidates to run for all officer and director positions in our association. There are no specific requirements to run for office other than being a paid-up member in good standing. The duties of each position are spelled out in our bylaws that can be accessed on the TSNA web site.

A person may nominate themselves for an office, or any member may nominate another. If you nominate another, be certain that person is willing to run and serve. Please send all nominations by name and position to me, Dale Bryan, TSNA Secretary, at [dale.bryan@gmail.com](mailto:dale.bryan@gmail.com). If you must send your nomination by surface mail, send it to Tan Son Nhut Association at P. O. Box 236, Penryn, PA 17564-0236. Deadline for all nominations is May 31, 2021. A self-nominee or one accepting a nomination by another member must submit a statement of approximately three to five paragraphs of their vision for the future of TSNA and how they would help achieve that vision by serving on the TSNA Board. A nominee running for reelection must submit a summary of their achievements during their term of office. The announcement of the upcoming election and a listing of all nominees, with their vision statement, will appear in the August 2021 issue of Revetments.

Dale Bryan  
TSNA Secretary

## A SON'S TRIBUTE by Clair L. Smith

Living here in Florida, almost everyone in our community has a golf cart to get around. Like most guys, I wanted something a little different so I yanked the roof off. My son came down for a visit and we discussed the idea that we could buy a 'jeep' front end, paint it blue and it would look something like an Air Force vehicle. We put the cart into the back of his pickup, I gave him the money for the fiberglass front end which he was going to pick up on his way back to NY. He told me he had some friends up there that could help him get it ready.

Two years - I knew he was busy but it seemed like an awfully long time but we had a second cart so it wasn't really a problem. In February 2020 we met him in Arlington, VA for the internment of a relative. He and I walked the Mall together the morning after- it was very quiet with very few people out. He was interested in my time in the service and I realized that I had never really talked to him about it. For the rest of the year, he would ask questions about the various squadrons I had been assigned to and the dates involved.

Apparently, the friends he had to work on my 'toy' were a professional body shop, upholsterers and graphic sign artists! Kevin arrived on Monday, March 15<sup>th</sup> with the most incredible machine I could have ever imagined. He and his friends had created a tribute to me and to every veteran who has ever served. I can see it in their eyes, I see them react, I feel their pride in having served their country - simply by seeing this gift.

My son built me a tribute - it is really dedicated to all of us . . .

MY GOLF CART !!! It started as a 2003 Club Car and wound up being a history of my military career .



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** I saw this on the Facebook Group, "[Tan Son Nhut Veteran's Forum](#)". I wrote to Clair asking him to write up something for us. Above is the wonderful result. Thanks Clair!!

## THE BEST THERE IS

By: Clair L. Smith

There exists in a darkened corner,  
in a deep recess of my mind  
the shadow of a carefree youth  
his boyhood left behind.

Many years ago, in history  
our country was at war  
that carefree youth of yesterday  
existed, nevermore.

For in a strange and foreign land  
a half a world away  
my carefree youth had vanished  
adulthood came to stay.

Responsibility sought me out  
to learn to be a man  
and grow my skills in leadership  
to be the best I can.

When my country called, I answered:  
“Present!”, I loudly swore  
and very shortly after,  
I was headed off to war.

Such a period of danger  
I should have been paralyzed with fear  
but that was so much lessened  
with my soldier brothers near.

So where we were and what we did  
made us who we are,  
my fellow soldiers in history  
the best there is by far.



## TSN AND BASKETBALL

By: SSgt Jim Marshall  
377 CSG, Hq Sq, Data Automation  
Feb 1970 – Mar 1972

Most GI's will agree the Vietnam war was a crazy and, at times, an insane place.

Back just before I arrived in February 1970, it was said there was a recent informal deal made between the Vietnamese government/military, US military and the Viet Cong. Saigon would be peaceful and free from attacks. The reasoning was the 70K US support troops stationed in and around Saigon was using their spending powers, paychecks, to support the local economy. All the hotels, restaurants, bars and other merchants paid bribes (protection money) to the Vietnamese civilian/military police and the Viet Cong. If the attacks continued, the Commanding General over the 70K US troops would keep everyone confined to their bases, BEQ/BOQ hotels and not being able to spend money. This lasted I am told until April 1972, about 3 weeks after I left.

The centers of life for any airman was his work assignment, living area and what ever entertainment was dreamed up. There was a decent Air Force Base Exchange with a large movie theater, Post Office where each airman had his own PO box. You might check it 2-3 times a day never knowing when a mail shipment arrived. There was a huge Exchange downtown in the Chinese section of Saigon; Cholon. Then, there was the PACEX catalog (aka Wish Book for you wished you could buy all of it) where one could order items out of Japan. There were things like cameras, stereo equipment, kitchenware, monkeypod, etc, at great prices. The US dollar was very strong with the Japanese YEN weak making their products OH SO cheap. I know I bought a Stoneware, service for 12, sending it home (free) for around \$35. I still have it today.

There was a small library, air-conditioned along with a place to record music. Cassettes were big then along with reel-to-reel recorders. You could bring in records and record, building a library of music on your own cassettes or recording tape. At that time with the war all around us, it seemed unreal we had all these luxuries along with clean sheets and hooches to keep us dry in the monsoon season.

There were a few part-time jobs to be had on the base but the strangest one came from the Army. The Army was drastically short of helicopter gunners. One gung-ho airman computer operator in my shop signed up to be part-time gunner on Army Huey helicopters being paid \$4 per hour. He was paid too during training learning how to fire an M-60 machine gun. His flights were all milk runs with no expected combat. I never asked if he got it authorized through the Orderly Room. This I saw as another example of someone doing insane things.

After I arrived I heard the base was offering Intramural Basketball leagues. In the US I had officiated at the local YMCA, local Community College for two years and one season at the University of Florida. I checked and was hired on the spot. My second was a SSgt (can't recall his name) working midnights at the COM Center. I worked midnights too and the games were in the afternoon. It was great for both of us. The gym had just a roof on it and rows of bleachers about 6 deep all around. I could run off all those Classic cokes you drank laden with sugar not to mention a beer or two.

I wrote home to my mother to cut the legs off my black pants making Bermuda Shorts, send over the shorts, 3 black/white striped shirts, black sneakers, white socks and 3-4 whistles. Heck, we needed to look the part. With all this equipment, the games were 2-3 days a week, 3 games a day and paid \$3 a game. This was not bad when the minimum wage was \$1.60/hour in the US. Not only did I get paid but I now was getting exercise running up and down the court.

The teams were quite good with many of the players just out of High School. The more interesting games involved the Security Police Squadron. Since they had so many young guys, the squadron had multiple teams. The games played around Shift change in the afternoon highlighted by an audience with some just coming off guard posts in full combat gear carrying their M-16s, M-60 machine guns with belts of ammo, etc, around the neck and shoulders. They were all cheering in the stands grasping their weapons. I imagined what might happened if there was ever a bad call.

The season had wrapped up in late 1971 and there were only a few months to go before I was to catch the Freedom Bird back to the "Real World". One day I had just gotten up around noon in the hooch and an Army Jeep stopped outside. I heard someone asking for SSgt Marshall and the someone was an Army 1Lt. My referee sidekick was in the back of the jeep. The 1Lt asked me if I was interested in referring some games; heck YA. I grabbed my gear and jumped into the jeep.

On the other side of the base was the MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) part of the base which had a regulation US Field House complete with a basketball courts, bleachers. The gym had a beautiful wooden floor. The facility compared to ones at small colleges. The Army, too, had local intramural basketball leagues but decided on an All-Vietnam Basketball Tournament. Yes indeed, Vietnam was sometimes an insane place to be. In the midst of a war, teams from all the big Army Posts were coming to Saigon to play basketball. I can imagine any trip to Saigon from "OUT and UP" there was coveted. I wondered why all of the sudden the Army wanted Air Force referees.

Just as my sidekick and I officiated the intramural games, the Army had 3 Army Reservists who got called to active duty from their primary job as professional American Basketball Association (ABA) referees. At the time was the NBA (National Basketball Association) and the upstart ABA. The 1Lt told us the story of his planning the tournament and yesterday the 3 Officials decided they wanted \$30 per game instead of \$15 deciding to STRIKE. Without referees, all the teams had shown up to play and no games meaning the 1Lt's career was in jeopardy. The 1Lt was panicking until he heard the Air Force at neighboring Tan Son Nhut had referees.

Heck, these prima donnas were getting \$15 a game when we were being paid \$3. We would have done the work for less but gladly accepted the going rate. We suited up and over the next 4 days ran our butts off. It was a glorious payday. There was another more interesting attraction in the MACV compound. Outside the Field House was an actual Olympic sized swimming pool constructed entirely above ground. Mind you, these pools are 18 feet deep with 1-meter and 3-meter diving boards.

The pool was encased in a huge steel supporting frame. To get up to the pool, one had to climb a 21-foot ladder up to the deck running around the pool. On the deck were deck chairs used for sunning yourself just like those around pools in Miami Beach. The water was clean and crystal clear. Yep, bring sun tan lotion, lounge around the pool in your lounge chair catching rays and forget all about the war. Being so high up, the view was spectacular. Looking off in the distance, you could see an actual 18-hole golf course. Yes, in the war zone, I am told the General and Senior Officers could take a break and play a round of golf; guess it was to unwind. I knew there had to be tennis courts somewhere.

The reality of the war would come back when you would see shot up helicopters slung under a larger helicopter being dropped into the huge repair compound just across from the Base Exchange. This is where the Air Force wanted me to be and this was the place I served for 25 months. There is still a bit of survivors guilt no matter how hard one tries to rationalize it differently. Yes, indeed it was a crazy and insane war.

### **More regarding "Death in a Saigon Alley."**

Larry,

Further to the first article in Jan 2021 Revetments "Death In A Saigon Alley".

A friend of mine from the old UseNet group alt.war.vietnam received a Silver Star for his actions in that alley. He was on duty at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Hospital in close proximity to the event and rushed to assist.

#### **MCDONNELL, DENNIS MICHAEL**

Private First Class, U.S. Army  
3d Field Hospital, 68th Medical Group, 44th Medical Brigade  
Date of Action: 31 January 1968

#### ***Citation:***

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918 (amended by an act of July 25, 1963), takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Private First Class Dennis Michael McDonnell, United States Army, for gallantry in action while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force while serving with the 3d Field Hospital, 68th Medical Group, 44th Medical Brigade, in the Repub-

lic of Vietnam. Private First Class McDonnell distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions while serving as a Medical Aidman in support of the United States Army Headquarters Area Command reaction force. When a truck transporting military policemen was ambushed in an alley in the Gia Dinh sector of Saigon, the reaction force immediately rushed to assist the severely wounded survivors. Snipers all around the tiny street where the vehicle had been attacked unleashed continuous volleys of automatic rifle and grenade fire making an approach to the scene extremely perilous. Time and time again the reaction force was driven back by the strafing fusillade. Ultimately two officers prepared to attempt the rescue, and Private McDonnell, although completely unarmed, volunteered to accompany them. As soon as the three reached the stalled vehicle, the scattered Viet Cong snipers opened fire. Private McDonnell had immediately begun administering medical aid to the wounded lying around the truck when a grenade exploded nearby, wounding him and throwing him to the ground. He managed to crawl under the truck as the two officers fought their way out of the alley. For more than five hours, Private McDonnell lay trapped under the vehicle, yet he did what he could to treat those whom he could reach. Finally the officers succeeded in leading the reaction force into the alley, driving the snipers away and evacuating the casualties including the wounded Medic. Private First Class McDonnell's gallantry in action was in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

**General Orders:** Headquarters, U.S. Army Vietnam, General Orders No. 270 (January 31, 1970)

**Home of Record:** Los Angeles, California <https://ameddregiment.amedd.army.mil/silverstar/vw/vietnamwar2.html>

Best Regards, Nigel Brooks Aug 66-Aug 71, HHC Special Troops, USARV

### **WE NEED A PRAYER**

"We need a prayer", my wife said. That request triggered a memory.

Friday, June 12, 1964. I had my bus ticket to Milwaukee along with a voucher for two days stay at a downtown Milwaukee hotel where the new recruits were staging for the Monday, the 15th, Air Force induction ceremony. As the packing was completed, just before leaving home, my mother walked in and handed me a 4" x 6" cream colored book. "You're going to need this", she said. Time was short as we were leaving to catch the bus, so I threw it in with my socks. Hugged and thanked her and we left for the bus station. We were like many other families as we said our goodbye. The many emotions of the moment carried me forward in a fog. It was as we went through our personal items in basic that I found the book, LUTHERAN BOOK OF PRAYER, it was the only thing that the DRILL INSTRUCTOR would let me have that I brought with me.

Back to present day, the prayer book was behind the Bible. The cream color cover is now a dirty grey from the many years of travel, both in the service and after. The pages that were trimmed in gold now were a faded yellow. The pages, after having been exposed to many different levels of humidity, had trouble lying flat. The book automatically opened to page 149, FOR A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY IN DANGER, with the WHILE AWAY FROM HOME on the opposing page. New Hampshire, Thailand, Arizona, Vietnam, Japan, Okinawa, followed by civilian Arizona, Wisconsin and Tennessee rolled through my brain. Triumphs, failures, broken hearts, happiness.... this little book was there with the right prayer that was needed for the occasion, and yes there was a prayer for us that my wife requested.

Think of the many mothers, of all faiths, that felt like my mother and did something similar as their child prepared to leave for military service. My mothers inscription: MY SON, WITH A PRAYER THAT THIS GIVES HIM STRENGTH AND HELP, COMFORT AND FAITH.

This little book is still available. In its 5th printing it is available from the Concordia Publishing House. The Book House description follows.

*Lutheran Book of Prayer* has assured and guided generations of Christians in their personal prayer life. This edition speaks to the unique needs of contemporary Christians, and strengthens and informs readers as they go to God in prayer. Personal prayers are included for almost any life circumstance, including for morning and evening, worship, our world, our neighbors, ourselves, and the sick.

Chuck Templeton, Oct 68-Nov 69, 377th SPS

## The Day the Fire Department Came to Visit at the Hotel-3 Heliport

By Andy Csordas, SP/5, 31S30

Our unit at Tan Son Nhut, the Special COMSEC Support Detachment (SCSD) was located inside the H-3 Heliport perimeter. We repaired Crypto gear for a number of Armies including the US, Aussies and ROKs, but much of the equipment we repaired was used by the ARVN's. One piece of equipment used by the ARVN's was the KL-7 which was basically similar, but much improved technology, to the WWII Enigma machines used by the AXIS powers. We had used the KL-7 during the Korean War. But that is another story.



M-209 as seen in the National Cryptologic Museum

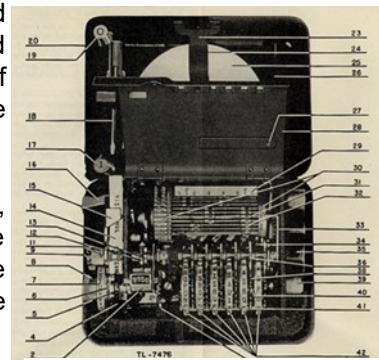
In addition the ARVN's used the M-209, seen at left, which the US had first used during WWII and then Korea. At one time the M-209's were sold military surplus, but were recalled for use in Vietnam. Our SCSD CO was a Boy Scout leader back in the states and he said his Boy Scout troop had some M-209's that had been procured through the surplus system.

During my time there in 1970 an order came down to destroy the M-209's. Since our unit directly supported the ARVN's in the headquarters area we ended up with several 55 gallon drums full of old M-209's. The M-209 was all mechanical; no power needed, was approximately 8" by 8" and about 3" high. It was constructed of steel robust enough to stand up to being thrown around, etc. It printed encrypted messages on a paper tape. The key settings could be changed for a different encryption algorithm. To decrypt the message you had to use the same key used for encryption set on the decryption unit.

So the conventional wisdom was to smash them with sledgehammers. As noted above they were of very robust construction, see the picture of the inside of the unit below. You may recall it was a bit warm over there. Each unit required a lot of hits to completely destroy and as noted we had a couple of 55 gallon drums full of M-209s. Long story short, using sledgehammers to destroy them with was way too much like work.

So being enterprising young troopers and trying to think outside the box we determined there was an easier way to destroy the units all at once. As noted we were a Crypto repair shop and we had to have a means of destroying classified equipment if we were overrun. We had a very ample supply of thermite grenades and other thermite products to be used to destroy equipment. During our training we had been repeatedly instructed on how to destroy equipment with the thermite units. But of course we had never actually had chance to use the thermite units, so we convinced the CO to let us "learn" to use them.

So to save lots of work it turned out to be easier to dig a pit inside our shop perimeter, which was located inside the Heliport perimeter. We placed the M-209's neatly on the bottom. We then placed the thermite products on top. Many of the thermite units were thin flat and a relatively large shape designed to burn down through equipment so we ended up neatly covering the entire pile of equipment with thermite.



Inside view of the M-209

We then set off the thermite, which was really kind of cool for a couple of minutes. A huge yellowish green cloud of smoke went high in the air. We stood there and admired our handiwork. But all of a sudden the Heliport Fire Department raced up with their water cannon and stopped near the pole at the corner of the fence in the picture of the shop. Well if you know anything about thermite, you know you can't put it out once it starts burning, you have to let it burn out.

We were all standing past the pit and the fire truck, staffed by Vietnamese civilians, was on the other side at the fence. Had they started spraying it would have pushed the thermite and molten metal out of the pit and on us. As I ran into the bunker, shown near the back of the building, I saw our CO running toward the fire truck waving his arms and screaming NO, NO, NO. Fortunately they did listen to him but waited around until everything was out.

So that is the day the Fire Department visited the Special COMSEC Support Detachment at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. Like I said it was kind of cool for a couple of minutes.





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#### **IN MEMORIAM:**

Mike DeTuccio, Nov 65 - Oct 66, 377th Air Police  
(See above pictures, from a couple of TSNA Reunions)  
(Top graphic by Charles Penley)

**RIP MIKE**

#### **NEW MEMBERS**

David G. Facey Lakeland FL [dfacey@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:dfacey@tampabay.rr.com). Jan 67 - May 68  
460 Field Maint. Sq. Jet Engine Mechanic

Gordon R. Lawrence Monticello IL [glawrence@mchsi.com](mailto:glawrence@mchsi.com). Nov 71- Nov 72  
377 CAMS Sq. Supply Maintenance Liason

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