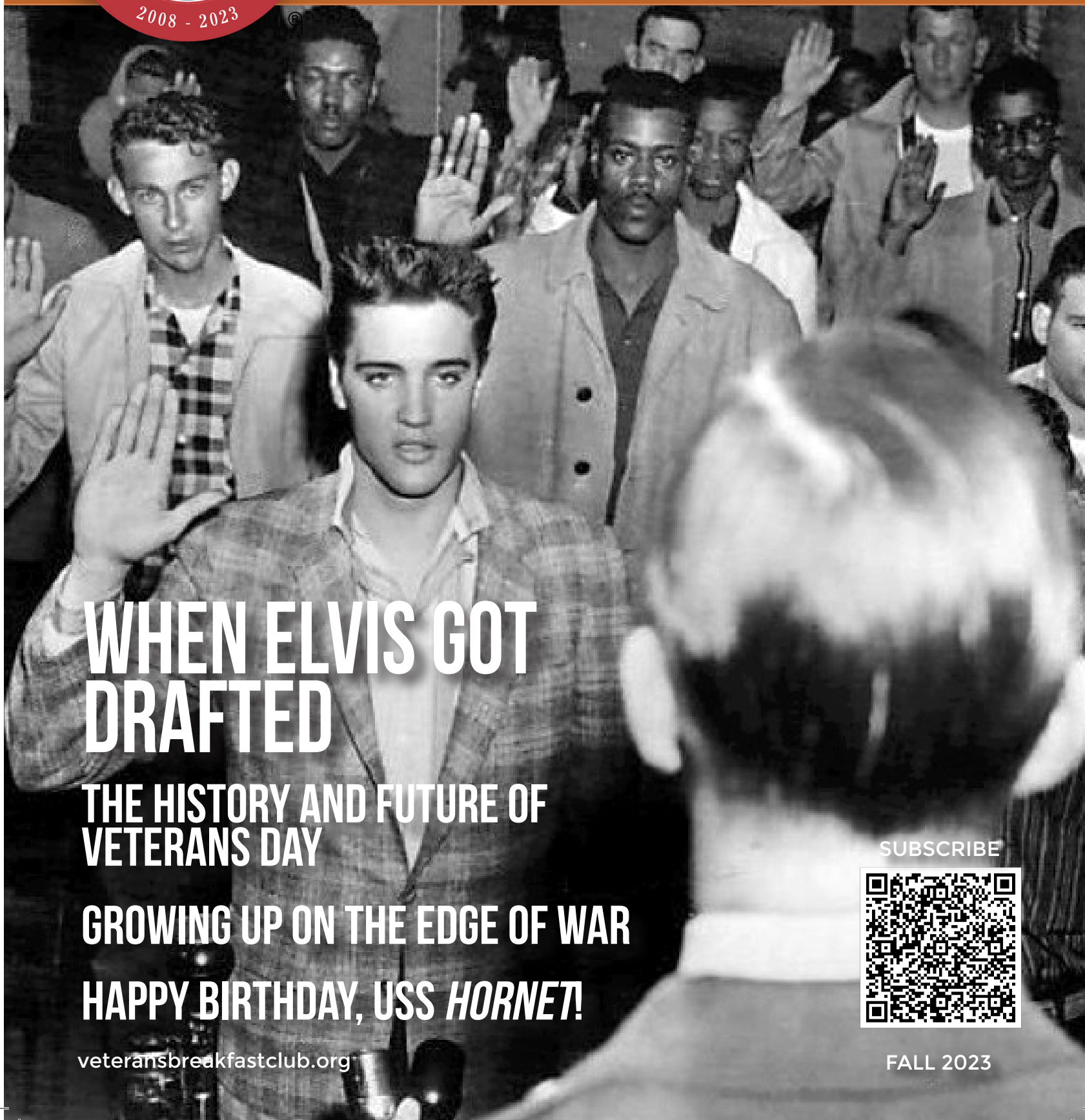




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WHEN ELVIS GOT DRAFTED

THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF
VETERANS DAY

GROWING UP ON THE EDGE OF WAR

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, USS *HORNET*!

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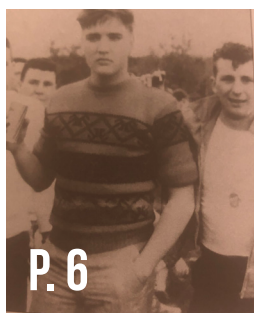
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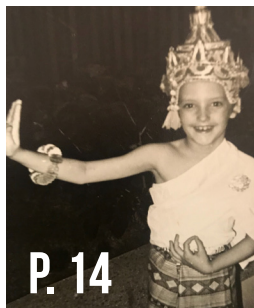
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VETERANS' DAY

Armistice Day is no more. Not because the people of the world are any less peace-minded than they were in past years, but simply because Armistice Day has long since lost its original meaning. The new observance, beginning today, Nov. 11, will each year be Veterans Day. The men who have served our nation eminently deserve such tribute, and a grateful people will happily accept this opportunity to express their heartfelt thanks to all ex-servicemen.

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(Small print) Cover: Elvis Presley and other recruits are being sworn into the military on March 24, 1958 in Memphis, Tennessee, by Maj. Elbert P. Turner (AP)

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.

200 Magnolia Place, Pittsburgh, PA 15228 (412) 623-9029 veterans-breakfastclub.org For more information, contact betty@veterans-breakfastclub.org

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FROM THE DIRECTOR



On March 24, 1958, Elvis Presley reported to his Memphis Draft Board office, raised his right hand, and took the Oath of Enlistment into the United States Armed Forces. He didn't want to go into the Army and would have taken any reasonable out he'd been offered, but he served anyhow and, he later admitted, was glad he did. In this respect, Elvis, for all his celebrity, resembles so many other American veterans who have told me over the years: "I wouldn't want to do it again, but I wouldn't trade the experience for anything." That someone as big as Elvis could not only serve but grow from the experience testifies to the special place of military veterans in our American life. Veterans Day is set aside to honor and celebrate those who served, but the dwindling number of Americans in the military—the smallest proportionally since before Pearl Harbor—makes me question how long November 11 can hold a vital place on our national calendar. On the Veterans Breakfast Club's website, we state that our strategic vision is "to build a nation that understands and values the experiences of our military veterans." Achieving this vision is impossible without veterans themselves sharing their stories of service for the education and inspiration of their fellow citizens. If you're a veteran and haven't yet joined us in-person or online, please do so and add your voice to our large and diverse collection of stories. If, like me, you're not a veteran, then your participation in VBC programs is even more important. Veterans Day should be for all of us, story-listeners as well as storytellers. We need a nation of both.

Todd

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Executive Director
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IN-PERSON EVENTS

For the latest event schedule, scan this QR code!



All in-person events begin at 8:30am and include breakfast for \$15pp unless otherwise noted. RSVP to betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org or 412-623-9029.

FRIDAY, October 20: **FREE breakfast** Town & Country Diner (177 US-130, Bordentown, NJ 08505)

WEDNESDAY, October 25: Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

TUESDAY, October 31: Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

SATURDAY, November 4: University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg (Hempfield Room, Chambers Hall, Greensburg, PA 15601) \$5 breakfast

WEDNESDAY, November 8, 8am-12pm: **FREE breakfast** VBC 15th Birthday Extravaganza with UPMC for Life, Rivers Casino Event Center (777 Casino Dr, Pittsburgh, PA 15212)

FRIDAY, November 17, 10am-12pm, FREE continental breakfast: Beulah Presbyterian Church (2500 McCrady Rd, Pittsburgh, PA 15235)

WEDNESDAY, November 29: Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

WEDNESDAY, December 6: Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, 15009)

SATURDAY, December 16: Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)



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ONLINE EVENTS



VBC Happy Hour features conversations with veterans about all things military, past and present. We're live every Monday at 7pm ET on Zoom and simulcast to YouTube and Facebook. See schedule and connect at veteransbreakfastclub.org/events.

OCTOBER 16: 40th Anniversary of the Beirut Barracks Bombing, 1983 with Marines who were there, part 1.

OCTOBER 23: 40th Anniversary of the Beirut Barracks Bombing, 1983 with Marines who were there, part 2

OCTOBER 30: 40th Anniversary of the "Able Archer" Nuclear Scare with USAF Veteran and Author, Brian Morra

NOVEMBER 6: WWII Montford Point Marine Theodore Britton, Jr.

NOVEMBER 13: The Casablanca Conference of 1943 with historian James Conroy

NOVEMBER 20: *Getting Out of Saigon: How a 27-Year-Old Banker Saved 113 Vietnamese Civilians* with author Ralph White

NOVEMBER 27: Guantanamo Bay Veterans

DECEMBER 4: Finding Mass Graves in Vietnam with Veteran and Expert Bob Connor

DECEMBER 11: *Nam Sense: The 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam* with Arthur Wiknik

DECEMBER 14: **SPECIAL EVENT** with Legendary Navy Veteran, Oceanographer, and Underwater Archeologist, Robert Ballard, the Man Who Discovered the Titanic

DECEMBER 18: Fighting with the Wehrmacht with WWII Veteran Wolfram Forster

JANUARY 8: Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About the M-16 Rifle with Veteran and Author Bob Orkand

RECENT ONLINE EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

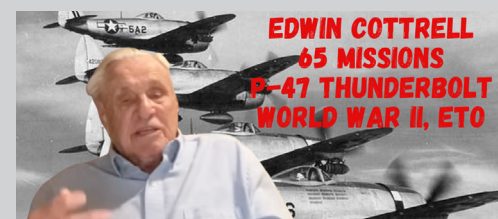
Watch at veteransbreakfastclub.org/past-events



USS Kitty Hawk Race Riot of 1972
The Untold Story
with Marv Truhe



Under Secretary of the VA for Benefits
Joshua Jacobs



NEWS: Donut Dollie and 25th Infantry Division Veteran Reunite After 53 Years

Back in May, former Vietnam Red Cross Donut Dollie Peggy Lynd Kelly got an unexpected blast from past on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Peggy was staffing the Red Cross booth at "Camp Legacy" for the Welcome Home! Vietnam War Commemoration. A man walked into the tent and looked at the photos displayed. Peggy approached him and joked that he looked too young to be a Vietnam Veteran. Then, she noticed his 25th Infantry Division pin.

The Veteran, Adib Sabree, pulled out a handful of fading color photos from his service at a firebase near Cu Chi in 1970. He shuffled one to the top and pointed at a woman in the picture.

"Would anyone here know who this Donut Dollie was?" he asked.

"You're looking at her!" replied Peggy.

Back in 1970, Peggy had visited Adib's firebase, and the two had this photo taken together.

We talked with Peggy and Adib on our VBC Happy Hour Open Conversation program on July 31. You can watch them tell the story and talk about their service at veteransbreakfastclub.org/past-events.





FEATURE

MY FRIEND, ELVIS

by Johnny Lang

*Last June, we had the immense pleasure of hosting a VBC Happy Hour with the inimitable Johnny Lang, an Army veteran who served with Elvis Presley and seemed to channel Elvis's extraordinary energy. Johnny's new book, *My Army Days with Elvis: Friendship, Football & Follies*, tells of hijinks and warm friendship with The King of Rock n' Roll as the Cold War heated up in Europe. Johnny told us what Elvis was like, in private. Below he shares an adapted excerpt from his book, giving just a glimpse of the adventures he had with Elvis in Germany from 1958 to 1960. Contact Johnny for a signed copy of his book. He loves hearing from readers! Email him at myarmydayswithelvis@gmail.com.*

Image: Elvis Presley poses for the camera during his military service at a US base in Germany (Wikimedia Commons)

first saw Elvis on the rifle range at Fort Hood in the spring of 1958. I was in Basic Training. Everyone knew Elvis was, too.

"Johnny," someone said, nodding his head in the King's direction, "there's Elvis."

"I'm not going to bother the guy," I swore. "Everybody bothers him, and I'm not going to be one of those guys."

The second time I saw Elvis was a few months later, aboard a troop train heading for New Jersey. We were all bound for a ship to take us to Germany.

On the train was a buddy, another GI named Charlie Hodge. Charlie was a singer in his own right, a tenor in a Gospel quartet called "The Foggy River Boys." Just a few years earlier, he'd gotten to know Elvis on the music circuit, when The Foggy River Boys were bigger than Elvis. They reunited by chance in the Army at Fort Hood. Charlie would go on to become a member of Elvis's entourage, the so-called "Memphis Mafia."

"Johnny, come up and sit with us," coaxed Charlie. "Elvis is two or three cars up. Let's go see him."

"I ain't gonna bother that guy," I replied.

"Come on, Johnny, what's it's going to hurt? If he says no, we'll leave."

I relented.

We staggered through the compartments until I saw Elvis relaxing in his seat.

I was instantly starstruck, paralyzed. I just stared at him like a dummy.

"Sit down, Chief," Elvis said, smiling.

I sat and tried to play it cool. It didn't work.

Before I knew it, I was frantically searching for a pen and asking for Elvis's autograph. "Would you sign my sister's picture, a picture for my mother, my grandmother?"

"Sure," Elvis said, and he signed all of them.

We met again once aboard our ship, the *USS General George M. Randall* (AP-115), which was to take us on a ten-day journey to Bremerhaven, Germany.

"Come see me, Johnny," said Elvis, and I told him I'd find him once we were at sea.

I did and spent a great ten days getting to know Elvis as a person, not the movie star and Rock n' Roll icon. He was a great guy, kind, funny, and generous. We talked about movies a lot. He wanted to become a serious actor. His favorite actors were Marlon Brando and James Dean.

"Hey, Johnny, go see if you can find me a piano," he said one day.

I located a piano in a large empty compartment and led him to it. He sat down and started playing quietly. Then, the music started to build, and Elvis started getting into it.

People heard the sound and wandered in. Elvis kept playing, oblivious to the growing crowd. I just sat back and watched the whole little impromptu performance. He played for fifteen or twenty minutes, then suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Holy cow! I'm not supposed to be playing," he joked.

Everybody clapped and cheered. It's one of my greatest life memories.

Another night, I was on the deck way up high getting fresh air with the guys. It was pitch black, and I got spooked. "I'm going to go back downstairs," I said. "If I fall off the ship, nobody is going to know."

All of a sudden, Elvis appeared.

"Hey, Babe," I said. (I started calling Elvis "Babe" after Babe Ruth. Elvis was to music what Babe Ruth was to baseball, and they were both charismatic, larger-than-life figures).

"Here, Johnny, I got something for you," Elvis said, bringing his hand from behind his back.

I didn't want to take anything from him. Everyone wanted a piece of Elvis, and I didn't want to be one of those guys.

"Take the damn thing," Elvis insisted. I relented.

It was a watch. Elvis had purchased it at the ship's store for \$72.50 (I checked). This was a small fortune at the time. Keep in mind, I was only making \$78 a month.

Elvis and I went our separate ways after the *USS General George M. Randall* docked at Bremerhaven. I went off with the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment to be a Reconnaissance Scout, while Elvis went to the 32nd Armor Regiment as a jeep driver.

"Come and see me anytime, Johnny," Elvis said when we parted.

I found Elvis again about a month later staying at the Hotel Villa Grunewald in Bad Nauheim, which was close to Ray Barracks.

"Hey, Elvis do you know this guy?" said the person who answered the door.

Elvis said, "Oh, yeah. Come on in, Johnny."

I came in and shook his hand. And, again, I was starstruck.

But Elvis broke the spell and made me feel right at home. He fixed me up an ice cream sundae. Imagine, the King of Rock-n-Roll serving you an ice cream sundae!

After four months, Elvis and buddies--Red West, Lamar Fike, and Charlie Hodge--got kicked out of the hotel.

They kept breaking things, lighting off fireworks, and having water fights in the hallway. They were just like a bunch of kids.

I visited Elvis every weekend after he moved into his rented house in Bad Nauheim. I'd arrive after Saturday inspections around noon and stay until 10pm on Sunday so I could be back at base by midnight.

Some days, I'd have to fight my way through throngs of fans to get in. They were all there hoping for a glimpse of Elvis.

I also went out with Elvis, which was always an adventure. Wherever we went, we had to sneak in to avoid the mob of fans. Once we were at the Army base movie theater watching either *Jailhouse Rock* or *King Creole*, I don't recall.

We alerted the theater manager ahead of time, so he could usher us in after the lights went down. He sat us in the front row, and we watched the movie.



Elvis below, Johnny above, aboard the USS General George M. Randall, 1958



The watch that Elvis gave Johnny on the USS Randall, 1958

How strange that was: sitting and watching a movie next the guy who was starring in the movie. As we watched, Elvis told us about the other actors and what the filming was like.

Elvis had a signal. If he tapped you on the forehead, he wanted you to do something outrageous, make a scene. It was the kid in him. During the movie, I felt the tap.

I threw my popcorn in the air. Popcorn flew everywhere, and people behind us yelled.

"What's going on?!"

Elvis laughed. That was his kind of humor.

Things quieted down, and we resumed watching the movie.

Elvis broke the silence by saying loudly for everyone to hear, "This guy [meaning Elvis] can't act and can't sing. You call that acting? I can't believe he's on the screen!"

Someone shouted, "Would you mind shutting up down there? We're trying to watch."

Elvis shouted back, "I'm telling you the guy can't act. And he can't sing either."

The audience got riled up and started yelling at us again. Before things erupted, we left the theater. We always had to leave early anyhow, before the lights went up, to avoid Elvis being recognized. If we got caught, which we did sometimes, it was a madhouse. Hundreds of fans swarming.

The highlight of our weekend during the warm months was playing touch football on Sunday. Elvis loved football. He was the quarterback, and I was the running back. Back then Elvis was slim and trim, about 6' tall, 175 lbs. He had a damn good arm, too.

I was the fastest guy out there and the smallest. I always played in my socks because shoes slowed me down.

We wore black t-shirts as a sort of uniform. Other guys would challenge us from other bases or units and try to beat us. We didn't lose many games.

"All right, here's what we're going to do," said Elvis once in a huddle. "Johnny you're going to run that way. I'm going to throw a pass and hit you in the flat."

Elvis hiked the ball, and I ran, and he threw the football way over my head like I was 6'9", so I couldn't get near the ball. I came back to the huddle.

He said, "You got a problem with your eyesight?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Man, I'm not 6'9", I'm 5'7". You missed that throw by a mile."

"I don't want to talk about it," he said angrily. "Let's get the next play."

The next play, he threw lower, and I caught it.

Most of the time, we'd just call plays on the spot. We didn't practice them. We'd just go to the field, and Elvis would make them up right there in the huddle.

Of course, there was always a crowd on hand to watch us play. On any given Sunday, we might have 100-200 people following us to the field, which was just a few blocks from his house.

Once, before a game, Elvis and I were standing in the vestibule about to leave. He carefully combed his hair, and then asked, "Johnny, do you think I'll ever be bald?"

"No," I told him. "I'll be bald someday, but you will get uglier."

He just looked at me. "Let's go play ball."

Christmas, 1959. Presents stacked across the room to the ceiling and in every corner. They came from all over the world.

Elvis loved Christmas, both giving and receiving presents. He gave me a Ronson lighter, which I kept as a souvenir. I read later that Elvis's giving became more lavish and spontaneous through the years. That doesn't surprise me because he thrilled at the sight of people receiving gifts.

New Year's Eve 1959, Elvis threw a big party. During a fast song, I asked 14-year-old Priscilla Beaulieu to dance. She enjoyed dancing, and we were having a great time while Elvis was playing pool.

One of the guys came over to me.

"Elvis doesn't want you dancing with Priscilla."

"What's the problem?"

"I don't know. I'm just doing my job," he said.

"So the big dog's worried about the little dog?" I replied.

Then, I looked over at Elvis by the pool table. He looked back. "Big Hollywood, guy," I thought. "I got him going."

Sometime later, just to bust my chops, Elvis said in front of the guys, "Hey, Johnny, I heard you're a pretty good dancer."

"Yeah, I'm OK, why?"

"Why don't you dance for us here, right now?"

"I don't think so," I said. Everybody was laughing.

We all used to tease each other quite a bit. Once in a while, the teasing would go too far. There were one or two times when Elvis did hurt my feelings.

I remember on one occasion, I got up after being hurt and went into the kitchen by myself. Elvis came in and put his hands on my shoulders. "How are you doing, Johnny?"

He squeezed my shoulders, and that was his way of apologizing to me. Because Elvis never apologized.

One night I went to a bar by myself and started drinking big German beers. I'd been feeling homesick. Also, I had an abscessed tooth. The only good thing was the extra stripe I'd gotten the week before. I finally made corporal.

Besides me were three big German guys also drinking.

"You know," said the biggest one, in English, "all of these guys come over from America and they think they're tough, they mess with our women, and we don't need this kind of company in this country."

I didn't react but asked the bartender for another beer.

The big German kept up his badmouthing of Americans.



*PFC Johnny Lang, Infantry Scout
3rd Armored Division*



*Elvis and Johnny on the sideline during a
Sunday football game*

"Excuse me, sir," I finally interjected. "I just want to say if it wasn't for you f**** Germans, I wouldn't be here in the first place, and I don't appreciate your attitude towards America."

POW! I never saw it coming. A punch right in my abscessed tooth.

I got up to go after him.

POW! again.

Now I was down on the ground, and he kicked me in the ribs, cracking three of them.

The only thing that saved me were two MPs on patrol. They stopped in the bar, grabbed me, gave me a tongue lashing, and took me to the hospital.

My face looked like a truck hit it. When I got out, I went to see Elvis.

I tried to get Elvis to send his would-be Memphis Mafia to take care of my assailant.

"I'm not doing that, Johnny," said Elvis. "I've got enough problems without getting involved with yours too!"

I didn't get any sympathy from my company commander, either.

"I understand you got into a fight, Lang," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"We're taking away the stripe you just got."

"Sir," I protested, "it wasn't my fault."

"I don't care whose fault it was, Private," said the captain. "When you're in this country, you're a guest of the German people. Therefore, you're going to lose your stripe."

I went into the Army as a Private, and came out as a Private.

Elvis went in as a Private, and he came out as Sergeant. I guess it's all who you know, brother.

At least that's what I tell myself.

We were in combat training in Grafenwoehr, and Elvis was sick, stuck in the barracks on a shivering February day. I found him alone, lying in the bunk with the blanket scrunched down by his waist.

I sat on the edge of the bed and made small talk.

"El, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, Johnny."

"All the people you know in the world, and all the fame you have, why are we friends?"

Elvis said, "I'll tell you something, Johnny, you and I are friends because if I was a janitor, you'd still like me . . . and thank God, I'm not."

I got up and I took the blanket and pulled it up to his chin.

"Babe, you take care of yourself."

I'll never forget that.

The last day I saw Elvis was a sad one. I got there about noon. There was a bunch of guys all standing there in a sort of line, saying our goodbyes.

Elvis walked up to me and shook my hand. I tried holding back tears and couldn't.

"I want to thank you for the two years in the Army," I said. "You made my life real nice." Tears streamed down my face.

"It's all right, Johnny," he said gently, "it was my pleasure."

I didn't join Elvis back at Graceland after the Army, as a few others, like Charlie Hodge, did. Instead, I returned home to

Michigan, went back to work in the steel mill, and two years later met my wife. I'm happy the way my life turned out. I became a family man, was married for thirty years, had five kids, nine grandkids, and wouldn't change a thing.

At twenty-two years old, I remember thinking to myself, "One day I'm going to tell my kids about this." And boy, did I tell them, many times over.

I've seen a lot of entertainers come and go over the last sixty years. Some are described as having "incredible talent" or "being gifted." When I hear that, I just chuckle quietly to myself because I got a glimpse of the enormous talent my friend possessed.

I'm often asked what I remember most about the King. He had a great laugh, for sure, but an even greater heart. That's why I loved the guy.

I'm now eighty-eight years old, and I still keep busy doing janitorial work at Expert Machine Repair, Inc. in Roseville, Michigan.

When I'm by myself in deep thought, pushing that broom around the shop floor, I often think back and reflect on my life. I think about my mom and dad, the joy of raising my children, how they're raising my grandchildren, all my dear friends, and of course those memorable times with Elvis.

As far as my current job, well, Elvis once told me that he and I would be friends even if he was a janitor. Well, I'm proud to say we were friends, but I ended up being the janitor.



VET★A★THON

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November 11, 11AM-11PM

Vet-A-Thon is our annual Veterans Day 12-hour online conversation with veterans of different backgrounds, ages, and branches of service from around the country.
Join at veteransbreakfastclub.org/events

11am-12pm: VIETNAM THROUGH MY LENS
1st Infantry Division combat photographer Stu Richel

12pm-1pm: VETERANS AT WORK at FEDEX GROUND
FedEx Ground veterans from around the country share stories of service

1pm-12pm: HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR AND FRENCH RESISTANCE FIGHTER
Survivor Kurt Leuchter joins us to share his unforgettable story

2pm-3pm: THE WWII LOGBOOK PROJECT
Our friends Lars McKee from Sweden and Nick Devaux from St. Lucia update us with stories from their record-breaking logbook.

3pm-4pm: VETLANTA: ATLANTA'S VETERANS COMMUNITY
Lloyd Knight and Kevin Horgan talk with Atlanta veterans

4pm-5pm: VETERANS AT WORK at FEDEX GROUND
FedEx Ground veterans from around the country share stories of service

5pm-6pm: WWII SUBMARINE VETERAN JULIAN MOSES
Glenn Flickinger speaks with WWII veteran who fought undersea in the Pacific

6pm-7pm: THE SOLDIER'S TRUTH: ERNIE PYLE AND THE STORY OF WWII
Glenn Flickinger speaks with author David Chrisinger, who walked in Ernie Pyle's footsteps and wrote about what he discovered

7pm-8pm: LIONESSES
Daria Sommers speaks with members of Team Lioness, the first women in combat in 2004

8pm-9pm: WWII VETERANS WITH SCOTT MASTERS
Canada's Greatest History Teacher brings WWII veterans together to share stories

9pm-10pm: WALKING GUADALCANAL
Marine Dave Holland, leading expert on Guadalcanal, walks us through the battle site

10pm-11pm: NATIONAL VETERANS ART MUSEUM
NVAM Executive Director Giselle Futtrell gives us a tour of the museum's treasures

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FEATURE

COMPANY "D"
1ST BATTALION

Elvis cleaning his new company's sign at Ray Barracks, Friedberg, Germany, 1958

WHEN ELVIS GOT DRAFTED

by Todd DePastino

Three-hundred miles due west of Memphis, close to the Oklahoma border, stands a vintage Army barracks with a barber pole fixed to its whitewashed clapboard.

Inside is the room where the "Haircut Heard 'Round the World" took place on March 26, 1958.

The Fort Chaffee Elvis Barbershop Museum preserves a moment in history that's hard for us to imagine today, when respectable men can wear shaved heads, dreadlocks, or even ponytails with impunity. But in the 1950s, Elvis's swoop of long hair on top and modest sideburns down his cheeks caused scandal. High schools banned the hairstyle, newspaper editors condemned it, and stars like Bing Crosby urged Elvis to "take those sideburns off!"

And on March 26, 1958, the Army did just that.

"Hair today, gone tomorrow," quipped Elvis from his barber's chair before 55 members of the press.

The moment was a footnote in history, but one laden with significance.

Elvis's induction into the Army removed him from the public eye and changed the course of popular music. Elvis's absence (and Buddy Holly's death, Chuck Berry's Mann Act arrest, Jerry Lee Lewis's marriage scandal, and Little Richard's conversion) created breathing room for new stars and sounds: Motown, the Beach Boys, and, ultimately, the Beatles.

But Elvis's induction into the Army also marked a key moment in the Cold War, which was a contest of culture as much as arms.

That the most famous man in the world had been forced to trade his gold lamé for olive drab was a startling signal of the American commitment to containing

Communism.

And, unlike prior celebrities, Elvis wasn't dispatched to Special Services to entertain troops. Rather, he was put in the 3rd Armored Division in Friedberg, Germany. That meant he was standing point in the Fulda Gap, the expected route of the Soviet invasion of Western Europe and ground zero of any future World War III.

The Soviets were so astonished to see Elvis in uniform they thought it was a trick. East German Defense Minister Willi Stoph called Elvis a "means of seduction" intended to lure defectors over the border.

To counter the threat, the Communists created a rival dance in 1959, the *Lipsi*, which was something like a speedy waltz combined with a rumba in 6/4 time. The point was to nip any Elvis-like gyrating in the bud by forcing dancers into male-led couples and away from solo dance floor antics. Official East German dance halls posted signs:

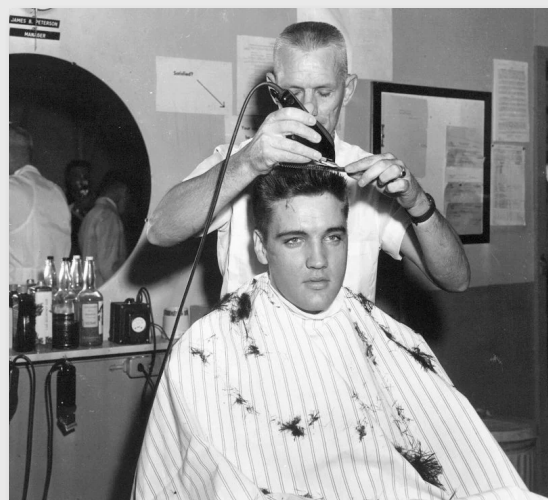
DER TANZTEIL IST VERBOTEN
(Dancing apart is forbidden)

The *Lipsi* was worse than a flop. It was openly mocked, and the Communist government's fixation with Elvis only heightened Rock n' Roll's allure to East German youths.

In Leipzig and 13 other East German cities, authorities jailed teenagers for shouting "Long live Elvis Presley!" as they danced in the streets.

None of this, of course, was intended or orchestrated by the United States. Elvis, along with 142,245 other American men in 1958, had simply gotten caught up in the Cold War Draft.

Elvis had dutifully registered for the Selective Service 11 days after his 18th birthday in January 1953, while the Draft was feeding battlelines in Korea.



Elvis Presley receiving his famous haircut at Fort Chaffee (AP)

With the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement in July, conscription numbers plummeted, and it took the Memphis Draft Board until 1957 to contact Elvis.

By that time, he was famous. He'd released three number one records, signed a major Hollywood movie deal, and was the most watched act in television history. After he passed his pre-induction physical and was listed as 1-A, Elvis knew it was just a matter of time.

Elvis dreaded the Army because he feared losing his fame. No one in 1957 knew that Rock n' Roll was here to stay. Many considered it just another fad like the poodle skirt or 3-D movie. Singer Pat Boone recently admitted he thought Elvis would be a one-hit wonder, going the way of The Chords ("Sh-boom") and The Penguins ("Earth Angel").

"I have no way of telling if my fame is fading," Elvis said later in Germany. "You just don't know. I hope the folks back home haven't forgotten me."

An assignment in Special Services would have kept Elvis in the spotlight. Instead of serving in the ranks, he'd have performed for them, like Glenn Miller and Mickey Rooney had in World War II.

It's hard to believe, but the Army in 1957 didn't think Elvis would be much of a draw among GIs. "Our studies indicate that his basic appeal is to young girls," said an Army spokesman.

The Navy showed a bit more wisdom and tried to lure Elvis into uniform with a promise to serve with his Memphis buddies, perform at naval installations, and enjoy his own priority housing.

But Elvis's manager, the infamous Colonel Tom Parker, didn't like the idea of Elvis singing on stage for Uncle Sam. Such performances would be free-of-charge and remain forever in the public domain, meaning no royalties for the Colonel and his star client.

The Colonel also knew any special treatment by the Pentagon would brand Elvis a coddled celebrity and only compound his intense unpopularity among those who disapproved of his rowdy music, leg-shaking performances, and long-haired appearance.

The best strategy, the Colonel told Elvis, was to profess a readiness to serve in any capacity.

"I'm not gonna ask for anything. I'll do what they want

me to do," the 22-year-old told reporters in March 1957.

In the end, he did ask for one thing: a deferral of Basic Training for 60 days so he could finish the movie *King Creole*. For Elvis, Hollywood was a hedge against Rock n' Roll. If the music did turn out to be a fad, his fame could continue on the silver screen.

Elvis created plenty of headaches for the Army, from the famous haircut in 1958 to his return from Germany in 1960. Every move Private Presley made had to be coordinated at the highest levels so the Army could enforce crowd control over swarming fans, reporters, and photographers. Elvis was bigger than any of his commanders or General Staff officers assigned to handle him.

After Basic Training and Advanced Armor Training at Fort Hood, Elvis shipped overseas as a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) 133.60, Armor Intelligence Specialist. He was what we'd call today a "Cavalry Scout" and drove a jeep for the 1st Medium Tank Battalion, 32nd Armor, 3rd Armored Division, at Ray Barracks, Germany.

His first assignment was to Company D, where he served as a jeep driver for the company commander, Captain Russell. It didn't last long. Russell learned he couldn't go anywhere without being mobbed by German fans.

The Army then transferred Elvis to Company C, where he drove for Reconnaissance Platoon Sergeant Ira Jones.

Back at Ray Barracks, guards kept watch 24/7 for girls trying to scale the fence and catch a glimpse of the famous singer.

At the Army Post Office, clerks battled a fifteen-fold increase in letters to the battalion from fans around the world.

But for the most part, the Army shielded Elvis from the public eye. For eighteen months, Elvis was out of sight. No performances, no recordings, no TV, and hardly any interviews. He'd fallen off the media radar.

Soon, the King of Rock n' Roll settled into a routine like that of other soldiers. He woke at 5:45am and reported to duty at 7:00am. He took classes in map and compass reading. He washed his jeep and did calisthenics. He planted munitions and scouted for enemy mines. And he spent his Friday nights scrubbing latrines to be ready for Saturday inspections.



Sgt Elvis Presley briefs his reconnaissance team before moving out toward their objective as part of the Winter Shield war games in Bavaria, West Germany, 1960 (National Archives)



The happiest man in the world says goodbye to Germany at his final press conference, March 1, 1960 (National Archives)

Army buddy Rex Mansfield says, "Elvis really tried hard to be just one of the boys."

He participated in every training class, every field trip, and marched alongside us for hours. Most of us usually watched him from the corners of our eyes. We were very skeptical and expected Elvis to ask for and receive extra attention and favors. But I can honestly say that from the very start, Elvis never asked for special treatment.

As Elvis later put it:

When I came in the Army I was expecting a lot of kidding and so-called harassment from the other boys. People told me when I got in they would make it hard for me. But it was really just the opposite. When the fellows found out I was doing the same things they were—on guard detail, road marches, KP—they figured we're all alike.

Still, no one would have mistaken Private Presley for a regular GI.

First, Elvis had dependents, including his grandmother and recently-widowed father, as well as members of his entourage. They followed him to Germany, which allowed Elvis to live off base, first in a hotel, then in a large house where Johnny Lang would visit every weekend.

Second, as Johnny details, Elvis's wealth and fame afforded hijinks and dalliances beyond the reach of other soldiers.

Nothing, however, but returning to Graceland could assuage Elvis's homesickness. Throughout his 18-month tour, he was desperate to get back to stage and screen. He hoped the media blackout would be a temporary blip, and he'd come home the same old Elvis.

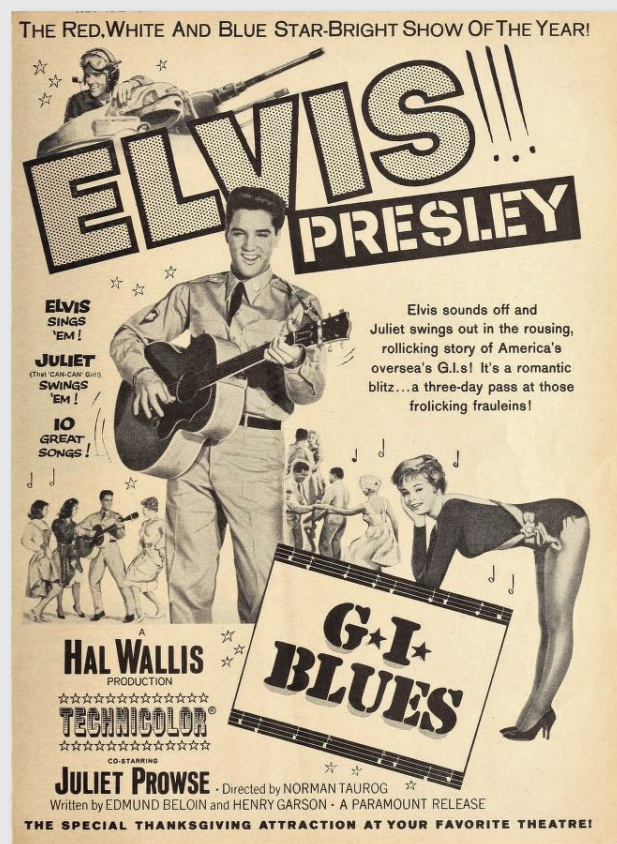
That's not quite what happened. When Elvis landed at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey on March 3, 1960, he was a changed man, even if he couldn't see it at the time.

He'd met a special girl in Germany—the 14-year-old step-daughter of Air Force Captain Paul Beaulieu (and biological daughter of James E. Wagner, a Carnegie, Pennsylvania, native and Navy pilot, killed in a plane crash during World War II). Elvis and Priscilla would stay in touch and eventually marry in 1967.

Sergeant Presley (he'd gotten his stripes on February 11) also returned home with a new drug habit. A fellow soldier had introduced Elvis to amphetamines as a way to gain energy and stay awake in the field. Elvis took to the stimulants immediately and found an Army pharmacist willing to prescribe them in large quantities.

Elvis's prescription drug addiction grew after his return home and would eventually lead to his early death in 1977 at age 42.

But perhaps the most intriguing change was in Elvis's music. It turns out, Elvis spent much free time in Germany singing at home, to himself, by himself. He sang to keep his voice in shape and expand his range, especially to reach and hold notes at the top of the register. He also kept up with trends in popular music and debated with his friends how much he should expand beyond Rockabilly, Country Western, and Gospel. He even made home recordings that covered a wider range of music than he had ever performed in public.



Elvis's first movie and record after getting out the Army was G.I. Blues, which received mixed reviews from critics, including this from the New York Times: "Gone is that rock 'n' roll wriggle, that ludicrously lecherous leer, that precocious country-bumpkin image, that unruly mop of oily hair ... Elvis is now a fellow you can almost stand."

Elvis expert (and Air Force veteran) Alan Hanson writes that the King of Rock n' Roll returned to civilian life a more mature and expansive artist. To his repertoire, Hanson explains, "he added strong pop ballads, such as 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' and 'Can't Help Falling in Love.' Combine all that with the pop arias 'It's Now or Never' and 'Surrender,' and it's clear that Elvis returned to the music business in 1960 as a much more diverse vocalist than he had been before entering the army in 1958."

Elvis's stint in the Army also sent a powerful message about the dynamism of American culture in the Cold War. Where else but in the United States could a poor boy from Mississippi rise to fame and fortune, then disappear into the Army in service to his country, only to return to the celebrity limelight?

In the end, the Army seems to have instilled a deeper self-confidence into what was, despite all appearances, a shy and awkward young man.

On March 1, 1960, on the eve of his departure for home, Elvis gave a farewell press conference in Germany.

"People were expecting me to mess up, to goof up in one way or another," he said. "They thought I couldn't take it and so forth, and I was determined to go to any limits to prove otherwise, not only to the people who were wondering, but to myself."

FEATURE

GROWING UP ON THE EDGE OF WAR

by Daria Sommers

*The VBC got to know writer and filmmaker Daria Sommers through her award-winning feature-length documentary **Lioness**, which tells the story of a group of female Army support soldiers who were part of the first program in American history to send women into direct ground combat. We screened the film and hosted a conversation with Daria and veterans from the original **Lioness** team on June 12, Women's Veterans Day. Daria worked with the VBC's Shaun Hall to create **Lioness: The Origin Story** Podcast series. Below, Daria tells her personal story of growing up in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Her recently completed novel, **Sawadika American Girl**, is a fictional coming-of-age saga set in Bangkok, Thailand in 1968. See more of Daria's work at dariasommers.com.*

It was 1963 when Vietnam first tattooed itself into my memory. I was six years old. My siblings and I were seated on the living room sofa in our suburban New Jersey ranch house when my father, staring down at us, announced he was done being a town manager and had taken a job with the State Department. We're moving to Saigon, he said. The capital of a country called Vietnam. He explained his new job at length. Not much registered except that we had to get lots of shots and Vietnam was as an underdeveloped country that needed America's help. "What's underdeveloped?" I asked.

"They don't have the modern conveniences we have," my father responded.

"What about bathtubs? Do they have bathtubs? Will I be able to take bubble baths?"

"Don't worry," my mother placated. "It will all work out."

That was her answer to everything.

Whether it was the influence of *National Geographic* pictures or wacky Saturday morning cartoons, I'll never know, but my wee brain concluded with precocious certainty that bathtubs in an 'underdeveloped' country must be made of mud. The image I conjured is as crisp today as it was back then. A reddish brown tub, dusty to the touch but remarkably solid. I don't recall being upset about leaving New Jersey but the question of whether Vietnam's mud bathtubs would turn my Mr.

Bubble bubble bath brown or leave it white and fluffy troubled me endlessly.

Two months later, across the Pacific, my concerns evaporated. Our new house, a mansion compared to our New Jersey home, had six bedrooms, five bathrooms (four with shiny new ceramic bathtubs), a twenty-foot stocked fishpond, an outdoor aviary, extensive servants' quarters, a spacious yard, and a large swimming pool shared with our landlord.



Daria's Bangkok home, 1963 (Daria Sommers)

It just wasn't in Saigon. A last minute change of plan sent my father to Bangkok, Thailand. Another 'underdeveloped' country near Vietnam that also needed America's help. That's how my father described it. The switch didn't seem to upset him. His nonchalance made me think the two countries were interchangeable.

Years later, I learned about the tragic event that precipitated my father's reassignment. I was fifteen and had begun to glimpse the bigger picture. How America's presence in Thailand was feeding the war effort in Vietnam. How the policies that enabled my fantastical childhood were responsible for inflicting brutal devastation on a country for reasons that, in 1972, no one even bothered to pretend were true. But in 1963, that future wasn't on anyone's radar and would have been, in any case, well beyond my six-year-old grasp.

My early years in Bangkok were wonderous in their extremes. Despite the heat and language barrier, life was all-consuming. Each day opened up new dimensions of experience. In the cool of morning's first light, monks stopped by for food. Water buffalo sometimes followed. The soft knocking of their wooden cowbells made for the kindest wakeup call. At Ruam Rudee, the Catholic Missionary school I attended, my new friends were from around the world: Japan, Pakistan, Egypt, Taiwan, Italy, Switzerland.

One of my teachers was Sister Elizabeth, a French nun whose white habit hid all but her ancient, sweating face. Another teacher, Mrs. Mohan from Sri Lanka, mesmerized me with her colorful saris.

After school, I took ballet, horseback riding and piano lessons. My mother had a dressmaker create clothes to our specifications. Anything I wanted. I learned to swim and play tennis at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. We attended Sunday Mass in a Church that looked like a Buddhist temple. Afterwards, my parents packed us into our giant Plymouth station wagon to visit actual Buddhist temples.

During monsoon season, fish swam through our flooded kitchen. In dry season, I stayed off the grass because of pit vipers. After getting attacked by a swarm of red ants, I stayed away from bushes too. Once, walking home from a friend's house, I froze. A long, thick snake I thought was a cobra was slowly slinking across the road. I was more fascinated than scared.

Snakes were a fact of life. On holidays, my father invited the local snake charmer, an Indian man with a beaming, nicotine-soaked smile to stop by. When he played his flute two, sometimes three, cobras rose up from wicker baskets. With their hoods open they swayed to his eerie music.

I often accompanied my mother on her visits to Bangkok's numerous markets. She liked the lesser-known places where few farangs (foreigners) ventured. The finds were better, so were the prices. At the *Woeng Nak-hon Khasem*, popularly known as the "Thieves Market," the stares directed our way were unpleasant reminders that as much as I loved living in Thailand and had begun to think of it as home, I was and would always be an outsider.

In 1965, my world changed. Overnight, our neighborhood filled with so many American families that trick or treating on Halloween became worthwhile.

Many were transplants from Saigon which was no longer safe for dependents. The others had fathers who

worked for the US Mission, USAID, CIA, the military or as contract workers. The number of U.S. military personnel around town multiplied. So did the nightclubs, massage parlors and bargirls catering to American servicemen. Hotels welcoming GIs on R&R from Vietnam mushroomed in tandem: *The Prince. The Florida. The Swan. The Honey. The Grace.* The list went on.

In a city dense with aromas, even I caught whiff of the darkness these changes signaled.

By 1966, adults talked more openly of the fighting in Vietnam. My father made a number of trips there. When I asked him about it, he didn't mince words.

"It's more than a conflict," he said. "American soldiers are fighting to stop the Communist North Vietnamese from taking over South Vietnam. It's a war I think we can win. Even Thailand is under threat. I've got projects in the Northeast meant to counter the Pathet Lao insurgency along the Laotian border."

At ten, I'd learned to listen. My father's words were Gospel.

Emboldened by his fervor, I wanted to meet those fighting this war.

On Saturdays, I slipped away (easy to do since I was now one of six kids) and rode my bike to nearby R&R hotels. Standing at the entrance, I asked random GIs to buy me a hamburger. Most laughed at the sight of me. But a few times, big brother types, indulged me.

Danny and Coop are the guys I remember. They were returning from a sightseeing tour when I accosted them. The food was good, our conversation light and teasing.

Where are you from? No, you go first.

What is Arkansas like?

Do your parents know where you are?

Yes, we go trick or treating here. Last year I dressed up as a clown.

A clown? You like living in Bangkok?

They refused to believe me when I said I never wanted to leave. They must have found me amusing because they ordered another round of French fries. But curiosity inevitably trampled my good sense, and I pointedly asked Danny, who'd mentioned being in the jungles, if he'd ever killed anyone.

The table went silent. The mood changed. Coop put his arm around the back of my chair, leaned in close, sighed, and in a church whisper said, "That's not a question you should ask. Ever."

I put down my half-eaten hamburger and stared at it in shame.



Daria as Thai Dancer, 1964 (Daria Sommers)



Halloween in Bangkok, 1965 (Daria Sommers)



I had my answer, and it felt horrible.

In 1969, my father's tour in Thailand ended. I was almost thirteen and heartbroken. Wherever we ended up next, it would never compare. Plus, I hated the idea of starting over.

After a few months in the States, the posting my father wanted, Rio de Janeiro, was denied. Another last minute change. The Saigon desk wanted him for the Civil Operations and Rural Support (CORDS) program, a joint military-civilian effort to get rural populations to support the South Vietnamese government. "Pacify the peasants" was the idea. Because of the war, my father's orders were non-negotiable. Vietnam or resign. As a civil servant with six children, he accepted the assignment.

That's how, in 1972, at the age of 15, I ended up in Saigon.

My mom and us kids occupied another palatial house in Bangkok while my father took an apartment in Saigon's Red Light district. We looked forward to his monthly visits with Christmas-level excitement. His high-energy presence was the glue that held our divided world together. When 'safe weekends' were declared, my mom was only too happy to ship one or two of us off to him.

By now, I'd read all about the anti-war movement. A poster on my wall said, 'Make Love, Not War.' I wore a string of raw hide around my forehead, covered my arms in Indian bangles and lined my eye lids with kohl. On the one hand, I was against the war. On the other, I believed in my father. Working with rural populations was his strength. If anyone could make a positive difference, it was him. He'd never doubted himself, so why should I? I didn't see my position as a contradiction. It was how I made sense of my world.

There were only three passengers on my Saturday morning Air Vietnam flight to Saigon. During our descent into Tan Son Nhut Airbase, I counted bomb craters. Taxiing up to the terminal, I scanned planes, helicopters, sandbags, barbed wire, and enormous guns hanging from shoulders of stern-faced soldiers. The charged atmosphere put me on edge.

The sight of my father just outside the terminal - smiling, waving, happy to see me - calmed me. He whisked me through security, and we were off. Brunch at the Continental Palace Hotel was followed by a drive into the countryside to tour an old lacquer factory. Somehow my father knew the owner. After watching the artisans at work, we were served refreshments and the owner gifted me a wine and gold colored jewelry box. Aside from the candied gasoline smell, it was all weirdly normal.

Then, on the drive back, we passed two dead bodies on the road. Young Vietnamese. They looked like boys.

Neither of us said anything.

Before dinner at House of the Seven Beefs, we had drinks on my father's balcony. I tried to keep my eye-rolling to a minimum while he subjected me to yet another round of questions about school, grades, and my piano lessons.

Then he went quiet.

In the distance, smoky black plumes from dropped bombs curled up into the early evening sky.

"How's it all going?" I asked. He swirled the ice cubes in his scotch glass before emptying it. Minutes passed. His expression twisted into discord. I could feel him sinking.

"Dad? Dad?"

"I don't know if you remember," he said in a monotone so subdued I had to move my chair closer to his, "but we almost came here in '63. Dale, an old friend, was an early advisor here. Great guy. Brilliant, too. He convinced me to join USAID and come work for him. At the time, it all seemed possible. A month or so before we were to arrive, he and his interpreter met with a village headman to discuss aid projects. Turned out to be a VC set-up. They were both killed."

The moment turned suddenly fragile. An old injury resurrected into a fresh wound. "That's so sad," I murmured.

"It's more than sad," my father added bitterly, shaking his head. "It's a waste. This whole thing," he continued, swatting his hand against the dirty pink sky, "is nothing but a senseless, tragic waste. We shouldn't be here. We never should have come."

We sat there until sunset. He with his anguish, me with mine.

In the fall of 1975, five months after the Fall of Saigon, I started college. My father was stationed in the Philippines with my mom and younger siblings in tow.

Where are you from? became a question I hated.

At first, I answered truthfully, even explaining my father's work. My eagerness to defend his honest desire to improve lives was naïve. I didn't anticipate the backlash. More often than not, someone saw fit to condemn my father and by extension me.

USAID was part of an immoral war.

American advisors were fat cats living large.

Nice that you had such a great time while so many people died.

I understood where they were coming from but silently raged at how easily they denounced me and my family when they knew nothing about us. I started telling everyone I was from New Jersey, sharing the truth with only my closest friends. Even then, I was selective about what



Daria with father, Pattaya, Thailand, 1973 (Daria Sommers)

I said. By the time graduation came, I'd become expert at circumventing certain facts of my childhood and sometimes my whole background. So much of what made me who I am was hidden away like contraband.

The evening I spent with my father on his Saigon balcony, sequestered in the folds of my memory for so long, burst back into my consciousness in the spring of 2008 through a chain of events I could never have predicted.

After graduating college, I'd gone on to become a writer and filmmaker and by the 1990s, I was living in New York.

I was there on 9/11 when the Twin Towers fell. I wanted nothing more than to bring those behind it to justice.

But then, in the spring of 2003, like many Americans, especially those who'd lived through some version of the war in Vietnam, I found the invasion of Iraq more than unsettling.

So did my father. We followed the developments in Iraq obsessively. The threat of a Vietnam-style quagmire shadowed our endless discussions. When I told him I was considering making a film about a group of Army women who were serving in combat in Iraq without formal recognition and in defiance of DoD policy, he couldn't have been more supportive. As my filmmaking colleague and I navigated the uphill battle of funding and permissions to make it happen, my father's belief in our efforts was unflinching.

Lioness, our feature documentary, received its US premiere at the 2008 Full Frame Documentary Festival in Durham, North Carolina. The film focused on five women – Army support soldiers – who were attached to an all-male Marine combat unit to defuse tensions with Iraqi women and children during house to house searches.

In 2004, with the rise of the insurgency, these women, without the proper training, ended up fighting in some of the bloodiest battles of the Iraq war. Left out of the media's accounts, they returned home to a society that was both ignorant of the role they played and ill-equipped to give them the healthcare benefits and support they needed. While the film didn't take a position on the Iraq war, it did reveal the disconnect between the boots-on-the-ground reality in Iraq and the public's perception back home.

I was buoyed by the film's reception in the media and the big crowd at our Full Frame screening. But mostly I was thrilled that the Lioness women's stories were finally receiving public acknowledgement.

After a lively Q&A, a woman came up and took my hand. Her face red with emotion, her eyes teary, she thanked me for making the film. She explained that she had been an Army nurse in Vietnam assigned to a field hospital. Like the *Lioness* soldiers, she'd felt invisible when she returned home.

As she detailed her experience – a year of near daily trauma, working to save young men with mangled bodies and wounded psyches – her anguish was palpable. The film's recognition of the Lioness women, she said, made her feel seen. I clasped her hands with both of mine. My voice cracked when I thanked her for her kind words.

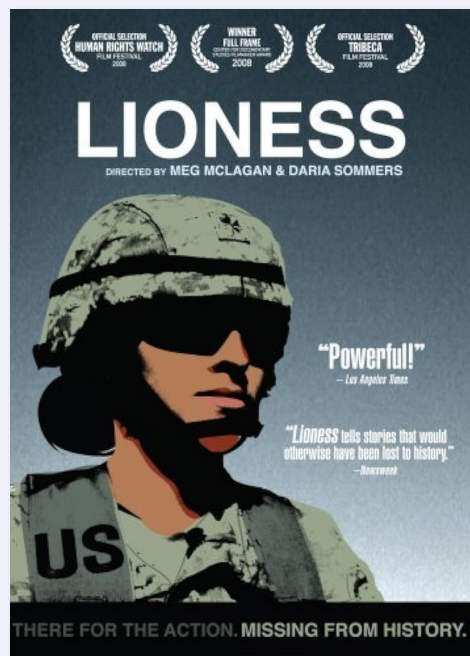
That night I couldn't sleep. Meeting that nurse, listening to her story, provoked something in me. My thoughts shuffled back and forth like a deck of cards, returning me to that evening with my father in Saigon, to his anguish, to the sting of accusations at college, to that hidden part of me. Decades later, the hurt was still there, the guilt too.

I replayed my answer to an audience member's question of why I made this film. *To make sure the Lioness soldiers' stories were heard.* True but on a deeper, personal level, making this film offered me a degree of catharsis, soothing my inability to reckon directly with my own story.

After its national broadcast on PBS in 2009, *Lioness* screenings continued at women veterans' events, military healthcare conferences, VFW posts, VA hospitals, veteran community centers, and educational centers around the country. Special screenings were also held on Capitol Hill and at DoD. The film served as an alarm bell for much-needed

changes to healthcare services for women servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This effort was spearheaded, in large part, by a network of women Vietnam veterans, most of them nurses, who, during the 1980s and 1990s, began the fight for gender equity in the veterans' community at large and at the VA in particular.

I attended most of these screenings and, in the process, got to know many of the women who'd served as nurses in Vietnam. Over conference dinners, late night drinks and car rides, they shared their individual experiences with me and, without filtering myself, I started



Film poster for *Lioness*



Lioness women addressing House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, 2009 (Daria Sommers)

sharing the details of my life in Thailand, my father's two tours in Vietnam and my time in Saigon with them.

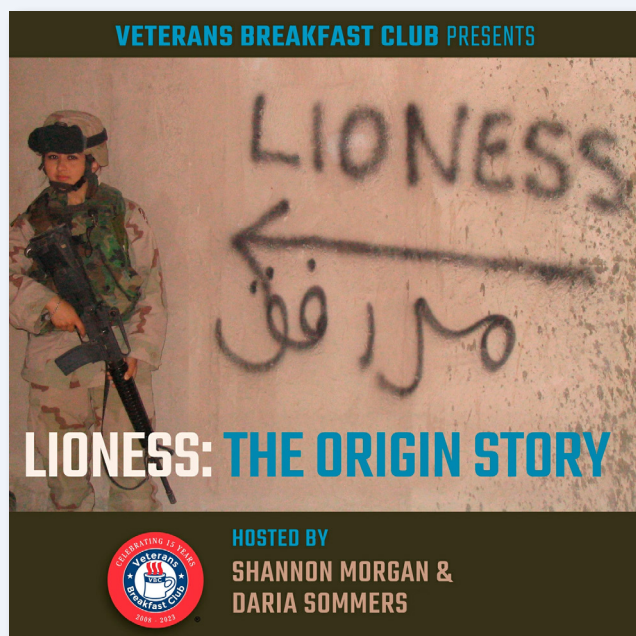
While my stories were inconsequential compared to theirs, simply being with them helped me feel like less of an outcast. My childhood wasn't contraband. It was just my childhood. No one was judging.

By 2015, I had moved on to other projects and was surprised when I received an email from Diane Carlson Evans, founder of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, inviting me to speak at the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, The Wall, on Veterans Day. I was overwhelmed by the honor, plagued by impostor syndrome, and immediately said yes.

That November 11 was clear blue and crisply cool. With the names of those lost carved on The Wall behind me and the faces of those who survived in front of me, I told my story.



Shannon Morgan (l) and Peggy Mikelonis (r) represent two generations of Army veterans. Shannon served as a Lioness in Afghanistan, and Peggy as an Army nurse in Vietnam. Peggy has been at the forefront of the network of women Vietnam Veterans supporting post-9/11 women veterans.



NEWS

FALLEN THROUGH THE VIETNAM MACV-SOG V

by Todd DePastino



*Paul Mihalic
(Paul & Karen Mihalic)*

On our September 18 VBC *Happy Hour* with Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary of the VA for Benefits, VBC Member Karen Mihalic shared the troubling story of her husband Paul, who served two tours in Vietnam as a USAF Air Commando with MACV-SOG—"Military Assistance Command, Vietnam-Studies and Observations Group."

Don't let the "Studies and Observations" name fool you: this wasn't a group of professors on an ethnographic tour of Vietnamese rain forests.

Rather, the innocuous-sounding title was cover for a top-secret, all-volunteer, theatre-wide, unconventional warfare force that took Air Commandos, Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and Vietnamese counterparts across national borders, into enemy territory, and beyond the thresholds of official oversight. Their uniforms bore no name tags, rank, or insignia. Their weapons had no serial numbers. They flew into darkness at the tip of the spear.

Virtually every SOG member was either killed or wounded. Those who survived suffered the further indignity of having their service disavowed by the Pentagon. It was not until the 1990s, when books and Congressional testimony revealed the extent of SOG's decade of operations in Southeast Asia, that the government finally admitted to SOG's existence.

Today, Paul Mihalic is no longer bound by the vow of secrecy he took when he entered SOG. He can talk freely about his missions.

But, stricken with advanced Parkinson's Disease, speech is difficult for Paul, as is walking, eating, and other daily activities common to most people.

Parkinson's is one of 19 illnesses on the VA's "presumption" list for Agent Orange exposure. That means if you served in Vietnam (or a dozen-odd other locations where Agent Orange and related herbicides were used, transported, or stored) and you have Parkinson's, the VA will presume it was caused by Agent Orange exposure and will provide medical treatment and tax-free disability compensation if application is made.

THE CRACKS: VETERANS FIGHT FOR CARE AND RECOGNITION

But the VA has repeatedly denied Paul disability compensation because he can't prove to the VA's satisfaction that he served in Vietnam.

And that's because his MACV-SOG records are still classified. Paul's Official Military Personnel Files are incomplete, key records having been removed and kept inaccessible.

Paul is no longer able to advocate for himself, but his wife, Karen, is smart and tireless in her efforts to win justice for Paul.

The issue, she says, isn't the money. It's the principle that those who served should be acknowledged and recognized by the VA. And Karen knows that Paul is hardly alone.

"I have appealed his claim to the VA Board of Appeals, where it has remained in remand and stagnated since June," she says.

What's especially frustrating is the VA's system-wide ignorance of MACV-SOG, a product of the group's three decades in shrouded secrecy.

"No one we have encountered in the VA system knows anything about this highly classified, covert unit, including the judge who heard my husband's testimony. I have asked for assistance from two Congressmen, a Senator, and President Joe Biden's office. They all needed to be educated too, yet again, no records."

Most puzzling, perhaps, is that the VA won't accept Paul's Vietnam Service Medal (VSM) and Overseas Service Bars—both listed on his DD-214—as proof of "boots on the ground."

She's exhausted every avenue she can think of: the Air Force's Freedom of Information Act office, the Defense Accounting Agency, the United States Special Operations Command, and the Air Force Board of Corrections.

No one can explain how a DD-214 with a VSM and OS bars isn't proof Paul was in Vietnam.

Paul was wounded by grenade in his final mission and treated for his injuries at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. But not even Walter Reed will release his records out of concern over their classification.

One ray of hope came in 2018 with the passage of something called the "Gary Deloney and John Olsen Toxic Exposure Declassification Act" as part of the larger 2018 National Defense Authorization Act.

The act, intended to fix precisely the kind of problem Paul and Karen have encountered, was named for two sailors whose service was classified, making them unable



Unofficial insignia of MACV-SOG

to access compensation for their service-related illnesses.

Like Paul Mihalic, Gary Deloney had the Vietnam Service Medal. He also possessed financial statements noting hazardous duty pay and other evidence of his service in Vietnam. But, because his missions were classified, Gary never received a service connection

designation from the Department of Veterans Affairs. He died in 2017.

John Olsen, similarly, fought for years to get access to his records to prove his exposure to highly toxic carcinogens aboard his ship in the mid-1960s. Olsen took part in Project SHAD (Shipboard Hazard and Defense), which included tests to gauge the vulnerability of naval vessels and personnel to chemical and biological attacks. His chemical exposure led to four bouts with cancer over the years.

The Toxic Exposure Declassification Act finally allowed Olsen to refer the VA to his Project SHAD records for proof of exposure. He's now accessing his benefits and receiving care from the VA.

This is precisely the kind of legislative action that should have unlocked the records Paul needs. But, for some reason, MACV-SOG records were not included in the Toxic Exposure Declassification Act's mandate of disclosure.

Until that happens, Paul Mihalic and other MACV-SOG veterans will remain outside the VA system of care and benefits. And Karen will continue her fight to honor her husband's service and sacrifice.

Editor's Note: All veterans seeking compensation, including those who served in the newly designated areas defined by the PACT Act of 2022, should contact a Veteran Service Organization (VSO) for assistance in making their applications. VSOs help veterans make VA claims at no charge. Once you appoint a VSO as your representative, it can access any records the VA has on file, both military and medical. Something as simple as a tooth repair or a vaccination signed or stamped and dated by an attending physician can serve as proof of "boots on the ground. For a list of Congressionally chartered VSOs, see <https://veterans.house.gov/resources-for-veterans/veterans-service-organizations.htm>

THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF VETERANS DAY

by Todd DePastino

Americans over the age of 75 might remember when November 11 was called “Armistice Day,” commemorating the ceasefire on the Western Front of World War I. The Armistice agreement signed between Britain and France on the one side and Germany on the other took effect at 11:00am on November 11, 1918. The so-called Great War of 1914-1918 was so catastrophic, simply the cessation of hostilities was cause for celebration.



Joseph Pulitzer's New York World broke the news of the impending Armistice four days early (Library of Congress)

The holiday turned somber in following years, banquets and festivities giving way to moments of silence and memorial services for the fallen. Great Britain and Commonwealth countries like Canada and Australia began referring to November 11 as “Remembrance Day.”

Armistice Day also evolved in the United States as menacing new armies marching overseas cast a perilous shadow over World War I commemorations. In 1938, two months after the *Anschluss* of Austria into the German Reich and in the midst of a Sudeten Crisis that would soon see Hitler annex part of Czechoslovakia, the US Congress voted to make Armistice Day, November 11, a federal holiday “dedicated to the cause of world peace.”

There would, of course, be no peace. War consumed the globe on an unprecedented scale. Four times as many Americans served in World War II as in World War I, and they fought longer and in more places around the

world than ever before.

Even when World War II ended in 1945, a looming Cold War with the Soviet Union meant that the US military wouldn't shrink to pre-1941 numbers. Preparing for World War III through Universal Military Training ensured the country's veteran population would only grow in the foreseeable future.

In 1946, 38-year-old civic leader and WWII Navy veteran Raymond Weeks worked channels to get a message to Army Chief of Staff, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Because the US already had Memorial Day, he told Ike, we didn't need another “Remembrance Day” on November 11. And given the distance world events had traveled since 1918, a federal holiday commemorating the WWI Armistice seemed beside the point. Why not, he argued, treat November 11 as a “National Veterans Day”?

The wheels of DC officialdom ground slowly toward the idea. In the meantime, Weeks rallied his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, to launch a “National Veterans Day Parade” on November 11, 1947.

“Daddy wanted a day to honor everyone who had sacrificed and fought for their country. It was important to him that all veterans were included,” Weeks' daughter recalls. “It was something he worked night and day on for years.”

The work finally paid off seven years later, when Congressman Edward Rees from Kansas introduced an act as part of H.R. 7786 to amend the 1938 federal holiday law “by striking out the word ‘Armistice’ and inserting in lieu thereof the word ‘Veterans.’”

VETERANS' DAY

Armistice Day is no more. Not because the people of the world are any less peace-minded than they were in past years, but simply because Armistice Day has long since lost its original meaning. The new observance, beginning today, Nov. 11, will each year be Veterans' Day. The men who have served our nation eminently deserve such tribute, and a grateful people will happily accept this opportunity to express their heartfelt thanks to all ex-servicemen.

The Van Nuys News explains Veterans Day to readers, Nov. 11, 1954

Dwight Eisenhower, now President, signed the bill into law on June 1, 1954.

It helped, certainly, that the Armistice Agreement ending the Korean War had been reached less than a year earlier. The word "Armistice," in other words, had lost its celebratory and commemorative connotations, while the word "Veterans" had grown in stature.

Our Founding Fathers would have, at best, puzzled over Raymond Weeks' efforts to honor veterans. More likely, they would have condemned the whole notion of "Veterans Day."

In the first decades of the Republic after the American Revolution, there was no Veterans Day or Memorial Day. No national cemeteries or war memorials. No veteran organizations. No benefits or special recognition for those who'd served. While the federal government felt obligated to support widows of officers (not enlisted, at first) killed in service and those maimed in battle, it didn't have the funding to do so and usually passed such obligations on to the states, which also fell short.

The most a former soldier could hope for was a handshake.

None of this oversight was lost on war veterans themselves. A biting set of couplets penned in 1799 by Revolutionary War veteran Anthony Haswell expresses well the sense of forgotten-ness:

*In Times of War, to God we humbly pray
To bless our arms, and grudge no Soldier pay.
When Dangers over, they are both alike requited,
God is forgot, and the poor soldier slighted.*

This traditional neglect of veterans wasn't a bug in the American system. It was a feature, stemming from old republican fears of large standing armies and professional soldiers.

The Founders believed in the republican form of government with leaders appointed and elected to power, rather than winning it through inherited title or coercion. The Framers studied history and found that military power was the single greatest threat to free republican government. Julius Caesar has crossed the Rubicon with his army into Rome and had overthrown the Roman Republic. Oliver Cromwell had transformed republican Britain into a military dictatorship. And, of course, there was Napoleon.

As Jefferson put it:

Bonaparte... transferred the destinies of the republic from the civil to the military arm. Some will use this as a lesson against the practicability of republican government. I read it as a lesson against the danger of standing armies.

Americans clung to the hope that the United States alone would avert the doom of previous republics by shunning a standing army. (The navy, whose power stopped at the shoreline, was regarded more benignly.)

Instead of Big Army, Americans embraced local militias where every citizen was, in effect, a soldier in waiting. In times of crisis, the theory went, men would put down their hammers and plows and pick up their rifles and swords. George Washington wrote:

Every citizen who enjoys the protection of a free government owes not only a proportion of his property, but even of his personal services to the defense of it, and consequently, that the Citizens of America from 18 to 50 years of age should be borne on the Militia Rolls.

In other words, military service was simply an obligation of citizenship. Every citizen a soldier.

This belief lingered well into the 20th century. As late as 1932, the President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, could say publicly, "The nation owes no more to the able bodied veteran than to the able bodied citizen."

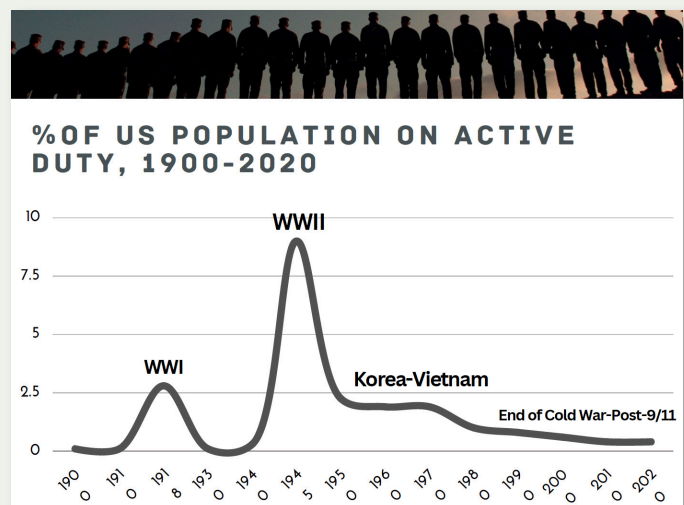
But, by then, the year of the infamous Bonus March of WWI veterans on Washington, DC, public sentiment had shifted. People believed that special recognition and attention were due to military veterans. Local militias alone would no longer do. What Eisenhower would later call the "military-industrial complex" was starting to grow.

By the time President Eisenhower issued his famous warning on national television in his Farewell Address of January 17, 1961, the United States was producing over 100,000 new military veterans per year, as draftees like Elvis Presley cycled out of their two-year commitments in the Armed Forces.

In 1960, almost half of US men had served in the Armed Forces, and the rising generation of male teenagers expected to do so. Local draft boards wielded enormous power over young men's lives and set the nation's timetables for school, work, marriage, and children.

That world in which many of us grew up—where our neighbors, aunts, uncles, parents, teachers were veterans—is long gone. Today, only 6% of adult Americans have military experience, the lowest percentage since before Pearl Harbor.

This decline is a direct result of the overall shrinkage of the US military over the past 50 years. Before the All-Volunteer Force arrived in 1973, 3.5 million Americans served on active duty. Today, it's almost one-third that number, while the nation's overall population has increased by 130 million. Only .4% (four-tenths of one percent) of the US population serves on active duty.



To put it in perspective: almost twice the number of Americans today are serving time in prison or jail as in the active-duty Armed Forces.

This trend will continue. In twenty-five years, as the Vietnam generation passes, the number of living veterans will shrink even further.

That means by 2050, Veterans Day will exist to honor and celebrate about 2.5% of our population. We'll be searching high and low for veterans to thank and to remind us about the bonds, benefits, and burdens of military service. And it will be easier than ever to forget what November 11 signifies.

The decline in the veteran population has already had a negative impact on military recruitment. All the service branches, except the Marine Corps and Space Force, are suffering serious recruiting lags.

Part of the problem is that young people aren't interested in the military because they're unfamiliar with it. And they're unfamiliar because they don't know anyone who served.

"The grandpas, uncles, aunts who served just have an extraordinary influence," reports LTG Thomas Spoeher, Army, retired, who now directs the Center for National Defense. "You may not think it's a big deal, but it plants a seed in young people. It helps with recruiting."

Having a veteran in the family is the single most important factor determining whether someone will choose to join the Armed Forces. No wonder veterans increasingly feel as if they're part of a caste, separate and distinct from the general population, and often lost in a civilian world that doesn't appreciate or understand their language, values, and ethic.

As military service becomes less common, Veterans Day will be harder to sustain, though, I would argue, also more important than ever.

Having Veterans Day on our federal calendar provides us with a great potential focal point for a larger effort to educate and inspire Americans with candid stories of service and accounts of what veterans have gained--and lost--in service to their country.

This doesn't mean pro-military propaganda or an advertising campaign for the Armed Forces. The All-Volunteer Force is not for everyone. But it can be for many more than it is today.

And those, like me, who've never served can still benefit from the perspectives and hard-won wisdom of those who have. A huge swath of history resides in the memories and experiences of our veterans. So, too, does a broader understanding of the responsibilities and benefits of citizenship. I would even argue that veterans have a deeper understanding of the human condition--the good and the bad, the darkness and the light--than the rest of us.

Veterans have a lot to give. But the wealth of spirit and insight they bring can only be activated by a citizenry willing and able to receive the gift.

If Veterans Day remains just *for veterans*, the holiday will wither on the vine. There simply won't be enough veterans to sustain a meaningful federal holiday.

But if Veterans Day can become something larger, something geared for all citizens, for all of us to enjoy, learn from, and connect with, then it can serve as an annual source of renewal and inspiration.

Our veterans' community is small. But it's densely constellated around key civic virtues as much needed today as in George Washington's time--service, sacrifice, honor, respect.

Veterans Day is a great occasion to promote these virtues so they can be part of all citizens' lives.

VETERANS DAY VETERAN'S DAY VETERANS' DAY WHICH IS IT?

by Todd DePastino

The proper punctuation of "Veterans Day" is a not-so-simple matter of grammar.

Grammar is never simple because it's arbitrary and often doesn't make a lot of sense.

Most people make their meaning known without following strict rules of grammar.

When Woody Guthrie sang, "I Ain't Got No Home in this World Anymore," no listener went away confused by the double negative or the non-standard "ain't." And no one was probably impressed by the proper one-word use of "anymore."

Still, grammar errors in public discourse can distract from a message.

With Veterans Day, the common mistake is referring to it in the singular possessive as "Veteran's Day." This construction, on the face of it, doesn't make much sense. Which veteran is the day meant to honor? My Uncle Mike? The head of the VFW?

A more logical choice would seem to be the plural possessive "Veterans' Day," a day belonging to all veterans.

In fact, Veterans Day is not a possessive at all, and no apostrophe should adorn the term. The word "veterans" in Veterans Day is used in the attributive case, not the possessive, meaning that the word functions as an adjective modifying "day." It's an adjunct noun telling us what day it is. It doesn't belong to veterans. It exists for us to honor veterans.

Grammar lesson over.

See you on Mother's Day.



READER FEEDBACK

We love to hear from readers of VBC Magazine and viewers of VBC Happy Hour. If you have anything to add, correct, or rebut, please send your thoughts our way to todd@veteransbreakfastclub.org.

We received several responses to our articles in the Summer 2023 VBC Magazine about the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. One was the story of Chosin Marine Bob Harbula, the other a short piece titled "The Myth of the Tootsie Roll Airdrop at Chosin." We're grateful for the letter below from Chosin Veteran and Marine Colonel, Warren Wiedhahn.

Tootsie Rolls at Chosin No Myth



My fellow "Frozen Chosin" combat veteran, Bob Harbula, sent me a copy of the Summer issue of your VBC Magazine. The article on Bob and his, as well as his fellow Marine and Navy Corpsmen Heroics, was "Excellent to Outstanding."

I then turn the page to read that you think the Tootsie Roll Airdrop was "Probably not true." The only thing that keeps you from being "boiled in chocolate" by Mrs. Ellen Gordon, the CEO of Tootsie Roll Industries in Chicago, is the word "probably" which means ... "as far as you knew"!

I was a PFC in a heavy mortar company in "Chosin." We were located close to the artillery "behind" the front infantry lines. As such we provided "working parties" to attend the airdrops on the snow covered frozen drop zone's to receive ammo, rations, etc.

One day an unusual looking pallet hit the ground. As we unhooked the chute we recognized it was full of, you guessed it, Tootsie Roll Cartons! We quickly broke the pallet down for wide distribution but, of course, we stuffed our "Parka Pockets" with the delicious (yet frozen) Tootsie Rolls.

So now, Mr. Director, you know ... "The Rest of the Story!"

Warren Wiedhahn
Col USMC (Ret)
National President
The Chosin Few

We concede Tootsie Rolls were dropped by air at Chosin in 1950. We remain skeptical of the claim that "Tootsie Roll" was the code word for mortars. - Eds.

On our VBC Happy Hour on August 21, Brigadier General (ret.) Chris Petty spoke about his service in Iraq and also about his recent book, 12 Battles Every American Should Know: Lessons Learned from Lexington to Desert Storm. BG Petty argues that these battles serve as landmarks of a shared cultural heritage and bind us as a nation. Many on the Happy Hour chipped into the conversation with their own must-know battles and quibbled about a few on BG Petty's list. Below, retired history teacher Carole Popchock offers a thoughtful rebuttal to the whole concept of putting military battles in the front and center of our history curricula.

US History Bigger Than Its Battles

While I agree it's helpful to know something about key battles throughout our history for context, I believe the detailed study of battlefield tactics and strategy is probably best saved for our service academies and the US Army War College.

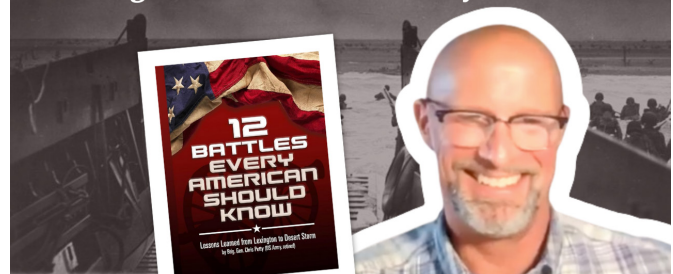
I remember well what US History textbooks used to be when I was growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s: a litany of names and dates. The names were mostly those of white men, and the dates mostly a chronicle of battles. Only in college and graduate school did I encounter Native American history, Labor History, and Black Studies. In my era, there was not even a single course on Women's Studies. These critically important subjects were only made possible by scaling back coverage of wars and battles in US history survey courses.

I taught US History, my late husband was a military historian, and my family is full of veterans. Several of my family members died in combat. So I know much about America at war. And I urge every citizen to read about and understand our nation's military past.

But we should never lose sight that our battles were fought on behalf of something larger: that thing we call the United States of America. If we don't understand our country in all its complexity, diversity, and changing characteristics over time, we'll never grasp the significance of the battles or the wars fought in its name.

Carole Popchock

12 Battles Every American Should Know with Brigadier General Chris Petty



HAPPY BIRTHDAY, USS *HORNET*!

by Chuck Myers

Back in 2021, we welcomed Navy veteran Chuck Myers to our VBC Greatest Generation Live to give a virtual tour of the USS Hornet (CV-12). Chuck served as a junior officer on USS Yorktown (CVS-10) in the 1960s. Today, he volunteers as a docent with the USS Hornet Sea, Air, and Space Museum and is a member of the Aircraft Carrier Hornet Foundation Board of Trustees. Below, he tells the story of the Hornet and how it continues to serve an educational mission today.

On November 29, 1943, the USS *Hornet* (CV-12) was commissioned in Virginia as the eighth United States ship of that name. By the time she was relegated to reserve status in June 1970, she was known around the globe. But her fame didn't come from exploits in World War II, the Cold War, or Vietnam. Rather, it derived from the appearance of four famous men on her decks in July 1969.

The world's eyes were on the *Hornet* from the time the Apollo command module, Columbia, was sighted coming through the clouds with parachutes open, to the moment President Richard Nixon greeted Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins through the window of the Mobile Quarantine Facility (MQF).

The *Hornet* went on to recover the Apollo 12 astronauts in November of that year, albeit with much less fanfare, before sailing off to retirement a few months later.

Today, the USS *Hornet* is a Sea, Air, and Space Museum docked in Alameda, California. The museum features many space exhibits, including an Apollo command module, the Apollo 14 MQF, and the rare "Biological Isolation Garment" – the "BIG" suit. The astronauts of the first three moon landings wore BIG suits from the time of their exit from the command module until they were isolated in the MQF.

The *Hornet's* journey from commissioned Navy ship to a floating museum began in 1970. The Navy dispatched her to the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, where she became a "mothball ship" along with many other ships of all types that had served in World War II. Her flight deck and hangar decks were covered with Styrofoam, although from a distance she would look pretty normal to the casual eye.

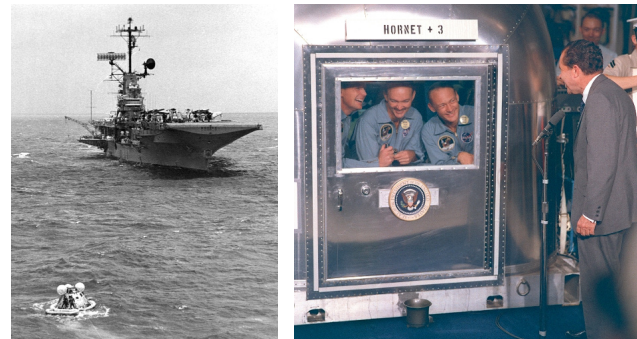
Nearly 20 years later, the Navy decided that Essex class aircraft carriers would never be suitable for duty – too small, too weak, too costly to bring up to standards – and she was "stricken from the registry," a death sentence in Navy terminology.

Imagine, a vessel nearly 900 feet long, with a two-and-a-half-acre flight deck, displacing 40,000 tons when fully loaded as "too small and too weak"! But that was the reality – the hydraulic catapults could not launch modern aircraft and the flight deck could not support the force of landing airplanes that needed acreage almost twice as large.

Unwanted, the *Hornet* nonetheless benefited from the devotion of some industrious and influential folks, including Apollo 11 astronaut, Buzz Aldrin. They managed to get the *Hornet* named a National Historic Landmark in 1991.

Unmoved, the Navy sold the ship for scrap, and she was towed back to California to become razor blades.

The ship was saved from such an ignominious fate by a short legal battle. In the end, a chastened Navy sold her to the Aircraft Carrier *Hornet* Foundation.



Left: *Hornet* maneuvering to retrieve the Apollo 11 Command Module from the Pacific. Right: President Nixon visiting with astronauts in Hangar Bay 2, July 24, 1969

In 1995, during the 50th anniversary of World War II, the *Hornet* became a fixture at Pier 3 of Alameda Naval Air Station, which was closing. Three years later, on October 28, 1998, the USS *Hornet* Museum began serving the community. Some 5,000 guests came aboard and pier-side to celebrate the moment.

The USS *Hornet* Sea, Air, and Space Museum, a Smithsonian affiliate, is the world's largest artifact of two of the major historical events of the 20th Century: World War II and the Space Race.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



The F-18 *Hornet* in flight

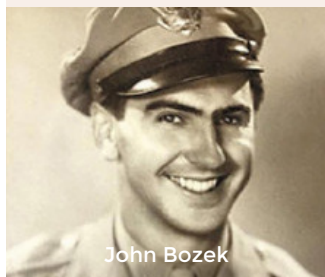
The name "Hornet" was established in American history in 1775 when the Continental Congress purchased two commercial sailing vessels and converted them to 10 gun sloops. With no naming conventions to draw on, the two ships were designated "Hornet" and "Wasp" and sent off to fight the Royal Navy.

Over time five more ships carried the name "Hornet" and flew one form or another of the evolving American flag. The first steam-powered *Hornet* was a Confederate States blockade runner captured in 1864.

The last of the eight ships named *Hornet* is the museum ship in Alameda. With a touch of good luck and support from the modern Navy, the current "Hornet" will be added to the collection of aircraft featured by the museum. In this case, a F-18 jet aircraft.

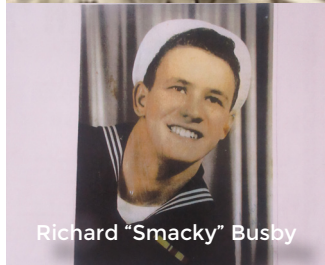
FINAL SALUTE

TO THOSE WHO RECENTLY PASSED, WE SALUTE YOU.



John Bozek

John Bozek
WWII Air Corps



Richard "Smacky" Busby

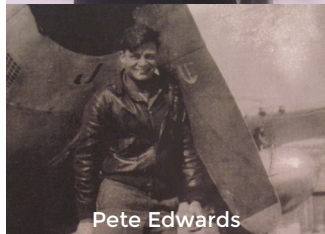
Al Burlikowski
Vietnam Army

Richard "Smacky" Busby
Cold War Navy

Bill DiSabato
Cold War Navy

Pete Edwards
WWII Air Corps

Ed Glenz
WWII Army



Pete Edwards

Bob Heil
Cold War Army

Donald Maloney
WWII Army

Don McIlrath
Korea Army

Clifford Morton
Cold War Marines



Ed Glenz

Bill Norberg
WWII Navy

Lou Nudi
Vietnam Army

Don O'Rourke
Korea Army

Frank Rota
Cold War Army

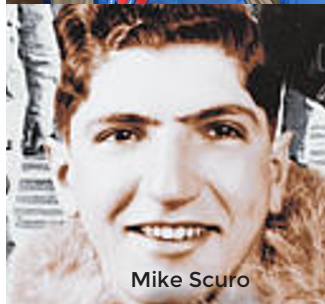
Mike Scuro
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