

MEMORIAL DAY - A TIME TO REMEMBER AND HONOR

BY DIBBY CLARK

I had the special honor of marching in the 2014 Washington, DC, Memorial Day Parade with the National Dusters, Quads, and Searchlights Association (NDQSA), which is composed of the Air Defense Artillery (ADA) units who served in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972. The ADA units helped protect/defend convoys and other units in trouble/under fire from the enemy. The NDQSA had been selected to represent the Vietnam War in the Memorial Day Parade. (Each war back to the American Revolution had a representative group—the more distant wars being represented with re-enactors). The NDQSA motto for the parade was “Lost Convoy...Brothers on the Wall.”



During the parade, each of the veterans and their wives were displaying rubbings from “The Wall” of the names of those individuals in their units who had made the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam. Among the various units, each had at least one name on each panel of the wall, as they were the “First to fire...last to leave” units. They were the only group of Vietnam Veterans to have such a broad representation on “The Wall.” Their wreath-laying ceremony was very moving and impressive, as a NDQSA member

~~stood at each panel with hands on the names of their fallen “brothers.” The good news is that the units have only 5 MIA's left—a team that was lost in Laos. The NDQSA is looking forward to having a full accounting soon.~~

As background, I served a tour of duty in Vietnam as a Volunteer for the American Red Cross (ARC), Supplemental Recreation Overseas Association (SRAO), from September 1970-September 1971. My sister Anne was an ARC SRAO volunteer from July 1969-August 1970. (The ARC would not allow both of us to be “in country” at the same time.) I served at Cam Ranh Air Force Base, Bien Hoa Army Base, and Qui Nhon City. Anne served at An Khe, Qui Nhon, and Cam Ranh Air Force Base.



There were 632 women who served in the ARC SRAO in Vietnam during the war. They were affectionately known as “Donut Dollies,” a name that was coined during World War II when the American Red Cross served coffee and donuts to the troops in the field. In Vietnam, there were no donuts due to the tropical climate—only lemonade & cookies in the ARC SRAO Recreation Centers on the large U.S.

bases. The ARC SRAO “clubmobile” unit members were transported two by two out into the field, usually in helicopters, to visit the troops, put on programs, serve “hot chow,” or whatever it took to bring “a touch of home into a combat zone.” My fiancé's name, John Hayes Lakin, is on the Wall—he was a Marine.



Over the Memorial Day weekend, the NDQSA was celebrating its 32nd Annual Reunion, “Operation DC... Welcome Home.” Many of the NDQSA veterans had never marched in a Memorial Day Parade in Washington, DC, had never been to a Vietnam reunion before, and had not talked about their experiences in Vietnam since the war (40+ years ago)—not even with their wives. Most of them had served in small 5-8 man tight-knit teams isolated on remote hilltops to provide firepower to protect the US & Army of Vietnam (ARVN) troops operating in their areas. It was a special reunion with about 300 attendees, including wives who marched alongside their men in the Parade—not a norm in Washington, DC’s, Memorial Day Parade.



I was invited to the reunion events as a special guest representing the ARC SRAO Donut Dollies who served the NDQSA units in Vietnam. To honor all those Donut Dollies who served, and the four who lost their lives, I wore my boonie hat (previously worn by my sister Anne during her tour in Vietnam), my Donut Dollie t-shirt (not formally accepted by the ARC), and carried my “claymore” bag, displaying patches of many of the units I served in Vietnam.

The NDQSA Memorial Day Weekend Reunion was a 5-day event which included the “One Day in the War” event organized with Vietnamese American Community of Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia at the American Wartime Museum in Nokesville, Virginia, to remember and honor those who had made the ultimate sacrifice while fighting to save the country of South Vietnam, and to honor, and thank the U.S. veterans. The Community had stands serving regional Vietnamese food and displaying treasured family heirlooms from South Vietnam. They presented a parade of regional dress for women and men, played music the South Vietnamese had played for the U.S. troops during the war, showed videos slideshows of pictures from the Vietnam War, and had guest speakers and other ceremonies to honor the U.S. and ARVN contributions during the war.

One display contained the last U.S. flag to fly over Khe Sanh Combat Base after the 21 January-9 July 1968 battle there—part of the now well-documented “1968 Tet Offensive.” The flag had been given by the last U.S. commander at Khe Sanh to the South Vietnamese (ARVN) commander upon the departure of the U.S. military from that infamous battleground. The Vietnamese commander’s family has kept the flag as a prized possession. The grandson of the Vietnamese commander displayed the flag at his family’s stand. This was especially moving for the U.S.

NDQSA veterans who had fought in the Battle of Khe Sanh.



There were also U.S. military Vietnam Era displays: restored helicopters from the Vietnam War, which is known as the “Helicopter War” (I had flown regularly into the field in many of them—special memories...); completely outfitted mess and barrack tents; a commander’s tent with audio of calls for help, directing fire, etc. from troops in trouble and ADA responses; a display of small arms and equipment used in the Vietnam War manned by 101st Division (Screaming Eagles) re-enactors, who had served more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan; and even an “out house,” the latter of which I only witnessed once during my entire tour of duty. I contributed to the experiences of the day, most notably and effectively in “Operation Letters From Home” also known as “Mail Call” for the totally unsuspecting U.S. veterans, whose wives had secretly written letters addressed to their husbands, and created care packages, all as if it were 40+ years ago during the Vietnam War.

Memorial Day 2014 and the NDQSA Reunion opened a treasure of memories, and provided a much-needed source of healing/closure for the veterans, their wives, and I. It was a time for the healing, and now traditional, Vietnam “Welcome Home” hug greeting. I had the opportunity and honor to offer a personal “Mail Call” and “Welcome Home” hug to the guest speaker at the Annual NDQSA Banquet, a former 1st Lt of an ADA unit who is now a

Major General and who had never been to a NDQSA Reunion, nor ever received a Welcome Home hug—a special moment which brought down the house.



It was a time for the men to gather in small groups to share their photo albums and stories; to re-connect with a part of their lives they had kept to themselves until this time; for wives to talk among themselves, sharing their perspectives and experiences of the Vietnam War, and to hear, for the first time, about their husbands’ Vietnam experiences; and it was an experience that helped me re-discover my true “come from,” which has been and always will be “in service” in this life.

