

They Also Serve

John McCarney

Senior Airman USAF 1973-1977

*"...over Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."
- Milton*

A few years ago, I drove down to San Diego from the Los Angeles area. My son was coaching college baseball and my wife and I decided to see him and take in the wonderful sites in the area. After one of his games, he came over and handed me a large manilla envelope. "Hey Pops, this is from a coach I know. He wanted you to have it," he said. I was totally perplexed and opened the envelope. Inside was an Air Force Academy baseball hat, an Air Force shirt and a sealed envelope. I opened the envelope and there was a challenge coin and a plain card. On the card was written; "Mr. McCarney, thank you for your service, looking forward to meeting you someday - Tim Dixon." That moment changed my life forever.

I had buried any thoughts about serving in the Air Force some 40 years ago. I had thrown away all my uniforms the day I got out. Vietnam was fresh in everyone's minds. People would make derogatory comments about the Vietnam War and I just did not want to deal with it. I just wanted to forget about it. My son had obviously mentioned my service to the Air Force pitching coach. His note and Air Force garb started a series of recollections in me that swirled into a large cloud of guilt. As we drove back to Los Angeles that evening, my wife drove while I was quiet. We passed Camp Pendleton, the Marine Corps base just north of San Diego. I remember looking over and wondering how many young kids had come through there and gone on to give their lives in so many conflicts around the world.

I also thought about how I had not...

After we got home, the Air Force garb that Tim Dixon gave me reluctantly made me remember my time in the Air Force. I served as a Medical Corpsman from 1973-1977. It was right at the end of the Vietnam War. I had gone to the University of Oregon on a football scholarship and it had not worked out. I guess it would be more accurate to say I did not work out. Everything overwhelmed me and I became depressed and left school. My whole young life I was a football player. There was never any doubt that that was my calling. I was lost. I had no identity except John the football player.

I do not know why, but one day I walked into a recruiting office and I took an aptitude test. I scored high enough that I had my choice of several jobs classifications. I chose Air Force "Medical Service Specialist." I later learned I would be called a Medical Corpsman by those I worked with. Looking back, I wonder if I chose that job because my dad had been in the Air Force and my mom was a nurse. Maybe in some way I wanted to make them proud, to be like them, if I was not going to be a football star.

I went to basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. After I finished my Medical Corpsman technical training at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, I was sent to one of our bases in the Philippines. There I experienced the most unexpected duty, and the biggest source of guilt that haunted me for decades. I was assigned to the 13th Air Force, Regional Hospital at Clark Air Force Base. This was the same base and hospital that the POWs were brought to after their release from the Hanoi Hilton in North Vietnam in 1973.

It was now late 1974 and while the war was officially over for the United States because of the Paris Peace Accord, South Vietnam was showing signs of collapsing from North Vietnam moving south. When I arrived at Clark Air Force Base aboard a World Airways military charter

flight, the first thing I remember is the oppressive heat when I walked onto the tarmac. I wore my dress blues. I soon learned that 1505's khaki light uniforms were what everyone wore.

I reported to the hospital and was looking forward to getting my assignment. I knew most of the corpsmen were also assigned to a Tactical Hospital. They would rotate out to any conflicts or skirmishes and be set up like "MASH" type units for short periods of time. I was looking forward to rotating out to some crisis, doing something I could be proud of. As I reported to the Personnel Sergeant, I walked in with another brand-new corpsman. We sat down in chairs in front of the sergeant's desk as his head was buried in paperwork. There was a large whiteboard behind him with all the different areas of the hospital written on it.

The corpsman with me noticed right away that there appeared to be two different openings in two different areas. When the sergeant finally looked up to address us, the corpsman with me immediately, nervously asked: "excuse me, it looks like there is a need on the Medical Ward, could I have that position?" My head spun. I looked at the board and could not figure anything out. I saw where there was a blank for the Medical Ward and one other blank under the letters "O.B." The sergeant shook his head yes and then looked at me. He looked me up and down. He took in all of my six-foot-five-inch, two hundred and thirty-five pound, muscular football body. He laughed. "That leaves O.B. for you." I nodded my head not knowing what "O.B." was.

As we were given some paperwork, we both got up to leave. I asked the sergeant where O.B. was and what it was. He smiled, "Third floor, Obstetrics...they need someone to work in Newborn Nursery." I was floored. I was so angry. As I took the elevator to the third floor, all I could think was how could I get transferred away from taking care of babies. When the elevator dinged and the doors open, the cries of the babies echoed so loud I could not think.

I walked towards the crying and saw two women officers standing in the doorway of the Newborn Nursery, Lt. Lynn Fuzz and Captain Fannie Gaines. Being fresh out of technical training school, the sight of the brass second lieutenant bars and the shiny silver captain's bars made me nervous. I awkwardly tried to salute and Captain Gaines smiled and looked at my tall frame up and down and said something to the effect, "I asked for two corpsmen and they send me one big one instead."

I quickly learned Lt. Fuzz was in charge of the Nursery and was under Captain Gaines, who was in charge of the whole Obstetrics ward. After a brief orientation, they gave me a pair of hospital greens and for the next fifteen months I worked with the babies.

I slowly adjusted to the newborns. I became attached to the babies and went from not being able to put a diaper on them, to being on night shift by myself. Sometimes, I took care of tiny two-pound premature infants. I excelled in the Neonatal Intensive Care side of the nursery. I

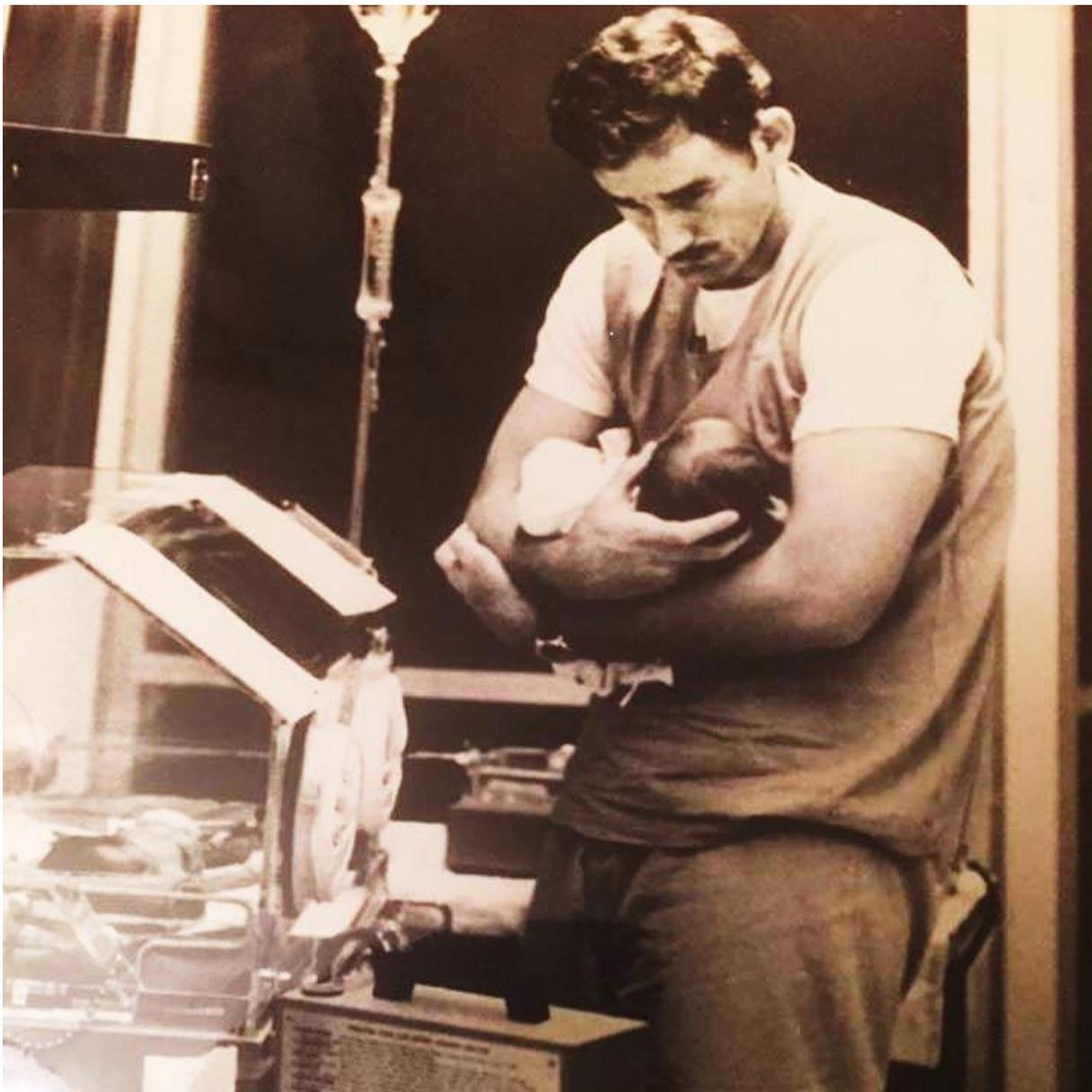


Senior Airman McCarney monitoring a premature baby's vitals in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit. Clark Air Base

was this huge, former college football player taking care of tiny premature babies. *Stars and Stripes* newspaper even came by and did an article on me. One of the photos won some kind of award because of the contrast of the huge hand against the frail, tiny premature baby.

I thrived under Lt. Fuzz's guidance. I read every medical book I could and became like a guardian angel to those "preemies." On the night shift, sometimes we would be understaffed. I excelled at taking care of the little ones without supervision. Captain Gaines and the staff

pediatricians had enough confidence to let me work many a shift by myself. My duties included tube feeding, injections and draw blood work, all the way to resuscitating the little guys when the monitors would go off and they would forget to breathe. I would have to run over to a premie that would stop breathing and revive them. I would bathe another six healthy babies at the same time--then drop everything when that piercing beeping would bring my huge hand



Senior Airman McCarney Serving in the Obstetrics Unit at Clark Air Base, Philippines

over to the tiny babies and get them breathing again. I remember I felt like I was doing something important and the sting of leaving football started to fade away.

But then something happened that would end up being the source of great guilt for me. It was April 1975 and South Vietnam collapsed. Chaos reigned supreme. There was fear that the mixed-race babies of American G.I.s and Vietnamese women would face unspeakable consequences. As I worked in the hospital at Clark A.F.B. in the Philippines, actions by others in Vietnam would trigger an amazing event that would lead to my guilt.

Civilian orphanage personnel and World Airways owner, Ed Daly, worked to save as many babies as they could. A twenty-year-old, long haired hippie orphanage worker, Ross Meador, drove a beat-up Volkswagen van to remote orphanages and picked up abandoned children. Ross would dodge Viet Cong patrols and explosions and was a lifeline to the remote orphanages. I have talked to Ross quite a bit over the last few years about that time. We were close in age at the time. Ross described the time to me as "Like *Saving Private Ryan*...but with babies."

Also, during this crazy time, Leann Thieman, an Iowa homemaker and prospective adoptive parent, smuggled in \$10,000 in her bra for food and medical supplies to the orphanages. In her book, *This Must Be My Brother*, co-written with her friend Carol Dey, she explains how "instead of helping to get out six orphans...we now were going to help get three hundred out." In talking to her, she has a great perspective on the events of that time.

Ed Daly was the hard-punching, Bowie-knife-toting CEO of World Airways. He was frustrated by the red tape holding up getting the orphans out. He defied protocol and with fifty-eight children that Ross helped get on one of his planes, Daly flew the orphans to the U.S. and his heroism woke up the world to the crisis. I have been in contact with Ed Daly's

granddaughter, June Behrendt, to get some perspective on the events. Mr. Daly passed away in 1984 and June was a young child in 1975. But she had heard all the stories. I think she summed it up best: "It was complicated." As she wrote me a few more lines...she wrote again, "...did I mentioned it was complicated?"

President Gerald Ford authorized "Operation Babylift" on April 3, 1975, with these words:

We are seeing a great human tragedy as untold numbers of Vietnamese flee the North Vietnamese onslaught. The United States has been doing-and will continue to do-its utmost to assist these people...I have directed that two million dollars from a special foreign aid children's fund be made available to fly 2,000 Vietnamese orphans to the United States as soon as possible. I have directed that C-5A aircraft and other aircraft to care for these orphans...be sent to Saigon.

President Gerald R. Ford, 3 April 1975

General Paul Carlton was the Military Airlift Command Commander. He oversaw the organization of the operation. As Medical personnel and volunteers were gathered from our base. The massive C-5A transports were the largest cargo planes in the world. Crews converted the planes from carrying military cargo, like the fourteen Howitzers one C-5A had just delivered, to a giant flying crib to bring back hundreds of orphans.

I knew a couple of the Medical Technicians who were assigned to the MEDEVAC UNIT and on that first C-5 A. The Intensive Care Newborn Nursery was right next to the Medical Intensive Care unit. When the Medevacs would come in from time to time, I would talk to the guys as they would roll a gurney with an injured or wounded soldier by the nursery. Little did I know I would never see one of them ever again.

Here is where guilt crept into my body and did not leave for over 40 years...

Since I was so efficient at working the nursery, I was not assigned to a Tactical hospital or any of the operation. A large tent city was set up to triage the babies and orphans as the plan was to bring thousands of them to Clark Air Base as a medical assessment center before sending them on stateside. My job was to stay in the nursery and work with the "preemies" and other babies that were already there. I felt isolated from the amazing effort that was going on. The gymnasium and other buildings were turned into a shelter in addition to the building of "Tent City." So many civilian volunteers and Air Force personnel were put in place to serve the expected onslaught of needy children

Then the unthinkable happened...



Pictured is the inaugural Operation Babylift C-5A just after takeoff from Tan Son Nhut Air Base, South Vietnam, 4 April 1975. Shortly after this picture was taken, the aircraft experienced a rapid decompression and control loss when the cargo doors failed and blew off. Air Force pilot Captain Dennis "Bud" Traynor was able to maintain control but was forced to crash land in a rice paddy while attempting to return to Tan Son Nhut. (Source: NPR's Rachel Martin, 26 April 2015).

The inaugural C-5A flight of Operation Babylift crashed shortly after takeoff from Tan Son Nhut airport, Saigon on April 4, 1975, killing 138 people, including 78 orphan children.

The news was devastating back at Clark A.F.B. in the Philippines. At the time I remember feeling a little strange. My job assignment kept me in a safe spot while others perished doing something so valiant. It was a small thought at the time. I think because the event was so catastrophic and affected so many people on our base, I felt guilty that I was safe while others, including civilian volunteers, perished. It was a thought that would linger inside of me. Little did I know when I left the Philippines, ironically on a C-5A transport, and headed back stateside, a certain amount of unworthiness started to grow in me for years to come.

I recently have been in contact with Retired Colonel Regina Aune to talk about that fateful event. She was the flight nurse in charge on that doomed C-5A inaugural Babylift flight from Clark Air Force Base. She did some amazing heroic actions. With a broken foot and bone in her back, she saved so many infants and children from that plane. Captain "Bud" Traynor and all the surviving crew were amazing in their efforts to minimize the loss of life. Regina Aune was a young lieutenant then. For her actions that day, Lt. Aune became the first woman to receive the Cheney award. It is *"awarded to an airman for an act of valor, extreme fortitude or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest."* She retired as a Colonel in 2007.

I finished my tour of duty and received an Honorable Discharge in 1977. I did not pursue a medical career. I developed some circulatory issues in my legs when I was taking care of those babies so many years ago. It became difficult for me to stand for prolonged periods of time and I had two different operations on the veins in my legs while on active duty. Today I am classified disabled by the Veterans Administration for the conditions of my legs from those long days so long ago.

I have been thinking about those orphans. I think about the birth moms and how hard it must have been for them to give up their children to the orphanages. A desperation I cannot imagine. And the orphans themselves landing in California or even Australia to new families.

Guilt is a funny thing. It hides within us and never raises its head. It casts a shadow on our soul and emotionally lingers like a black cloud. I can remember the exact moment when I finally dealt with the guilt. Actually, I had nothing to do with it . . . it dealt with me. A couple of years after I had received the items from the former Air Force baseball coach, an event gave me a new perspective of my service in the Air Force.

I sat with some friends at a Major League Spring Training baseball game in Arizona on a warm night, watching the Seattle Mariners play the Cincinnati Reds at Goodyear, Arizona. At the end of the second inning the stadium announcer asked for all Military Veterans to stand and be honored by the crowd, giving a round of applause. I was slow to get up. One of my friends, Jim Gustin, knew I had served and yelled at me to get up. Another friend, Mikey Chalmers, who did not know I had served, seemed irritated that I was slow to get up. I quickly sat down before the applause was finished.

That night during dinner, Mikey was still perplexed about me not proudly standing up with the other Veterans. Not sure why, but I suddenly got choked up and tears welled up in my eyes. I had no idea where it was coming from. Everyone at the table became uncomfortable watching this big old guy cry. I explained that while I served, I did not feel as worthy as those that served and actually put themselves in harm's way. I was safe within the Newborn Nursery, while others from my base and on the C-5A died. I just felt what I did was not as important and honorable as what others sacrificed.

My friend Mikey's wife Lynda could not stand seeing me cry. She got up in my face and tried to distract me. She said, "John, think about squirrels. Don't think about that...think about squirrels." It caught me off guard and I smiled and then chuckled. It worked. I stopped crying. They all went on to try and cheer me up and tell me I served, I went where I was asked to go by my country and did what I was asked to do. Lynda told me I should write down what I feel and it would help me. Get it out on paper. So, I did.

After a week or so, I started pouring down on paper how I felt and it made me feel better. I decided to write my feelings into a story and pursue a creative path with my ideas. I talked to so many people involved with the events surrounding Operation Babylift as mentioned above. I also talked to former Air Force personnel, former Marines, former Army and several former Vietnam Veterans that served in that conflict. They all told me the same thing. *You served...*

I met two Vietnam War Veterans in particular, and they had a huge impact on my guilt. They helped me look at my service in a new light. One was Elvis Bray. He was a crew chief on a U.S. Army Air Cavalry Search and Rescue helicopter team between 1968 and 1970. He was in harm's way all the time in the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands. Elvis has helped a lot of service members deal with survivor's guilt. He stressed to me that circumstance does not outweigh commitment. He was adamant when he talked to me and made me come away with one thought and one thought only: YOU SERVED, be proud of it.

Another former Vietnam Veteran Marine helped me ease the pain. I think his name was Danny Hernandez. He served at the height of the conflict. He probably wouldn't even remember me. I met him in passing at the Ace Theatre in Los Angeles, at a presentation and panel of Ken Burns' documentary film, "Vietnam." I happened to end up standing next to him in the lobby for

a few minutes. As we said hello to each other, he asked if I had served in Vietnam. I said no, I was safe in the Philippines working in the Newborn Nursery. He made a powerful comment that made me rethink my feelings.

He said something to the effect, "well, it makes me feel good that someone was bringing life into the world, while we were taking it out."

As the days slipped by, I kept thinking about all I had experienced the last few years. Finally, on Veterans Day, November 11, 2017, I woke up feeling different. I went into my closet and I found the Air Force shirt and hat that Tim Dixon had given me a few years earlier. I put them on and looked in the mirror. I then did something I had not done in over 40 years. I put my feet together with the toes pointing out at a 45-degree angle. I stood at attention and cupped my hands and had my thumbs point out perfectly, like a brand-new recruit. I snapped my right arm up to my Air Force hat with my hand turned exactly right, and snapped off the best salute I could muster.

Standing tall in my Air Force garb, I got in my car and drove to my favorite Starbucks. A middle-aged lady who was waiting for her drink kept staring at me. She approached and smiled. "Thank you for your service." The barista chimed in... "Thank you for your service." As I drove away in my car, it became clear to me: all who take the oath and defend our country provide a sacred service, regardless of our role. We all served—every last one of us who built barracks, slopped grub in the mess hall, wrote letters of condolence to bereaved mothers, and comforted orphans. Chance and circumstance are not ours to judge. We all served: Regina Aune, Bud Traynor, Elvis Bray and I—we raised our right hand; we served.

John McCarney is an award-winning screenwriter. He is currently a Fellow in the Writers Guild Veteran Writers Project: <https://www.wgfoundation.org/programs/the-veterans-writing-project> He has twice been named a semi-finalist for the Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting (awarded by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences). He is retired and currently lives with his wife, Barbara, in Goodyear, Arizona, where he writes, golfs, and volunteers as an ESL teacher.

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