

That's the Latest December 2022

## Saigon Marine

During my 50<sup>th</sup> plus 1 class reunion in September, I got to spend quite a bit of time with my lifelong friend, classmate and old neighbor Steve Johnson. On the Saturday before the reunion we drove up and down many of the country roads that we used to traverse as kids. We shared a lot of stories and memories and looked at how the landscape has changed around Concord Township since the days of our youth. There are houses and building sites where there used to be farm fields. There are farm fields where building sites used to be. There are fields where the old railroad track used to be that ran parallel to highway 56.

Steve regaled me in stories of how he used to go over to play with Joe Erler, who lived in what used to be the old country school house that was about halfway between our farms. The one story was about the two of them throwing darts until one dart landed right on the forehead of Joe. That's when Steve was sent home. But he was asked to come back. And so he did and by then Joe had a pony. Steve said let's play Roy Rogers. Steve ran up behind the pony and jumped up and got right on the pony. He told Joe to try it. Well it did not end well as Joe was about to leap on the pony's back, the pony kicked Joe right in the gut. Steve was sent home again.

But there was another time. Steve was over and noticed wasps going in and out of the water faucet on the side of the house. A bit later after some running around the yard, Joe said he was thirsty and Steve suggested that Joe put his mouth on the outlet of the faucet and he would turn it on. As you can imagine, Joe got a mouthful, not of water but of wasps. Steve did not wait, he went home. Through it all, Steve and Joe remained good friends.

During our visit on reunion weekend, Steve showed me his scrapbook of his military career. He joined the Marines right after graduation in 1971. After completing his 2 year active duty contract spending 15 of those months in Iwakuni, Japan with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Air Wing, he re-enlisted for an additional 4 years. He was selected to attend Marine Security Guard School in Virginia. Upon graduation, he was again selected to be a member of a very small group of Marines to provide security to Ambassadors and other dignitaries around the globe.



*Steven Johnson USMC*

This group was under the operational control of the U.S. Department of State and was known as the 'Personal Protective Security Unit'. One such mission was to protect U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Steve traveled around the globe providing this security along with State Department security personnel and the US Secret Service. His scrapbook included a cabin pass

to Air Force One in case Sec. Kissinger had to fly with the President. Steve lived out of a suitcase much of the time. He spent Christmas Day, 1973 standing outside Dr. Kissinger's residence in Washington DC, one of his more unenjoyable duties.

Through much of the 70's, Steve was in hostile territory starting with the Yom Kippur war. This was a war in October, 1973 between Israel and a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria. Some U.S. Marines were right in the middle of this fight and Steve was among them. Even though the fighting lasted less than a month, it was a war which meant it was dangerous and deadly and a near confrontation between the Soviet Union and the U.S. was averted.

His orders took him to the Dirty War in Argentina which lasted from 1974 to 1983. This was an internal political, ideological war where it's estimated that from 10,000 to 30,000 people died. In a box of old memorabilia I have, I recently found a letter I received from Steve that had a return address of Buenos Aires, Argentina and was postmarked July 11, 1974. I sent a copy of it to Steve and after he read it he emails me that things must have been going bad at the time he wrote it. He added that it was going bad most of the time he was there.

Vietnam was no different. Steve was a Staff Sergeant on security detail for U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin and the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Steve told me at our 45<sup>th</sup> class reunion about one night about a month before Saigon fell when he was on duty by himself in the embassy. Martial law had been declared in Saigon. He thought he saw lightning bugs that were faster than any he ever saw back on the farm in Concord Township. Then he realized that they weren't lightning bugs but instead they were tracer bullets.

Over the years I've told the story how my classmate was on one of the last choppers off the roof of the embassy. While that is true, it doesn't begin to tell the story of the chaos that ensued in those last hours. There is a newsletter and website called HistoryNet that is produced by the Weider History Group, the world's largest publisher of history books. Two writers, Bob Drury and Tom Clavin wrote a book about the final day and the evacuation of the Saigon Embassy. The edited version for a newsletter is a very well written piece of exactly what went down that day. It was an extremely gripping piece of reading especially since I personally knew one of the players in the story.

Exceptionally gripping because just 24 hours before this, two of Steve's fellow marines were killed at the Tan Son Nhut runway as the airport had been bombed. After that, evacuations were done by helicopters only. Literally hundreds of chopper flights came and left from the roof of the embassy to ferry remaining Americans and refugees to



ships at sea. At 4:58 on the morning of April 30, 1975, Ambassador Martin left on a chopper and took the flag with him and landed on the Seventh Fleet command ship Blue Ridge. Those higher in command thought when the Ambassador left, all military personnel were out. That was not the case. At least 60 Marines plus some others from other branches of the service were still there. Not to mention the 400 refugees inside the gate of the embassy grounds hoping to get out and hundreds more busting down the fences to get in.

All of this going on while the North Vietnam Army (NVA) was shooting at choppers and people. After a call to the commanding General stationed in Honolulu, the final choppers were sent in. To get as many as possible on one chopper, they had to leave behind all personal effects, helmets and flak gear. Between the second to last chopper and the very last was about an hour wait. 11 Marines that waited for the last ride out didn't know if it would all end for them on the roof. It did not. In the nick of time and under considerable enemy fire, a CH-46 came in at daybreak to get the last Marines out. Many of the refugees who thought they were about to get out, were left behind.

My friend, West Concord class of 1971 graduate Steve Johnson lived it firsthand. He's not a hero though. He told me so. The heroes were his two fellow Marines who died at the airport and the other 58,000 who were killed in this war. So since I can't call my friend a hero, I call him a warrior.

The book Last Men Out by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin is available at [HistoryNetShop.com](http://HistoryNetShop.com)

*To the right is Steve Johnson when he visited the West Concord Historical Society museum in August, 2022 pictured next to his FFA Chapter Presidential jacket. The museum building is where Steve went to all six years of grade school.*

*Below is a picture of the envelope I received from Steve while he was stationed in Argentina in 1974.*



