

Mail Call, Vietnam: A Labor of Love

Langhorne resident Jenny Ornsteen has unusually clear memories of the national mood in the early years of the Vietnam War. “The country was at least as divided as it is now,” she said.

She remembers it well because her parents, June and Richard, launched a project at that time called Mail Call, Vietnam that aimed to bridge, at least temporarily, the chasm of opinions for and against the war.

June was upset by the way American troops were being vilified, especially since they were very young and most of them were not in Vietnam by choice. The troops were called murderers and “baby killers” by many vocal critics of the war.

“My mother sent a letter to the editor of the local newspaper,” Jenny said. The gist of her letter was: “Our young men overseas are hearing these terrible things. With the holidays approaching, let’s tell them ‘We’re all Americans and we’re thinking of you.’” She asked local people to write letters to the troops as part of what she dubbed Mail Call Vietnam.

The letters began to arrive at the Ornsteen household in Gladwyne, PA. NBC picked up the story and it began to get national attention. Letters began to pour in from all over the United States.

Some people were skeptical of the project, suspecting that its aim was to win support for the war. June and Richard, however, intended Mail Call, Vietnam as a nonpartisan labor of love.

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Early on, some of the letters were negative and hurtful. One was from a 7 year old girl who wrote: “Dear soldier, Merry Christmas. I hope you read this before you get shot.” But such letters proved to be very much the exception. The vast majority of the letters were warm and supportive of the soldiers, if not their cause.

The US military was at first indifferent, and refused to pay for the delivery of the letters to the war theater. Richard, a doctor who had served as a captain during the Korean War, hired the Flying Tigers, an aviation group of retired veterans and volunteers, to deliver the first load —52 boxes, 3200 pounds of mail.

Once the mail reached Saigon, the military took over and got the letters to the men in the field, focusing especially on the combat zones. General Westmoreland, then commander of US forces in Vietnam, had become acquainted with the project and threw his weight behind it.

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Mail Call Vietnam continued until about the end of 1966 and eventually sent out nearly 400,000 letters to Americans in Vietnam. Jenny keeps a collection of hundreds of now-yellowed letters sent to her parents from grateful American soldiers in the war zone some 50 years ago, along with a trove of newspaper clippings and awards bestowed on her parents.

Jenny Ornsteen is proud of what her parents accomplished and what it revealed about her countrymen. “It’s striking that so many understood that we are all Americans, regardless of one’s position for or against the war,” she said. “Mail Call Vietnam was a little bit of beauty in a very ugly situation.” ■



Top photo: the Commanding Officer of the USS Kitty Hawk passes out letters from Mail Call, Vietnam; center left, Richard and June Ornsteen receiving a Distinguished Service award; Jenny Ornsteen, their daughter; a box of letters sent by troops in Vietnam. —Color photos by Alan J. Micklin