

4-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

McCormick, Arley (2018) "Crimes in the Pacific, Vietnam, and Afghanistan," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 43: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol43/iss1/7>

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Crimes' in the Pacific, Vietnam, and Afghanistan

*By
Arley McCormick*

The history books are full of red blooded American patriots that responded when the nation needed them, served with distinction and returned to friends and family with little more than what they possessed when they left. Their contribution is often described simply; Military Service.

Steward's Mate 1st Class George H. Crimes was such a patriot. At 18 years of age, he had hardly mastered proper military protocol when he joined the USS



USS Zeilin

Zeilin's crew early in 1944. After several months in the Philippine Islands, on January 12, 1945, the Zeilin was underway in a convoy when a single Japanese kamikaze crashed into the starboard side of the ship destroying the cargo loading equipment. The incendiary weapons carried by the aircraft exploded starting several fires and the damage was extensive. The deck

superstructure and framing as well as several staterooms were destroyed. Seven crew members were killed, three were missing, and thirty were injured.

One of the injured crew members was Steward's Mate 1st Class George H. Crimes. Seamen Crimes was burned extensively over a large portion of his body.

The war ended on September 2, 1945 and just over a month later his service in the US Navy ended; October 26, 1945 but he would spend two years recuperating in hospitals in Hawaii, New Orleans, and Pensacola. His recovery took another year before he returned home visibly scared with a Purple Heart.

Mr. George H. Crimes settled into the routine most returning GI's experienced; finding a job, housing, and a lifelong companion. There were many struggles but he and his wife managed and on August 12, 1949 they were rewarded with a son; Richard.

The Vietnam war was twelve years old when the young student, Richard Crimes learned his country wanted him. He had attended William Cooper Council school in Huntsville, graduated from Huntsville High School in 1967, and enjoyed two years at Alabama A&M when, this ideal candidate; smart, enjoyed

education, work, and church, hit the lottery that few wanted to win; thanks to a revised system that allegedly, was fare.

For the first time since 1942 the Selective Service System initiated a lottery system to select men between the ages of 18 and 26 to provide manpower for the Armed Forces. Three hundred sixty-six blue plastic capsules containing, a number correlated to a date in the year that represented draft eligibility for those watching. The capsules were placed in a large glass container and drawn by hand to assign order-of-call numbers to all men within the age group. Previously, candidates registered with the Selective Service System were selected by a local board composed of upstanding members of the community and the critics argued that the boards tended to select minority, blue collar, uneducated, and poor men rather than wealthy educated men.

On June 13, 1969 Richard and Ms. Ethelene Watkins were married and 6 months later on December 1, along with every young man in America, they sat with their family and waited to learned if their number would be called. The blue capsule number 95, the lottery number that covered his 12 August birthdate, marked the day that would change Richards' life; everything except his attitude.

Like the rest of the nation he could not avoid the Vietnam war news reports and the news was always grim. His family was reflective, trusted in god, and felt no relief when his lottery number was called but accepted it as a duty to the country.

Students and others were always protesting somewhere and the elected representatives often provided sound bites of their support for the protesters as an acceptable democratic process, and yet were supporting the president and the military through the national budget votes and backroom encouragement.

The history of the Vietnam war is ugly. In 1969 the “Vietnamization” of the war was announced by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and in April the U.S. military personnel in the country peaked to 543,400. In June President Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25,000 troops and followed up by announcing the “Nixon Doctrine” in July. President Nixon announced his doctrine during a press conference in Guam and in November elaborated that it meant the USA would provide a nuclear umbrella for its allies but each would be responsible for its own security. To Richard it meant the war was winding down as over 68,000 troops had departed the country when he hit the lottery. He didn’t know at least 4,000 military personnel would die in Vietnam during his tour.

Most fathers would say that Richard was the perfect son, he learned to operate a lathe while working part time with Parker Hannifin, was attending Alabama A&M, and was an active member of the Union Chapel Missionary Baptist Church. And, now the family would watch him leave for the uncertainty of war.

The war and Civil Rights activists made protesting a national pastime in the 60’s. The Civil Rights demonstrations provided inspiration and an example for the Students for Democratic Society and in April of

1965 as they protested and war demonstrations gathered momentum. In October, 1967, the antiwar protestors “March on the Pentagon” was attended by approximately 50,000 demonstrators and in April 1970 the largest pro-war demonstration was held in Washington. The country was clearly divided. The social situation could not be ignored as protesters marched and others made their way to Canada to avoid the draft. Richard Crimes chose to accept his responsibility as an American citizen even if it meant going to Vietnam.

On May 21, 1970, the 1967 graduate of Huntsville High School reported to the induction station at Montgomery, Alabama, after having passed the physical in Nashville, Tennessee. He took the oath of enlistment and was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for Basic Training. It was a new world of constant supervision, roll calls, barracks living and sleeping in small bunks with his worldly possessions locked in a footlocker or a metal wall closet. Sergeants barked orders, he was constantly marching, climbing in and out of trucks, and his new friends and acquaintances learned to help each other, and depend upon each other, with emphasis on how to stay alive on a battlefield. Before his company marched in a graduation ceremony he learned his next challenge would be Advanced Individual training at Fort Polk, Louisiana and the training would help his career as a civilian.

Private Richard Crimes did not view his future role in the U.S. Army as very significant even when he

learned he had passed the scrutiny qualifying for a secret clearance and trained as clerk typist. Yet, European history illustrates otherwise. In the spring of 1814, Napoleon was defeated, abdicated his throne and was exiled to the island of Elba. In February of 1815 he escaped from Elba and returned to Paris to reclaim the throne. During his months of isolation on the Italian Isle his most efficient Chief of Staff retired and the platoon of scribes that had transcribed his orders and instructions to his generals were whisked up in the aftermath of his 1814 abdication and flung to the four winds. He rebuilt the Army but his new Chief of Staff and new cadre of scribes found it difficult, if not impossible, to transcribe Napoleon's thoughts into action and the result was confusion in the field and defeat at Waterloo. Now Private Crimes would become the U.S. Army's newest generation of scribes. He had no idea that his effort would help form United States Army Policy and actions in Vietnam.

After a week in Oakland, California waiting for a flight to Vietnam he arrived at Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon, (now Ho Chi Min City), on October 20, 1970. In processing took awhile but shortly he learned his assignment would be with the Military Assistance Command Vietnam Inspector General's Office. In 1962 MACV headquarters was formed in Saigon. The Headquarters orchestrated the buildup of American Advisors and support personnel and was reorganized in May 1964 to provide command and control of combat units being deployed to Vietnam. General Creighton Abrams had replaced General William C.

Westmorland in 1968 and was commanding when Private Crimes joined the Inspector General's cadre. His reports would occasionally get to General Abrams desk.

The Inspector General is the Commanding General's independent eyes into the operations of all the organizations under the MACV headquarters and it requires teams or individuals to travel throughout Vietnam verifying the General's instructions, policy, and orders are being implemented appropriately. What Specialist Crimes did not know was that an Inspector General review or inspection brought many officers to tears. A finding by the Inspector General could be a career ending report and for a careerist it was life threatening. Official orders have the weight of law, consequently, failure to follow orders can be prosecuted as a violation of law. For the average soldier on the ground, knowing the Inspector General is coming gives them more courage and provides an opportunity to register a complaint. The unit leaders upon learning an Inspector General inspection is pending initiate a bevy of checks to insure there are no findings recorded against the organization.

Private Crimes labored alongside a squad of scribes bent over their electric magnetic tape typewriters all day and occasionally consulting with the officers that scratched out their reports in pencil and pen with all the accompanying spelling and grammar errors. There was no end to the reports.

The annoying constant screech of planes taking off and landing at Tan Son Nhut never quite seemed so

normal that they could be ignored. The pressure to finish a report would always mount and the smells of the city, constant screeching of aircraft could make for an exhausting anxiety filled day but there was time after a day's labor to relax. Richard found music the ideal release from the tedium of a hot work day. He was invited to join a band and played in different venues in both Army and Air Force recreation areas. They even played venues in the clubs of Saigon and the monotony of their effort was broken up by the official training schedule that included excursions to the firing range to remain competent with an M16 weapon, briefings on the dangers of fraternization with the local population, knowing your enemy, and from the roof top of their building they could watch the smoke rise and tracers light up the sky as the Air Force ground police protected the base from enemy intruders. Occasionally he would be required to accompany officers on a short trip to Long Bien where logistics operations were controlled. It was a plus that the comrades working for the IG were also friends. They were easy to work with and they enjoyed the association, one of the benefits that Richard would miss from that year. Breaks from the constant administrative roll and music kept him fresh and ready for each day. Finding humor in the oddities of life in and around Saigon was always a release. No one could understand why the hooch maids stole their underwear.

Saigon was a busy city. Pedestrians, motor cycles and mopeds, dominated the roads and trying to cross

a street meant placing your life in their hands. Military trucks, commercial vehicles and men young and old pulling carts as taxis were everywhere. The Saigon River was not too far away and combining the various smells of city with gas fumes, smoke, and fish, depending on the wind was not particularly enjoyable. The Vietnamese cuisine was not like mama used to make either. Pigeon's whole with their heads dominating the center of the plate, shark fin soup, and limiting patrons to chop sticks just didn't feel like home. But it was his duties, acquaintances, and music that eased the frustration of being away from his wife and family.



Richard Crimes

Upon honorably completing his military commitment in 1972 he returned home with a Bronze Star for service and continued his education at Alabama A&M with the aid of the GI Bill, earning a degree in business, continued working for Parker Hannifin Corporation and eventually earned a certificate from the University of Alabama, Huntsville for graphic design and multimedia production. In his retirement he uses the skills acquired while serving as the historian of the Vietnam Veterans of America Huntsville Chapter 1067, supporting the William Hooper Council Alumni Association, the Jazz society, and he belongs to the Union Chapel Missionary Baptist Church.

After 9/11, the world changed and another opportunity for a Crimes arose to serve the country. With Terrance, their son, Richard and Ethelene, kissed, hugged, and waved goodbye praying for their daughter, Francien's, safe return. She joined the U.S. Army and deployed to Afghanistan, thereby extending the family commitment of service to the country.

Richards' commitment to serving is recognized. The Vietnam Veterans of America has awarded the TSgt E. A. Phillips Humanitarian Award to Specialist Richard Crimes for his commitment and dedication serving chapter members as well as their families. He served as an administrative assistant in the 931st Engineer Group, is the Chapter's photographer but most noteworthy is his support for all the chapter commitments with pictures and videos that last a lifetime. In addition, the William Hooper Council Alumni Association recognized Richard at an Annual Confederation of Historian's luncheon in 2017 for his long service and contribution to the Association.

Richard Crimes is representative of a family of patriots that continue to serve the community.

About the Author; Arley McCormick is a former soldier and active in the history organizations of the community.

References; Interviews with the subject of the article.