



The VHPA AVIATOR

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A Smiling Tiger UH1-B, D Co. 229th AHB 1st Cav Div. flies through the Bong Song pass June 1967. Armed with four flex mounted .30 cal machine guns, fourteen 2.75 inch rockets and an M-6 40 mm grenade launcher, it is ready to go to work.

Photo by VHPA member Al De Mailo, Smiling Tiger 21, '67-'68.

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Jerilyn Brusseau (left) stands beside Gail Garcelon at Dan Cheney's crash site fifty years later.

Green Pastures beside the Still Waters

By Colin Cahoon

On January 6, 2019, in Hau Nghia Province, Vietnam, Gail Garcelon and Jerilyn Brusseau stood together on the canal bank, poised but with heads bowed, in front of two small tables positioned between them and the muddy water drifting by. They gazed silently at the pictures of Lieutenant Dan Cheney that Gail had brought with her from Texas and arranged carefully on one of the tables. Fruit and various other offerings lay on the other table, set for the ceremony soon to begin.

It was then that the golden sunlight transformed the two ladies in my eyes. I was no longer looking at two women in the autumn years of life. Instead, before me were Dan Cheney's big sister, Jerilyn Cheney, and his young fiancée, Gail Higgins. The many years and thousands of miles were bridged in an instant. The two women appeared reunited

with the memory of the young Cobra pilot who meant so much to them, the fun-loving twenty-one-year-old with the big smile and impish glint in his eyes, the young Cavalry trooper who died a half-century before on this very spot.

Fifty years ago, Lieutenant Dan Cheney had been in-country but a couple of weeks and not out of flight school much longer. In between flight school and his arrival in Vietnam he took a short leave back home to Bellingham, WA, where he promptly proposed to his sweetheart, Gail Higgins. Joyous celebrations followed between the Cheney and Higgins families, long friends and now to be united by marriage. It was the most magical of Christmas seasons, but Dan found himself on Christmas day the newest aviator in A Troop 3/17th Cavalry (the "Silver Spurs") assigned as a Cobra copilot.

The Bellingham Herald posted the engagement announce-

of Miss Gail Higgins and First Lieutenant Daniel B. Cheney in its January 6, 1969, edition. That same day, half a world away, Lieutenant Cheney was part of a different engagement, flying over the rice paddies of southern Vietnam as a part of a 3/17 pink team sent to investigate reported enemy activity south of Duc Hoa. Soon he was in the middle of a battle, one that began when the Cav pink team's Loach, piloted by Lieutenant Dennis Duarte, came under fire and crashed into a canal. The little-bird's crew crawled out of the wreckage and began swimming toward the opposite shore. Dan's Aircraft Commander, Warrant Officer Walter Koslosky, nosed their Cobra over into a gun run, hoping to keep Charlie's head down and give the downed crew a chance to make the safety of the opposite bank. Pulling out of one pass over the enemy position, WO Koslosky pointed the Cobra's nose skyward for a classic "return to target" maneuver. The aircraft climbed straight up, but its nose never swung back toward the ground. Instead, the Cobra fell straight back to earth, tail first, plowing into the bank of the canal. In all likelihood, both pilots were put out of commission at the beginning of the maneuver by the intense ground fire. The crash was not survivable, in any event.

The two Cobra pilots had not sacrificed their lives in vain. Their gun runs bought the Loach crew precious time. The two Loach troopers made it to the opposite bank and were later rescued by another aircrew. Two days later, the January 8, 1969 edition of the Bellingham Herald announced Lieutenant Cheney's death in combat over Vietnam.

I was honored and a bit surprised last fall when Jerilyn and Gail asked me to accompany them on their memorial trek to Vietnam. The trip had been arranged by Peace Trees Vietnam, a non-profit co-founded by Jerilyn. Peace Trees had a long history of clearing Vietnam War battlefields of unexploded ordnance and rehabilitating the land by planting trees. I was writing a book about Vietnam era helicopter pilots who earned purple hearts in combat. The Loach pilot whom Dan Cheney died trying to defend, Dennis Duarte, was one of the vets working with me on the book. Word got back to Jerilyn that I was writing about the battle in which her brother sacrificed his life. The next thing I know, I'm in Vietnam with a delegation from Peace Trees led by Jerilyn and Gail.

There were seven Americans in the group, only two of us didn't know Dan. Gail brought along her best friend, Terry Skeesick, her brother, Brian Higgins, and another family



Jerilyn Brusseau(left)stands beside Gail Garcelon at Dan Cheney's crash site fifty years later.

friend, Pam Clayton. Jerilyn was the sole participant from the Cheney family. Norm Knodt, a former Huey gunship pilot, and I rounded out the group.

The battle occurred northwest of Saigon, and the memorial service was scheduled toward the end of our delegation's two-week tour of the country. We started in Hanoi and worked our way progressively south, visiting among other sites the DMZ, Dong Ha, and Khe Sahn, before leaving Hue on a plane headed to Saigon.

As we flew into Saigon, I peered down at the endless rice paddies crisscrossed by ribbons of brown canals. It all looked very much like the images I'd seen as a boy watching the war unfold on TV. I didn't know Dan Cheney, but he was suddenly with me. My heart raced imagining the young soldier looking down at the same scene fifty years before. I felt anxious looking out the window of our jet. Dan must have felt even more so.

On January 5, our delegation spent the night in Duc Hoa, now a suburb northwest of Saigon. The next morning, we took a van to the crash site. From what I knew about the battle fifty years before, I was expecting to park and hike a ways through the countryside before arriving at a rural setting far removed from the constant noise and commotion of Saigon and Duc Hoa. Instead, the van pulled off the highway into the driveway of our hosts, a local Vietnamese family that owned the house next to the canal bank. The crash site was just feet from their driveway, in the middle of Vietnamese suburbia.

It was a beautiful, sunny day. We exchanged pleasantries with our hosts, who then left us on our own as we set up a small shrine on the bank of the Bobo canal utilizing two small tables our hosts had provided. The memorial ceremony was a blend of our cultures, with incense burning all along the bank. Vietnamese custom holds that prayers float upward on the smoke. I wondered if Dan Cheney's last prayers received an assist from the smoke that surely engulfed the site fifty years earlier. Clumps of freshly cut vegetation floated lazily by us, as if the canal itself was paying homage with green funeral pyres. Occasionally, the slow-moving water produced a swirl. Jerilyn felt as if Dan was dipping his hand in the water and making the pleasant swirls for her. I think she was right.

Prayers were said, a poem recited, and we all basked in the familiar phrases of the 23rd Psalm. We stood before the green pastures with the still water slowly rolling by in front of the table prepared in the presence of his former enemies. We all scattered bits of food about the canal bank in order to feed the roaming spirits that might congregate with us. It was all quite lovely, and deeply moving.

I never met Dan Cheney, but I think I know him now, a little. He clearly made the world a better place by his brief presence and very real journey through the valley of the shadow of death. He left behind family, friends, and a fiancée, all of whom loved him dearly, and made life itself a continuing possibility for his fellow troopers. It was a privilege to honor him and his sacrifice. Surely goodness and mercy followed Dan all the days of his life, and now he dwells in the house of the Lord forever.

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