

Flight,

Those of us who served with Ed Bilbrey were very happy to see Karen show up on our list. It had been almost thirty-two years since Ed was killed in action on LAMSON 719, when Steve Williams forwarded a note telling me she had signed our guest book expressing a desire to track down those of us who knew and served with Ed.

When I first contacted Karen, most of our correspondence was sent back channel as we got to know each other. We were both amazed as we reviewed some of the unique details about how I had tried to contact her through Ed's Mom when I first returned from Vietnam and how his Mom and I had stayed in touch, speaking regularly about events in our lives up until she passed away. There are some very special points about how things took place over the years, between me and Mrs. Bilbrey, that Karen and I still find amazing, but trying to explain them on the reflector list would take awhile.

Karen and I also spent a lot of time on the phone talking about so many things she could only wonder about over the years. With my journal, I was able to portray some of the aspects of our duties and life in the 48th. Those of you who also corresponded with her provided additional details which helped paint the picture about what it was like for Ed during our days at Ninh Hoa and later at Dong Ha. It was great to finally meet Karen in Las Vegas and see her fit in so well with the Blue Stars. One night there, after she and I had a few shots of tequila, we talked about all the messages we had sent back and forth over the months leading up to the reunion in Vegas. She told me my journal notes about Ed meant a lot to her, but she wished we had communicated more over the reflector list so those of you who didn't know Ed could have heard more about him. I'd like to share some of those notes with you now.

In my first note to Karen after she had joined the list, I told her that, "Ed and I would sit on the bunker after tough missions, to kind of decompress and, as close friends have a way of doing, share certain thoughts we might be reluctant to share with others. He had the additional duty of being our Mess

Officer and overseeing the dining hall, so we would unlock the Mess Sergeant's private stock of canned ham and sliced bread, fill our canteen cups with whatever refreshing beverage we could get from the O'club or scrounge from one of the slick pilots and talk about what we missed about home and what we wanted to do when we got back there. We spoke about our country not having unity of purpose with the war and so many other issues of the time. We wondered if we were doing the right thing by being where we were. We realized our span of control over the situation we faced in Vietnam was narrow, but we made a promise that, by God, we were going to control as much as we could and do whatever necessary to take care of each other and those in our charge! That was Ed's nature, he was a true warrior."

"Many of those nights we sat there talking until we saw the sun coming up! We'd grab a shower before everyone else beat us to the 'warm' water, fill our thermos with coffee, pick up our mission sheet and start all over again! I know this all probably sounds a little crazy, but that's just the way it was."

"I miss Ed. I think of him often and I wish I could see him now . . . I'd still kid him about his 'cowboy' tan and I'd still give him crap for all the food HE served us in the chow hall, but in a way that probably only those who served in the 48th would really understand, I'd let him know how much his friendship meant to me and how knowing him influenced my life."

Karen asked me about the mess officer's duties and I gave her some background to explain, but I thought I'd share this story with the group, especially since it seems so appropriate for the holiday season. Looking through my journal, reviewing the period of September-November 1970, one entry I noted was about the time we had an officer's call in the club. This meeting was, just coincidentally, on a day we had come back from a long and 'shitty' mission to find that, for the fourth time in five days, the chow hall was serving for dinner, some form of roast beef! If you recall, some days it was roast beef and gravy, sometimes it was gravy and roast beef, beef "tips" and gravy, sliced roast beef, beef stew or beef with onions and gravy! Many times, returning late from missions, we would find that the chow which had been saved for us was sandwiches . . . you guessed it, sliced roast beef, which closely

resembled very old beef jerky, between two slices of stale bread!

“Operations gave us the heads up about dinner as our fire team was hovering out of POL to the gun revetments and we couldn’t believe it! Ed Bilbrey and I were pissed and decided to skip the mystery meat, commonly referred to as Bluestar special. We retreated to my hootch, ate C-rations and had a few shots of tequila which we chased with some of that ‘great’ Crown Beer the ROKs had given us! By the time officer’s call started, Ed and I had worked ourselves into a lather, bitching about how ‘the troops’ deserved better, how all that crappy roast beef had probably come from LBJ’s Texas ranch and how we weren’t going to put up with this crap any longer! We were tired of busting our butts all day to return to a chow line that had these trays of dried out roast beef glistening with this strange, oily ‘rainbow hue’ from being on the steam line for hours!”

“As Officer’s call began and the Executive Officer was briefing all the requisite administrative crap, Ed stood up, interrupted him and said, ‘The hell with all this Military Pay Certificate control BS! We need to talk about a serious morale issue, we’re all getting sick of having this damn roast beef almost every night!’ Most of the pilots chimed up in support and Ed looked over at the rest of the Jokers, smiling and nodding his head. The Commander, who was seated in the front row, now stood up and, to everyone’s surprise, voiced HIS support, saying he was also getting sick of all that roast beef! Ed proudly raised his hands giving a double thumbs up as everyone cheered! Then the CO added, ‘ . . . and Lt Bilbrey, I believe YOU are just the guy who can correct this serious morale problem!’ He then turned to the XO and said, ‘Place Lt Bilbrey on orders as the company’s new mess officer, effectively immediately!’ And the crowd went crazy!”

“That comment kind of cut through our tequila fog and as Ed sat down he looked at me and, even over the noise of everyone’s laughter and cheers, you could hear him expressing how he felt about his new ‘additional duty.’ As it finally got quiet and everyone was looking back toward the XO, Beau Newton stood up and said, ‘Hey, Lt Bilbrey, what are you serving for chow tomorrow night?’ ...and everybody broke up laughing!”

“Ed took a lot of grief over the next few weeks, and the roast beef stayed off the menu for the most part, but when we did have roast beef, Ed had it rough! We all took notice as he really became serious about improving the mess operations and soon, he and the mess sergeant became very close. When anyone complained about the food, Ed would ‘return fire’ and tell them about how he thought all the cooks and maintenance guys always worked their butts off, but never got any credit!”

Almost every time you saw Ed on his days off, he would be reviewing the Army manuals about mess operations and management of the Army’s “master menu.” He reviewed all documents related to food procurement, cooking equipment and the military occupational specialties of required personnel and decided the Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) needed to be modified. The TO&E being used only addressed equipment and staffing for an assault company, minus our attached support, so he and the XO figured out a way to increase the number of personnel assigned to the mess hall. MY additional duties were as Assistance in Kind, (AIK), fund custodian and Civilian Personnel Officer, (CPO), so Ed asked me for additional civilians to help do cleaning and prep work. During my review of the appropriate Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, (MACV) and United States Army Vietnam, (USARV) regulations I applied some “dynamic” interpretation techniques which allowed us to add, just coincidentally, the number of additional people Ed said he needed. I figured if anyone at 10th Battalion or 17th Group took issue with our efforts and tried to send us to the Long Binh Jail, (The LBJ), we could always argue that our actions were purely “for the good of the Army!” Right?!

“Things were starting to improve in the mess hall and in early November Ed told me that he wanted to make the 48th’s Thanksgiving dinner the best ever and asked me to help him out. I had met an Army veterinarian at Cam Ranh Bay after he noticed me walking to the 91st Finance office carrying an AK-47. The Vet was fascinated with the gun and asked me if I would be willing to trade it. I asked him what he had to trade and he responded that he was ‘a Vet.’ I told him I wasn’t in the market for any animals and we didn’t have any

which would require his services, (Cpt Reno ran off our monkey after it sexually assaulted him and Duke, our baboon, died after biting an Air Force FAC pilot). He said, 'You don't understand, don't you know what my job is here? I have to inspect ALL Class I, (rations!), which arrive in country via the port of Cam Ranh Bay!' Well, it didn't take long to realize what a valuable contact this guy was and, after gladly relinquishing my AK-47, I was soon at the finance pad loading cases of steaks and BOTTLED beer into the admin bird that Chuck Markham brought in to pick me up."

"I told Ed this contact could be a big help to him, so we took my aircraft, 520, on a 'test flight' to Cam Ranh Bay so I could introduce him to the Vet 'gun collector'. Over the next few weeks, Ed did a lot of networking with this guy and a bunch of his Air Force friends. I don't know what all he and the Mess Sergeant actually gathered from those guys, but I know that every time we could, we picked up weapons captured by the ground units we supported throughout our area of operations and gave them to Ed. He would head off to Cam Ranh Bay on a "business trip" and soon the mess hall became a lot more popular! It even became almost routine for the Mess Sergeant to walk into the Officer or EM clubs late in the evening with trays of fried chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs, fresh fruit or cookies and cake! That was quite a welcomed change!"

In my journal I noted on 16 November 1970, " Ed says he's in a bind with a Thanksgiving deal he's working with the Vet at CRB . . . needs four AK-47's and two M2 carbines. The deal will get us cases of fresh fruit, whole hams, wine, (other than that Mateus Rose crap), prepared (?) pies . . . and real LIVE turkeys! Ed's a great guy, but I'm betting against him on the live turkey deal. I think the Air Force guys are feeding him some BS . . . so I told him not to promise the old man on that one."

"We heard through the rumor mill that the CO is planning a 'health and welfare' inspection of our hooches and the enlisted barracks within the next week, so we've developed a plan to gather some extra trading material for Ed to use in his efforts to close the deal with the Air Force. The SOP for the health and welfare inspections calls for all illegal/contraband weapons

collected in conjunction with the inspection to be destroyed. The 48th's method of destroying the weapons is to have one of our aircraft fly off the coast and 'deep six' them. We'll have to somehow make sure that one of the Joker birds gets that mission!"

Well, to make a long story short, the health and welfare inspection was a goldmine or as Ed and the Mess Sergeant said, while rejoicing with their scotch, (his and Ed's beverage of choice), "We PILGRIMS have just reaped a blessed and abundant THANKSGIVING HARVEST!" And, yes, the Jokers flew the mission to "destroy" the contraband weapons and even "properly" certified the destruction paperwork. Ed was very quiet about what he was up to, but finally on 20 November, I noted, "OPS got a call from an inbound slick and relayed a message from Ed Bilbrey telling me to meet him at the command pad. I wasn't sure what was going on until I walked down there and saw Lt Ed Bilbrey, gun pilot and Mess Officer Extraordinaire, sitting in the back of a slick grinning from ear to ear while covered in feathers and turkey shit! He was wrestling with this 'brace' or 'gaggle' of live turkeys who, one or two at a time, would escape from their makeshift cages and thrash around inside the aircraft! Needless to say, this event drew a lot of attention from almost everyone on the compound and after a rowdy welcome to this excited group of turkeys, who had just experienced their first helicopter ride, Ed's prized turkeys were finally escorted to their new digs up by the mess hall."

Every day you'd find a group of guys, acting like little kids, checking on the turkeys and playing with them. Ed's "big score" was a true hit with everyone and seemed to take our minds off the war. It also seemed like everyone was getting into the holiday spirit and looking forward to the big feast! Ed and I flew a mission together two days before Thanksgiving and I told him the Mess Sergeant had been bragging about him, telling me how much he had done for all his guys. Ed was really humble and didn't say much, but he was truly proud of what he and the Mess Sergeant had been able to accomplish. I asked him when they were going to prep and cook the turkeys and he said, "Well there's been kind of a change in plans, no one has the heart to kill the turkeys." He said most of the cooks as well as the rest of the unit had become "kind of attached to them," and he was even referring to THEM, the turkeys,

BY NAME, as he told me the Mess Sergeant had promised everyone that they wouldn't kill and cook them! I asked him what we were now going to have for our Thanksgiving dinner and he said they were "... working on that."

Well, he and his mess team came through in spades and we ended up having all kinds of great food. The mess hall remained open all day and for once, you could have as much to eat as you wanted and because the food was so good, we all ate too much, but the only turkey we had, came from a can! The "guests of honor," Ed's turkeys, stayed in our company area for a while after Thanksgiving but, one or two at a time, they "escaped" and as Ed said, "were probably over there hiding ... **IN THE ROKs!**"... as he pointed to the Republic of Korea Army's Whitehorse Division compound!

I can't believe that was thirty-two years ago. This year, I'll be celebrating Thanksgiving in my family's traditional way. We'll do as always and try to divide time between Jane's parents and mine and rejoice in the fact that they are still with us, while remembering our friends who now face their first holiday since losing a loved one. I'll be amazed, as I am every year, by the variety and abundance of unbelievably delicious fare, as it is lovingly prepared and presented in the finest southern tradition. I will give thanks for every blessing God has graciously rendered me.

This year, after attending the funeral for the crew of Blue Star 811, who have been missing since 1967, and spending time with many of their family members, I will be thinking about what the families who have lost loved ones or have loved ones missing in action, have had to endure all these years. I can only imagine what it has been like to suffer the loss of someone you cherished so much or, for so many years, to cope with the anguish of wondering about the fate of those still missing. I have witnessed the pain of many of our friends who still face their personal demons from their Vietnam experience and I will pray they let that experience temper them, make them stronger and enable them to find their peace.

I will try hard to recapture the feelings I experienced walking with fellow Blue Stars and family members across that hallowed ground at Arlington National

Cemetery. Being there among those who have gone before us, viewing the granite headstones who's etchings not only reflect letters of a name, but illuminate memories of those with whom we shared life. Those men whose strength of commitment, in a most difficult war during one of the most trying times in our country's history, cost them their future. I will always remember their courage and selflessness.

In the excitement of the holiday's activities, I will do as I have done every year since 1971 and seek a place where I can be away from others who may not understand. I will ~~even the ice in my old can teen~~ cup with scotch and, in that peaceful time of sunset, toast my Blue Star brothers who gave their all. While smiling through my tears, I will also remember a special guy named Edmond David Bilbrey, who made his last Thanksgiving... my most memorable.

**Rick Lester
Joker 94**