

Americal Division's "Old Glory"

By Dale Meisel and Julia Brennan

Spread across a geographically huge area of operations (AO) in Vietnam, the Americal Division's 23rd Military Police Company had a wide variety of important duties to perform. They escorted convoys, secured division and brigade tactical operations centers (TOCs), and operated prisoner of war collecting points.

To the Military Policemen in Chu Lai fell one important but more ceremonial duty: each day they raised and lowered the American flag which flew over Americal Division Headquarters.

In late 1970 and early 1971 I was the Operations Officer for Americal Division Provost Marshal, LTC Everett I. Perrin, Jr. When the flag was lowered each day it was stored near the MP desk sergeant, "ready for duty" on the following morning. Periodically, when the flag had become too tattered to be flown, it was replaced.

After observing this operation day after day I decided that the next time the flag was changed I would keep the old one rather than see it destroyed. I am not sure why I decided to save the flag as I returned from Vietnam with few souvenirs. But 30 years later, in

2001, when I attended my first ADVA reunion in Cleveland, I was glad I kept this special souvenir.

The flag had spent most of the intervening years gathering dust in my closet. The majority of the time I forgot I even had it. But while preparing for the 2001 reunion I recalled I had it. I contacted Dave Taylor, who along with Larry Watson, was organizing the annual ADVA get together. I told Dave about the flag and asked him if he wanted me to bring it along. He gave me an enthusiastic yes.



When Dave saw me in Cleveland with the flag he asked me if he could hold it. It was then



Photos Courtesy Julia Brennan

that I realized that for many the flag would resonate in a special way.

On the Saturday afternoon of the reunion I hung the flag in the ballroom. At the banquet that evening Dave had me come to the podium where I briefly told the audience my story. Several attendees later told me that the introduction of the flag electrified the veterans.

I subsequently displayed the flag at other reunions. But I realized along the way that

the flag was in need of professional attention. I contacted Dr. Richard Verrone of Texas Tech University for advice. Verrone has attended several ADVA reunions in his quest to enhance TTU's Vietnam Center with Americal veterans' memories and memorabilia. Through Dr. Verrone I ultimately contacted Julia Brennan of Caring for Textiles in Washington, D.C. Julia agreed to use her professional skills to conserve the flag. Her story follows.

Dale's American flag that flew over the Americal Division headquarters is the first flag from the Vietnam War that I have conserved. It fills an important piece of history for me. I grew up in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, Thailand, (1964-1970) during the Vietnam War. My father served there in 1968. It was a worrisome time for me as a child.

When Dale's flag arrived I was

working on two World War II flags; the flag that flew over the US Capitol on September 11, 2001; a Marine Guidon used in the Battle of Faluja, Iraq; and a 16 star hand-stitched wool flag from the 1850's. Each one of these flags tells a story. Each is owned or cared for by someone who, like Dale, has taken the time to keep the stories and artifacts alive.

My job as a conservator is to extend the life of the object. My work is not restoration. I do not recreate or reweave a textile to make it look new. I use reversible techniques to stabilize it. I try to be as non-invasive as possible to preserve the integrity and history of the piece.

Over twenty years of experience has formed my conservation processes. As a professional member of the American Institute for Conservation I adhere to a code of ethics. Treatments have to be reversible (no tapes, glues,



23rd Military Police veterans with "Old Glory's" first appearance Cleveland ADVA reunion 2001.
L-R Vic Kornaski, Tom Packard, Randy Teal, Paul Stiff.
Photo Courtesy Tom Packard.



Photo Courtesy Dale Meisel

paint, staples, bleaches) and respect the integrity of the object.

My handwork has to be distinguishable from the original. Also, all treatments are accompanied by written and photographic documentation of the artifact before, during and after treatment.

This is part of the historical record for the future. It is work that demands patience, careful looking, thoughtful evaluation – not rote formulas, hand-skills, and sometimes scientific analysis. Each textile that comes into my studio is treated uniquely and with the utmost care and professionalism.

The Americal Division's flag was in fairly good condition overall. It was soiled and one end was tattered, frayed, and missing sections of the borders. These edges had been tied up in multiple knots in order to prevent them from falling off, but they were pulling at the body of the flag and looked unsightly.

I left some of the worn ends "incomplete", but stabilized them with fine hand stitching so that they would not continue to fall apart or unravel.

These physical damages are reminders of its history and use.

Since the flag was nylon and fairly contemporary, I knew that it could be wet cleaned. As a matter of practice, I tested the reds and blues to make sure that the dyes would not bleed. They were fast.

Next, I untied all the knots and tangles in the border and flattened them out. This enabled me to reconstruct the end of the flag with as much original material as possible. These dangling ends were very vulnerable. I sandwiched them in nylon bridal netting to protect them during the cleaning. The flag was wet cleaned flat in a non-ionic detergent, blocked, and pressed. The stabilization work focused on the tattered end. Once I had the dangling ends all realigned, I could see there were large gaps between the body of the flag and the torn off ends.

I used lightweight nylon of the same cream and red colors to insert "bridges" to fill in these gaps. I left the frayed edges as is, and hand stitched the patches in place to fill in the areas of loss. The corners, which were worn off to gentle curves, were stabilized with tiny blanket stitches to secure every other thread.

Now the flag is sturdy enough to be handled and displayed. Its wear and tear are still evident, but not causing any damage. Finally, I folded it, padding out the creases with acid free tissue and packed it in an acid free box for long term storage.

Textiles are amazing vessels of history. As children we are swaddled in them, as brides adorned in them, and in death honored by them. Quilts cover our

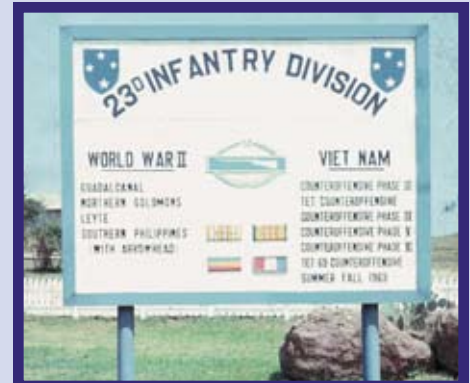


Photo Courtesy Dale Meisel

beds, samplers record family history, and rugs provide colorful and warm footing. From ancient times textiles were the most revered of gifts.

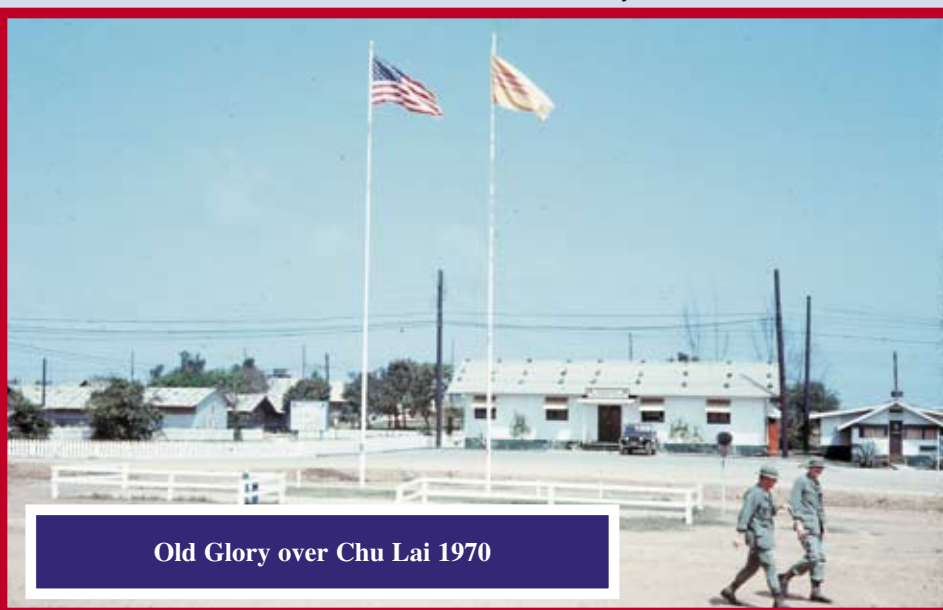
Highly evolved, easily transported, they were instant symbols of kingship, wealth, belonging, or surrender. They continue to be. I hope that people will look in their closets and pull out these powerful mementos and commit to their preservation.

After about two months of work, Julia returned the flag to me. Her work was skillfully done and should give the flag the stability it badly needed. Our Stars and Stripes still looks her age, and perhaps will never again achieve the heights she once attained. But she may still occasionally show herself off to some old soldiers, who may see a bit of themselves reflected in the Americal's "Old Glory".

Dale Meisel was First Platoon Leader, 23rd MP Company and Americal Division Provost Marshal Operations Officer in 1970 and 1971. He is currently the Warden of the 1,354 bed Lehigh County Prison in Allentown, PA, but claims he got his start in corrections at the PW cage in LZ Bronco/Duc Pho. He can be reached at dalemeisel@lehighcounty.org

Julia Brennan, owner of Caring for Textiles, based in Washington DC, has been working in the field for over 20 years. She has worked on three of George Washington's waistcoats, Lou Gehrig's 1931 jersey, Babe Ruth's 1930 All Star Tour kimono, General Patton's riding silks, Miss Kitty's dress from Gunsmoke, and hundreds of other beloved "non-celebrity" textiles. She is committed to public outreach and spends time each year teaching textile conservation in museums overseas. Her recent missions include Algeria, Madagascar, and Bhutan. You may reach her at www.caringfortextiles.com

Photo Courtesy Dale Meisel



Old Glory over Chu Lai 1970

