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Kevin O'Hara: The medal not taken

Posted Friday, May 10, 2019 4:36 pm

By **Kevin O'Hara**

PITTSFIELD — My mother was a wreck when I left our Pittsfield home for Vietnam in April, 1969. Through tears, she repeated her untiring litany, "Keep good company, go to Mass when able, and please write as often as you can."

Despite my mother's concerns, I had lucked out with my base assignment, which sent me to Cam Ranh Bay, a relatively safe airbase 200 miles north of Saigon. Furthermore, I was a firefighter in the Air Force assigned to work the runways, not a soldier toting a rifle through hostile jungles. But even those assurances did little to lessen her fears.

True to my word, I hung out with great guys, was a regular at the base chapel, and wrote home twice a week without fail. Since I found it unwise to tell my mother about dicey occurrences, such as mortar attacks, runway mishaps, or my hopping cargo planes to visit friends in Saigon, I wrote her Howdy Doody letters — all freckles and smiles. In return, Mom's weekly correspondences never failed to lift my spirits.

Nearing the end of my tour, our crash-crews at South Station responded to an F4C Phantom fighter returning to base all shot up with no landing gear. As the aircraft circled the bay to burn off fuel and drop its payload, our crews hurriedly foamed thousands of feet of runway, lest the aircraft catch fire on landing and blow sky-high. When the Phantom finally touched down, it sparked, screeched, and belly-slid almost a mile before grinding to a nose-diving halt. Our crash trucks pursued the injured warbird, turrets at the ready. Once in position, two burly members from Coco-3 bravely pulled the pilots safely from the

wreckage. Night's tally: one spent South Station, two grateful pilots, and a trio of operators from Control Tower singing our praises. To mark the occasion, our station master suggested we all get a tattoo of our unofficial mascot, Hot Stuff, the little horned devil of comic book fame.

Of course, I wanted a tattoo in the worst way, knowing that it would be the closest thing I'd ever get to an actual medal. Plus, such a badge would always remind me of my wonderful mates. However, I had one major problem: my mother hated tattoos

CHECK WITH MOM

My dad thought Mom's abhorrence toward tats stemmed from her nursing days in England, when she witnessed British soldiers staggering home from the war like "paper cutouts," with their arms covered in red poppies and regimental insignia. Some years later, when our family emigrated to America, Dad noticed that Mom was uneasy in the company of WW2 veterans, who sported ink etchings of bulldogs, grenades, and pinup girls.

"Hey O'Hara, when you getting your tattoo?" my crew chief asked, proudly showing me his own.

"I've got to get my mother's permission first," I squeaked back.

"Your mom!" he roared. "C'mon, O'Hara, you're in a combat zone. Time to cut the apron strings, don't you think?"

Prodded by my mates, I managed to book a phone call home through the MARS station, usually reserved for emergencies and married personnel, and handled by volunteer amateur ham radio operators throughout the states.

Shortly after I got connected, I asked Mom the big question. "Is it OK for me to get a small tattoo? Over?"

"A tattoo? Over," she repeated in dismay.

"Yes, of a cartoon devil. Most of the guys in the firehouse are getting one. What do you say? Over?"

What followed was an unnerving hum of static. Finally, her words broke through the crackling transmission, and her somber tone told me all. "Kevin, you're a young man now, and I can no longer tell you what you can or cannot do. All I ask is that you come home safe, tattoo or not. Over."

Following our allotted five-minute call, I plodded back through the sand to my distant hooch. Despite the incessant whir of Huey gunships, I could still hear my mother's tender but troubled voice. For her, she simply saw no romance in military tattoos, but only dreadful emblems to be carried throughout one's difficult life. Indelible markings of unforgettable grief.

Whatever the cause of her bias about tattoos, her wishes came crystal clear over the squelching shortwave that long-ago night. And when I made my joyous return home to a loving family in April, 1970, I did so without any trace of the little horned devil.

Kevin O'Hara is a longtime Eagle contributor. Visit his website at www.thedonkeyman.com

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