

# AFVN Reunion, Memphis Tennessee, Oct 3 to 6, 2012

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On September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Ken wrote: "There will be 27 people present who served at AFVN the American Forces Vietnam Network, most of whom were on-air personalities. There will also be three women who served with the American Red Cross in Vietnam. Some of the Red Cross women volunteered to work with AFVN for five-minute short features in radio and as the TV "weather girls." Chris Noel will be in attendance. Chris toured Vietnam as part of USO groups, and she also voiced a daily one-hour radio program that was recorded in Hollywood at the American Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS) studio and then shipped to all AFRTS outlets, both ashore and at sea. Chris founded a shelter for homeless veterans that operates in Florida. This will, in all probability, be our last reunion. We were always few in number, and time has taken some of our best from us.

Why did we choose Memphis? We took a vote within our Yahoo discussion group. The candidates were San Diego, Branson, Dollywood, A Florida cruise, and Memphis. Those who selected Memphis did so primarily because Memphis is the home of Sun Records, a label upon which many of the artists whose music was played on AFVN were recording. Almost all of us were in broadcasting prior to and following our work with AFVN, and the Sun label was central to our real-world broadcast work. Was I an announcer with AFVN? Yes. I was an anomaly, though. Most of the AFVN talent had attended the Army's Defense Information School (DINFOS) at Fort Benjamin Harris in Indianapolis and were trained by DOD to broadcast in a military environment. They were, as you might already have guessed, primarily Army. I originally went to Vietnam in July of 1967 as a 3rd Class Gunner's Mate. I was a gunner on small river boats called PBRs (Patrol Boat, River) and spent TET of 1968 in Vinh Long, during which two of our boats were sunk and our unit was twice ordered to retreat while under assault.

I was injured in April of 1968 during a helicopter rescue and sent to Saigon to recover. When it was learned that I had previously been in broadcasting, I was scooped up by AFVN as an announcer. That's where I stayed until I left Vietnam on 28 February 1969. I was one of three Navy personnel at AFVN at the time, and the only on-air voice. My live show ran from 10 am to noon daily, but I also did production work and ran the audio board for pre-recorded shows such as the one by Chris Noel that I mentioned earlier. Other AFVN broadcasters were about as anonymous as I, but we

were also able to boast names such as Adrian Cronauer (he headed the MIA/POW recovery efforts during the G. W. Bush administration), Gary Gears of WLS in Chicago, Pat Sajak, and John Steinbeck III. Many of us went on to successful broadcasting careers. Gary and Pat were my AFVN contemporaries. Pat's daily morning shift preceded mine from 5:00 to 9:00 in the studio, and Gary's ran in the six hours leading up to midnight.

One of those who will attend the reunion is Joe Ciokan who, with another AFVN staffer, went to the Saigon Embassy to photograph and report on the Tet assault on that facility. Our jobs as talent were targeted at one goal: troop morale. We could not have carried out that mission without the support of our engineering, news, and production staff. The engineers were the gerbils making the wheels turn. They kept our towers up and operating. They fixed everything from a blown fuse to Hue's destroyed facility, where two of our staff were killed in a firefight and four taken prisoner by the NVA. One of the Hue POWs was Harry Etmullier, who may be attending—he has outpatient surgery scheduled for October 3<sup>rd</sup>. The news staff kept everyone up to speed on what was going on outside of our tiny corner of the world. The production staff were wizards. They created fun, professional spots from material that was about as dry as a Mastodon bone. Their spots warned us to take our pills so the evil anopheles mosquito wouldn't give us malaria, to get medical help if we found ourselves dealing with sexually transmitted diseases, and to take those two weeks of Rest and Relaxation leave each of us earned for our in-country service—exotic destinations such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Seoul, Taipei, Sydney, and Honolulu. Some of those people will be attending the reunion.

There is not a Vietnam war veteran alive who didn't hear AFVN at some point during his tour. They know us from the music and news and sports, and some were able to watch AFVN TV. They think they know how "soft" we had it. That they believe we had it "soft" is an indication of how well we did our job. They don't know about those of us who were wounded, killed, or taken prisoner. They never knew that the Saigon anchor station was bombed twice, each time knocked off the air while the emergency tapes at the Can Tho kicked in to keep the music machine running. They never knew that many of the voices heard providing live music programs during daylight hours at our northernmost outlets were infantry grunts, just like them, who spent most of every day "humpin' the boonies." Yes, I was part of the AFVN mission. We knew that every day we were on the air was going to be the last day of life for some of our listeners, and we did everything in our power to bring a tiny bit of home to them on that last day. Sure shoots down the Robin Williams 'Good Morning Vietnam' clown, doesn't it?"

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