

AFN 'darling' keeps date with Viet vets

From press dispatches

Servicemen who had daily "dates" with Chris Noel over the air waves while they fought in Vietnam gathered in Portland, Ore., to meet their radio companion in person, and say they still love her.

"Hi, luv," Noel, disc jockey for Armed Forces Network radio, used to say to open her daily 55-minute program.

Americans in Vietnam between 1966 and 1970 gathered around radios in bunkers, foxholes, tents and towers for their "Date With Chris."

The Vietnam Veterans of Oregon invited Noel to Portland to meet and thank her.

"Chris is a Vietnam veteran just as much as the rest of us," said Jerry Pero. "We love her for what she did for us."

In 1965, Noel was an actress, appearing in movies with Steve McQueen, Elvis Presley and Richard Chamberlain. A tour of a California veterans hospital changed all that. "All those bodies lying there, with no limbs," she said. "They were faces and just lumps under the sheets."

When she heard AFN needed a woman disc jockey, she auditioned. For almost a year, she taped the program in California, but she soon wanted to broadcast from Vietnam. For the next 4½ years she shuttled between Vietnam and Hollywood.

"I tried to keep it real upbeat, positive, happy and full of energy," she said. "But as the years went on, it got harder."

She said she drew energy from "heart mail," the letters of her listeners, to tape as many as 12 shows in a day. Soldiers would request dedications, share their lives and thank her. She also visited the soldiers. Twice, her helicopter was shot down.

"Usually their mouth would hang open," she said, "and they would say, 'What are you doing here?' I'd laugh and say, 'I'm here for you.'"

After four years, she returned to the United States with her husband, a Green Beret she met in Saigon. Within a year, her husband had committed suicide.

"That was it," Noel said. "I didn't want to hear the word 'Vietnam' again."

She said she later suffered from nightmares, migraines and Valium addiction. Now recovered, she said, she travels around the country to support veterans groups. She also counsels juvenile delinquents in West Palm Beach, Fla.

"She's the shoulder for every Vietnam vet to cry on," Pero said.



Chris Noel, the darling of U.S. forces in Vietnam, is interviewed by AFN's Frank Bresee back in '68.

The STARS and STRIPES

AUTHORIZED UNOFFICIAL PUBLICATION FOR THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

Vol. 44, No. 116

Monday, August 12, 1985

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