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HISTORIAN



OF HANCOCK COUNTY

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Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

April 2024

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, April 18, 2024, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. The guest speaker will be Lori Massey, CEO of Mississippi Coast Crime Stoppers, a member of the Mississippi Crime Stoppers Advisory Board, and a member of the Hancock County Historical Society. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 228-467-4090. **Please call by noon on Wednesday, April 17** to make your reservation. Seating is limited to forty-eight (48) people, and we need to order the correct number of lunches. **Served at noon, lunch is \$15.00 for members and \$17.00 for nonmembers**, payable at the door. The catering order is submitted on Wednesday at noon prior to the luncheon on Thursday. If you need to cancel your reservation, please call by noon on Wednesday prior to the luncheon if at all possible so that the society does not incur unnecessary expenses. It is catered by Almost Home Catering with Chef Michelle Nichols. The lunch menu is chicken and sausage jambalaya, green beans, salad, rolls, and lemon gooey butter bars.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Yearly membership is **\$30.00** per year for an individual and **\$50.00** for a family. Please mail your renewal check to Hancock County Historical Society, P. O. Box 3356, Bay St. Louis, MS 39521. Or you may renews by credit card on our website.



Helicopter pilot, Lt. Ron Thorp participated in Army Air Cavalry warfare in Vietnam flying missions in hot landing zones in 1969 in his Huey helicopter called "the work horse of the Vietnam War."

THE VIETNAM WAR (1964-1972)

By
James Keating, M.D.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 prompted the United States Congress to pass a resolution enabling President Lyndon Johnson to deploy combat troops for the first time to South Vietnam. Previously, the United States had sent military advisors to South Vietnam. After World War II, the US assumed the role of the world's peacekeeper, and today there are 171,736 active duty military troops across 178 countries. Nevertheless, the United States was formally at war in South Vietnam from 1964-1972 hoping to prevent North Vietnam from uni-

fying all of Vietnam under a Communist government. Several veterans from Hancock County have kindly offered to recount some of their experiences during that time for the historical record.

Ronald (Ron) David Thorp was born April 15, 1945, in Westerly, Rhode Island. His father was Raymond Thorp (1914-2014) who was a construction worker. His mother was Ann Manzella (1917-1989). Ron graduated from Westerly High School and the University of Rhode Island in 1967 where he completed the ROTC program entering the US Army Infantry during the Vietnam War as a Second Lieutenant. He had fixed-wing pilot training in his college ROTC program. Ron added two years to his active-duty commitment by volunteering for helicopter training. In 1968, the Army

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trained five thousand helicopter pilots. Ron had eighty-two in his flight class, nine of whom were killed in action. On December 7, 1968, Ron deployed to Vietnam and he quickly learned that “Over there, we owned the day and the Viet Cong/NVA owned the night.” Ron was stationed at Bear Cat located in Three Corp with the 240th Assault Helicopter Company. The mission was to support any of our troops that needed assistance. Ron’s day started at dawn, before the mess hall opened, which meant he did not get a hot breakfast but ate C-rations left over from World War II with his own tobasco sauce to add flavor. During the first six months his weight diminished from 175 to 130 lbs.

Ron and his helicopter company performed the following missions: 1. Insert or extract troops, medical evacuations or move supplies; 2. Attack gunships to protect insertions and extractions or hit identified targets; 3. Command and control to coordinate all aircraft in the mission and provide an air platform for the commander of the troops on the ground. A “slick” was a helicopter used to insert or extract troops in a LZ (landing zone). A hot landing zone was one under enemy fire. Most of the helicopter pilots were Warrant Officers

rather than commissioned officers like Ron. Warrant Officers are trained to do a job such as fly a helicopter, but not to command others, and they had grades: W1, W2, W3, and W4. W1 and W2’s were very young and very good at their jobs. A “Huey” was the nickname of the Bell Helicopter Utility-1 Iroquois, which was the phonetic pronunciation of HU-1. The Huey was the “workhorse of the Vietnam War” and Ron’s unit. Pilots such as Ron refined their techniques so they could swoop down in tactical formations into a hot LZ Zone, and insert or extract troops or casualties and take off in seconds. Designated Medical Unit Pilots known by their “call sign,” *Dust Off*, flew some of the most dangerous missions in the Vietnam War.

Most helicopters had Indian names like Chinook, Iroquois, Apache, Comanche, Creek, and Black Hawk. A typical helicopter unit going out into the field would cluster nine “slicks” with a gunship on either flank under the leadership of the command-and-control helicopter. Ron’s helicopter company was called the Greyhounds with emblems stickers on the slicks provided by the Greyhounds Bus Company. The gunships were called “Mad Dogs.” The repair choppers were known as “Kennel Keepers.”

THE PRESIDENT’S CORNER

Eating crabs and shrimp for many of us is one of the many benefits of living on the MS Gulf Coast. Whether you enjoy catching your own, cooking them, or ordering off the menu, they are a mealtime staple for many.

At our last luncheon meeting, Jason Saucier with the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (DWF) Crab and Shrimp Division shared with us some of the history and current facts about the crab and shrimp industry in MS. Two important bits of information shared were the abundance of crabs and shrimp in the MS waters. The good news was tempered by the fact our commercial shrimpers are challenged to make a living harvesting shrimp. High operational costs and lack of profitability are driven by fuel cost and low market price.

Unfortunately, these two drivers are for the most part unmanageable problems for the shrimpers and the DWF. Fuel is a problem affecting many industries and have the flexibility to address this issue by increasing price for goods and services. Because of the low cost of imported shrimp, our shrimpers are at a competitive disadvantage. Crabs, on the other hand, benefit from the high demand and lack of foreign competition for their catch.

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In 1969 Ron Thorp was in charge of a VIP Transportation Unit. In this photo, five USO Showgirls are departing one of his fixed-wing aircraft. These Showgirls entertained troops on tours to as many as twenty bases such as Danang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Bien Hoa (Saigon).

The company needed twenty-seven Hueys in order to have twelve at all times for operations. The US Army employed seven thousand helicopters in the Vietnam War, half of which were destroyed in combat. Nevertheless, the Army invented an Air Cavalry lethal strategy to compliment the air war abilities of the US Air Force that proved vital in this different kind of warfare.

In Ron's company there were 240 enlisted men and 30-50 pilots depending on if there was a shortage or full complement of aviators. Ron was shot down three times but not injured. That was because a Huey would land immediately if an enemy bullet hit a vital structure such as a hydraulic fluid line or a fuel line. It did not mean a crash. A big Chinook helicopter would then be called in, if needed, and it would be powerful enough to lift the Huey by lowering a cable hook that attached to a "Jesus Nut" on top of the rotary blades. The damaged Huey would subsequently be transported back to the base for repairs.

After six months Ron was transferred to Long Binh Army Headquarters and placed in charge

of a VIP Air Transportation Unit. Ron's airline had twenty-seven helicopters, twelve fixed-wing aircraft, and occasionally borrowed an executive jet. It was a wonderful desk job in a war zone. Ron served five-and-one-half-years active duty and twenty-three-years in the Reserves. He completed Command and General Staff College while in his reserve unit.

Ron's wife, Gretchen Clasen (b. 1947), met him on a blind date in 1968. She was from New Orleans and graduated from Behrman High School in New Orleans. She was a nursing student at Texas Christian University, and they married in 1970 after he came back from Vietnam. They have two children: Brian (1973) and Nicole (1976). Ron and his family lived in Houston, Texas, for thirty-five years. Ron was in the insurance business until 1985 when he started an office supply and printing company. He also owned and operated a storage facility and rental property. While in Houston, Ron and Gretchen were involved in mission work in Honduras. There are three types of mission work—medical, construction, and evangelical. While living in Houston, Ron and Gretchen arranged to fill sixty containers with medicines, drugs, clothing, and all sorts of donations from across the country. These large shipping containers were then shipped on Chiquita Banana Boats to Honduras from Houston assisting the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Ron retired

in 2007. His activities since moving to Bay St. Louis include Knights of Columbus, Hancock County Historical Society, Church, Politics (Hancock County School District Merger), Food Pantry, and his secret garden.

Ron's takeaway thoughts about the Vietnam War are that Vietnam is one of the most visually beautiful countries in the world, possessing abundant rice, oil, minerals, and rivers. The people who wanted democracy and capitalism just could not fulfill their dream. He learned a great deal from being with them that he says has assisted him for the rest of his life. Regarding the war, he thinks that in 1969 it could have been won, but that's another story. Heroin and other drugs were common among the soldiers. There was evidence of black/white race tensions in the ranks. Finally, the Pentagon Papers revealed that the US Government lied to its citizens about the decisions that brought the USA into the war and then our country lacked the stomach to win the war.

SOURCES:

Thorp, Ron and Gretchen Clasen. Personal interview, January 21, 2024.

Ward, Geoffrey C., and Burns, Ken. *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*. New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2017.



Ron Thorp with his family, grand children Ellie Devens, Chase Devens, and his wife, Gretchen.

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THE PRESIDENT’S CORNER

During shrimp season many of us can remember seeing a “city of light” offshore which was comprised of hundreds of shrimp boats. This “city of lights” has dimmed considerably over the past few years to only a handful of boats awaiting the start of the first day of the shrimp season.

The low price paid by the processors for shrimp has resulted in many shrimpers selling off their boats which has been a boon for the consumer. Instead of getting less than a dollar from the processor, they offer the retail buyer a real bargain of \$2.00 to \$3.00 per pound off the docks in Pass Christian Harbor.

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou

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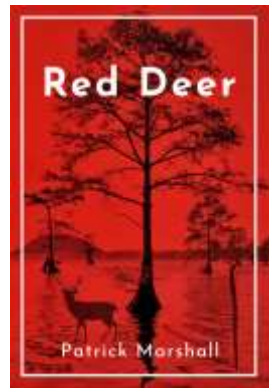
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