

Interview by Judy Allen, 3-15-2024 at home of Joetta McIntyre in Pittsburg, OK. Leon Labor BD August of 1947

Stinson Leon Labor, Vietnam Veteran

US Navy veteran Leon Labor of Kiowa, Oklahoma entered the armed services in 1969 and soon found himself in Vietnam. He said he was stationed on the U.S.S. Arlington, a Major Communications Relay Ship. While on board, the Arlington was assigned to assist with communications during the Apollo 11 splashdown in 1969. Fifty years later, Labor's memories of that day are still vivid. This was the splashdown after the astronauts made the first moon landing, with the command module containing Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong and Michael Collins.

Labor said President Nixon landed on the Arlington to rendezvous with the nearby ship, U.S.S. Hornet, that was taking the lead in the recovery operation of the module. While on board, the President toured the ship to meet the sailors. Labor said he was in the shower when the "come to attention" call was made, so he met the President in VERY casual attire. "All I was wearing was a towel," said Labor. But he still shook hands with Nixon and other VIPs.

Labor also served on hospital ship the U.S.S. Hope, then was transferred to the U.S.S. Sanctuary. He attained the rank of E3 in his two years of service between 1969 and 1971.

He enlisted in the Navy so he would have a choice. "I was fixing to get drafted, and a Navy recruiter came down and said we could get on a 'buddy plan'. We enlisted, but my buddy, Boone Lewis, and I were separated after boot camp. He had blisters on his feet and had to stay when I was shipped out. We met up again in Vietnam."

He said the worst part of the military for him was marching. "We marched everywhere at a dead run. One time I had been up for 18 hours and I was so tired, I fell asleep. They mortared the bunker and I didn't wake up. It blew up a whole side of the barracks but I didn't know it until I finally woke up."

Labor said, "This was in Da Nang. I remember going across Da Nang in a bus. They gave each of us a rifle, but no firing pins or ammunition for them. What good is the gun, we asked ourselves, use it for a club? I was told it was just for show. We weren't allowed to shoot even if they were shooting at us, unless we had orders to shoot."

Labor served two tours in Vietnam. He was on a ship in and out of Da Nang – a hospital ship anchored in the bay. "I took a boat and went to shore and picked up the wounded, the mail, etc."

"We got to go in every six months to put in supplies and stuff. We would go to different ports, sometimes leaving 'Nam for the Philippines, then other places," said Labor. I got a week of R&R and went to Australia. I went to Hawaii, Guam, Midway Island – I did a lot of traveling when on a communications relay ship."

He made friends while in the Navy, and remembers a guy named Ray Price from South Carolina.

A humorous memory for Leon was seeing goony birds. "They would fly into the ship and everything else. They were close to Johnson Islands. The birds could fly good, but were clumsy on land.

Leon did not consider a career in the military. When discharged, he came home.

Leon's sister, Joetta, was a young child and remembers the day that Leon came home from the war. ""We had a big window and I looked out all day, waiting for Leon. I saw a car and a guy got

out with a duffle and a Navy suit. It wasn't Leon, but it was his friend, Eddie. I ran out and met him. Leon didn't get home until almost midnight," said Joetta.

Labor had a long trip getting back home. He flew from Vietnam to Japan, then San Francisco, where he mustered out of the Navy. He rode a plane to Dallas, but the weather was too bad to land the small plane he caught from Dallas to McAlester. They finally landed in Muscogee, and he met a family who was sending their boy off to service. "They lived in Hartshorne and gave me a ride back home."

Work during the day and school at night became the routine for Leon. "I came back and went to college at Eastern on the GI Bill. I got a two-year degree."

He married Shirley Wisenburger in 1973. He has lost his wife and four boys, and has two sons still living. He spent many summers breaking horses. "We once got 32 horses from Kings Ranch in Texas and had them all broke by end of summer."

The most amazing things he has seen in his lifetime are, "A front row seat to the recovery of astronauts. Also, Bob Hope came to entertain on the ship and I got to bring them in from shore on the boat. We had Tina Turner, a baseball player and a whole show of people. He was laughed off the stage because he was giving a performance for wounded, and talking about making a career of service. They laughed him off the stage."

Labor said, "Everything changed while we were gone (to war). When we came home, it was like being in a different country. I see so many freedoms that are gone. If you are here all the time, the change seems gradual. If you are gone and come back, it seems a big change."

He would like to tell people about veterans, "The main thing is you go in with the thought that you are fighting for your country. Fighting to help preserve freedoms and rights. Come to find out, you aren't fighting for what you thought was right – that was the 'Nam deal – it was a money deal. People want to fight for freedom.

"War changes your view a lot. You aren't just fighting for your freedom and other people rights. You are fighting for survival. I saw a lot of our American boys crippled. The worst view of the war was in Da Nang. We were $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through it, and started pulling back. We lost more boys taking them back than taking it over. I was on the hospital ship and we were flying wounded back out. A boy from Oklahoma noticed I chewed tobacco (I had just got a shipment from Mama). I heard someone say, 'How about a chew?' and when I looked down, he didn't have any arms or legs. I cut him off a chew and put the rest of the packet in his pocket."

His siblings are Stinson Leon, John Henry, Roy Virgil, Floyd (deceased), George William and Joetta Labor McIntyre. Parents were Loyce Henry Labor (dad) and Youil Dean Labor (mom). "People always thought dad (Peachy) and Mama (Skeet) were each other because of their legal names. Dad had shrapnel all down his side because of WWII. He went to Italy, France, Germany, Austria. Once they were in a foxhole and a German dropped down and Daddy cut his throat with a bayonet to keep him from killing his buddy," said Leon. "When they landed on Omaha, (second day they took the beach), it took him two days to find a guy who had been there all three days. The others were dead."

His advice for future generations is to, "Preserve your freedom and your rights."

