Vietnam
Memories and Future Dreams

Last Saturday, April 30, marked the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War. It brought forth a number of memories about the early days of the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel and how that property was touched in many ways by a war thousands of miles away in Southeast Asia.

When the Outrigger Waikiki opened late in 1967, the Vietnam War had been “hot” for almost four years. The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam was approaching half a million. The bloody Tet Offensive followed in January and February of 1968. (Although the offensive was a devastating military defeat for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces that launched it, it was nonetheless a resounding public relations victory for them and was the watershed event that led to the eventual U.S. withdrawal and defeat.)

In the midst of the war’s chaos, there were several programs designed to give U.S. troops a brief break from the horrors of battle, including sending entertainers to military camps not far from the front lines. Fighting troops were also given a week off for “rest and recreation,” dubbed “R&R.” The single guys generally took their R&R in major Asian cities such as Bangkok, Tokyo, Manila, or Taipei. Air Force Sergeant Bill Peters (now Outrigger’s Vice President, Reservation Service & Market Development) flew to Sydney, Australia. Married servicemen and some singles would meet their wives, girlfriends, and families in Waikiki, and the just-completed Outrigger Waikiki quickly became a favorite R&R location.

It was a hectic time for the members of our ‘ohana working the Front Desk and the Reservations telephones. R&R was “scheduled,” but with the vagaries of war, the timetable was often not kept. Families would arrive in Waikiki and find that their loved ones had been delayed. With scant communications available, family members could only go to Hickam Air Force Base every day and watch the planes unload, hoping to find their boyfriend, brother, or son coming down the steps. Some were still in their battle fatigues, having been plucked from the field only a few hours before.

In the midst of all this, the Outrigger Waikiki was full and scrambling to find space for everyone. Each night was a struggle, as we balanced commitments to tourists and last-minute calls from the R&R Housing Office pleading for “just one more room” for a serviceman. Interestingly, one of the officers responsible for the R&R program was Colonel John Chasteen, father of two current members of our ‘ohana, Renovations Manager Peggy Chasteen and Corporate Interior Designer Patricia Moore.

We could usually find a room for one more soldier, sailor, marine, or airman, but the effort was not without cost. One day, I was slapped with a subpoena to appear in court to answer to a tourist whose room had been given to a serviceman on R&R. We fought the case and lost, and Dold v. Outrigger has become the classic benchmark for hotel overbooking liability in America. However, I supported our staff in 1970, and if I had to make the same choice again today, I wouldn’t change a thing.

One of the favorite hangouts in the Outrigger Waikiki for the guys on R&R was Davy Jones Locker. This was a basement bar with a great big window giving an underwater view of the swimming pool. There was lots of action to watch during the day, and in the evening, after the swimmers retired, a musician or two provided entertainment. University of Hawaii students Terrie and Jennie Frankel, known as the Twin Sisters Two, played there from 1970 to 1972 and were among the favorites of the R&R crowd. Having also toured remote U.S. military camps in Vietnam with the USO as entertainers in November and December 1968,
they could authentically relate to their audience and made them really feel at home.

Now, 30 years later, the issues of the Vietnam War are still with us. It was certainly a passionate part of the last U.S. presidential race, when the service records of both candidates were questioned. According to USA Today, the search goes on for 1,835 men who are still officially listed as "missing in action" (MIA). Last week, the Pentagon identified the remains of four more U.S. servicemen, lost in 1967.

Many members of our ‘ohana served our country during the Vietnam War, including Marine Corps Lieutenant Bill Henderson (recipient of the Silver Star and now Outrigger’s Vice President Business Development), Marine Corps Captain Alan White (now Outrigger’s Vice President Operations IT), and many others. Quite a few of our ‘ohana are of Vietnamese descent who, one way or another, escaped that tragic country and came to the United States to seek a better life for themselves and their families. We are proud of them all and feel lucky to have them as members of our ‘ohana.

Jennie and Terrie Frankel are retired in Arizona after a fascinating life, which includes writing a New York Times-best-selling book, being an Emmy judge, serving on the board of directors of the Producers Guild of America, and traveling around the world entertaining. However, they say, “Nothing can compare to those days in Vietnam at the age of 18 and later singing at Davy Jones Locker at the Outrigger Waikiki, where we were treated with respect and love from the GIs.”

Recent news articles say that capitalism is alive and well in Vietnam. Its prime minister, Phan Van Khai, will soon visit Washington, D.C. According to Hotels magazine, tourism is booming there. Deluxe cruise ships are including Vietnam on their itineraries. China Beach, where U.S. Marines landed in full battle gear 40 years ago, now has a string of modern resort hotels with azure swimming pools and beach bungalows just a few yards from the sand, once again pristine and white.

Outrigger Hotels & Resorts currently has 12 properties in Australia and recently announced a management contract for a property in Indonesia. Perhaps there will be an opportunity for the announcement of the Outrigger Vietnam in the near future. If that happens, maybe the Twin Sisters Two can be persuaded to come out of retirement to play at the opening party!