Finding Aid for the John J. Petchel Cold War and Vietnam War correspondence 2019.026.w.r

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4/17/2019
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Contributing Institution: Center for American War Letters Archives
Title: John J. Petchel Cold War and Vietnam War correspondence
Source: Tunnell neé Bau, Anne Roxie (Anne Bau Petchel Tunnell)
Creator: Petchel, John J., LCPL, b. 1942
Identifier/Call Number: 2019.026.w.r
Physical Description: 0.2 Linear Feet (2 folders)
Date (inclusive): 1962 March 2 - 1966 February 23
Abstract: This collection contains correspondence from LCpl. John J. Petchel, USMC to Anne Bau while aboard a ship in the Caribbean before and during the Cuban Missile Crisis and during the Vietnam War.
Condition Description: Approximately half of the letters have had their stamps removed or cut off.
Language of Material: English.
Storage Unit: Vietnam 3
Storage Unit: 6-8
Storage Unit: 1-3
Storage Unit: Vietnam 4
Storage Unit: 1-5
Storage Unit: 4-8
Conditions Governing Access
This collection is open for research.
Immediate Source of Acquisition
Gift of Anne R. Tunnell
Arrangement
This collection is arranged in chronological order.
Biographical / Historical
Lance Corporal John J. Petchel, United States Marine Corps (b. 10/15/1942) was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where he went to school at John Bosco High School and immediately joined the Marine Corps. He met Anne Roxie Bau on November 1, 1961 and they were engaged on Christmas that year, shortly before LCpl. Petchel left for a tour of duty aboard a naval vessel sailing the east coast and Caribbean.
LCpl. Petchel served with Headquarters and Service Company, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines Reinforced, 6th Marine Expeditionary Unit in 1962, as well as the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade in 1963. He later served in the Pacific and during the Vietnam war with Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 214, Marine Aircraft Group 12, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, as well as VMA 214, MAG12, 1st MAW, Avionics. VMA 214 is a famous squadron known since the Second World War as the "Blacksheep."
Though John closed his letters "Your loving husband," or "Until death do us part," the two were not married until after he returned from Vietnam. After an honorable discharge, they married, moved to Phoenix and had a son and a daughter. He also refers to Anne as "Roxie," or "Roxanne," because of her middle name, and their daughter was later named Roxanne. He took college courses on the Gi Bill while working full time.
John and Anne got divorced, he remarried and had another son and daughter, and according to Anne had "many business oriented jobs and numerous moves...John is now retired and living in Reno, Nevada surrounded by family."
Preferred Citation
[Item title / description; Box "n" / Folder "n"], John J. Petchel Cold War and Vietnam War correspondence (2019.026.w.r), Center for American War Letters Archives, Chapman University, CA.
For the benefit of current and future researchers, please cite any additional information about sources consulted in this collection, including permanent URLs, item or folder descriptions, and box/folder locations.
Content Description
This collection contains 129 letters from LCpl. John J. Petchel, USMC to Anne Bau while aboard a ship in the Caribbean before and during the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well as during his nine month deployment during the Vietnam War. Also included are one photograph of Iwakuni, Japan, some pamphlets, college test scores, a hand-drawn map of Guantanamo Bay (July 2, 1962), and newsletters that were sent with his correspondence and are arranged with the original correspondence. Some correspondence is missing, with some referred to letters not included in this collection. The letters
may have been pulled completely by the censors as LCpl. Petchel mentions this possibility. His correspondence is very detailed and telling, and though most of his letters containing combat operations and other pertinent details are included, he expressed the possibility that he may have gone too far in a few instances when letters never arrived to Anne.

The correspondence begins in March 1962 while LCpl. Petchel was serving as a cook aboard the USS Rankin. Over the course of his service, he served aboard seven ships: USS Rankin, USS Boxer, USS Grant County, USS Okinawa (first units aboard after her commission), USS Thetis Bay, USS Valley Forge, and the USS Merrick. During 1962 he worked as a cook, with a secondary MOS as a machinegunner on the then new M60, while sailing up and down the east coast and Caribbean. His cruise was between Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Vieques, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and several other Caribbean islands.

During 1962, LCpl. Petchel expresses his love for his then fiance, Anne, and his wish to marry her soon, but his expected deployment is rumored to last a long time. He also fears his own death and fears for the state of the world, given the political situation surrounding Cuba at the time. During his time before and during the Cuban Missile Crisis, their ship was at condition one (high alert) often, chased a Soviet ship out of Cuban waters, and continued war games and exercices, or "field problems," both as training and shows of force during alerts. In October, during the crisis, he describes President Kenney's speech as they "are breaking out ammo" while he is writing his letter. In November, after the crisis, his ship continues to circle Cuba, "off the coast of you know where," and says that there have been interesting incidents, plenty of action to tell when he gets home. He then describes some incidents in Haiti in May 1963, saying he is "scared stiff."

In February 1965, Petchel is concerned about the Vietnam conflict escalating as he heads to Hawaii. He laments that their wedding will be postponed because of his new deployment, though he does not yet know that he is going to Vietnam. He has been reassigned to an AHC Phantom attack fighter unit and sails to Iwakuni, Japan where they are put on a 15 day combat ready alert, rather than the usual 60 days to get ready. On May 8, he received his orders to Vietnam. He later participates in an advanced party to Vietnam, eventually staying with his unit at the airfield in Chu Lai, South Vietnam (through Typhoon Amy). While in Chu Lai, from June 1965 to February 1966, LCpl. Petchel says their base is on a 12-1 kill ratio against the Vietcong and he participates as he serves as a guard in various scenarios; on patrol, guarding liquid oxygen and fuel tanks, and a guard in a tower along the beach, one of three that cover five miles.

In Chu Lai, there were several engagements with the enemy and Petchel describes many incidents, as well as the layout of his base, in great detail. On October 11, 1965 He mentions that there are no censors like in WWII because intelligence is not as big of an issue, they are merely asked not to write about things that are going to happen. Death, destruction of planes and equipment, numbers of troops, directions and distance of patrols and bombings near the base, and more are all described in detail. Also discussed during this period is their impending marriage and when that may be, always relayng the latest rumor of his return, as well as money saved, combat pay and other financial considerations. The remainder of Petchel's discussion is centered on his lover for Anne, to which he poetically expounds upon for at least a paragraph or two in every letter.

LCpl. Petchel is very verbose when it comes to his love of Anne and his patriotism, as well as his distaste for communism and belief in the United States' mission. Of particular note are the following letters and quotes:

- May 15, 1962: The "world situation is looking rather poor...war now seems probable instead of possible."
- July 2, 1962: Mention of "Castro's Jungle Bunnies."
- August 9, 1962: "Somebody just pushed the panic button...Something has happened or is about to happen." There is a follow-up explanation in the letter dated August 15, explaining he though they were going to war.
- October 12, 1962: Description of the new USS Okinawa.
- October 20, 1962: Zig-zag patterns off the coast of Cuba (anti-sub maneuvers during the Cuban Missile Crisis), and October 22 in the same letter, President Kennedy's speech was "alarming...they are breaking out live ammo," and writes like it's his last letter. "Captain's words at the end of Kennedy's speech, 'This is no drill."
- October 24, 1962: "Action here on the front is quiet and very tense. It's as if we're sitting on a bomb and no one knows when it will go off."
- February 10, 1965: He is shaken up about Vietnam.
- March 7, 1965: Received word that 3500 Marines landed in Vietnam, including his first unit.
- April 6, 1965: Interviewed by Major Garmen for TAD (Temporary Additional Duty) and selected to be security for nuclear weapons cache, given secret clearance.
- April 12, 1965: Beefed-up security, including a special team that tries to break through and sabotage planes or nuclear stockpiles for readiness testing. All attempts were stopped, and his guard stopped two of the ten.
June 12, 1965: Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze and General Parker inspecting to determine if the personnel at Chu Lai rate combat pay. "Just one nite here and they'll grant it." He later confirms that it was granted.

June 21, 1965: Safety procedures after a bomb accidentally exploded and killed a few men and destroyed some planes. Also, two clippings about Chu Lai.

June 27, 1965: A plane got hit and came in for a hard landing. The pilot was okay but this was the first plane casualty for their unit.

July 5, 1965: One guy accidentally shot himself practicing fast loading. He says the grunts are really getting beat up "protecting us." He is later involved in many "protective" operations as guard and patrol.

August 6, 1965: "No heart MacNamara" considering 18 month deployments. On the 9th he mentions a visit by General William Westmoreland and Henry Cabot Lodge.

August 17, 1965: Two VC infiltrated wearing sergeants' uniforms they had killed. Mentions Hill 661 with 2000 soldiers of fortune; French, African, Chinese suicide commandos. He also mentions losing his hearing from working next to the jets so long.

August 21-September 18, 1965: Discussion of Operation Starlite and other battles.

Sept 13, 1965: Senator Richard Nixon came through the base. Also included is a poetic description of the moon rising over the beach.


October 28, 1965: Large VC attack on the base, expects Anne heard about it. Planes were shot, he was shot at, including machine gun and close mortar fire. This letter contains great battle detail and commends Marines that tried to put out fires on grounded planes that had bee shot up, as well as a few Marines that unloaded "hot, steaming" bombs from burning planes minutes before they could explode, all with their bare hands. Included is the "MAG-12 Chu Lai Chatter" newsletter.

November 4, 1965: Marble Mountain attack is discussed.

November 11, 1965: Martha Raye USO show, in which she has strong words for demonstrators in the States.

November 15, 1965: Marine Corps Birthday dinner programs.

January 18, 1966: A commendation/memo from the commanding officer to all Marines for setting the record as a Wing for sorties (50 sorties, 72.7 flight hours in 17 hours).


February 23, 1966: Last letter, from Iwakuni.

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**Subjects and Indexing Terms**

Cuba

Vietnam War, 1961-1975 -- Naval operations, American

Correspondence -- Vietnam War -- 1961-1975

United States. Marine Corps.

Tunnell neé Bau, Anne Roxie (Anne Bau Petchel Tunnell)