Little was known about 1LT Kenneth R. Shoemaker Jr., 1 of 2 nurse anesthetists killed during the Vietnam War, outside of his family and friends. This column examines the life, death, and legacy of Shoemaker as seen through the eyes of his family, former classmates, and fellow nurse anesthetists who served in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Nurse anesthesia history, Kenneth R. Shoemaker, US Army, Vietnam.

Lt. Kenneth R. Shoemaker, Jr., of Owensboro, Kentucky was killed in a plane crash in Vietnam November 30, 1967. He was graduated from Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital School of Nursing, Owensboro, Kentucky, and received his anesthesia training at St. Joseph Hospital, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, graduating in 1966.

Lt. Shoemaker passed the 44th qualifying examination for membership and became a member of AANA in January, 1967.

Lt. Shoemaker is survived by his wife Jeanette, who, on January 4, gave birth to their first child, Kenneth R. Shoemaker, III, and his parents.1

So reads the “Vietnam Casualties,” entry in the March 1968 A.A.N.A. News Bulletin, as it was then known. There is a tandem entry for Shoemaker’s fellow Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA) and fatal plane crash victim, “Lt. Jerome E. Olmsted of Galesville, Wisconsin,” on the same page.

Cold hard facts such as these can be unsettling. Shoemaker and Olmsted are 2 names I’ve run across occasionally in the 10 years I have worked for the AANA. Always curious about the sole 2 nurse anesthetist victims of the Vietnam War, I collected information about them. AANA Archivist-Librarian Kathy Koch, MLIS, CA, and her predecessor, Kevin Corbitt, MA, shared articles and news items that they had in the AANA archives. I also did searches on the Internet and found entries for the 2 CRNAs on the Vietnam Wall’s virtual site. But they remained names, old photographs, and statistics. Every so often something new would come to light, but nothing that told me about the human beings that were Shoemaker and Olmsted. After awhile, the trail went cold.

In 2008, church Trustee Jack Laukhuff dedicated a room at Silver Spring Baptist Church in Silver Spring, Pennsylvania, where Shoemaker had been the first elected deacon. This would later reap fortuitous contact between Laukhuff and Shoemaker’s son. Laukhuff, aware that AANA also desired contact with anyone in the Shoemaker family, pointed the son toward AANA. In April 2010, an email to AANA from Kenneth R. Shoemaker III set off an excited correspondence that led to an interview with young Shoemaker and his mother, Jeanette Shoemaker Gay, RN. Finally, the hunt for Shoemaker the man became productive.

Kenneth R. Shoemaker Jr
Kenneth Ragan Shoemaker Jr, was born in Mt Vernon, Illinois, on April 2, 1941. He graduated from Mt Vernon High School in 1959 and then from Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital School of Nursing in 1963 (Figure 1). He married Jeanette Howard (Figure 2) on July 9, 1963, and graduated from the St Joseph Hospital School of Anesthesia in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1966. “He was fun loving,” Jeanette said from her home in north Texas when asked to describe her husband (oral communication, June 10, 2010). “He
was serious when the occasion called for it, but he liked to kid around. He enjoyed life.”

“He was a prince of a fellow,” agrees CRNA Ray Moore, who was a class behind Shoemaker at the St Joseph Hospital School of Anesthesia (oral communication, June 29, 2010). “I called him in the middle of the night about a case, and he was real nice about it, not like some others would have been.”

“I do remember that he was a very nice person, a real gentleman, a good student,” remembers Lois Cassel, CRNA, who was at St Joseph’s at the same time as Shoemaker, but not in his class (written communication, June 29, 2010). “He always had a smile.”

“He was one of those guys: you like him when you meet him,” says AANA Past President Rodney Lester, CRNA, PhD, MSN, MBA (oral communication, July 22, 2010), who served briefly with both Shoemaker and Olmsted in Pleiku, Vietnam. “He was straightforward, easygoing, no pretensions. He was a good man and a good anesthetist. He had a good sense of humor, wry.”

Shoemaker’s wife Jeanette agrees (oral communication, June 10, 2010). “He used to tell me he was preparing a 7-course meal for dinner when I worked late,” she said. “It was a TV dinner! He also called and asked me to bring a pizza to the intensive care unit when he and his coworkers were working late one night. He had told his coworkers I was a large woman—300-plus pounds—in actuality I’m about 90 pounds!

“His interest was in medicine, pre-med,” Jeanette continued, “but the cost was prohibitive, his family couldn’t afford it.” So Shoemaker began his coursework at a nursing program in Owensboro. The couple met in the nursing program and also knew each other through church. Shoemaker attended his nursing program at Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital School of Nursing in Owensboro, Kentucky, and originally Jeanette attended the Jennie Stuart Memorial Hospital nursing program in Bowling Green, Kentucky, some 67 miles away. When Jeanette’s nursing program closed, she was transferred to the Louisville General Hospital School of Nursing in Louisville, Kentucky.

While Shoemaker was attending the St Joseph Hospital School of Anesthesia, “we were afraid he would be drafted before he finished nurse anesthesia school,” says his wife (oral communication, June 10, 2010). “We appealed to the governor so he wouldn’t be drafted before he finished.” Jeanette confirms that then-governor of Illinois, Otto Kerner Jr, did hold off drafting Shoemaker until he finished his schooling. “We knew he was going to Vietnam as soon as he finished training,” echoes Lois Cassel (written communication, June 29, 2010). “[I] lost track of him after that.”

To Vietnam

“We had a plan,” Jeanette said (oral communication, June 10, 2010). Shoemaker would go to nurse anesthesia school, and upon completion would go to work as a nurse anesthetist so Jeanette could take her turn going through a nurse anesthesia program. “That’s not how it worked out.”

Shoemaker was drafted in 1966 and went from Pennsylvania to the military base at Ft Sam Houston, Texas. His first post was to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on December 24, 1966. He shipped out to Vietnam on July 2, 1967, serving at the 67th Evacuation Hospital, 55th Medical Group, 44th Medical Brigade in Qui Nhon, Vietnam (J. Shoemaker Gay, written communication, July 9, 2010) (Figure 3). Qui Nhon is located on the east central coast of Vietnam, about 104 miles from Pleiku, which was located further inland; Pleiku housed the 71st Evacuation Hospital and would be
Anesthesia in Wartime Vietnam

When asked what his first impression of Vietnam was, Rodney Lester replied (oral communication, July 22, 2010), “Lord, it was hot!” He landed at Long Binh, which seems to have been the main landing place for American troops heading into Vietnam.

It was hot even in the early morning, and there were a lot of people milling about but not doing much. We arrived at Long Binh where we began processing documents and got our assignments. Most confusing was having crossed the International Date Line where you either do the previous day over or skip a day.

Sometime during the next day or two we caught a flight to our assignments and went to work.

Comparatively speaking, “Field anesthesia...was very primitive,” explains Lester (oral communication, July 22, 2010). He continued:

We had very basic anesthesia apparatus and next to no monitoring equipment. We did not have ECG monitors or ventilators in the OR. We used BP cuffs and precordial stethoscopes as the primary monitors. The operating rooms were very basic with OR tables and lighting of the time period. Cauterizers were an electrical hazard, so explosive agents had to be avoided. The surgical instrument sets were basic and used for a wide variety of cases. Availability of all kinds of supplies was limited, so you just could not be wasteful.

“We had 4 surgical tables, and there were 2 ORs,” says AANA Past President Frank Maziarski, CRNA, MS, CLNC (oral communication, July 27, 2010).

Whenever there was a push or some campaign activity, we ran all of those tables. You could pretty much speak to the other anesthetists and surgeons in the room because there were 4 patients going at the same time in each OR. The operating rooms were going pretty much 24 hours a day. On slack days, when there wasn’t a push, or some type of military activity, we would have open operating rooms, so we would do civilian casualties.

The pace was grinding, no doubt. “We had basically 2 Quonset huts with 3 ORs each, 6 ORs total,” says Leo Le Bel, CRNA, JD, MEd, APRN (oral communication, August 23, 2010).

I arrived at the 24th Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh just as the 1968 Tet Offensive by the Viet Cong was beginning. I was received by MAJ Norma Horsley, CRNA, who was the chief nurse anesthetist. She told me where I could go to stash my stuff. I came back to the OR, and her greeting to me was, ‘Welcome to the 24th. Here’s the pentothal, there’s the patient. Call me if you need anything.’ I then provided anesthesia for combat casualties for the next 19 hours.

Lester was stationed at the 71st in Pleiku, which he describes as “the central highlands of Vietnam” for his first month there. He was then transferred to the Qui Nhon’s 67th Evacuation Hospital. “There were about 4 to 5 neurosurgeons at Qui Nhon, and we also did chest work; we had a thoracic surgeon there,” says Lester (oral communication, July 22, 2010). “Also, plastic, oral, and maxillofacial surgery.” Together, the 67th Evacuation Hospital and the 85th Evacuation Hospital in Qui Nhon had more than 1,000 beds. The 85th eventually downsized to a few hundred beds where they cared for prisoners of war.

“Olmsted and Shoemaker came from Qui Nhon to Pleiku to help us out at the 71st Evac,” says Lester (oral communication, July 22, 2010).

There was a major push going on at Dak To, and we were getting a large number of casualties and needed help. These guys volunteered to come up to help. This is when I met Shoemaker. I had known Olmsted for several years. They were with us in Pleiku for about 2 weeks and as the activity drew down, they were to go back to their assigned hospital. They were assigned to fly down with some patients being sent to Qui Nhon. The first flight they were to go on was cancelled for some reason, so they were to go out the next day. This is the flight that was lost.

“It was a rainy day—windy, cold, nasty,” says Lester (oral communication, July 22, 2010). At first the hospital staff heard the plane was delayed, then late. It got quiet in Pleiku as they waited to hear the fate of the plane and their coworkers and patients. There was an ominous feeling. Finally, the plane was reported missing and then down. Jeanette also was told the plane was missing (J. Shoemaker Gay, oral communication, June 10, 2010). In a bizarre twist, Shoemaker’s father heard about the crash on television and that everyone had died. He went to Jeanette’s parents’ house where Jeanette was staying and she and her family were awaiting word. She was told there was bad weather and the plane had crashed. Conditions prevented recovery of the victims right away.
“It was raining a lot,” says Lester (oral communication, July 22, 2010). “It was cold, and the ground was a slippery clay. They knew about where they were, but it was steep and craggy. There were also Viet Cong out there, and you didn’t want to jeopardize more people by sending a whole bunch of rescuers out there.” According to A History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps:

[They] were en route from Pleiku returning to their parent units in Qui Nhon. Their aircraft hit the side of a mountain while trying to land in a dense fog. The wreckage was found in a mountainous area ten miles south of its intended destination. None of the passengers or crew survived the disaster.

Carrying On

The funeral for Shoemaker was on December 18, 1967. “Military wives always go with the assumption that their men may not return,” Jeanette said (oral communication, June 10, 2010). Nearly full-term in her pregnancy, and grieving, she still had the presence of mind to call the nurse anesthesia school where Shoemaker had graduated. “She called after he was killed and also called after the birth of her son,” remembers Ray Moore, CRNA (oral communication, June 29, 2010). “It was very emotional. The entire department was devastated by the news.” Fellow St Joseph alumnus Lois Cassel offers (written communication, June 29, 2010),

Three of our class plus 1 instructor all went to the same hospital to work, so we still had contact with the people at St Joe’s. They informed us of his death…I thought at the time what a horrible waste. He was such a nice person and had so much to give to the profession and to his friends and family. It was very sad.

The January 1968 birth of Kenneth Ragan Shoemaker III helped ease the sorrow and ensured the legacy of Shoemaker. Known as “KR,” he inherited his father’s coloring and some of his mannerisms, although the 2 never had the opportunity to know one another. They share a love of fast vehicles, a faith in God (like his father, KR was ordained as a deacon in his church), and hunting. A gun his father owned was kept in his grandparents’ attic, and he was told not to touch it. It was stored there until KR was old enough to use it responsibly. “It’s a single shot .22 rifle,” says KR (oral communication, June 10, 2010). He uses it to hunt squirrels and rabbits. He still has it, and it will go to his son Christopher when the time is right.

Shoemaker also loved sports cars and racing. “He used to race against his brother,” says Jeanette (oral communication, June 10, 2010), who worked as an emergency room nurse and had plenty of occasion to see the results of car accidents. Despite their shared love of fast vehicles, it is his faith that KR would most like to tell his father about, that he is raising Christopher with the same beliefs, and passing along to this third generation the strength and unswerving faith that he feels and that binds him to both his father and his son.

Jeanette saw the mobile Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall when it came to Fort Smith, Arkansas. KR has seen the moving wall 3 times.

Figure 4. Shoemaker’s name on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC (Courtesy of Leigh Owano.)

Although neither one has been to the memorial in Washington, DC, friends have taken rubbings and photographs of the name “Kenneth R. Shoemaker Jr” for them (Figure 4). Shoemaker did not go unrecognized for his sacrifice. He was honored with a Bronze Star, given for “heroic or meritorious achievement or service,” shortly after his death. Shoemaker’s son wore his father’s Bronze Star at the age of 3 months (Figure 5). He was also awarded the National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with Bronze Star, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon with device, and Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation Badge. In 1989, Shoemaker was honored with a medical annex named after him in Fort Knox, Kentucky. (The Shoemaker Reception Medical Processing Clinic was rededicated in 1997.) In 2008, the Silver Spring Baptist Church dedicated a room in honor of its first elected deacon, Kenneth Shoemaker. He is buried in Owensboro Memorial Gardens, Owensboro, Kentucky.

Lester feels certain that, had they lived, Shoemaker and Olmsted would have excelled in their chosen
fields. “It would be interesting to see what they’d be doing now. Goodness that was apparent then would have played out,” says Lester (oral communication, July 22, 2010).

Both were great guys, very good anesthetists, and good soldiers….I would like to go back to Vietnam to see how the country is different. There were many good people there and too many lives lost there. It would be comforting to see that at least something we did made a difference.

REFERENCES

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