

40 Years after Firebase Sherman – Vietnam Veterans Reach Out to Thank PGA/LPGA Professional Renee Powell for Her Work to Deliver Memories of Home

By Bob Denney

Thanks to a series of events aided by today's social media, PGA/LPGA Professional Renee Powell of East Canton, Ohio, the daughter of a World War II veteran, considers this Veterans Day extraordinary. Forty years ago, Powell was part of a USO tour visiting U.S. troops in Vietnam. Powell spent three weeks "in country." PGA NEWS revisits the story behind a journey among golf professionals and the veterans that they touched.

Memories of a life-changing trip of 40 years ago came flooding back to PGA/LPGA Professional Renee Powell this past May. The former PGA First Lady of Golf from East Canton, Ohio, received surprise visitors among her Facebook messages. Kevin Perrier of Minneapolis and Doug Paetz of Centerville, Ohio, were connecting, only this was more than a standard "Friends" request.

Paetz and Perrier, Vietnam veterans, were searching for the African-American woman golfer, who along with two other golf professionals, risked their safety to deliver goodwill from home during the height of an unpopular war.

Perrier, a former Specialist Fourth Class, had taken the lead in the search on Facebook, attaching the photos taken by then-First Lt. Paetz. Perrier located Powell, he said, after reading a story about her late father, William Powell, the 2009 PGA Distinguished Service Award recipient.

"I figured that I had the right person," said Perrier, now 61, and a carpenter. "I just wanted to thank her for showing up way back then. At that point, in the war, the stories were more about what was happening at home. We felt forgotten."

The USO contingent, co-sponsored by the Department of Defense, featured Powell, the second African-American member of the LPGA Tour; LPGA Professional Mary Lou Daniel (now Crocker) of Dallas and the late Jimmy Nichols of Monson, Mass., then a 66-year-old one-armed golf trick shot artist. The trio arrived at Firebase Sherman on Jan. 14, 1971, where Paetz was platoon leader for the 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company. A member of the platoon, Sgt. Rodney Cress of Salisbury, N.C., had kept a diary while in Vietnam, including the date of that USO visit. Cress later went on to connect Perrier with Paetz.

"My unit [Echo Recon 2nd Battalion, Seventh Cavalry] walked out of the jungle and opened Firebase Sherman on Jan. 10, 1971, along with Doug's Charlie Company, who had flown in on 'Hueys' later that same day," said Perrier. "Renee and her friends were the early visitors. The water was bad there and a bunch of us got sick the first few days. It was a good thing that she didn't get there when I did."

Crocker was asked by Nichols to join the USO trip, learning that she was an alternate pick. "Sandra Post could not make the trip, and I took her spot," said Crocker. "I realized quickly that we were headed into the war, and not to visit just a hospital. The memories of that war linger. I lost a couple friends in Vietnam. You don't get over how brave those who serve are, and they need to be remembered." Crocker said that she wears a couple bracelets in tribute to the MIAs.

"I remember us flying to that Firebase Sherman in the helicopter, and Renee was commenting. 'Oh, look! There's a helicopter on this side and there's another one on our right side,'" said Crocker. "One of the soldiers in the helicopter politely said, 'Those are gunships, ma'am. . . .for support.'"

As the USO group arrived, met the troops, and conducted a golf clinic and a trick shot show, Perrier was an absentee. He was lying in a sleep bunker, recovering from the stomach virus brought on by the contaminated water. While seven of his ailing buddies were transported to the rear of the unit for treatment, Perrier elected to remain on Firebase Sherman.

“We were located 30 miles northeast of Saigon, in War Zone D,” said Perrier. “The VC (Viet Cong) had the run of it. It was a dangerous place.” Nicknamed “Pee Wee,” Perrier said that his father sent him a camera a few months after he arrived in Vietnam, demanding proof that he was alive. “I had a buddy take the photo of me, which is on my Facebook page,” said Perrier. “It must have been a good day, I'm smiling.”

Perrier was surprised when he first saw photos of Powell and the golfers, having missed the entire show. But Powell was “shocked,” that any photos existed of her and her companions after 40 years. She and Daniel were the first LPGA professionals to travel to Vietnam during the war. “I had no idea the photos existed,” said Powell. “I was so moved, and to realize 40 years later when these guys thanked me for going to 'Nam, I could tell it meant so much for them. It is by far the most rewarding trip I have ever made. It was the only thing we could do to try to take a little of home to our troops - especially in a war where they were not treated as they should have been by the public.”

Daniel and Powell signed autographs on soldiers' shirts, on arms and bare backs. They ate C-rations on site with their hosts. With the American flag flying over every firebase, Powell recalls, “being so proud of every American soldier that was in country.”

Powell, Crocker, and Nichols, a resident of Monson, Mass., began their journey on Jan. 10, 1971, from Travis Air Force Base near Fairfield, Calif., with stops in Honolulu, Guam, and the Philippines, before arriving in Saigon. Near the end of their trip, they stayed in the Meyercord Hotel, which was 1½ blocks from the residence of the President of South Vietnam. They dined with Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, a four-handicap golfer before headed to service, and who would become the last commander of U.S. military operations in Vietnam.

The traveling golfers had only one day off during their trip, and conducted five golf clinics per day to a string of firebases. They flew as far north as Da Nang, 400 miles from Saigon and to Pleiku, which lied near the Cambodian border.

“I remember for three weeks that I tried to give all I could and could not give enough. I felt the more I gave the more I received back twice in return,” said Powell. “I remember that every time the troops saw planes going back to the U.S., they said that they were going to the world.”

Paetz, who has been married 32 years, is retired after 30-plus years working as a computer programmer analyst for several large corporations in Dayton, Ohio. He never took up golf, but remains an avid outdoorsman, enjoying adventure travel in the U.S., Canada, and Alaska. He and his wife, Karen, own a farm, and have no children, but do have two faithful canine companions: Dakotah, a German Shepherd; and Keetna, a Labrador Retriever. The Paetz family provides a wildlife sanctuary for whitetail deer, wild turkeys, coyotes, foxes, red-tailed hawks, owls, and other assorted small game and birds.

Powell's memories of 40 years ago included the dust of the firebases, swirled by the helicopter arrivals and departures. She recalled the warmth of the soldiers and how proud she, Mary and Jimmy were to be able to take whatever joy we could to the troops, even if it was brief. Jimmy Nichols would live to age 82, passing away in 1987.

“We were so happy that we could do a little good for some of the troops,” said Crocker, who played from 1966 through 1980 on the LPGA Tour and today is a teaching professional in the Dallas area. “They just wanted to see somebody from home.”

As another Veterans Day passes, Powell had one more story to share. This time it took place in her golf shop at Clearview Golf Club. A friend from Charlottesville, Va., along with her brother who lives in Canton, paid Powell a visit. Powell spoke about her women’s veterans program that she began this year, Clearview HOPE (Helping Our Veterans Everywhere).

“The brother told me that he served in Vietnam in 1969 and ’70; that he had been wounded twice in action and spent rehabilitation in Walter Reed Medical Center,” said Powell. “Then, he said, ‘I want to give you something.’ He pulled out of his wallet a small card which he said he had carried since his days in Vietnam.”

“It’s time to pass it on,” the veteran said. Powell took one look at the yellowed laminated card and said that she could not accept a memento that meant so much to him for 40-plus years. But the veteran insisted that Powell keep it and share its message. He asked that more might know that the words came from a Vietnam veteran:

**“We are bewildered and weary
Lonely to the point of madness,
And if we shout and curse
Through our quiet dreams,
Forgive us. . .
We are merely looking for a way to go home.”**

###