

Air Force Village Widows' Home: The Untold Story

After the Korean War, before the Vietnam War and long before the Survivors Benefit Plan, an Air Force wife, the late Helen LeMay, wife of the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis LeMay, started a world-wide enterprise that would involve international marketing, foreign businessmen, air cargo and thousands of enterprising Air Force wives. While most Village residents are familiar with the "demand" side of this million-dollar fundraising effort, possibly few are familiar with the "supply" side provided by the Air Force husbands "hauling the goods."

While every Air Force officer was "encouraged" (strongly encouraged) by his commander to contribute to the Air Force Assistance Fund by checking the "Air Force Village Widows' Fund" box, the "heavy lifting" in fundraising was done thru the AF Wives Clubs. Not to belittle this fine effort, fighter pilots always seemed to check the box for "unwed mothers."

The wives operated thrift shops in the states and gift shops at overseas bases. While both contributed to raising the millions needed, this story is about the extraordinary enterprising wives in the gift shops. These gift shops sold merchandise from the craftsmen and artists of the world. Just looking around the homes of Village residents will give you an idea of the "treasures" acquired around the world, during the fundraising years. In the "older" residents' quarters you will find ceramic and teak elephants, ivory figures, monkey pod carvings, lacquer and teak furniture, custom jewelry and the list of treasures goes on. Watch for one of the "old girls" wearing an irreplaceable four seasons gold bracelet from Laos or the beautiful opal rings from Thailand.

These gift shops looked like an international bazaar. So how did the jewelry of Thailand end up for sale at the Wives' Gift Shop at Torrejon AB, Spain and the wonderful globe bars from Spain in up in a Wheelus AB, Libya gift shop. So, here's an untold story of how honest business between honest businessmen and enterprising young wives conducted international trade in order to make the "Widows' Home" possible.

Say a guy like myself was flying a machine with more than one engine overseas and a Kadena AB gift shop wife said, Dick, if you happen to land in Hong Kong, would you call Mr. Wong who has some things for the Wives Gift Shop. Wondering how she knew I was going to Hong Kong, I said "Sure, I can do that for the wives club." Mr. Wong somehow knew when we landed and picked us up at the airport and took us to the Hilton to RON. (Can you believe the Hilton room was only \$4 a night in those days) Ready to return to Kadena, Mr. Wong had all the "treasures" boxed for several wives' clubs: Kadena, Clark, Guam Yokota. I told him I was only returning to Kadena "...no problem." Everything was apparently a hand-shake with the wives' gift shop on consignment. "Did I need to sign anything?" "...no problem." I guess some other pilots would deliver the stuff from Kadena. The wives had this all figured out.

Over the fundraising years, air crews hauled gift shop merchandise from all over...James Jewelers in Thailand, Richardo's Furniture in Taiwan, God knows who made all those ceramic elephants in Vietnam and the miserably heavy green egg barbeques from Japan. And...God bless the enlisted crews who loaded the stuff. Talk about trust...all seemed to be on consignment.

I've often thought that if these gift shop entrepreneurs were put in charge of the Defense Department we could have avoided Vietnam, everybody in the country would have ceramic elephants and there would be widow's homes everywhere.

An enterprise like this will probably never happen again. You will never again see a bunch of Air Force wives build themselves a multi-million-dollar "widows' home." Today's Air Force is not "...your father's Oldsmobile."