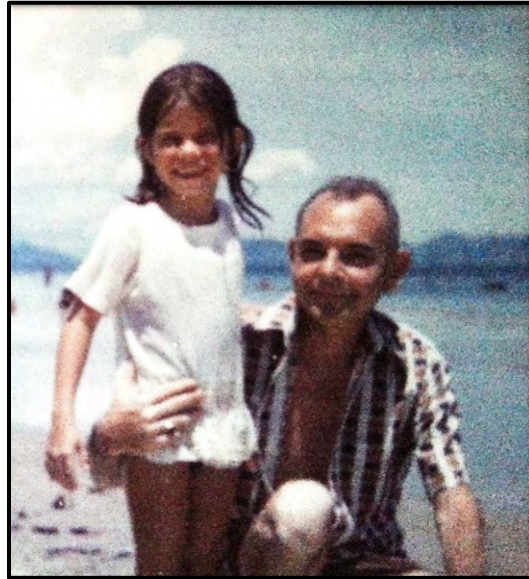


This Week in Saratoga County History

Moving Day 1974: The Welches Begin Again in Vietnam

Submitted by Kat Fitzpatrick, September 11, 2024

Kat Fitzpatrick is a freelance writer and educator and the author of a narrative nonfiction book, "For the Love of Vietnam." She was a Saratoga County resident for nearly a decade before spending time in the Adirondacks and then settling in Delmar, N.Y. where she now resides. She offers free weekly "Stories of Vietnam" on Substack, katfitzpatrick.substack.com. Kat will present her story at Brookside Museum in Ballston Spa on September 25 at 7pm



Kat and her father in Vietnam, 1975

Early on July 6, 1974, my family and I boarded a China Airlines flight destined for the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam. I was just shy of my eighth birthday and delighted at the prospect of living in the same country as my father again. We'd been separated since July 1972 when he'd been transferred to the world's hotspot of Saigon, and we'd been given "safe-haven" on the island of Taiwan.

Prior to that we'd lived all together in Seoul, Korea. My father had had a two-year PSYOP assignment there. Working as he did for the CIA and in psychological warfare, I was not privy to the nature of his work but certain clues indicate that he may have had something to do with Kissinger's behind-the-scenes work to normalize relations with China. Today, we see in the news that our relationship with the "Middle Kingdom" is strained; back then even conversing with the communist country had been deemed impossible.

In March 1972 my mother wrote home to her parents:

“More than you could ever know, I wish I could tell you of our plans for this coming summer... Jim wrote a really fantastic paper... which was pouched to Washington and I hope that it gets to Mr. K and therefore to the president.

It was so good that our chief suggested that he would like Jim to go to DC to participate in the discussions regarding the future of this line of work in the role of the USA. (Well, Jim laughed to himself as he said someone at his level just would not be invited to “sit-in.”)

I personally feel that Nixon, etc., will be so short-sighted that they will terminate this line of work which will mean that we will be coming home during the summer”

As it was, we would not return to the States in '72. Nixon went to China in February, and—after we finally got our marching orders—my mother wrote home in July:

“A quickie! Suddenly all H has broken loose! Jim is due back here 15 July after a stop over in Taiwan. Taiwan cable today granted us safe haven there. I’m delighted.”

And so from mid-1972-July 1974 the Welch family would live apart, my father coming home to visit us every 5-6 weeks for a long weekend on the misty Grass Mountain just north of Taipei. Then, in early 1974, Saigon was deemed safe for families and thus it was 50 years ago that we set off for our final Southeast Asia post.

In recent years I’ve thought a lot about what a third move in four years must have meant to children between the ages of 4 and 15. The changes in schools, friends, and stability are hard enough at that age. Factor in the “vibe” of war and it’s hard to imagine just how we coped with it. Today’s awareness of social-emotional health was not prevalent at that time. I don’t recall any sort of support or understanding—or even discussion—about what was to come.

I recently read Craig McNamara’s memoir, “*Because our Fathers Lied*” in which I learned that his father, Robert S. McNamara, died fifteen years ago on July 6, 2009. The elder McNamara was the eighth secretary of defense (1961-1968) and the man who, more than any other, was the leading architect of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

A single sentence in [biography.com](https://www.biography.com): captures the enigma of Robert McNamara:

“He is best known for helping lead the United States into the Vietnam War during the Kennedy Administration, an act for which he spent the remainder of his life wrestling with the moral consequences.”

In his book, Craig describes his struggle to come to terms with his father’s role in that “fumbled war” and moreover his father’s consistent silence on matters related to the conflict. I found

myself filled with empathy for the author who both loved his father and hated his father's actions in the war.

I felt a kinship with his struggle though our experiences are vastly different. We both had fathers involved with the war and eager to win it. I found myself feeling grateful that my father was not directly responsible for anyone's death—at least not that I know of.

How will I ever know? In that, I have not progressed much farther than a child of seven who boarded a plane for her third home in a foreign land. In both instances there is so much unknown, so much that cannot be pinned down. Seeking answers, one often simply finds more questions.

Toward the end of *Because Our Fathers Lied*, I came across a sentence which made me stop what I was doing, paddling my kayak on the Hudson on a hot afternoon.

“I don't think I could have put it into words back then, but in retrospect, I was clearly involved in a personal project of reshaping my family's legacy. “

I was struck by what an effort that is on anyone's part, and especially for someone with an earnest heart like Craig McNamara's. On reflection, I've decided that I have not been trying to reshape a legacy with my writings but have been striving to pin down the exact nature of my father's legacy. He saved 1000 South Vietnamese people at the end of the war, but he had a family, too.

Fifty years ago, we embarked on a new adventure. This time, all nine of us, together. I don't remember holding my father's hand as we boarded the plane, but I like to think that maybe I did. Maybe I felt safe in that moment of crossing the tarmac, climbing the metal stairway, and settling into the seat beside him. Maybe I was happy. Maybe it seemed as if, together, our lives were now going to be better than ever.

Originally published on Substack on July 6, 2023