

Waiting for John McCain

By Archives Specialist Vishi Garig: A Service of the Clay County Clerk of the Circuit Court

October 27, 1967: John McCain's wife and children had just been notified that John was missing in action. His plane was shot down over Hanoi, Vietnam. They did not know it yet, but their waiting would last five and a half years, years spent in Orange Park, Florida.

Carol McCain was no shrinking violet. A true Navy wife, she set about waiting for his return with grit and determination. Naval aviator's spouses spend most of their marriages waiting: waiting for them to go on deployment, waiting for them during deployment, waiting for them to come back from deployment. Today, cycles of "going to sea" last at least six months and happen at least twice in a three year duty assignment. If you're a carrier pilot you go out with the carrier even more often on training missions.

Now just imagine that your Navy pilot is going to war. He or she is going to be shot at, maybe captured or killed. They might be gone for a very long time. It takes a special person to be a Navy spouse and Carol McCain was one of those.

Carol Shepp McCain was nick-named "Long Tall Sally" by John. She stood 5' 8" and had been a swim wear model back in her home state of Pennsylvania. She was tall, thin and beautiful. She and John met first when he was at the Naval Academy. By the time they reconnected, she was divorced with two young sons. She and John married in 1965 and he adopted her children. Soon they would have a daughter named Sydney together.

They were stationed at Cecil Field in 1966. His squadron was slated to go to Yankee Station off the coast of Vietnam for deployment in September 1967. Carol and the children would stay behind in Orange Park. After the customary Navy good bye on the tarmac, the family went home and John flew off to meet the carrier Oriskany. It was only about a month later that John was shot down.

Son Doug McCain told the Virginia Beach Pilot newspaper about his memories of the day his father was shot down. "It was my first day of Cub Scouts and I came home and my mother was crying at the kitchen table", he recalled.

Carol busied herself while waiting. Official records at the Clerk of the Courts showed that she improved their home at 553 Fatio Lane, Orange Park, by adding on a room addition, a swimming pool and a new septic tank and fuel tank. Back in 1969, in Florida, for a married woman to take out a mortgage, buy a house and so on she had to have herself declared a "free dealer", giving herself the same rights she had as if she was a single woman. In October 1969 she filed her petition and got a court order making herself a free dealer. She had no choice - John was locked up at the Hanoi Hilton as a prisoner of war (POW).

Carol McCain took the kids to visit her family in Pennsylvania. On December 23, 1969, Carol was traveling on icy and treacherous roads to deliver gifts. Her car slid headfirst into a telephone pole propelling her through the front windshield. She lay grievously injured in the snow. Hours went by before she was discovered. Her injuries were massive; her legs, and an arm were crushed. There were internal injuries, too. Surgeons, in order to save her legs, removed about 5 inches of bone in each leg. She was no longer "Long Tall Sally." She spent six months in a hospital bed. She had to learn to walk again. Ross Perot, an

advocate of POWs, paid her medical bills. True to form, she refused to allow the military to notify John of her injuries. She felt that he had enough to worry about in captivity.

All the while, friends and neighbors in Orange Park helped care for her and her children. Folks in Clay County do that to this day when deployment is underway.

After his release in 1973 John was eventually assigned to command the training squadron (RAG VA-174) at Cecil Field. After serving several more years in the Navy and making the rank of Captain, he retired. John McCain divorced Carol in 1980 and later married Cindy Henley. Carol went on to be the director of the White House Visitors Center under the Reagan Administration.

When McCain came through Jacksonville during his 2008 presidential run he spoke to reporters with Action News Jax. "Long ago, when I was away in prison, the town of Orange Park and the people of Jacksonville could not have been kinder to my family during the period when I was away, nor have been more warm in welcoming me home", he said. "The people of Jacksonville opened their hearts to my family," he added. "My children had about 50,000 parents while I was gone and I'm very grateful."

McCain wrote in his memoirs that Orange Park neighbors fixed his house, took kids to sports and "helped my family hold together, body and soul."

Carol Shepp McCain owned the house at 535 Fatio Lane till she and John sold it in 1979 to Leonard and Susan Certain.

Sources: File of Clay County Archives, New York Times, United Press International, Florida Times Union, Action News Jax, First Coast News, The Virginia Beach Pilot, *Faith of My Fathers* by John McCain, The Washington Post, <http://memory.loc.gov>



With Dad in Vietnam, Carol celebrates Thanksgiving with Doug, Andy and Sidney. (Family Photos) From the Washington Post Farhi, Paul (October 6, 2008). "The Separate Peace of John and Carol"



A joyous return in 1973.



At home in Orange Park in the mid-1970's. (family photos) From the Washington Post Farhi, Paul (October 6, 2008). "The Separate Peace of John and Carol"



1973 Orange Park Elementary School FL
Commander John S. McCain III (USN) on Left; Colonel Carl B. Crumpler (USAF) on Right

<http://memory.loc.gov>