

# SWEET HEART OF THE BOYS AT CAM RANH BAY



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Dear Kennesaw Junior College,

We're writing in response to an article in the "Stars and Stripes," the daily newspaper here in the Republic of Vietnam. The article publicized the "Spring Festival" held at your illustrious school and depicted the joyous and care-free life that young people in our country have at home. We're in a position now where we can appreciate this type of disposition. We respect a school who [sic] can reflect the happiness people can have together in spite of the discontent and death at home and here at war.

The group of guys here have taken particular interest in the serene beauty of the girl in the photo of your school accompanying the article. Without exception she (whoever she may be) won the love and admiration of us all. We're writing to ask for maybe a few words from our dearest sweetheart and of course a picture. If you can only find her! She is keeping alive, in our hearts, the passion we need to bring us home. We'd like to adopt Kennesaw Junior College as our peacetime counterpart and if any of your coeds would be interested in writing, we'll be sure to find a pen pal for each letter.

From the guys of  
the Signal Spt. det.  
Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

dents at Kennesaw Junior College in Marietta, Ga., relax in the sun and listen to music from a band playing on the library steps during spring festival activities. After the concert they had a tug-of-war, watermelon eating contest and an automobile race."

It was a bit of good news to a country awash with bitter headlines. A look at Atlanta's newspapers during the four-day period (May 18-21) Stella's photo hit the press shows a grim national mood: an NAACP executive was murdered in Savannah; the Charles Manson "Helter Skelter" murder trial was hot copy; so was the My Lai massacre trial; notices of war dead were daily news; President Richard M. Nixon was sending U.S. troops into Cambodia; South Vietnamese troops were entering Laos; North Vietnam — in celebration of Ho Chi Minh's 80th birthday — was launching a heavy attack on South Vietnam; Attorney General John Mitchell, referring to the May 4 shootings at Kent State University (four killed, nine wounded by Ohio National Guardsmen) and the shootings one week later at Jackson State College (two students killed by Mississippi Highway Patrolmen), said that American education was experiencing the "saddest semester in its history"; the Rev. Ralph Abernathy was leading a 110-mile Southern Christian Leadership Conference march from Perry, Ga., to Atlanta to protest the "wanton murder" of six blacks killed in Augusta during rioting the week before, the "increasingly brutal oppression" of black people's movements in the South and the "shoot-to-kill mentality of the Lester Maddoxes of this country"; Gov. Maddox fired back that the SCLC was being "supported by the communists" and called for the organization to cancel the march because the marchers were "creating a spawning ground of hatred, bias, prejudice, death and destruction."

To readers across the nation and to the guys at Cam Ranh Bay and the thousands of other soldiers fighting a war that many of them did not understand, the image of a pretty girl having fun during an idyllic day of music, watermelon and tug-of-war must have been like the fresh scent of peach blossoms in spring air. Stella was the antithesis of Hanoi Jane; a kind of Betty Grable of the Vietnam War. The voluptuous Georgia peach was the ideal of American womanhood. Hello Miss American Pie.

And it was good press for the young Kennesaw Junior College, which was deluged with letters from as far away as Alaska, Ohio, Texas, Tulsa, Seattle, Baton Rouge and New



Who was she? Twenty-one-year-old Stella Merritt of Marietta, who was unaware her photograph had been taken. Her only other claim to fame had been when she won the college's mini-skirt contest the day before.

The photo was published May 18 on page 2-A of *The Atlanta Journal* and then sent over The Associated Press wire service to newspapers around the country and overseas.

The cutline under the photo that had appeared on page 2 in the May 21 edition of the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*: "While many colleges are closed by disturbances, these stu-



Charles Pugh — The Atlanta Journal

“WHO IS SHE?” soldiers asked in letters to Kennesaw Junior College after seeing a photo similar to this one appear in the May 21, 1970, issue of the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. Inset: Stella Merritt 19 years later with son Bradford at the same location on the campus front lawn.

Jersey. A college official began filling a scrapbook with those letters and the ones that arrived from Vietnam on military stationery.



nineteen years later Stella came back to campus to talk about her days as sweetheart. The years haven't changed her much; she is still beautiful. Her hair, about the same length as it was in the photo, is a rich brunette.

“People kept contacting the school and asking, ‘Who is this girl?’” says Stella, her wide blue eyes scanning a letter from Spec. 4 Ralph Granucci in the ring-bound scrapbook. “See, ‘WHO IS SHE?’” She laughs softly and reads the letter, slipping back to 1970. “Here it says, ‘I know of at least 10 guys who’d like to write her.’ They wanted, you know, someone to write to.” She sighs, “I was just so honored.”

Her long, graceful fingers flip through cellophane-wrapped, yellow pages. “‘The Peach You Saw Was Stella,’” she says, pointing to a headline. “See, they followed it up on ‘Wide, Wide World of People,’” a column in the *Morristown, N.J., Record*.

The article, with a closeup of Stella from the wire photo, reads: “Who was that girl pictured on Page 1 yesterday? About a dozen readers — all men — called to ask about the dark-haired beauty. ... The Associated Press, which provided the picture, didn’t have her name, but the dean of students at Kennesaw College did. She is (now take this down) Stella Merritt (that’s Miss), age 21, of Marietta, and

she’s a sophomore [she was a senior]. The school, the dean says, has a policy against giving out addresses, phone numbers or measurements. Sorry, fellas.”

The following day “Stella: Chapter 3” appeared in the *Record*, complete with Miss Merritt’s Marietta address and “vital statistics” of “36-22-36.”

“God, I was 21 years old,” she says. “See, here’s the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. What amazed me was that people would contact the school and send them the clippings. Someone took the time out to clip it and send it to the school. I was the focus evidently, of a lot —” her words tangle with soft, delicious laughter — “Who is she? Who is she?”

At the time that photo was taken, Stella was a transient student from the University of Georgia taking courses at Kennesaw. But Stella had been a KJC charter student who was on the first yearbook staff.

“Dr. Sturgis and I and another student put the first flag on the flagpole out there,” says Stella. “There was a color photograph on the front page of the paper [*The Marietta Daily Journal*, Sept. 25, 1967]. I still have that. The other student — I can’t think of his name right now — he was a really, really bright guy. I’d like to know what happened to him — probably a chemist, a scientist.” (Bob Myatt owns a wood product business in Cleveland, Ga.)

Stella turns a page and reads the letter from Cam Ranh Bay. “Yeah, you can see why I wanted to write these guys back,” she says. “You know, I’m against any kind of war, but I had a brother over there and I felt like if they’re over

there fighting, we need to be supportive and appreciative of their efforts."

One letter from Vietnam got Stella's support in a very direct way. "This one company said, 'Here we are fighting this war and we don't even have an American flag.' It was a real tear-jerker."



o their sweetheart marched right down to the state capitol and presented the letter to Lt. Gov. George T. Smith. "I said, 'These guys need a flag. Let's get 'em one.' There was a ceremony at his office and he presented me with a flag and then I mailed it to them."

Stella answered "every single letter that I got." For the first two or three months her mailbox bulged with up to 40 letters a week; most were from soldiers of three companies that had adopted her as sweetheart. "I got tons of mail, so after that, I wrote the entire company and addressed it to all of them. I couldn't keep up with all the letters and my studies."

In addition to the attention she received from the soldiers, employees of the *Morristown Record* named her "Machinist Playmate of 1970" and "this one guy who had a fried chicken place — he wanted to put me on billboards or something." Stella laughs and brushes her thick hair over her shoulder. An embarrassed silence as she looks at the picture that went around the world.

"Well, I was a little embarrassed of the photograph because of the angle," she whispers. "I've always been self-conscious of my ... bustline. And it kind of emphasized that. And I was kind of embarrassed because I felt like, you know, that's what a lot of these guys were responding to."

"Ummm ... especially when I got an offer from *Playboy*. I thought it was some crazy guy calling me up; I didn't think it was legitimate. But then it was verified, and so," she laughs, "that made me feel — at that time I was so embarrassed about what I had. Back then you didn't take it all off, of course. But the money they were offering was good. It would have helped me pay my way through school. I was struggling. I don't know if I would have done it or not, but \$5,000 is a lot of money. They contacted me three or four times. I told them 'Oh, no way, no way.' My parents would have killed me." A full-bodied laughter. "Yes, it would have been all over."

Stella graduated from UGA in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in education. Not wanting to "get married in my early 20s right out of college" and eager to "travel and experience life," Stella began a career path that followed her many interests: tutoring, selling commercial real estate, teaching day care school, flying the friendly skies as a stewardess and operating a jewelry business.

Stella eventually married, but she divorced almost two years ago. At 40, her main occupation "is being a mom" to her three-year-old son Bradford, "and I'm thoroughly enjoying it." She also substitute teaches at Bradford's school and occasionally sells gemstones that a friend brings in from Brazil. After her son starts grade school, her plans are to get back into the full-time jewelry business or work at her sister's travel agency.



Stella Merritt posed for this photograph on the steps of the administration annex, which was the cafeteria when she was a student at KJC. "Nice legs," said a male student who was passing by. "I can see why you are taking the picture." Stella laughed and said, "It all started with my legs — at the mini-skirt contest."

Stella's time in the sun lasted about eight months, when she mailed her last letter to Vietnam. But she says the brightest moment of being "Sweetheart" came years later. "I came to a concert here at Kennesaw. I was in line to get my ticket and Mr. [Roger] Hopkins [vice president for business and finance] recognized me. He said, 'You don't have to pay, go on in. As much publicity as you have brought to the school and put us on the map, it's nice to do something for you.'" Stella laughs, tossing her hair. "Yeah, and I thought, 'Gosh, that is so nice.' That made me feel so good. So Kennesaw has a real special place in my heart." ♦