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JFK's Pilot Picked Sanibel Over Hawaii

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The Marine aviator who had served during WWII, Korea, and Vietnam – and who once piloted JFK's helicopter-- took one look at Sanibel and said, "Here's home."

That pilot was Colonel Edwin Reed. He and his wife, Jean -- a Navy flight nurse -- had both been on active duty during the Korean War. They had met in Japan and got married in Hawaii after a short courtship. They fell in love with it and went back many times during their marriage.

But something would beckon them to Sanibel.

By 1970, the Reeds started planning for life after the Marines and began the search for a place to live. Their daughter, retired Navy Captain Nori Ann Reed, lives on Sanibel today. Intrigued by what we had heard of this extraordinary military family, we contacted Nori Ann and asked her to tell us more -- about her family, their love of Sanibel, their service to their country...and to our island as well.

How, we asked Nori Ann, did your folks find Sanibel?

"Mom and Dad," she said, "set out in a little Cessna and went island hopping down the East Coast, looking for someplace that captured the 'feel' of their beloved Hawaiian islands but wasn't so far from both their families. They stopped off in lots of places, including the Keys, but no place even came close.

"Then," she continued, "on their return to Quantico, VA, where Dad was stationed, they came via Fort Myers, because very close friends lived in Cape Coral. During the visit, Mom and Dad were told, 'you have to see Sanibel.' And like so many others, they fell in love with it. Though neither of them was impulsive, they bought a Sunset South condominium essentially that day. They came home from their trip, bubbling over with enthusiasm to my brother, Rob, and me about the wonderful place they had discovered. After that, even their favorite island Kauai took second place to Sanibel."

We asked Nori Ann for some background on her dad and his military service before he arrived here.

From A Farm In West Texas

“He was raised on a farm in west Texas,” she said, “where his father was essentially a sharecropper for my Dad's maternal grandmother (who literally sat at their kitchen table when the cotton crop came in and was given her 51% before any other bills were paid).

“Dad was very tall for his time,” she continued, “almost 6’-5””, and was given an athletic scholarship to college. He planned to be a football and basketball coach, but like so many of his generation, WWII changed all that.

“In 1942, his entire basketball team went down to the Marine recruiter and signed up. Since they had some college and were athletic, the recruiter asked if they were willing to become officers and pilots for the Marine Corps. Despite being mostly Texas farm boys who had never been in a plane, all of them said OK. They all had the attitude of “whatever needs doin', they'd do it.” Thus began Dad's lifelong love of flying and his 30 plus year career in the Marine Corps.”

And what, we asked, did that career include?

“He did great things in the Marine Corps,” Nori replied, “at one point having qualified to fly every type of aircraft in the Marine Corps inventory. One of the highlights of his career was being President Kennedy's pilot in the Marine One helicopter. In the famous film clip of President Kennedy reaching down to stop the toddler John-John from running out to the helicopter, I never watch the Kennedys -- I always try to catch a glimpse of my Dad looking back at the scene from the helicopter window.”

When, we asked, did your parents move to Sanibel full time?

“During his Marine Corps physical in 1972,” Nori told us, “Dad was discovered to have a brain tumor. Later on, we would find out it was due to Agent Orange from his time in Vietnam, but at the time, “why” didn't matter. Dad was in the fight of his life and spent 5 months in Bethesda Naval Hospital. Upon his release from the hospital, he was also retired from the Marine Corps, and we (Mom, Dad, and I) headed for Sanibel. While Dad certainly was ‘better’ and would be around for two more decades, from then on our family had almost a sense of being on borrowed time, and where else would we spend it with joy except on Sanibel?”

Walking The Beach At Sunset

“Mom and Dad loved to walk the beach at sunset, and I can still see them in my mind's eye, ambling down the beach, my very quiet, tall Dad nodding at my tiny-in-comparison (5’-2”) Mom's conversation as the day slowly came to an end.”

We knew that Colonel Reed had joined the Committee of the Islands and was elected chairman in 1976, just one year after its founding. What was it, we asked Nori Ann, that attracted him to this new organization?

“To Dad,” she replied, “the Committee of the Islands seemed to be the right thing to do. I go back to the same attitude he exhibited when he joined the Marines. A job needed doing, and like so many others on the island at the time who joined with him, he set out to do it.

“Dad had a unique perspective on Lee County politics and plans for Sanibel,” she continued. “He was a Sanibel resident, but he had been hired as the airport manager at Page Field, which at the time was the main airport for southwest Florida. This job required involvement with the Lee County Commission, both at hearings and in day-to-day discussions.

“Dad became increasingly concerned about what he was hearing when it came to Sanibel. Approval was being sought and granted for more and more densely populated projects. He believed it would get worse, because he thought Sanibel just didn’t have enough voters to sway the Lee County Commission from seeking more and more revenue from bigger and bigger projects -- even thought it threatened to destroy the very reasons why people came to Sanibel in the first place.

Coming Together For Sanibel

“Dad didn’t believe in ‘no growth,’ Nori continued, “but he believed that reasonable people could reach agreement on what was proper and in keeping with the Sanibel spirit. That’s what he thought the Committee of the Islands could be about, reasonable people coming together for the good of Sanibel, despite whatever other political views they held.”

We asked Nori Ann, “What else do you think people who love our island would be interested in knowing about your dad?”

“That he never stopped loving Sanibel,” she replied. “He has been gone 16 years and spent nearly the last 2 years of his life in a Cape Coral nursing home, a victim of the side effects from the tumor and with many cognitive functions gone. But no matter how confused he was, he never stopped wanting to come home and walk that beach one more time. And Mom, at 86, still watches the sunset on Sanibel and misses him. Me, too.”

We’re glad this Marine pilot and his family chose to land on Sanibel.

We are deeply grateful to them for their service to our country.... and to our island.