

Obituary for Elmer Melvin "Mel" Cook



Elmer Melvin "Mel" COOK (CW-4 U.S. Army Retired) passed away peacefully in his sleep on Leap Day, February 29, 2024, at home in Alexandria, VA, with his wife Bette, well-known in USAID, and son Joe by his side. He succumbed, at age 97, to congestive heart failure.

Born on October 7, 1926, in Delavan, IL, Mel was a descendant of military men who fought in every war this country has been engaged. Mel continued the legacy and served 32 years in the U.S. Army through three wars – World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam – entering the military as a Private in 1945 and retiring in 1980 as a Chief Warrant Officer W-4. Among the many medals and awards he received during his military career were the Distinguished

Flying Cross, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, Meritorious Service, Air Medals, Army Commendation, and Purple Heart. The capstone of Mel's career was induction into the Army Aviation Hall of Fame where he was cited as "the epitome of the finest traits and capabilities of our flying warrant officers." In 2000, he was invited by President William J. Clinton to accompany his final Presidential delegation to visit Vietnam. In Mel's mind, however, his most important honor was being the father of his son Joseph and a loving husband to Bette. Of their 67 years together, Bette remembers Mel's romantic side and their special times like horseback riding on a Caribbean beach.

Some highlights from Mel's exceptional career include:

- In 1945-46 during WWII in the Asian-Pacific Theater, he later found he was scheduled to participate in the invasion of Japan, which was negated by Japan's surrender, thus ending the war, and saving millions of lives, including Mel's!
- He returned to the Army in 1950 after a five-year civilian stint to further his education. This time, Mel was assigned to Japan under different circumstances and enjoyed meeting the people and learning their culture.
- Mel was accepted into the U.S. Military Attache service and assigned to the American Embassy in Tunisia in 1959-61. There, in his off-duty pursuit, he earned the first private pilot license – Tunisian Government License #4 (the first three licenses were honorary) – issued by the newly independent country. In 2019, he was invited to meet with staff, students, and spouses of the Attache course at Fort Meade, MD, to talk about the differences 60 years ago in the Attache field!
- Mel was also granted an age waiver (he was five years over the 30-year age cap) to attend the first class of the re-opened U.S. Army Primary Helicopter School in 1961. As a graduate rotary-wing pilot, he trained at Fort Knox, KY, and deployed as the advance party to set up camp in Vietnam for the 114th Aviation Company, the first air mobility unit in combat. For a Master Paratrooper trained to jump from airplanes into combat, this was a welcomed way to be transported into battle.
- Mel was quickly transferred from Vinh Long to the U.S. Army Support Command headquarters in Saigon to serve as Assistant Aviation Officer and personal pilot for Commanding General Joseph

Stilwell, son of the famous WWII "Vinegar Joe." Stilwell chose not only to command the air missions but also to be Mel's aircraft door gunner. Holes in the aircraft after combat missions were not uncommon.

- During two assignments (1965-68 and 1970-74) with the Aviation Warrant Officer Branch at the Pentagon, Mel participated in the rapid expansion of the Warrant Officer aviation program from 1,700 to 7,000 pilots, and the development of studies and plans that resulted in the creation of a new W-5 rank. In 2019, Mel was invited to meet with W-5 officers at a professional development session at the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command headquarters at Fort Belvoir and was pleased to learn the impact his work had on the Warrant Officer Corps was still being felt today.
- While a dual-rated fixed wing pilot at the Priority Air Transport Division, Fort Belvoir, VA, Mel served as a personal pilot for Secretary of the Army, Clifford Alexander, the first Black Army secretary, who granted him a waiver of the 30-year retirement requirement for Regular Army personnel. While mandatory retirement was not waived at that time, it has become more common today.
- After retirement, Mel served 18 years as the Director of Play at Army Navy Country Club, Arlington, VA, where he was privileged to become a friend and golf partner with a President. On September 11, 2001, while standing on the first tee, he witnessed an airplane fly low overhead and down the hill into the Pentagon. In shock and distress, Mel spent the day sending staff in golf carts down the hill to assist workers leaving the Pentagon for the clubhouse to call their families, rest, and recover.
- Mel continued military camaraderie through professional associations such as the Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA), the National Museum of the U.S. Army (founding member), Friends of the National World War II Memorial in Washington DC, U.S. Army Warrant Officer Association, Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association, 114th Aviation Company "Knights of the Air", American Legion (Auxiliary Post 39), and Army Navy Country Club.

Mel will be dearly missed by his family and friends. He is survived by his wife of 67 years, Bette Mayes Cook, and son Joseph Cook of Alexandria, VA; nephews Gale Johnson and wife Karen, Douglas Johnson, Dennis Johnson and wife Tina, Patrick Baillargeon, and Christopher Baillargeon; nieces Patricia Nelson Halper and husband Wayne, and Cynthia Oryall Gregg; and many loving grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He is preceded in death by his mother Josephine Van Buskirk and father Joseph Melvin Cook, sister JoAnn VanBuskirk Johnson and husband George Johnson, and nephews Robert Nelson and James Leroy Tauberschmidt.

Relatives and friends will be received at Jefferson Funeral Chapel, 5755 Castlewellan Drive, Alexandria, VA 22315 on Friday, March 8, from 4:00 – 8:00 pm. Mel's funeral service will be convened at Old Post Chapel with interment at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, VA, at a later date. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made in his honor to a charitable organization of your choice or to the National Museum of the U.S. Army at Fort Belvoir, VA, or the American Red Cross (Service to the Armed Forces). All are invited to view and sign the family guestbook at www.jeffersonfuneralchapel.com.