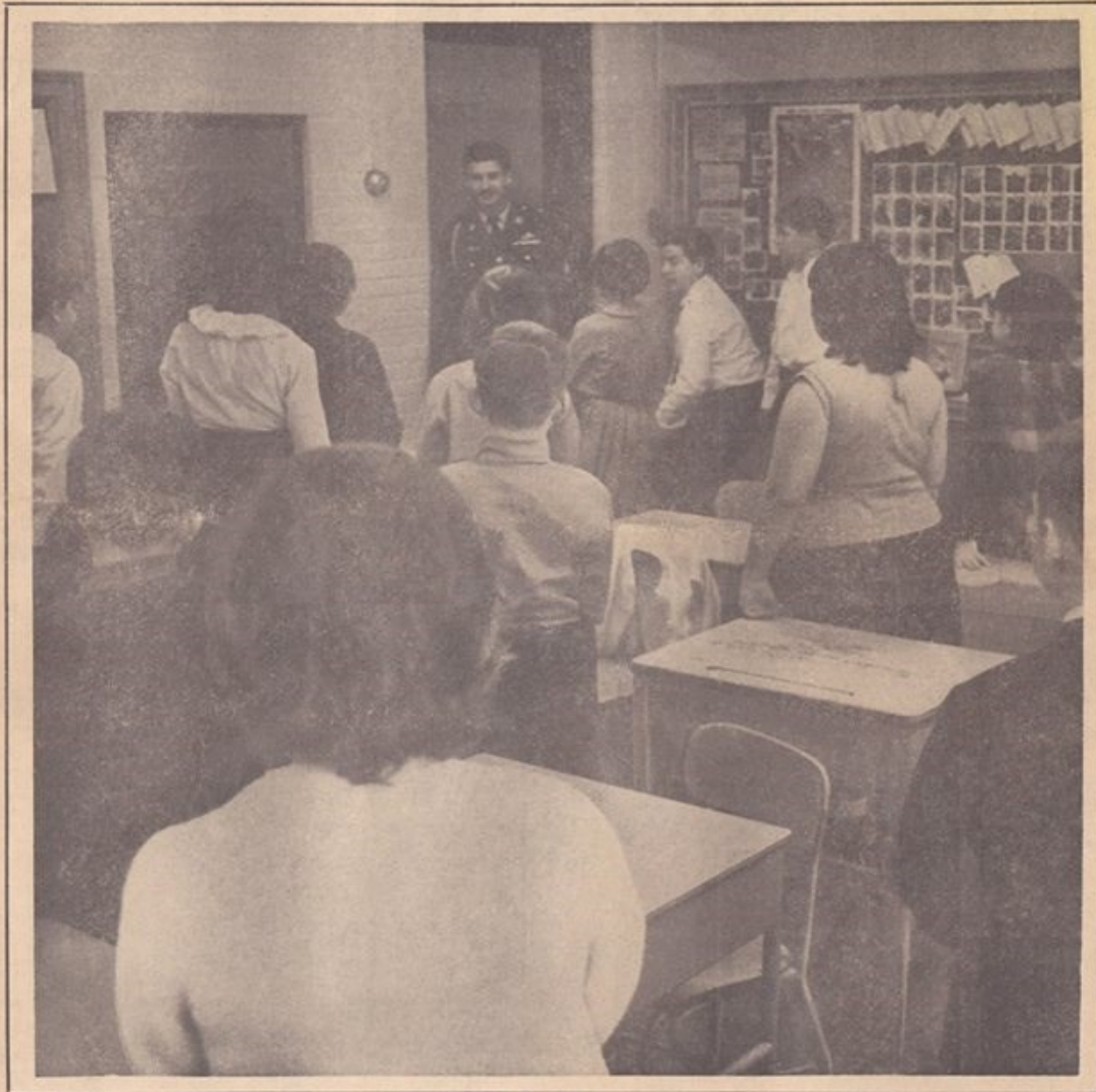


COURIER-POST  
**Weekend**  
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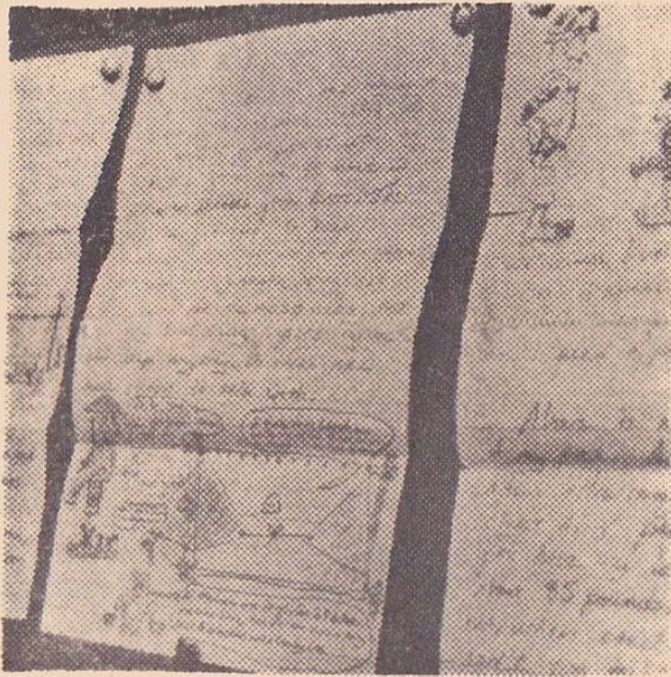


*Pupils at Camden's Yorkship School greet returning Vietnam War veteran.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 1969  
CAMDEN, N. J.

**VISITOR FROM VIETNAM**  
COVER STORY, PAGES 10-11  
**WHO DO TEENS BELIEVE?**  
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**THERE HE WAS**—the battle-seasoned, sniper-wounded veteran of the war in Vietnam — wearing his dress green uniform — and teaching geography to a bunch of Camden kids.

Only a few months before in war-torn Southeast Asia, the slim, trim U.S. soldier they call “Sgt. Mosquito” had resolved to come to see those youngsters at Yorkship School.

It was hard, said the sergeant when he emerged from the classroom, to explain how you could get so involved with a bunch of little kids.

But the kids — Mrs. Jeryl Davis’ fourth graders of this year and last — had one big thing in common: They were pen pals of the men in the combat platoon with which Staff Sgt. Joe Meskaitis had served in South Vietnam.

**AND THE 23-year-old** sergeant had seen men reading the youngsters’ letters by flashlight in a foxhole, or by moonlight on a bright, white Southeast Asian beach.

He had seen the soldiers carefully wrap those letters — and the kids’ pictures — in plastic, stow them in pockets or field packs to take through the A-Shau Valley, Hill 270, Hue and Khe-Sanh.

He had watched a G. I. shoot a hole through a half dollar one of the kids had sent. The soldier wanted to wear the coin with his dog tags round his neck.

“Sgt. Mosquito” had been there, too, the night the argument broke out between two soldiers and one half-jokingly threatened to blow the other’s head off.

The argument ended quickly when an observer commented: “You can’t do that to the kids!”

**SGT. MESKAITIS** also knew this: When mail call came for the yetter-starved men of his platoon, it was the kids’ letters they read first, then passed around.

The letters were about school and pets and weekend fun and all the other things kids are interested in.

“Those letters hit you,” said the sergeant, “in a way that you can’t explain . . .”

In a letter to their teacher the commander of the company in which the platoon serves had tried to tell how it was about the kids and his men:

"THE NEWS that reaches here on the front," wrote Capt. Harwood Nichols, "is usually of a sordid and sensational nature and not one that leaves a warm spot in one's heart when he thinks of home.

"Your letters remind us that our country is growing and that the goodness of our memories is being passed on to others and what we hope we are fighting for is really there.

"The utter innocence and honesty of your children is enough to reconfirm any man's faith in the goodness of human nature and the future of America.

"Tell them to work hard and we will know that our hardships and losses are not in vain."

Besides the letters the kids had sent gifts.

SGT. MESKAITIS remembered some of the gifts . . . Kool-ade that made bitter water drained from bamboo leaves taste good enough for a battle-weary soldier to drink . . . Spaghetti — cooked with tomato sauce in an ammunition box — that constituted a real feast . . . Easter baskets with colored eggs that were perhaps the only ones sent to U.S. servicemen fighting in Vietnam.

The kids who had sent these gifts, these letters, had seemed, the sergeant thought, almost too good to be true. And as he had thought about them he had made up his mind:

When he came back to the U.S. for reassignment he would go to Yorkship School.

SO, ON HIS way to Fort Jackson, S.C., to teach jungle warfare, the sergeant stopped off for a week to stay with Mrs. Davis and her husband, Bob — and to visit the Yorkship kids.

The kids, who hadn't known the sergeant was coming, were so surprised that they were momentarily speechless. But only momentarily. Everywhere Joe Meskaitis went kids' cries of "Sgt. Mosquito" bid for his attention.

One 10-year-old blonde charmer even confided she had sprayed her hair, and brought her best shoes to wear — both in "Sgt. Mosquito's" honor.

AND ALTHOUGH Joe Meskaitis hadn't planned to lecture, teachers and students had clamored to hear what he had to say.

So there he was telling the kids about Vietnam's hot, steaming jungles, about water buffalo and rich rice crops, and sand so fine it looks like snow.

There he was at the blackboard, chalking pictures of crossbows, and tropical rainforests, and mountainside houses built on stilts.

There he was answering questions like these:

Do the people of the Central Highlands use bows and arrows?

Do they use feathers for hats?

Do they have scarecrows . . . tarantulas . . . a lot of grass?

Do water buffalos have horns?

Was anybody bitten by a snake?

DURING THE week Sgt. Meskaitis was in the Camden area he put on similar performances for many other classes at Yorkship School. He kept his students wide-eyed, question-asking, entranced.

His was the modest showmanship of an experienced teacher — and an experienced teacher he was.

German-born, he had come with his family to the U.S. as a teenager — been placed, because of language difficulties, in a Wisconsin school's third grade. He had advanced rapidly — but had dropped out of high school in his junior year.

After enlistment in the Army, the dark-haired soldier was sent to Ft. Dix, and earned a high school equivalency certificate there. Later — also under Army auspices — he attended Germany's Goethe Institute. Then he taught German at the army's education center in Nurnberg.

**WHEN IT** was discovered — belatedly — that he was not a U.S. citizen — Sgt. Meskaitis was shipped back to the States.

It took an act of Congress to permit him to serve overseas again. This time he went to Vietnam . . . where he became acquainted with the Yorkship students' largesse.

January a year ago Sgt. Meskaitis joined the unit known as the Fourth Platoon of A Company, First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry Division, Airmobile, in Vietnam.

**SOON AFTER** "Mosquito's" arrival, Lt. Eugene Moppert, then the unit's commanding officer, handed Sgt. Meskaitis a list of the names of all the kids in Mrs. Davis' fourth grade class.

If you want a pen pal, Moppert told Meskaitis, pick out the name of a kid and write. Meskaitis did. First he wrote to Billy Harrison. Then another Yorkship youngster — Sandra Crissey — added "Mosquito's" name to her letter list.

"Mosquito" also sent letters to Mrs. Davis and to the rest of the class.

The other day tall, blonde Mrs. Davis explained how the love affair between the Yorkship youngsters and the Fourth Platoon came about.

**THREE YEARS** ago, she said, she had started assigning letters to servicemen as homework for students in her fourth grade.

One of the men to whom they wrote was Sgt. Glenn Williams of Cherry Hill, serving with Company A's Third Platoon in Vietnam. When Sgt. Williams was killed in 1967 the fourth graders decided the best way to honor his memory was to send packages to his outfit.

Some of those packages were air-dropped to the Fourth Platoon shortly before Sgt. Meskaitis joined it. The platoon then was in the Que-Son Valley where it had been locked in combat with the Viet Cong.

Grateful for the packages, Fourth Platoon members sent Mrs. Davis' fourth graders a thank you note. Every man in the platoon signed the note and listed his home town, too.

**EVERY WEEK** since the note arrived, a batch of letters has poured out of Yorkship School bound for the men of the Fourth Platoon.

Often the mail flow has included packages, too. Mrs. Davis' husband — instructor at a South Jersey training school for tractor-trailer drivers — foots the sometimes hefty postage bill.

But the mail is a two-way flow and the walls of Mrs. Davis' classroom are plastered with letters and pictures from the men of the Fourth. And there have been many gifts from the men to the members of the fourth grade class.

**WHEN PEN** pal Sandy Evans was hospitalized last fall, the guys in the Fourth Platoon passed the hat, had a dozen red roses sent from Hawaii to the ailing girl.

They also improvised a "get well" card from a C-ration box.

Last year — after a sniper's bullet ended Lt. Moppert's life — his widow came from New Orleans to Camden to give the fourth graders the flag which had covered the officer's casket.

Most recent token of the high esteem the Fourth Platoon ac-

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## Yorkship Pen Pals

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cards Mrs. Davis' fourth grade is a plaque which reads like this:

**"THE FOURTH** Grade for the best support given to the 4th Plt., A Co., 1st Bn., 7th Cav. Div. Airmobile."

And then there are the letters of thanks from the men of the Fourth Platoon. Letters like this one Sp 4 Frank Morgan sent to fourth grader Carl Bernhard:

"It is said that the American people are the type who do not want to get involved with others, are lacking in humanitarian characteristics and have not the least bit of camaraderie among themselves.

**"WITH YOU** people as an example I can most definitely deny those rather undignifying platitudes. I am most positively sure that Carl and all the Bernhards and Mrs. Davis went through a good deal of trouble to be kind to someone whom they know only through a few short letters.

"To me the wonderful thing about it is that it was done for the sake of kindness itself.

"If it is people such as you that I am fighting for in Vietnam, then I am proud and willing to fight.

"Thank you are the only words that I can say, but I doubt that those words have ever been used with more sincerity . . ."











