

Dick Jones, Civil rights and the KKK

This from the real life days of Rod Steiger, Archie Bunker and Mississippi Burning. Time was the summer of 1964. Place was Meridian, MS. I had just finished basic flight school in the T-34 in Pensacola, Fla. Kay and I were off to basic jet training in Meridian, MS, at NAAS Chase Field. Our family consisted of a two week old son and our cocker spaniel, Gumdrop. "Gummie" had been my wedding present to Kay and was purchased in Eastport back in Annapolis, MD. We made the trip in a 1962 Chevrolet Corvair, no air conditioning. One needed no air conditioning back in PA where Kay had been teaching school and where the car had been purchased. I tell the story that the Corvair in which we traveled contained absolutely every possession that we had in the entire world. Kay never agreed and always said that a small moving van was following us and would deposit our meager belongings in Meridian as we got established. Who knows? My story sounds better. We got to Meridian on a hot afternoon and had a flat tire. We could not purchase a tire. In those days, credit cards did not exist and we literally had no money. We ended up having the Corvair towed to the local Ford dealer and bought a new 1964 Ford Falcon Squire station wagon, WITH AIR CONDITIONING!!! It was really easy purchasing a car. If we failed to pay, they could just garnish my wages, report me to the base CO and I was really in deep kimshee. Once established in Meridian, we used to go out riding in that Falcon Squire just to turn the A/C onto max cold, high fan and just enjoy the ride. We registered for a motel room in the outskirts of Meridian. The motel was owned and run by two women; a mother (probably in her 60s) and daughter (in her 40s or so) team. Their husband/father had been a retired US Army Colonel and the motel had been their intended retirement undertaking. Colonel passed away and left Mom and Daughter to run the motel. Kay and I had a new baby who was no more than a month old having been born at the Pensacola Naval Hospital on 7/05/1964. Neither Kay nor I knew anything about caring for an infant. I was to be out and gone most days hoping to learn to fly the T-2, Buckeye, at NAAS Meridian. So, the mother/daughter motel owner team spent most of their time in our rented room caring

for baby Brian and helping Kay. They became very good friends. I checked into NAAS Meridian at about 0730 on a Sunday morning. I was immediately assigned to lead a "search party" on the following Thursday. It was an interesting time in Meridian, MS. The three civil rights workers transported to Meridian from up North, Messrs Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, had gone missing and been presumably murdered. Our Thursday search, in addition to searches earlier in the week by others, was to be for the missing bodies. The bodies were found on Tuesday as I recall, so I never had to make such a search. They had allegedly been murdered by the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan which at that time was a big thing in MS. The trial was held on the base at NAAS Meridian, presumably for security reasons. As I flew while the trial was underway, an interesting thing took place. By then, we had rented a duplex in Meridian that was shared with another flight student and his wife. Let's say it was a day when I was off flying at the base. Let's say that Kay was at home with baby, Brian. At 1300 or so, the telephone might ring. Kay answers - "hello." Silence on the other end of the phone. Kay might then hear a woman's voice saying something like the following. "Kay, do not ask any questions, just listen. Stay away from the Meridian courthouse between the hours of 2:00 and 4:00 this afternoon." Nothing more, the phone call then just hangs up. Silence. When I return later that afternoon from the naval base, we turn on the TV to the local evening news at 1800. Headline - "Ku Klux Klan burns cross on Meridian courthouse steps at 3:00 o'clock this afternoon." We never really knew and could certainly never prove it, but certainly Kay had a Meridian local angel looking out for her while we lived there. We always thought we knew who that angel was, and that angel might call in two different female voices. Anyone remember "Mississippi Burning with Rod Steiger which then became In the Heat of the Night with Archie Bunker/Carroll O'Connor?" We lived in the middle of it all in 1964.