

**A VENT WINDOW VIEW**  
**Hearing Around**  
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During the Sixties, the ongoing conflict in Vietnam affected almost everyone in the US as the fighting in SE Asia intensified. I was located far from the violence there, but the miseries of that war nonetheless appeared in my peaceful world of Kansas City with clock-like regularity, due largely to my job with United Airlines.

UAL served Kansas City with daily non-stop flights from and to San Francisco. The two flights were scheduled to arrive and depart within minutes of each other, making the 90 minutes between 2:30 pm and 4:00 pm the busiest part of my day.

As a “station agent” my daily duties varied; one day I would be handling cargo and baggage as a “ramp” agent while the next afternoon I’d be assisting deplaning and enplaning passengers.

As the conflict in Vietnam continued, it was common for the flight from San Francisco to arrive with at least one gray-painted wooden box containing the confined remains of some poor soul who had failed to survive the violence in Southeast Asia.

Offloading those heavy crates stressed ramp agents, but the stress was greater for those charged with getting passengers checked in and seated on the westbound flight to San Francisco. Almost daily those assigned to that duty had to weather the heartrending sight of a parent giving a last “goodbye” hug to a son whose ultimate destination was, in most cases, Vietnam. Worse was the sight of a teary-eyed young wife clutching her uniformed husband as she kissed him “adieu” one last time. Those of us who witnessed these family partings found them harder to deal with than the wooden crates that carried too many of these young men home.

In an effort to conceal those newly arrived gray boxes from onlookers in the boarding area, we quickly placed them in our International-Harvester “Metro” van, a unit normally utilized for other sensitive cargo such as caged pets or air mail during inclement weather. In most cases, a funeral home employee with a hearse would be awaiting the arrival of the coffin at our nearby airfreight facility where agents (like me) assisted in its transfer from the Metro Van into a hearse.



Occasionally, however, a “remains” had to be “trans-shipped” for its final leg of travel to some well off the beaten path Kansas town that was still served by rail. For those, arrangements made by the funeral home (or the US military) shipping the remains were already in place. We had only to ferry the coffin (still in its somber gray container) across the toll bridge dividing the airport from downtown KC, and thread our way through rush hour traffic to Union Station, Kansas City’s huge rail terminal.



Two agents were always assigned to make these trips and, one warm and sunny day, I was one of those. However, since I had never before made a delivery to the train station, my pal “Kenny” was selected to lead this foray off the airport grounds and into the world of “big city” commerce. Truth is I was happy not to be at the wheel of the Metro van because I had never driven it in traffic or at speeds above 20 mph. Add in rush hour traffic, the bulky dimensions of the truck, and the noisy clatter of its slab-sides rattling like a wreck in progress and I thanked my lucky stars that Kenny was driving. More important, he knew exactly where to unload the body and complete the necessary paperwork.

Amazingly enough (considering the rules and regulations that affect the transport of a deceased human) everything went swimmingly. In fact, things went so well that when my boss asked if I thought I could handle the task when the next dead person needed to catch a train, I said “Yes!”

I never did get to use that knowledge; that one trip with Kenny was the last trans-shipment of a body I had to deal with before United moved the IH Metro van to another city. Still, I remember that truck as one of the handiest and hardest vehicles for hauling cargo that I ever used. It also had the most rattles of any vehicle that ever plied America’s byways, highways, and (occasional) taxiways.