

By Nancy E. Lynch

Bound by honor and determined to complete their decades-long personal mission, the Vietnam veterans from Florida stride solemnly to a microphone before the towering Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Wilmington, Del.

A gathering crowd claims rows of white folding chairs, waving tiny American flags in the late afternoon heat. The overflow stands or sits curbside near the triangular park anticipating the veterans' remarkable story of recovery and, finally, return.

The group quiets. It is time for John W. "Bill" Melfi, Jr., tall and bearded, and Ngoc Van Vo, short and slight, the 2013 Grand Marshals of Wilmington's 146th consecutive Memorial Day observance, always on its traditional date of May 30, to tell their story.

"It's a great honor to be here today. Ngoc and I have waited a long time to finalize this long search," Melfi begins. Minutes later, Van Vo, a former South Vietnamese non-commissioned officer, now an American citizen, adds in halting English, "I thank all of you for this miracle that I never forget. Today, my duty is over."

They turn to a striking young woman with flowing reddish hair. Voices muted, they present her with a black notebook containing a fragmented military driver's license recovered from a 1968 helicopter crash site in South Vietnam. Only this charred license survived Army Capt. Michael Momcilovich, Jr., Delaware's 71st Vietnam War casualty.

And he was the father Kristin Momcilovich James of Nashville, Tenn., never knew.

Tears welling, she gratefully accepts their carefully preserved remembrance. An only child, she was an infant when he was killed on May 5, 1968, at age 24.

Beside her stands an equally somber Mark Momcilovich of Bear, Del., the captain's younger brother who was just 14 when his family received the dreaded notification that forever altered their lives.

Witnessing this extraordinary exchange and the improbable intersection of these four lives 45 years after Capt. Momcilovich died, the crowd erupts in a standing ovation.

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A perfect storm of tumultuous events thundered through the United States in 1968 precipitating rebellion, race riots and rancor. Americans protested the undeclared war in Vietnam, raged at the assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, and thumbed the Establishment with draft-card burnings.

The national mood soured on the endless-and seemingly unwinnable-war in Vietnam, a country no larger than the state of Washington, halfway around the world, yet telecast into millions of homes on the nightly news.

In 1968, its deadliest year, the polarizing war claimed the lives of 16,592 American forces.

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Three years earlier, a proud Michael Momcilovich, Jr., oldest of three sons of retired Army Lt. Col. Michael Momcilovich, a decorated veteran of World War II and the Korean War, graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Self-assured and popular, the younger Momcilovich had worked diligently throughout high school for his Class of 1965 appointment to the academy by Delaware's U.S. Sen. J. Caleb Boggs.

"He loved cars and took up our dad's favorite sport of golf," recalls Mark Momcilovich of his brother. "I remember he bought a beat-up 1940s Ford and worked on it fastidiously but it always leaked oil so Dad made him park it in the street."

Nicknamed "Mummy" in his 1961 yearbook, Mike Momcilovich entered a General Motors-sponsored national high school sports car design competition his last three years at Brandywine High School, winning his senior year and pocketing a full university scholarship. "We still have the wooden model he carved stashed away somewhere," Mark Momcilovich says.

Mike Momcilovich declined the generous stipend, choosing instead to follow his father's career path and proudly bore the family name to West Point where, at 17, he was among the youngest cadets to enter "Beast Barracks" on July 5, 1961.

Darkly handsome, of medium build and 5 feet 11 inches tall, he soon shed 25 pounds adjusting to the rigors of the academy. Mechanical engineering was his academic focus.

Despite West Point's intensity, Momcilovich became engaged in 1964 to Lynne Lawrence whom he'd met in middle school when his family lived in Nashville. The couple wed immediately after his graduation. He left for Army Ranger School and she moved in with his family in Wilmington.

She soon joined her new husband at Fort Benning, Ga., where he trained in armored tank warfare. He deployed to West Germany in 1966. There, Momcilovich switched to the Air Cavalry and returned stateside to attend the Army's helicopter flight school at Fort Rucker, Ala.

Kristin Renee Momcilovich was born Feb. 2, 1967. After her father's graduation from flight school, the young family settled in a small brick house in Nashville. That fall, Momcilovich had orders for Vietnam and was assigned Medevac duty flying the UH-1 Huey Iroquois helicopter.

Momcilovich would suffer minor injuries later that year, when his chopper apparently struck a tree branch that shattered its canopy. Then, during the 1968 Tet Offensive, he piloted the AH-1 G Huey Cobra helicopter, a fast attack gunship with multiple machine guns and rockets that ushered in a new era of aerial warfare.

Momcilovich was a respected team leader and pilot with A Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry and a valued member of the Bullwhip Squadron. Based in Quang Tri south of the DMZ separating South Vietnam from North Vietnam, he flew frequent armed visual reconnaissance missions for the Army's formidable 1st Air Cavalry Division.

The area was a hotbed of insurgency and for months major battles raged along the DMZ and in Khe Sanh and the A Shau Valley. On May 5, 1968, Momcilovich was on his second combat sortie of the day. His Cobra, traveling at an unknown altitude and unknown airspeed, was hit by hostile ground fire.

He successfully landed his helicopter south of LZ Sharon, a few miles inland from the South China Sea in Quang Tri Province but his aircraft was consumed by

fire. "Eyewitnesses said they could not attempt a rescue because his full load of ammo was 'cooking off,'" Mark Momcilovich remembers being told.

Other accounts reported Momcilovich and his co-pilot, 1st Lt. William Allen Rees (cq), also 24, of Drexel Hill, Pa., unsuccessfully struggled to evacuate. Although the helicopter was destroyed, both bodies were recovered.

Momcilovich, four months shy of his 25th birthday, and Rees were two of 187 U.S. troops killed on May 5, 1968, the date America sustained the second highest number of casualties in a single day during the entire war.

"Mike was easy to become friends with, open, warm, smiling. I learned the teamwork that was A Troop's legacy from Mike," fellow officer Phil Hendrix of Lakewood, Wash., posted in 2005 on the Virtual Wall.

"When [my platoon was] on the ground, it was always comforting to hear Mike's voice on the radio, and see his face looking out of his helicopter window. I was there to recover Mike and it was hard to see through the tears. I lost a friend and the hero I already knew he was."

Momcilovich's decorations include the Air, National Defense, and Vietnam Service medals, numerous Vietnam campaign medals, and the Purple Heart. He is interred in the U.S. Military Academy Cemetery at West Point.

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Momcilovich, a native Delawarean, never forgot his roots and returned often to Wilmington to visit family. His sense of community prompted him to write from Vietnam to his hometown paper, The News Journal, which provided complimentary subscriptions to all Delaware servicemen in Vietnam.

In four hand-written pages, he shared his views on the war with Nancy's Vietnam Mailbag, reporter Nancy E. Lynch's popular column of war correspondence. "I feel as though I'm doing a worthwhile job over here," he wrote. He also praised the field soldier who "has to outguess a very sly enemy."

His family has confirmed that was Mike's last letter, dated May 4, 1968. He was killed the next day. And I was the reporter he wrote to.

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Forty-five years later, in February 2013, a phone call jarred me. Bill Melfi of Sebastian, Fla., introduced himself, saying he found me on the internet. For more

than 20 years he had been trying to locate the Momcilovich family. He had something to give them.

"I have Capt. Momcilovich's military driver's license which was recovered from his helicopter crash site. Can you help me find his family?" he pleaded, detailing how he obtained the license. Its recovery required courage, perseverance and his friend Ngoc Van Vo's great personal risk.

Melfi, originally from Nashville, enlisted in the Army when he was 19 and shipped out to Vietnam in 1970. He met Van Vo during his second tour when both soldiers were assigned to an ARVN compound at Ba Hoa Mountain overlooking Qui Nhon.

The soldiers established an immediate rapport and stayed in touch after Melfi's tour ended in January 1972. But after the fall of Saigon in April 1975, all South Vietnamese were treated poorly and suffered greatly under the Communists who ended all communication to and from America.

Van Vo, born into humble circumstances in 1938, answered South Vietnam's call for military mobilization as a young man. Six months of training at a military center was not easy for him. "Being a student, as gentle as a lamb, I now had to learn how to stab, to shoot and kill enemies," he remembers.

But he rose through the ranks and in 1969, the South Vietnamese Army selected some non-commissioned officers to compete for an ammunition training course in the United States at Redstone, Ala. Van Vo was one of four successful candidates.

After Saigon fell, Van Vo was sent to a reindoctrination camp. When he was released, his every move was monitored. He, his wife and children were relocated to a collective farm in Lam Dong Province, far from their families.

To supplement their hardscrabble existence, they often went on clandestine metal salvage expeditions. In 1978, Van Vo's son, Long, 14, went on such an operation high in the mountains of Quang Tri Province near the DMZ.

Led by Montagnards in early morning darkness, Long saw remnants of a barely recognizable helicopter overgrown with vegetation. Although he found nothing salvageable in the wreckage, nearby he found a badly burned wallet containing a fragmented military driver's license.

He recognized it as Western and gave it to his father. Van Vo struggled to decipher Momcilovich's name and rank. He wrote it down on a scrap of paper. He had no way of knowing if the soldier's body had been recovered from the crash. Or even when the crash occurred.

What he did know was that his American friend would try to get the artifact back to the Momcilovich family. Van Vo hid the license from the Communists for 12 long years until he and his family immigrated to the United States.

To prevent the Communists from detecting the license at the airport in 1990, Van Vo had his wife, Luu, sew the fragments in the lining of his pants. After the Van Vos arrived safely in the United States, they lived with Melfi in southern Florida for a year before moving into their own house nearby.

"After about six weeks passed, Ngoc presented Capt. Momcilovich's license to me and told me the story of how Long found it at the crash site. We tried to contact the proper organizations in Washington at the time but they had no information," Melfi recalls.

Years passed and Melfi learned about Momcilovich on the internet but he still lacked a link to the soldier's family. "One of the reasons I persisted in finding the Momcilovich family was the strength of Ngoc's commitment," Melfi said. "He risked his life to bring that license to America."

In 2013, Melfi again started thinking about Momcilovich, "This young man that died so long ago and so far from home. I said to myself, 'I need to find his paperwork. What did I do with it?'"

The next day, Melfi opened his refrigerator and the paperwork and license literally fell from the top of the appliance and into his hands. He found my website and called me.

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How this extraordinary story unfurled, Melfi reflects, "is one of those things you just can't explain. Returning Mike's license represents what Ngoc and I couldn't bring home."

The Florida veterans' honorable deed, while of considerable consolation to the Momcilovich family, also provided them long-needed closure of the Vietnam War. "Ngoc lost his country and I came home to name-calling and an anti-war attitude.

On May 30, 2013, Ngoc truly felt like an American and I was finally welcomed home," Melfi says.

Mark Momcilovich, the last surviving member of his birth family, also was profoundly affected on that Memorial Day. "Ngoc and I had more than just my brother's driver's license in common in that we both had brothers who died for the cause of Vietnamese independence."

He adds, "I would like to thank Ngoc and Bill for everything they have done to bring this small piece of my big brother Mike's life back home to us. My brother's sacrifice that day is never forgotten."

Their father died in 1971, he shares. His brother, Peter, who served in Army intelligence and helped secure the U.S. Embassy in Saigon before it fell in 1975, died in 2001, his mother, Helen, died a year later. And Lynne, his brother Mike's widow and Kristin James's mother, died in 2012.

"I am completely overwhelmed with the courage and integrity that Ngoc and Bill have shown in order to return this piece of my father to me. I was 15 months old when he was killed but to me my dad was always a hero," James says.

"Ngoc risked his freedom and potentially his life to do what he thought was the right thing and I can never thank him enough for that. Bill never gave up trying to find our family and, fortunately, he was able to do so, even after all these years. There are no words to express how grateful I am to them."