

Working on *Faces Behind The Names*
By Ruth Lukkari

It seems like a hundred years ago, yet still feels like it was yesterday. I can remember the first time the author of the book *Faces Behind The Names* contacted my family. He had obtained names and addresses from the *Minnesota Vietnam Memorial* committee. This committee had built and dedicated a beautiful monument to the Minnesota men who had lost their lives in Vietnam. My brother's name was on that monument and our family had been invited to the dedication services of this monument. My brother's name is on four different monuments which are a great honor, but it does not make the pain of missing him any easier. Letters were sent out to these families informing us that someone wanted to put together a book of Minnesota's fallen soldiers from the Vietnam war and if we were interested, we should contact him. This letter went to my mother (my father had died in 1986) who passed the letter on to my older sister who in return gave the letter to me. I read the letter--it told us about a book that was being put together to pay tribute to those soldiers listed on the *Minnesota Vietnam Wall*.

The book was to be composed of stories, written by the families along with a picture of the fallen soldier. I remember thinking how great it would be to have a book published with my older brother's picture and story in it. I was proud of my brother and missed his life in mine very much. The thought of having him in a book would help to keep his memory alive and let others know what a gentle and caring person he was. What I did not understand at the time was why my mother and sister passed the letter on to me. I immediately wanted to send a story in on my brother--why did they not share my same enthusiasm. I now understand that we all handle and protect our pain and suffering in different ways. I remember coming home late that night and hardly being able to wait to call this gentleman the next day. I had no idea where that first phone call was about to lead me.

I sit here now writing this and wondering if I knew the journey that first phone call would take me on, would I still have done it? That answer comes easy to me now, although that journey was a very painful one for me, I still would have done it. I remembered that I had an older brother, but I was forgetting who that older brother was and working on this book brought back so many memories and I learned so many more things about my brother, that it was all a blessing in disguise.

RELIVING THE EXPERIENCE

I hadn't thought very often about my brother over the last 28 years, something I am not proud of, but something I admit to. You have to remember that I was only eighteen years old when my brother was killed in Vietnam. I remember being home sick from school when my mother came into my bedroom with tears in her eyes and said "you might as well know now that Tim is missing in action." I thought "what," those kind of things don't happen to our family, those kind of things happen to other families, families that you didn't know.

One week later, those gentlemen walked up our driveway to tell us that *Tim had been killed in action in Vietnam*--he stepped on a land mine. Our family had to wait three weeks for his body to arrive home. It was awful and we kept getting these telegrams from

the government telling us where his body was and when it would be arriving in town. I don't remember anyone saying they were sorry in these telegrams. They were just kind of factual, like they had sent thousands of these telegrams out to families. Our family had to have two funerals for my brother, something I think that we would not have done today. We had lived in this small town for many years and all of Tim's friends were from there, but the small town we had moved from is where all our relatives lived and where Tim would be laid to rest.

Nobody paid much attention to us young siblings. There is no one to blame for this because my parents were busy planning funerals and caught in their own grief. How hard it must have been for them to have to bury one of your own children. There were no such things as grief counselors back then, no one to teach us how to deal with the loss of losing a brother. Our family made it through the first funeral and got into our cars and started out on the long drive to the town where Tim would meet his final resting place. Following that hearse was not easy, all kinds of wild thoughts went through my head, what if they hit a bump and Tim's eyes would open up--remember I was just a kid. What I learned years later was that there were no eyes in that coffin.

When we reached our destination, all of us kids were shipped out to different homes where there would be room for us to sleep. Then again, we went through another funeral. Was it ever going to end for us? It had already been one week he had been missing in action, three weeks for his body to arrive home, one funeral in the town we lived in and now another funeral. That initial grieving seemed to stretch out for weeks. I remember being at the cemetery and Tim's coffin draped with the American Flag--it was cold and windy that day. There was a canopy up around the graveside to give us some protection from the cold. I remember the gun salute and how loud and final they sounded. They gently folded the flag from atop of his coffin and walked over to my mother and gently handed it to her. That flag is now in my house, still folded the same way as it had been folded that day. I remember walking away from my brother's coffin thinking, *are we just going to leave him there?* Then we went to the church where everyone gathered to eat those variety of casseroles and those silly little desserts. How bizarre it felt to me that just a few minutes ago we were all standing in the cold, listening to *ashes to ashes* and now here we were in the basement of a church, eating. What a strange concept for a young person to understand.

When I stared back to high school after the funeral, nobody said anything to me, kind of like he died from an overdose of drugs rather than from giving his life to his country. That day, we turned into Vietnam vets - nobody talked to us about it and nobody wanted to hear about it. So I guess I must have thought that life must go on and in order to do that, you must bury all those emotions and pretend. And that was what I did. Now here twenty eight years later, I was about to open a can of worms. Of course, I never knew that; had I, I might have chosen not to work on the book. Some people told me I was a brave person to work on this sort of book and maybe I am, if a brave person is someone who is willing to face their fears.

I called this gentleman and told him I wanted to submit a story on my brother, we talked for sometime. I told him if he needed any help with the book, that I would be willing to help out. This is the point where I went from submitting a story to becoming totally involved with the publishing of the book. It started out so simple, I sent letters out to the families and told them who I was and that I was helping with the publishing of the

book. I told them that I had a brother who was killed in Vietnam and that there was a VFW post built and named in his honor. In no time at all, I had many families calling me at home regarding the book. They were such wonderful people and we all seemed to share a common pain. Of course, there were a couple of threats from family members and some of those words they said to me cannot be repeated. That was really hard for me to take, I didn't understand why someone would lash out at me for trying to do something that I thought was such a good cause. But, again, we all deal with our pain in different ways and that was their way of dealing with it. But those two phone calls haunted me for a long time. But, I put that aside and focused on those that were happy about the book, a book that would bear a lot of pain and healing for us. Finally, someone was willing to hear our stories. [Back to Airborne Press](#)