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# Last Man Down

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## A reporter goes home to examine the last official U.S. casualty of the Vietnam War, the effect of the officer's death on their town, and its senselessness.

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MOUNT PLEASANT, Mich. — We all think we know most of the Vietnam War stories. Marriages shattered, families torn apart, years lost to self-doubt for soldiers who fought hard then came home to a nation of critics.

This is one that drifted through my childhood. The last official U.S. casualty in Vietnam was from my hometown, the father of a junior high classmate. He died just 11 hours before the cease-fire took effect.

It stuck hazily in my memory over the years, seemingly one last senseless death in a senseless war, a death that might have been one of the most senseless of all coming so close to the cease-fire. My friends remembered different details, about the family, about how the war had affected our town, but none remembered clearly. So more than 25 years later, I went back to fill in the blanks.

The Jan. 24, 1973, banner on the Mount Pleasant Daily Times-News, dug up on microfilm at the library, read like many headlines around America. Amid the news about who would be speaking at the Livestock Banquet and the man named Outstanding Citizen of the Year was the word the town had been anticipating for days: "PEACE! Vietnam Cease-Fire Saturday."

But five days later, the Daily Times-News led with these somber words: "Mount Pleasant's Col. William Nolde Last to Die in Vietnam." North Vietnamese troops near the village of An Loc had got in a last round of shelling before U.S. combat involvement officially ended, more than two years before the fall of Saigon brought peace.

William Benedict Nolde, 43, a fast-rising Army lieutenant colonel on his second Vietnam tour as an advisor in Binh Long Province, was the lone American victim. An editorial in the paper summed up the feeling in town: "For Us, a Tragic Ending."

Funeral Draws National Attention

The media rushed in to our town of 20,000 in the heart of Michigan's mitten-shaped Lower Peninsula, home to Central Michigan University and a then-impoverished Saginaw Chippewa Indian reservation. "Never has such a story attracted as much national attention to Michigan and Mount Pleasant in particular," the Daily Times-News noted. Nearly 600 people gathered at the local Catholic church, Sacred Heart, for the funeral.

After the service, Nolde's widow, Joyce, and their five children, ages 12 to 19, flew to Washington on a plane sent by President Nixon for the burial at Arlington National Cemetery and his posthumous promotion to full colonel. Later there was a meeting at the White House.

Col. Nolde was an unusual last official victim. The majority of American deaths in Vietnam were among the grunts, but he was a career officer who returned to Southeast Asia with hopes of getting his first general's star, says friend Clarence Tuma, whose restaurant, The Embers, is famous around the state for its "one-pound pork chop."

As I started asking about Bill Nolde, his friends, some of whom I discovered at a Mount Pleasant Rotary Club meeting, remembered the man. He was eloquent, thoughtful, compassionate and always smiling, they said--"personifying the Bible verse, 'This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,' " as Ted Kjolhede, Central Michigan University's former basketball coach, put it.

Active in the Lions Club service organization in Mount Pleasant and in Scouting, Nolde visited orphans and refugees in An Loc, the South Vietnamese village where he died, and worked with a local priest on rebuilding efforts.

In his last letter home to a friend, Nolde wrote: "We tend to think only in terms of what war has cost us, but by comparison, to what it has cost so many people, our price pales."

The Army couldn't have asked for a better poster boy at a time of defeat.

'I Lost It, I Totally Lost It'

The day her husband died, Joyce Nolde knew. She was awakened by an explosion in her dream and an apparition of Bill standing in the doorway, telling her he was all right. When Kimberle, then 16, saw the official green car pull up in front of her boyfriend's house in upstate Millersburg, she thought it meant her father was coming home. When she realized the truth, Kimberle began screaming and took off on a dead run through town. "I couldn't believe it," she says now. "I lost it, I totally lost it."

All the kids were in different places that weekend. Blair, the oldest and a student at Central Michigan, was working at The Embers; Brent, 17, was off wrestling; Bart, the youngest, was on a church outing. Byron, the 13-year-old who was a student at my school, was skiing with family friends. He cried hard when he heard the news but stopped just before being reunited with his mother, remembering his father's words that he was the family member who had to take care of things, what with his older siblings preoccupied with dating and friends.

Today, married and with two daughters of his own, Byron lives just down the road from his mother and sister. "To this day, I still go out and cry in the woods," he says. "You question why. I will ask God when I see him: Why? It still doesn't make sense. That's part of life; it doesn't make sense."

Soon, everyone in town knew what had happened. CBS News and the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times stormed into Mount Pleasant. This was before 24-hour cable and television newsmagazines and the Internet. Asked to leave the family alone, the media respected the request until Joyce was composed enough to make a statement, written by Blair. "They were very respectful," she says now. "You can't say enough good things about the media."

Neighbor Ken Schaeffer, whose children were friends with the Nolde kids, recalls it was "a pretty good blow for the community."

Bob Howard, now a state corrections officer living in Mount Pleasant and a force behind the town's Vietnam memorial, was a student of Nolde's at Central Michigan in the early 1960s. "Somebody has to be last, obviously, but at Central, in the '60s, no one knew where Vietnam was, and Col. Nolde was telling them," Howard says. "And then in 1973, everyone knew what Vietnam was, and they were getting out one way or the other, having seen how useless it all was, and then to die the last . . . ."

Nolde's story went around the world. Joyce Nolde received thousands of letters, including one from Germany, which insisted her husband was the reincarnation of a Prussian general. Then the story faded. Joyce tried to have the letters published but was told there would be no interest.

Except for son Brent, who stayed to finish high school, the Nolde family left town that May. Their abrupt departure wounded some friends. But it was, Bart presumes, Joyce's way of dealing with the loss.

She took the family to rural Black Lake, near her tiny hometown of Onaway in the tip of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, hoping to remove the kids from what to her were the influences of city life.

Family Faces Many Challenges

Joyce, now 69, lives with her white Maltese, Ange, in Onaway in an antique-cluttered 100-year-old house. The ensuing years have thrown many challenges at the family. Bart was tossed from a horse and spent nearly a year recovering from the fractures, with Byron carrying him into and out of the lake every day for physical therapy.

Kimberle, the only daughter, was in a head-on car collision in 1983, which left her comatose, with a brain stem injury and a prognosis that she would be a "vegetable," her mother says.

Refusing to accept that fate, Joyce hung a sign in the hospital room that said: "There will be nothing spoken negative around Kim." Kimberle, now 43, recovered enough to live on her own and drive again, although her good and bad days make it impossible for her to work. She and her black Lhasa Apso, Shadow, now live with Joyce.

In the house, Joyce displays a single photo of her husband, in uniform, with a collage backdrop of his name on the Vietnam War Memorial. The clock stopped when he was killed, but they had it restarted. "I'm one of those people who doesn't dwell in the past," Joyce says. But she feels her husband is often with them and has often made his presence felt over the years.

She never wanted to remarry, despite her children's insistence that she date. "I had the best," she says. They met when both were teaching in a two-room schoolhouse in Newberry, in Michigan's remote Upper Peninsula. Joyce taught fifth and sixth grades, Bill seventh and eighth. When they first met, "you said he was a hick," daughter Kimberle interrupts.

"He was not polished enough to suit me," Joyce concedes.

They came from different worlds: He grew up poor on a small farm near Menominee, a lumber town in the Upper Peninsula. She was from Onaway, which calls itself the "Sturgeon Capital of Michigan," and her parents were teachers. He was Catholic; she was Methodist. But "once we committed, we committed," she says.

Blair was 10 days old when Bill left for Korea, an Army draftee tapped for officer training. Soon they were living a career Army life: a tour in Germany, a stint teaching military science in CMU's mandatory Reserve Officers Training Corps program, a first tour in Vietnam in 1964-65, a posting to Italy without the family.

Bill arrived home from Italy in June 1972, the day before Blair's high school graduation. The call from Army Chief of Staff Gen. William C. Westmoreland came the next morning, Joyce says, asking if Bill would agree to one more tour "to clean things up."

None of the kids were happy that their dad went back; some were unhappier than others. But duty called, and Nolde had ambitions. He planned to run for president some day, Joyce says.

"There's little doubt in my mind that had he survived and stayed in the military he would have become a very high-ranking officer," says John Kulhavi, a former student who is now a brigadier general in the Army Reserves. "He had what it takes."

Ten days later, Nolde was on the plane. The last thing he said to his wife at the airport: "We don't have a lot of money, but we sure have a lot of love," Joyce recalls.

His mother "had every reason to be bitter," says Bart. "People weren't supporting the war at the time. She lost her husband at the pinnacle of his career." Her lifestyle now, he notes, is hardly "how she could have lived as a general's wife, because that's where he seemed to be headed."

Yet Joyce said she wasn't bitter then and isn't now. Not that it wasn't hard to be left with a lot of responsibility. She did not feel totally happy about the way the war was conducted, that the government gave in to demonstrators and that some loyal Vietnamese were left behind in the evacuation of Saigon. She is unhappy about military benefits; for one thing, she says she would lose hers if she remarried, even though "my husband gave his life for this country."

But, she says: "He was there for the right reason. Everybody wants me to be bitter. That's foolishness. He died doing something he wanted, and that's something most people never do. He wasn't there to fight a war; he was in the Army to spread good."

Children React Differently

All the Nolde kids except Bart, who lives in Tampa, Fla., are now scattered around Michigan. Not all of the Nolde children wanted to talk about their memories and feelings; their father's death was particularly hard for the oldest--Blair, now 47, and Brent, 44--Joyce says, although each of Nolde's children reacted deeply in his or her own way.

Byron, now 41, and Kimberle, who have an easy affection with each other, sit in the living room of their mom's house and reminisce about how, on the times their father was home, he would play sports with all the neighborhood kids and parents. He was so popular, their friends "would all say, 'We want your dad,' " says Byron.

The closeness of the family helped everyone pull through. Byron, now a power company executive and a high school sports coach, says the difficulty of the time made him appreciate day-to-day life. "Enjoy it while you're here. You're going to have the bad things that happen, but if you live for those, you're in trouble."

Bart, who at 39 looks like pictures of his father, has built his life around his father's last words to him as a 12-year-old at the airport--words that, "had [my father] come back, it would probably have been in one ear and out the other."

Instead, he took the advice to heart. His father's words, as Bart recalls them: "Find something in life you love to do and pursue it with a passion . . . , maintain your good name and integrity . . . and the last thing, remember how precious each and every 24 hours of life is--and develop a thirst for life."

Like his older brother Brent--now retired from the Marines and newly married to his Mount Pleasant high school sweetheart--Bart followed his dad into the military, first signing up for ROTC classes. He served eight years in the Army, including stints on the East German border and in Washington. Still a Reserve major, he is president and co-founder of Rebound Sports, a Tampa-based company trying to build a national brand for sports camps and clinics for kids.

Like his mother, Bart says he has always believed his father's purpose in life was to serve as a symbol of healing for the country in the aftermath of the divisive war. "He was a good person to do that," he says.

Nolde Name Not Singled Out in Town

Mount Pleasant took pains to claim Nolde as its own when he died, but today there is no Nolde name gracing the important buildings of the town. His name is on the Michigan Vietnam Memorial on the banks of the Chippewa River, in Island Park, but it's just one of 2,717 in the list of the state's war dead and missing.

Since his death, other places have claimed a piece of Bill Nolde's legacy. The Web site of Menominee, his birthplace, lists him among the 11 natives who lost their lives to the Vietnam War. His name adorns a plaque outside the Onaway Courthouse Historical Museum, along with those of three other Vietnam casualties. A barracks at the U.S. Army post in Vicenza, Italy, home to the missile unit Nolde once commanded, bears his name, and the Sperry Trophy, an honor twice won by Nolde's unit, was retired in his name at Ft. Sill, Okla. Nolde's uniform, his medals and the flag from his coffin are on display in the town of Frankenmuth, in the Michigan's Own Military and Space Museum.

And of course, his name is inscribed on the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. There it becomes clear that in reality, while Nolde may be the last official casualty, he doesn't anymore have the distinction of being the last American who died in Vietnam; in the 27 months between the cease-fire and the official April 30, 1975, end to the war, about 100 Americans were classified as war casualties, their names following Nolde's on the stark black wall.

lthough a core community of civic leaders remains in place, Mount Pleasant is no longer the small town it was when Nolde died. Casino gambling has transformed the Indian reservation into a mecca for 30,000 visitors a day, with more than $257 million in revenues per year. The fortunes of the Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort have brought changes: a new ice sports complex for the town; hotels that are springing up as fast as they can be built; subdivisions with $250,000 homes replacing the cornfields on the rural River Road where the Noldes used to live.

Recently, a new generation in Mount Pleasant has rediscovered Bill Nolde. In 1997, the ROTC unit at Central Michigan--which had given out a modest annual scholarship in Nolde's name, established with the donations that townspeople gave at his death--decided to create a hall of fame. Lt. Col. Rodolfo R. Diaz-Pons, who oversaw the unit at the time, also decided to start a lecture series on the interdisciplinary nature of military leadership, naming the series for Nolde.

"It seemed to fit his intellectual standing as a public speaker," says Diaz-Pons, pastor of the Riverbend Baptist Church in St. Louis, Mich. "He was not only someone worthy of being remembered, but his life and reputation embodied something we wanted to achieve."

Diaz-Pons says he feels a special bond with Nolde and his family. The Vietnam cease-fire, he says, "came into place on my birthday," when he was a senior in high school on his way to a military academy. "When

reading of Col. Nolde's death, I noted that when I got up that morning on my birthday, I had no appreciation and knowledge of what was going on thousands of miles away, so that I would be entering the military in peace and be able to complete my military service in peace."

'So Many Things Get Exaggerated'

Twenty-five years after the end of the war, with more of the pieces in place, we all relate differently to Vietnam, and sometimes our memory fails. Several people told me about a protest by Central Michigan students who burned down a building, but it never happened, insists town historian John Cumming, adding: "So many things get exaggerated."

Meanwhile, Nolde's death, which seemed a big deal at the time to me and my junior high friends, turns out to have had fewer institutional consequences than we all expected.

Many residents don't even know of their town's dubious honor. Nolde's best friend, Michael Chirio, who taught military science with Nolde at CMU and now lives in Detroit, says, his voice breaking, "It all seems for naught. I've got a lot of friends whose names are on that wall." Still, he says, his friend "will always be remembered as the last official casualty; in that respect he'll always have his place."

Indeed, for every person in town who doesn't know the story, I discovered one who did. I found a web of personal ties between families that I didn't know was there, and veterans of Vietnam and other wars with their own emotional tales to tell, stories that bubbled out as they recalled Bill Nolde. Like many Vietnam stories, Nolde's has a deep resonance for those who knew him, whose lives he touched.

Terence Moore, president of nonprofit health-care provider Mid-Michigan Health System, was a student of Nolde's at CMU. "There were a number of us deciding whether to be officers, and he was a role model. I thought that I would like to be like that guy, and if it takes being an Army officer, then that's what I'll do."

John Kulhavi, senior vice president at a brokerage firm, recalls his military science professor as having "all of the traits most men would want: charm, wit, compassion, leadership, understanding, knowledge, and he was a very easygoing person. Even if you did anything wrong, he would correct you with a smile on his face."

He says he thought about the meaning of Nolde's death "for a long time." His conclusion: "It was meant to be; it was what it was. I don't think there is an explanation for it."