Vietnam Gold Star Families

“I Never Thought He Wasn’t Coming Home”
A Special 50th Commemoration Story Project

Essays and Reflections by Vietnam War Gold Star Family Members & Central Connecticut State University Students
“I Never Thought He Wasn’t Coming Home”

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This splendid project came to fruition only because Eileen Hurst, director of the CCSU Veterans History Project, believed that CCSU students had the maturity and expertise to handle such an important and complex assignment.

We are deeply grateful for the faith she had in us and for this amazing creative opportunity.

The students from ENG 483 & Associate Professor Mary Collins would like to thank the

★ Trumbull Rotary Club ★

for its generous support of the Gold Star Project.

Club Members gave Professor Collins an incredible welcome when she came to speak in August 2014. Without hesitation, many individual members came up to her to offer donations and support and encourage her to apply for a Rotary Grant, which she did.

The grant paid for a second run of this magazine and for the cost of producing six-foot panels that will be on display at a special 50th Commemoration of the Vietnam War at the New England Air Museum in July 2015. Each panel will feature one of the Gold Star Families in the magazine. After the event, those panels will travel the state to public libraries and schools to further spread the story of Gold Star Families of Connecticut.

Thank you Rotary Club of Trumbull.
We wish to thank the following individuals and organization for their generous financial contribution to the Gold Star Magazine Project and the Gold Star Traveling Exhibit. Without their support and fund-raising efforts we could not have produced enough magazines for so many of the Gold Star Families in the state or created the Gold Star Traveling Exhibit, which will be on display at the 50th Commemoration of the Vietnam War in July 2015 at the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Connecticut.

Raymond G. Baldwin, Jr
Hughes & Cronin
Public Affairs Strategies
Robert Pirozzoli

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We would also like to thank additional members of the CCSU community that supported our project during the crucial early stages, including Provost Carl Lovitt, the CCSU English Department, Dean Susan Pease and Assistant to the Dean Dr. Brian Sommers.

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We would like to thank José Miguel Pasini for his assistance with the reporting and copy editing.

Mary Collins, CCSU Associate Professor, Creative Writing/Nonfiction

INTRODUCTION

Be silent or speak.

That was the choice facing many families that lost a son or daughter in the Vietnam War. Most felt forced to say little about their loved one’s service because of the seething civic anger over America’s involvement in the Asian conflict.

“He shouldn’t have been over there,” one neighbor told a Gold Star Family at their son’s funeral.

But he was, and he died, and he left behind family and friends that five decades later still feel the impact of that loss. Few of these Gold Star Families have ever even been asked about their experiences since the dreadful day they first learned the news that their son, brother, husband or boyfriend died.

Some heard secondhand on the radio while driving home.

Some heard at work.

Some of the women had to stand in their own living room with two soldiers that refused to tell them the news; they would only deliver it to the man of the house.

But remaining silent about such a loss, about such an experience, comes with a price. In many instances, those that spoke the least wound up with the most personal problems—too much drinking, depression, and post-traumatic stress that impacted their ability to keep a job.

This Gold Star Project celebrates the healing power of storytelling. Six courageous Gold Star Families agreed to share their tales of losing a loved one in Vietnam and then trying to somehow recover and move on. These essays and reflections are not about the men that died, but about those they left behind.

Even profoundly sad stories can take an unexpected positive turn.

Gold Star Mother Mary Kight tells a CCSU student about the loss of her son, Michael Kight, and the helicopter memorial on Route 68 in Prospect, Connecticut, that stands as tribute to his service and sacrifice. The student realizes she has passed that memorial dozens of times in her life, but this time on the way back from the interview, she stops. “I feel honored to know what it stands for,” CCSU student Katherine Wood writes.

This journal offers a combination of student essays and co-authored reflections. In some of the pieces, a CCSU student worked with the Gold Star Family and edited a longer interview down into a more readable narrative told from the point-of-view of the family member or members. By combining the voices of so many generations, we’ve created a community on the page.

Many of the Gold Star Families themselves remarked that one of the positive things they gained over the years was the Gold Star community.

“I have met some wonderful, wonderful people that I would have never known,” Mary Kight says.

Thanks to this Gold Star Project and the CCSU Veterans History Project, all of the ENG 483 CCSU students can say the same.

Mary Collins
Associate Professor, Creative Writing
Central Connecticut State University
Project Editor, ENG 483 Class Project
Spring 2014
Mis-Communicating
Remembering That Day:
A Family’s Reflections of Their Fallen Soldier, Arthur “Artie” McLellan

Diane McLellan, Althea McLellan, and Karen McLellan with Lisa Costa

Artie’s Sister, Diane:
I was playing hooky from high school the day I found out that Artie died. I knew my mom always came home for lunch at noon, so I ran upstairs and hid in my bedroom when I heard noise outside. A knock at the front door surprised me, but as long as it wasn’t my mother, I didn’t care who it was. That was until I saw two officials from the Marine Corps standing on the other side of the door asking if my mom was home. They asked me to take them to her when I told them she was at work, but wouldn’t say why. Mom knew the moment she saw their uniforms, and it was horrible having to see her get that information. It was a bitch day. A bitch day.

I didn’t even relate to the war, it was just that my brother was gone. Each day went by, and after awhile we just ignored it. Back then nobody talked about anything, especially my father. I could see that his heart weighed heavy, and we all went through our supposed mourning process but we never really talked. I would rather talk. I’d talk about these things forever because it helps with the healing.

I still miss my brother and think about him often. I think about the heartache that my mom goes through and I pray that she’s okay. It’s devastating to lose a child. She shouldn’t have had to suffer like that.

Mom knew the moment she saw their uniforms, and it was horrible having to see her get that information.

That was until I saw two officials from the Marine Corps standing on the other side of the door asking if my mom was home. They asked me to take them to her when I told them she was at work, but wouldn’t say why. Mom knew the moment she saw their uniforms, and it was horrible having to see her get that information. It was a bitch day. A bitch day.

Artie’s Mother, Althea:
I was working that day when the officers came to tell me about Artie. The owner came and brought me in the office, and the minute that door opened and I saw who was standing there, I knew. I knew. For two or three days before, I had premonitions that something was wrong but I couldn’t put my finger on it. And I never once thought of Artie because it could have been any one of my kids, and I never even once thought it would be him. But it was.

After it happened, I stayed home for awhile before going back to work. Every time I got to the parking lot I couldn’t go inside the building. I had a relapse; it took a hold of me. I started going to the doctor because of bad anxiety attacks. Matter of fact, I really thought I was going to lose my mind. I even asked the doctor if I was going to go crazy or what was happening to me, and he said, “No. Not if we can help it you won’t go crazy.” He knew the situation. And so I’d go to him in the morning and he’d give me a shot or something like that, and before the day was over with I’d be back there again. It wasn’t strong enough or I couldn’t beat it. I had those anxiety attacks for years and years. I don’t know how many shots I got or how many times I went to the doctor during the week. I was in a daze. I moved. I functioned. But there was... It was just gone. Artie was gone. Eventually, I changed jobs because I couldn’t go back where I got the news from. I couldn’t go back there.

Nobody from the service came to talk to us about what had happened; we got his medals in the mail. Nobody talked about it. Back then it was a sin to talk about someone when they died, and you’d get whipped or [put] in a closet if you did. It was taboo. Nobody from the service came to talk to us about what had happened; we got his medals in the mail. I think it must have hurt a lot of the families of the boys who were hurt or killed in Vietnam that they weren’t presented those medals in person. They should have

Althea McLellan in her living room under a framed collage of Artie at different stages of his boyhood.
been given personally, hand to hand. But the soldiers were ignored. Even Artie’s father didn’t show that it affected him. Maybe I wouldn’t have had such a hard time if he had talked to me about things, but I felt like I had to carry it all by myself. I know I’m not the only person who has had to go through something like that, and everybody else felt it when they lost their sons. So many were lost.

Artie’s Sister, Karen:

To this day, I can still remember it so clearly. It was early spring, one of the most beautiful days that we ever had. I was in middle school at the time and walked home the usual way that afternoon. I remember thinking to myself what a great day it was. As I got closer to the house, an empty feeling filled my heart. I don’t know why. I had no reason to feel that way, I just did. Coming up to the house I could tell by the cars in the driveway that both my mother and father were home, which was odd. When I walked inside they told me about Artie. I can’t even remember my reaction, but the day itself stands out so clearly in my mind. It was beautiful. The sunshine felt perfect. As a kid, everything seemed great. And then it was not so great.

The whole process took so long, and it was two weeks before Artie’s body came back. It was so long that by the time he finally got here it felt like it happened twice. His personal belongings took even longer; it was a month or so for those. Just waiting and waiting and waiting. It became more real when his body got home but there was still no sense of closure. We weren’t allowed to have an open casket given the condition of the body, and I felt like there was no confirmation that he was gone. I wondered, “Is it really true? Is this happening? Is this really the way it is now?”

We treaded on eggshells and it was like if we didn’t talk about it, it wasn’t real. I was always very cognizant of not making my mom more upset than what the situation had already created, though there were many times that I wanted to ask questions because I was so young. As I started getting older, I had even more questions. I avoided the subject to protect her, but it was probably wrong on my part. Maybe talking about it would have been better for her because it would have given her an opportunity to unload some stuff, too.

As a mother, she was trying to look out for what was left behind, who was still alive. But she couldn’t protect us from it.

All of us kids passed the cemetery he was buried in every day on our way to school. Mom didn’t want that for us because it would be a constant reminder, but she also knew Artie had wanted to come home. As a mother, she was trying to look out for what was left behind, who was still alive. But she couldn’t protect us from it.

When we arrive at Rosemary Reynolds’ home she is waiting at the door to greet us. She welcomes us into her neat living room and invites us to sit down. Rosemary settles in across from us, rocking and clasping her hands in her lap as we talk.

About 45 minutes into the interview our talk leads us to letters. Rosemary brings us a large binder overflowing with papers. We see photographs, newspaper clippings, letters; it is like a time capsule. I pick up a letter off the table, carefully, and begin to read the faded words: “The personal effects of your son, SP4 Rodney—”

“Rodney’s name was Ronald, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know how to proceed. Hesitating, I ask Rosemary, “They called him Rodney?”

“No Ronald,” she answers matter-of-fact. Pressing the issue makes me cringe, but I press further. “No, they called him Rodney.”

“What?” She leans over to glimpse at the letter, says, “Ha! Must be a typo,” then goes back to the other artifacts.

“I continue reading the line. “The personal effects of your son, SP4 Rodney J. Sheehy—” Ughhh, why did I say anything? The thought of having to point out another typo leaves me with the taste of discomfort in my mouth.

I swallow and say, “They spelled his last name wrong, too.”

Personal Effects: a metal cup and a “Code of Conduct” pamphlet every soldier carried.
I hand Rosemary the letter; my discomfort sits like a rock in my stomach. She takes her glasses and settles them on her nose.

The room is quiet.

“Oh yeah,” she pauses.

“Well, they had 50,000 deaths,” she trails off. After a moment she puts the paper down. “I never noticed that before.”

Rosemary said they had 50,000 deaths in that war. I discovered it was closer to 58,000 deaths. That means 58,000 bodies to handle; 58,000 families to send letters to; the personal effects of 58,000 men to send home. But is the sheer vastness of the paperwork the military must process for each soldier an excuse to misspell both the first and last name of the soldier who died for his country?

What’s the excuse for Ronald being drafted without even knowing where Vietnam was? What excuse is there that he died after being In-Country 11 days?

There is no excuse.

There is no excuse that his girlfriend heard of his death on the radio while driving on Route 8 and almost crashed her car. There is no excuse for the officers who wouldn’t tell Ronald’s mother that her son had died. There is no excuse that David Sheehy died from friendly fire 11 days after his cousin when he should have been home with his grieving family.

Sitting in Rosemary’s living room, looking at the misspelled name, I have suddenly stepped over the line and opened up a story to the world that has been sitting quiet for 50 years, a story of miscommunication, of loss, of grief, of moving forward.

Friendly Fire

Frances McCann with Nikki Sambitsky

When you hear me talking about my son you are going to think that everything he did was perfect. He wasn’t a perfect teenager. He was as much of a devil as the one next to him. But, he had a heart for other people. He always looked out for somebody else.

My husband had passed away before Jimmy got killed, and I had to deal with it myself. When they had come and told me that Jimmy got killed, I was in St. Mary’s Hospital. The nurse came and she gave me a pill and she said, “Here, I want you to take this.” She had a strange look on her face. I didn’t question it. I did what she told me. Her eyes were like big saucers. She looked at me and I was lying in bed. I couldn’t walk. I had a herniated disk in my back. She walked out and in walked two Marines. I said, “Just tell me that he’s wounded.”

They said to me, “We can’t.” They said he was killed by friendly fire. I dealt with that for 30 years. Friendly fire. What happened to him? I remember that as though I am sitting here telling you today. To live for 30 years and know that he got killed by friendly fire, you know, what is it? You heard about it during World War II and what’s it all about? I kept trying to find out.

His body came back on March 11, which was my brother’s birthday. It was sealed in glass. He was all together in his blue uniform. You could see everything but the leg parts. You couldn’t see another mark on him. You could see it was him. The undertaker said he got hit behind his right ear. That’s what killed him. For years I wondered. I met a journalist, Laura Palmer. She was up at the New Britain Library giving a talk and
I got nosy, so I went over and I wanted to meet her. I told her about Jimmy and she said, “I’ll find out.” She got in touch with somebody and they located this man, and he was the one who gave the story of what happened to Jimmy. There was a Marine who sent me a letter. He was from the state of Washington.

But that fella [the other Marine] was with him. He was only 19 years old. He wrote me a story. He asked me if I knew anything about the gallon can of peaches. He proceeded to tell me. He said they were climbing a hill and Jimmy was lagging behind and they kept saying—they never called them by their first name, it was always their last name—they kept saying, “Carney, come on!

opened up his pack and he had a gallon of peaches in it. They opened the can and everyone was having peaches. They said he must have bartered with somebody to get the can.

They were climbing a hill, and the sun shone on Jimmy’s helmet and somebody fired and that’s when he got hit. It seems as though they were trying to get out of the rice paddies and get to the top of the hill. It was somebody from their own company. The fella, when he found out that he hit someone from his own company, he went berserk and they sent him home. They discharged him and from what I understand he got into drugs and alcohol and he passed away.

So there’s a lot of sadness. Knowing exactly what happened to him—it was a relief. It changed my life in a lot of ways. I often think of him and what he would be like today. It’s just a hard situation to put together. I wonder who he would marry, how many children he would have. Stuff like that after 45 years. I met a veteran in church two years ago and his birthday is in June and he did three tours in Vietnam. His birthday was about three days before Jimmy’s. That man will be 71, and I think, oh my God, when I think of Jimmy, it’s, you know, you don’t forget it. You don’t forget it.

Nobody knows what it’s like until you lose a child, whether it’s in an accident or in the war. It’s just something that you think about that it’s not going to happen to you.

I don’t know, like I say he was far from an angel. He did devilish things but there were a lot of good things that he did that you can’t pick up a rug and shove them under and just forget about. Those are the memories that I try to keep alive.
Monumental Recognition

Katherine Wood

Stop and think about the countless things you drive past on a daily basis. Whether there are buildings, trees, parks, you never actually take the time to acknowledge any of it, unless you’re physically looking for it. I remain stunned when I realize how many years I drove past a monument dedicated to the son of my future Gold Star Mother interviewee.

Driving along Route 68 towards Prospect, Connecticut, the life-size helicopter memorial grabs any traveler’s attention for that split second, where it emerges in clear view through the windshield, then passes through the windows of the moving car; just another landmark during a drive through a typical small New England town.

With the loss of her child, Mary turned out to be a remarkably strong woman. She emerged from the damage and ridicule and recognized her son as a true hero, one who died for something he was passionate about.

“He didn’t want to just go into anything; he wanted to be a helicopter pilot. He always admired airplanes.” Mary now says that with pride, no longer feeling alone or afraid to speak freely about her deceased son to others. “Now we’re starting to be acknowledged and it makes us feel a little better.” Mary names the many groups she has joined, including the Gold Star Mothers and the Veterans of Foreign Wars [VFW]. By being a part of this group, Mary met a veteran named Leo Fortier. He suffered from PTSD and heavily got into drugs and alcohol, questioning why he made it back alive from Vietnam while some of his friends didn’t.

“This young veteran from Vietnam felt like he came back for a purpose, like ‘Why did I come back?’” Once he met Mary, he found his purpose. “He wanted to do something to remember.” Leo commissioned a helicopter memorial in Michael’s honor. “I think in doing that, it made him feel like he came back for a reason, and when people see the helicopter they remember, and that was his purpose.”

Mary recalls the day of the dedication, November 3, 2002, in Prospect. During the dedication, she received medals in remembrance of Michael, including an air medal with a V for valor. The citation that goes along with this medal explains that Michael and his crew volunteered to go on a mission to rescue seven airmen who had gone down in enemy territory. The citation says, “Under heavy enemy fire and severe weather conditions it was a success.” Mary couldn’t be prouder of her son, and now, with the help of this helicopter, society can see him as a hero. “Whether you like it or not, Michael was my son and I’m proud of him. And I think [the helicopter] was mostly the turning point,” in terms of allowing herself to publicly show her pride for a son who died in a controversial war.

The helicopter no longer stands as just another landmark to overlook. I now recognized its existence and specifically drove to visit it. I felt a connection. I took the time to pull over and study it, now understanding its physical and metaphorical structure. I acknowledge it. I feel honored to know what it stands for. No longer will it just be another blurred image blending in among the trees as I drive along Route 68 towards Prospect. I can now announce out loud to either myself or to a fellow passenger in the car: “I know the story behind that helicopter.”

Photograph of Michael’s framed medals, including the air medal with a V for valor (top left).
Moving Forward
I am not a very religious person. After the death of Stanley in the Vietnam War in 1970, I became more spiritual than anything else. His death was a surprise to me. I never thought he wasn’t coming home. We were both the youngest out of six children. I think our bond was strong because Stanley and I were the last two children living with my parents. When he was in Vietnam he would write to me often and he would ask me what the new top 10 albums were. Before he left for the war we were always hanging around each other. The pictures I look at today, with our arms wrapped lovingly around each other, these were not posed, that is just how close we were. I am lucky to have had that strong of a relationship with my brother.

The night before my brother’s death I had a dream that he passed away.

I remember the day of his death. I was babysitting the neighbor’s kids with my best friend. Our backyard fences lined up to each other perfectly. I remember going to the fence and one of the little boys, I think Ronnie, said to me, “Uncle Skeezix dead.” My father nick-named my brother after a cartoon character that had big ears and a lively personality. “Uncle Skeezix dead,” he repeated again to me. In shock, I could not believe what he was saying. I remember my mother handing me the letter that two soldiers had dropped off. “He wanted you to know first,” she said through tears.

The night before my brother’s death I had a dream that he passed away. I woke up in tears and forced myself to go back to sleep. “It was only a dream,” I repeated to myself. I never told anyone the next day about my nightmare. I did not want to upset my mother with just a dream. But I have always felt that he was killed on June 11th, not the 12th.

After the day that the news of Stanley’s death was brought to my family, I found it difficult to go to school. My grades were half-decent, but my mother made me go back to take my history final. Kids would say, “Sorry about your brother” or “I heard what happened.” What do you say to someone who lost their brother in such a controversial war? I felt no comfort in school and after that day I decided to stay home and wait for my brother’s body to return to us from Vietnam.

We found out much later that Stanley was killed instantly by a Vietnamese sniper. Because of this, I embarrassingly harbored resentment towards Asian people for years, as I felt they were responsible for my brother’s death. In 1974, four years after Stanley was killed, I worked for State Farm Insurance out of Newington doing clerical work. I had worked there for a while when they brought in a new man named Kim; he was Vietnamese. I found it difficult to work with him. He always followed me around. He wanted me to train him. I did not know why. I did not even know this man.

One day after work I was outside smoking my cigarette waiting for my boyfriend to come pick me up when Kim came outside. As Kim lit his cigarette, I said to him, “You know, my brother was killed in the war four years ago.” Kim looked at me and said, “So was mine.”

I was baffled by his response. His brother was killed, too? I never even thought about the young men that died on the other side. They had families, they were brothers, and they were sons. The men on either side of the war were so young. They were all just boys. His answer to me completely changed my views. I was no longer mad at Vietnamese people. I realized then that it was not their fault. Both sides were in the war. I have never told anyone that story.

I am not a religious person. But that day I felt that God had brought that man into my life for a reason. He was kind, and we built a strong friendship after that day.
Aftershock

Alan Collette with Heidi Eilenberger

The Vietnam War started and they were drafting guys. I said to [my younger brother] Curtis, “Jesus, they’re gonna draft you, and they put you over there on the front line. You oughta join the Navy. There’s no Navy war over there.” So, he did. He wasn’t stationed in Vietnam. [He] became a loadmaster on a transport plane over in Moffat Field, [and] they would just fly in and out. It was a wonderful place to be stationed. They’d make numerous stops on the way—stopped at Turkey, stopped at Okinawa. It was a big adventure.

He was on his last trip. The plane exploded in the air, and then when it hit the water it exploded again. That was it. He was just on the plane, bad timing, wrong place at the wrong time. That was his story right there. Nothing you can do, it’s just the way it works.

We weren’t alone. There [were] other people getting killed. There were other people. It’s a war. That’s what happens.

When I was in the Marine Corps, I just thought those guys were all wrong and we were all right, and that’s the way it is. Then I read a book about Vietnam and what the hell it really was all about, and it changed my mind completely.

I know a little bit because I was in and I got out. You [were] a big shot when you came home. Not the Vietnam guys. The Vietnam guys were not looked upon that way. It was too bad. They had it pretty tough. They were drafted. You’re drafted, you’re gone. Say, “I don’t want to fight over there. I’ve got nothing against them.” Too bad, get over there. Once you’re there, you can’t do anything about it. Shoot or get shot. That’s what it is.

They never retrieved his body. He’s not really MIA in our minds. There was no body to have a funeral or anything. We had a service at the church, but that was it. It was really kinda tough. There was no closure. [A] politician in town [tells] me they’re doing a lot of digging out there trying to find remains. They’re getting remains every now and then. I don’t see the point to it. It’s like being buried at sea. What the hell’s the point of the remains? To me, it don’t mean nothing. I hope they don’t find anything, really.

That was just a long time ago. A long time ago that doesn’t have any bearing on today whatsoever. We have the prayer said for him every year. We have the mass said for our parents and him. We remember.
During the Vietnam War, any night 19-year-old Ted Ciesielski made it back to his bunk alive he celebrated with a drink, a joint, and music. A year later, when he finally got discharged, still standing and physically in one piece, he walked away from it all with just his shaving kit and the clothes on his back. Stateside there were no parades or smiles.

He found the nearest bar and tried to forget his In-Country life.

In between being discharged, trying to forget his past and gain control of his life, he found Monica and married her when he was 21. In a few years he had a baby girl, Roxanne. Although he had a great family growing up and had made one of his own, something was missing that was never going to be replaced—his brother Stanley who died in Vietnam on June 12, 1970. A week later, his brother’s body arrived in Connecticut in a casket.

On a perfect weather day in June, two soldiers came to the door to deliver the news. “Elizabeth, my youngest sister, was babysitting at the time,” said Ted, “and Jenny, my other sister, was at work. When I came home from work that day and found out, I stormed out of the house and did not come back for a few hours, so distraught over the news.”

Silence fell over the house. For years, some of them fought to break the silence while others, especially their father, did all they could to sustain it.

Stormed out of the house and did not come back for a few hours, so distraught over the news.”

Silence fell over the house. For years, some of them fought to break the silence while others, especially their father, did all they could to sustain it. They all knew that only time could ease the pain.

Since then Monica and Ted have had three children. Monica says the young adults of the 1960s grew up so different from today’s generation. Ted agrees and encourages his daughters to make connections as they did when they met Carl Potter, Stanley’s friend during the Vietnam War. Carl found Stanley’s name on the wall, searched, and contacted Ted’s family. He recounted how Stanley died and how he held Stanley in his arms during one of his last few moments of life. This story helped relieve Carl of some of the guilt from the war, as well as answered the questions Ted and his family had about Stanley’s death.

Ted is currently retired and spends his free time doing carpentry. He and his wife spend a lot of time with their children and grandchildren and tell them about their uncle and great uncle.

“I will [always] talk about the Vietnam War because it is part of my history and my life, and it was a shame [we] had to lose our brother.”
A Private Grief
Brian Burghoff

It’s just like now. It’s happening now. Today, with Iraq and Afghanistan. There’s a lot of guys getting their legs blown off and arms blown off. It’s a terrible thing, really. It’s very private; most people don’t experience it. But there’s still a lot of guys there.

And a lot of them are getting shot.

Alan Collette

It’s all very private.

Alan Collette tells me over the phone that I’ll spot his house by the flag out front. Less than a week after St. Patrick’s Day, 2014, the Collette home flies the orange and green of the Irish. There is a four-leaf clover embroidered into the middle white. Next to the door inside the front porch, a polished wooden plaque bears the family name over an image of an armed soldier in dress blues against the stars and stripes. But there are no black ribbons, no bumper stickers plastered on the cars in the driveway, nothing that screams out to the world going by: “We lost someone we loved.”

Curtis Collette’s airplane went into Cam Ranh Bay on June 17, 1966. Alan, his brother, tells us, “They list him as MIA because they never got his remains. But [he’s] not, really. We know where he went.” Witnesses had seen Curtis’s plane explode.

He was on his last trip.

I don’t find Curtis in Alan’s firm handshake and words of welcome. I don’t find Curtis in the smiling face of Carol Pudvah, Alan and Curtis’s sister, who tells me how nice it is to finally meet me in person. I don’t find him in the warm glow of the polished wooden table we all sit around. There, Alan and Carol laugh as they tell us a story from their childhood.

Carol remembers the word “guts.”

“He used to get upset when we would say ‘guts,’” Carol says, grinning.

“He put on a big act like it was really upsetting him,” Alan tells us. “He’d get all mad and run off and hide in the corner somewhere, and we found him over there laughing like hell.”

The back and forth, the smiles, the way the memories seem to come so easily and so painlessly. I almost expect Curtis to walk through the door, maybe carrying a plate of food or a bottle of wine, and ask what everyone’s laughing about.

I ask Alan if he keeps any objects that hold special meaning.

“Nothing big,” Alan says. “He didn’t save anybody’s life or anything.”

He didn’t save anybody’s life or anything. I find myself not believing that. And I find myself believing that, though he doesn’t admit it to us, Alan doesn’t believe it either.

Curtis was a Navy loadmaster. He flew into Vietnam with supplies. He wasn’t killed on the front lines while dragging fellow soldiers out of harm’s way. But I can’t help but see one of those soldiers lying wounded in the jungle. And I see that soldier being treated in the field with medical supplies that would not have been there if not for Curtis. And I see that soldier returning home to his family instead of dying in a smoky clearing in Vietnam.

Curtis, returning from missions to Vietnam, would fly into Moffat Field in San Francisco, his cargo the bodies of the dead. I wonder to how many families Curtis personally brought some element of closure.

 Alan says Curtis’s death didn’t bring about any monumental changes in the family’s dynamic at the time. “He wasn’t living at home. He was away.” But the sheen over his eyes betrays his exterior stoicism. “There was no body to
It is as though they don't consider their grief to be their own, exclusively. Rather, they carry a share of the pain borne of some wellspring belonging to every family who lost someone in Vietnam...

have a funeral or anything. It was really kind of tough. There was no closure there whatsoever."

Curtis, returning from missions to Vietnam, would fly into Moffat Field in San Francisco, his cargo the bodies of the dead. I wonder to how many families Curtis personally brought some element of closure. I wonder how many families, reeling from grief, felt grateful that at least they had a body to bury.

I ask Alan and Carol if they still deal with that lack of closure. Alan says they don’t, that they weren’t alone. I think he’s going to tell me how they were comforted by outpourings of support. But instead: “There were other people getting killed. It’s a war. That’s what happens.”

I find the Collettes’ grief to be defined by humility. It is as though they don’t consider their grief to be their own, exclusively. Rather, they carry a share of the pain borne of some wellspring belonging to every family who lost someone in Vietnam, every soldier who lost part of himself there, every soldier and family touched by loss 150 years ago, 100 years ago, 70 years ago, 50 years ago, today.

It’s happening now.

Alan says he doesn’t think Curtis’s death has had any bearing on their lives as they are today. It’s been so long; they have moved on. But even there, in that movement, I find Curtis. He is there in their grief, but more significantly, he is there in their decision not to let their grief control their lives. He is there in their memories, clear as the crystal in the cabinet opposite the American flag hanging like a sentry, a symbol of their solemn patriotism, and he is there, too. He’s been there as the pain made room for joy, as the family made room for wives, husbands, and children. He is there in the spirit of his nephew, Alan’s son.

“I named my son after him,” Alan says. “So, we got another Curtis Collette running around town. He’s got a couple of sons now himself.”

Curtis could be everywhere. It’s just that, from the outside, it is hard to tell.

It’s all very private.

The Gold Star Mothers Memorial at the top of the stairs in Waterbury’s City Hall.
I was home from school [for Christmas break]. We found out probably 10:00 in the morning. Three officers came to the house but they wouldn’t talk to me or my mother. My mother went through World War II. She knew what was happening, they just wouldn’t tell her.

I was mad ‘cause, you know, I said, “I’m 18, I’m no dummy!” But they insisted they had to talk to my father. I said, “If you go bother my father at work, he is going to be soooo mad!” We had to wait ‘til he came home.

[That day] was just a fog. My mother was in the back bedroom; she wouldn’t come out. She wasn’t crying or anything. I was waiting; I didn’t realize what was going on.

[Ronnie] actually came back in the middle of the night on New Year’s Eve. When we went in the undertaker said to us, “I haven’t checked the casket yet. I’m not sure if it’s open.” If the body was pretty bad, unrecognizable, they sealed it. “There was no way,” he said, “you were going to open those caskets.” But [Ronnie’s] was open. It looked like he was sleeping.

He was my best friend. Growing up, we were only two years apart. We did everything together. In those days—my mother with the five kids, my father working—we were the gofers. She’d say, “Ronnie, take your sister, here’s the list.” She had it all written down. That’s what we did. We were the gofers. We were like twins. We could look at each other, and we didn’t have to say what we were thinking. We could tell.

[Nine days after Ronnie’s death,] I had gone back to school. I was only 18 years old, not even thinking that anything else could have gone wrong, and then [my house mother] told me my cousin passed away in Vietnam. The sad part about it was he shouldn’t have. He should have escorted my brother’s body home. So, off I go, [back] home.

Our house was not a happy place. [My parents] both got sick. Ron passed away in December; David passed away in January. I spent as much time at home as I could. My father worked at the same company for 42 years and he never missed a day—rain, snow, sleet, sickness.

I looked at him, he was supposed to go in at three, and I said “Daddy, you’re not getting ready for work?”

He said, “No, call me in. I’m sick.”

First time, and that was in January. It was like a snowball rolling down the hill.

He came down with pneumonia.

My mother had some surgeries.

My father broke his back.

It was just one thing, after another, after another.

I had to stay home for a long time with mom and dad. I was so busy taking care of them. Just try to keep going, you know? They didn’t have grief counseling like they do now. Just try to be strong for them.

My husband and I went to the Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C. You [could] hear people breathing it [was] so quiet. [Peter] passed away in February, 2013. He was in Vietnam, also, had to do thirteen months in Vietnam.

[Peter] had PTSD. It wasn’t too bad when he was younger and working, and we were raising the kids. We had a house, you know, there was always something to do. Always something to do. He didn’t really have time to think about it, until he retired.

He had to write down what happened in order to get certified for PTSD with the VA. I typed it for him. [Peter] was an alcoholic. Because [of] the alcoholism, he used to shake a lot. Tried to drink it all away. But he was a good guy, kept the roof over our heads, food on the table. Everybody was well taken care of. He just—we say he had his demons.

I did. I tried. There were days when it…it was harder in the end.
Mothering Hope
Mary Kight with Evan Tingey

One of the reasons I joined the Gold Star Mothers was because when I lost Michael, I felt very alone. I had nobody to tell, “Michael was a helicopter pilot. He saved so many people. I am so proud of him.” I couldn’t do that.

When I joined the Gold Star Mothers, there were mothers from World War II and the Korean War and they knew how I felt. It didn’t matter what war, we still had that bond. They were such a big help and we try to do the same thing now with the new mothers [from Iraq and Afghanistan]. They know if they have a hard time they can call one of us and we can tell them, “You’re always going to grieve for that one person, but you go on with your life.”

I didn’t even know there was such a thing as a Gold Star Mother. Nobody ever said anything about them. I went to a VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] luncheon one day and they said, “Well, you’re a Gold Star Mother” and I thought, maybe they thought I was a nice mother. They said, “You don’t know what a Gold Star Mother is?” I didn’t.

People didn’t really want to talk about it and I was afraid to mention it because I didn’t know what kind of response I would get from people. Some of them would say, “He shouldn’t have been there in the first place,” which was their opinion. In fact somebody told me that right at his wake. “He was a nice boy but he had no business being there.” That kind of hurt me.

But like I said, once I got with the Gold Star Mothers, I realized it didn’t just happen to me, it happened to other mothers and they knew how I felt, and I could open up to them. But still I held back when I was with other people. I just thought that I could be open with other mothers. It was hard to mention, but it was a really bad war for people to understand, so I would never say anything.

Now I’m proud to mention I’m a Gold Star Mother because people say, “Oh wow! Tell us about Michael,” or something like that, and it’s good to talk about him. I didn’t want to be where I didn’t want to talk about him because then it was like he didn’t exist. I was finally able to go to Gold Star Mothers meetings and I could tell them what Michael did, how he got an air medal with a V. The V stands for valor.

But I have to admit that I was very upset at first. I’m Catholic and, at that time when Michael went overseas in February, we had a nine day novena. That means you go to church every night for nine nights. And of course my prayer was to keep Michael safe. And of course when I got the news, I felt really let down by God. I felt like, “I trusted you, and look what happened.” But I kept thinking that I saw these veterans who were really messed up and that maybe God had a reason, maybe it was for the best. Maybe not for me personally but for Michael.

I’ve met some wonderful, wonderful people that I would have never known. I went to a wake the other night, and somebody says to me, “Every time I talk about something everybody says, ‘Oh, I know Mary Kight.’” Everybody on the Veterans Memorial Committee, they look out for me, they’re so good to me. Same thing with the American Legion and the VFW. And I really have some wonderful friends I would have never, ever had. It keeps me busy, like when I wake up in the morning I think what am I going to do today? I feel like for 84 years old I’m in good health. I don’t know what would happen if I got up in the morning and had nothing to look forward to, except maybe television.
Frances McCann’s son, James Patrick Carney, was killed in action during the Vietnam War in 1969. Photographs, cherished objects and letters transform a portion of her small apartment into a Memory Box of sorts for her son; the first thing visitors see when they move through her front door is an American flag hanging next to a Gold Star.

Several photographs of Jimmy line the walls and the tops of bookshelves.

“That was his high school picture. I [also] have his yearbook that says what he did.”

A framed black and white photograph hangs directly over the center of her kitchen table.

“I look at his pictures. There he was at his Communion. If you notice he’s got his hand around my back and on my shoulder. His father is holding his sister and I’m holding the baby.”

Above the family photo is a framed envelope with “James Patrick Carney Jr.” shaded in pencil given to her by her grandson, who visited the Vietnam Monument in Washington, D.C.

“His father is holding his sister and I’m holding the baby.”

Frances also received a collage dedicated to Jimmy that she fastened to the outside of her bathroom door.

“That was done by Cheshire High School and I didn’t know they were doing it. I went to the Wall and they gave me that.”

On her bed sits a teddy bear dressed in a Marine uniform that she received as a gift from a family member; on her couch lies a blanket with the Marine Corps symbol.

Frances has more than just photographs to look at and remember her son by every day. A small, hand-made, wooden bookshelf holds small trinkets on one of her living room walls.

“When he was in high school he made that bookshelf. He made his sister a headboard for her bed, a bookcase headboard.”

Along with the bookshelf, dozens of wooden crosses sporadically place remind Frances of when Jimmy was young.

“He went to Catholic school, [and] he was an altar boy; there’s that up there, and there’s one behind there, there’s one over there, there’s one on the mirror in the bathroom.”

“His father is holding his sister and I’m holding the baby.”

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Although they are not easily visible, Frances keeps two large binders stuffed full of letters, photographs, articles, and documentation.

“I have two loose leaf binders that are all about him. This book and I have another one over there, too. This is all his papers.”

In the same binders, the letter Frances wrote to journalist Laura Palmer (and her reply letter) asking for information about how Jimmy died sit in the page protectors she keeps everything in.

Sitting directly next to a photograph of Jimmy is a photo of the Marine who explained what happened to him and what friendly fire meant. Frances keeps his letter in her binder as a way of finally being able to understand what everything meant.

“That fella that’s in the Marine uniform there—the dark one—he sent me a letter and he was the one who gave me the story of what actually happened.”

An obvious reminder of Jimmy’s service is his Flag Box, which Frances leans in front of her television.

The one thing Frances continues to hold onto as an every day reminder is the ring she wears on her left hand.

“[Jimmy] bought me this ring with his money that he got [at] 16 years old.”
We cordially invite all Vietnam veterans and Gold Star families to come help commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.

Date: July 10–12, 2015
Place: Connecticut Air Guard Base, East Granby, CT and New England Air Museum, Windsor Locks, CT

For more information and daily schedules visit www.ccsu.edu/vhp.

This historic event is designed to honor, thank and recognize our Vietnam veterans, to honor and thank our Gold Star families and recognize their sacrifice, and to help educate the next generation of Americans who were not alive at the time of the Vietnam War.

Many special events are planned for the Vietnam 50th weekend:

- Amazing Vietnam-era aircraft and vehicle displays
- Helicopter rides in the famous UH-1D “Huey”
- Dynamic speakers
- “Flybys” and open cockpit tours manned by Vietnam veterans
- Hands-on demonstrations
- A highlight of each day will be the “Rescue at Dawn,” a one-of-a-kind, Army combat aerial re-enactment demonstrating the rescue of a downed pilot by the “Sky Soldiers.” Sure to be popular will be the “Veterans’ Gathering” tent for veterans to reunite and reconnect!
- There will also be programs and exhibits specifically designed to remember those who gave the “last full measure of devotion.”

The Vietnam 50th is sponsored by the CCSU Veterans History Project Vietnam War Commemoration Committee. Collaborating partners are New England Air Museum, the Connecticut National Guard, Bradley International Airport, the Connecticut Department of Veterans’ Affairs, and the Association of the United States Army (AUSA).
For more information on the Veterans History Project contact Eileen Hurst, Director of the CCSU Veterans History Project at hursteim@ccsu.edu.