Loss, Renewal, and a Dream Fulfilled

A Journey to Hallowed Ground in Vietnam

April 2008

4605 Words/Photos

By WILLIAM W. STILWAGEN, Bush Guide

WILLIAM W. STILWAGEN
17467 PLANTATION ROAD
ONANCOCK, VA 23417-2664
757-787-4070
Loss, Renewal, and a Dream Fulfilled

PART I of III:  THE PATH GIVEN

Judy Shields understood her daughter’s desire. Marcie, after all, had never met her father, WO-1 [Warrant Officer - One] Robert Hazen Shields, II. He was killed on August 15, 1969 while piloting his UH-1H (Huey helicopter) on a combat assault in Vietnam.

Marcie wanted to go to Vietnam to see where, and to find out how – and perhaps why – her father had to die when she was only 35-days old. Growing up without her Dad was tough.

But alas, in 2003, Marcie died suddenly at the age of 33 (just 7 years longer than her father’s life had been). Marcie never made it to Vietnam, never got the chance to fulfill her dream.

In 2007, Judy was talking with a friend who is bush guide for Vietnam Battlefield Tours, a non-profit company that specializes in returning veterans to the places of their youth. He explained how he could get her to the crash site. Judy decided to live her daughter’s dream and make the trip to Vietnam.

Vietnam Battlefield Tours (VBT) immediately began planning for the difficult trek that would take place in April 2008. Well-versed in military research VBT began to locate witnesses to the crash and uncovered not only an accounting of the shoot-down from the squadron archives, but pulled de-classified SITREPS (situation reports) from the infantry battalion that was there on the days surrounding the battle. They also recruited a squadron member, Tom Taggart, to come on the tour who was the crew chief flying in the helicopter in front of the Huey that was shot down. Gaining various coordinates and information from all sources, VBT staff matched all information to old 1:50,000 combat tactical maps and was able to piece together the events of that fateful day.

The greatest challenge facing VBT was how to ensure that they would get to the exact location of the crash site which was located deep in the mountainous jungles of central Vietnam. After 39-years of monsoons, typhoons, erosion, and unchecked vegetative growth, little was recognizable in terms of countryside topography that had been important during the war years. In addition, VBT needed to find the most efficient and safest route in. For this, they turned to their hand-held GPS (Global Positioning System). The GPS had already gotten them to some of the remotest battlefields of Vietnam. From the bomb crater where a Marine lost his legs, to isolated mountaintops better known as the Hill-fight peaks west of Khe Sanh, to the exact spot where a Medal of Honor recipient gave his last full measure, the GPS in the hands of an expert bush guide can pinpoint locations and prove that they were where we said they were.

Departing from the west coast, Judy, her sister and brother-in-law (who would share in this pilgrimage), along with a small band of veterans arrived in Hong Kong and changed to the plane that would take them to Hanoi, Vietnam. For two days, they explored the enemy city. These new visitors were surprised to see a monument to John McCain. And they soon discovered that the North Vietnamese were gracious and very happy to meet every need of the Americans. A
command briefing by JPAC (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command) was the first stop after lunch. A visit to the Hoa Lo Prison (the infamous Hanoi Hilton) rounded out the first day. A wonderful hotel and even better food put the visitors at ease in a place they never thought of as a country, just a war.

The next morning, the group visited additional sites in the city. After lunch they made their way to an A-6 Intruder crash site northwest of Hanoi. One of the participants, a Marine Vietnam veteran, was related to the Intruder’s navigator who had been listed as Missing-In-Action until declared KIA/BNR (Killed In Action / Body Not Recovered) at the end of the war. Interviewing a local village resident who witnessed the crash some 40 years earlier, they learned that both crew members did not survive to become prisoners. The surface to air missile that hit the A-6 may have killed them or rendered them unconscious. They did not eject. They stayed with the disabled aircraft as it crashed into the side of a hill. The impact was so violent that the pilot’s legs were ripped off and he was thrown from the wreckage 50-meters to the left front. The navigator’s right arm was torn off and he was thrown to the right and into a rice paddy. Both were dead when approached by the villagers. Their bodies and amputated parts were collected by the local farmers and buried in a common grave about a kilometer from the crash site. While gruesome, the knowledge gained from visiting the site put all the pieces to the puzzle together for the family. It was very important to learn that the men had never been prisoners and they did not suffer. Not knowing how they had died had been very painful to the loved ones. Now the burden of uncertainty had been lifted. JPAC had excavated the burial site in 2002 and the mixed remains were buried together in Arlington National Cemetery in 2006.
The group then flew to the former South Vietnam landing at Phu Bai Airfield, an old US base now being used as a commercial airport and traveled the short distance to Hue City. For the next nine days, VBT put the group through its paces. Major and minor battles were studied and I-Corps battlefields were explored including Hue, Quang Tri, the DMZ bases of Dong Ha, Con Thien, the Rockpile, Vandergrift Combat Base, Khe Sanh, and Lang Vei. They also climbed to the top of notorious Hill 861A, site of many vicious Marine Corps battles.

One of the highlights of the visit to the DMZ was providing assistance to a Bru Montagnard tribal village. Montagnards are mountain people and do not consider themselves Vietnamese, or Laotian, or Cambodian and seem to be stuck in the Bronze Age. Living in houses on stilts, they are hunters and gatherers who live off the jungle. They are therefore, quite poor. As Americans always do worldwide, this little band of Americans opened their hearts and brought medicines, clothing, fishing gear, and school supplies to share. For whatever reasons these travelers had come to Vietnam, personal or tragic, they rose above their own contemplations and wanted to help this village better the lives of its people.
Bru woman

Bru woman
Bru woman

Bru child
Bru woman

Bru child and grandmother
The group continued south, visiting areas in and around Da Nang. Everywhere the group went they were humbled by the warmth and the gratitude of the South Vietnamese who have never forgotten the sacrifices made by the Americans on their behalf.

After a free day in Da Nang City, the group traveled south to Chu Lai Air Base, Duc Pho Helicopter Base, and Quang Ngai, all important areas for this tour. The helicopter crew chief on the tour and Judy’s husband had served there. They were essentially retracing their paths, which was slowly leading them to the crash site.

PART II of III: THE CRASH OF DOLPHIN 993

In August of 1969, a communist .51 caliber anti-aircraft machinegun and crew had been firing at aircraft going into the San Juan Hill outpost and consequently, had sequestered the base. The .51 cal had shot down three helicopters, and damaged many others, so far that year. According to Ben Kennedy, a Huey crew chief who witnessed the loss of Shields’ helicopter, “One was a CH-47 [Chinook helicopter] that was shot down as it delivered a sling load to San Juan Hill. The NVA [North Vietnam Army] gun had effectively closed San Juan Hill to any helicopter support, and it was vital to the unit stationed there, that the gun be taken out of action. The Hill had been closed to helicopter traffic for at least a week, maybe a few days more, and the situation was getting bad for the men on top of that LZ [landing zone].”

Since the jungle was so thick, and the gun so highly mobile, it had never been destroyed with artillery or air strikes. After doing their damage, the NVA would quickly move the gun to avoid being hit. On August 14, 1969 as Charlie Company, 4\textsuperscript{th} of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Infantry (4/3) was being inserted into a hot [actively under fire by the enemy] LZ, one of the helicopters was downed by the .51 cal. Luckily all survived. Heavy fighting ensued and Charlie Company spent the night guarding the downed helicopter until the next day’s recovery.

Late in the morning of August 15, Shields and his crew were briefed and flew from their base in Duc Pho to a PZ (Pickup Zone) where they boarded six grunts of Bravo Company, 4/3. There were four Huey helicopters in the lift that day, with four crew and six grunts in each that would conduct a CA [combat assault] that was tasked with finding the .51 cal. They were to fly into a jungle landing zone about a kilometer away from where the gun was last known to be. Shields’ helicopter would be the last ship in the flight. Boarding the helicopter, Judy’s husband and the nine others on board had no way of knowing, but they all had just minutes to live.

Shortly after noon, as the flight skimmed across a ridge just a few meters above Charlie Company grunts, the anti-aircraft gun opened fire. Instead of strafing the entire flight, the gun zeroed in on this one helicopter and would not let it go. The fire was so effective that it severed the tail boom and caused the main rotor to separate from the fuselage from about 200 feet up. The aircraft exploded as it hit the ground and rolled, on fire, down the hill. All ten people on board died. Randy Jarrell stated, ‘I was one of the Shark (gunship) pilots called out the day Shields’ aircraft went down. The facts of the day are somewhat blurred. To the best of recollections, I was a new member of the Shark platoon flying copilot with Jerry Crispin. When we arrived over the crash site my first response was ‘nobody could have survived that.’"
remember Jerry saying, ‘Think positive, you never know.’ When we arrived the aircraft was completely engulfed in flames and lying halfway up a hill on a ledge. The only thing we could do was to provide air support to a small ground unit trying to reach the aircraft.”

Tom Taggart, the Crew Chief on Judy’s tour, said, “I was with the 174th and flying the day that Shields was shot down. He was in the first flight platoon and I was in the second. The 174th was a close group on a smaller firebase, so just about everyone knew one another. I didn't get an opportunity to fly with Shields, but I knew him. His ship was the trail ship in the formation. I was in the aircraft just in front of his. I don't remember if it was radio traffic that his aircraft was going down or one of the grunts on the ship pointing it out, but when I looked back I saw the tail boom was separated from the fuselage as the aircraft fell towards the ground. You could see that the pilot, who I would assume being Shields, since he was the AC [Aircraft Commander], was trying to control the ship as he was trying to turn left-right pull the nose up as it fell at about a 45 degree angle nose down until the ship hit the ground killing the 174th crew of four and the six 4/3 grunts. Watching helicopters fall from the sky and friends being wounded or killed would become a common sight as I continued my tour.”

Paul Huizenga, one of the other pilots carrying the grunts that day remembers, “It was my scheduled day off. As I remember, we were given a day off about once every two weeks. I was sitting on the front porch of the 2nd flight platoon, drinking a cold coke, reading a paperback. Things did not get any better than that at Duc Pho – catching rays and taking a break, relaxing. The operations runner came to the hootch and told me they needed me for an emergency CA. I was to report to operations ASAP. As I questioned the wisdom of my decision to hang around the company area, I dressed in my flight suit and grabbed my gear. The other AC's were already in company operations when I got there.

“A quick briefing told us it was to be a four-ship, two-lift CA near the 515 Valley. I don't remember where the PZ was. As the Ops [operations] officer was giving out the mission assignments, Shields expressed an interest in flying trail. The ops officer looked at me as I was Senior AC, I nodded my head that it was OK with me, this was my day off and the newer guys had to get the experience some time.

“We went to the flight line and assembled the flight on the runway and took off. I can't remember who all were on that mission. I know Shields flew trail and I was Chalk 3 [third helicopter in line] of the four-ship flight. We picked up the first assault force and proceeded to the LZ. The LZ was located on a ridge running off a peak near the 515 Valley.

“Approaching the LZ, I could see the Air Force FAC [Forward Air Controller] had a flight of two fast-movers [jets] making bombing runs near the LZ. We had been picked up by a Fire Team of Blue Ghosts made up of two Cobra gunships for our close fire support. The Cobra's had more fire power than our Sharks, but we always preferred our own guys flying support.

“The CA proceeded normally until we began our final approach to the LZ. We flew a four-ship echelon-right formation. The Cobras flying support were breaking off their gun runs at a high altitude. The first I remember seeing was Shields’ aircraft, which was flying to my right and
slightly to my rear, taking heavy damage from what was obviously more than small arms fire. The main rotor and tail boom separated from the aircraft. The picture that created is burned into my mind.

“The remainder of the flight made the LZ, discharged the 18 grunts, and returned to the PZ for the next lift. I don't think anyone on that flight wanted to return to that LZ. I know I didn't.”

With the exact location of the weapon now known, men of Charlie Company worked their way toward the gun, charged, and killed 3 NVA, captured 2 NVA, and captured the .51 cal intact.

Huishenga finishes, “The grunts saved us by not waiting for the second air assault. Instead, they John Wayne’d it up the ridge to the .51 cal anti-aircraft position and took it out. This and other similar examples gave me the attitude that nothing was too good for a grunt.”

Ray Hait, a grunt with Charlie Company, struggles with his own memories, “We were on the hill already and getting ready to set up a NDP [Night Defensive Position] when they [the four helicopters] were on a combat assault to somewhere else when the .51 cal opened up. All died and we carried them up in body bags and took the .51 position. That is all I remember.”

Another grunt who was there that day, Dave Malchow, has far more vivid recollections, “On August 15 we were all just sitting around at ease waiting for the downed chopper to be removed. I was sitting on a small rock with my back to where the enemy, hidden with its .51 cal, was watching the recovery team trying to remove this chopper [shot down the day before], when all hell broke out again. As soon as I heard the sound of the .51, I went flat on my back and I watched as WO Shields and the rest flew right over me. I don't think they were more then 10 to 15 feet above me and I could clearly see the right side of the chopper.

“They were returning fire. They were also moving very fast in almost a straight line. As I watched them I thought they were turning to their left, then and only then, could I see that they were hit and then they crashed into the side of the hill. A few of us started to run down the side of the hill when we came under heavy fire. By the time we got to the downed chopper it had burned itself out. The rest of the company had captured the .51 cal, killing two or three NVA and capturing two or three NVA.

“I have read where it is believed that WO Shields or [his co-pilot] Bozinski had overshot their landing after being hit. I don't believe this to be the case, because as I was watching them they seemed to be in control of their chopper. There was no jerking or spinning of this chopper. There was no sputtering or anything that would give you the idea that they were in trouble. They were returning fire. I could clearly see them doing this.

“I have always believed that they saw the .51 cal and they came low so that they would become the target. I have always believed this and I always will. If it were not for their actions, many of us grunts would not be here today.
“I removed the remains of WO Bozinski from the downed copter. He was seated on the right side. I carried him back up the hill and waited with him until his remains where airlifted away.

“The chopper was so badly wrecked and burned that there was no need to remove it.”

The ensuing fire from the crash had burned the hillside and the scorched ground was visible from the air for many months to come – a constant reminder of the events of that day.

Jim Finefrock, a crew member, sums it up beautifully, “I remember WO Shield's death vividly, do not know why. I was not present at the crash, but remember the memorial service. WO Shields was a very likeable, friendly man who touched everyone, in my view. I remember seeing his name on the Wall in D.C. I think of WO Shields often.”
Drawing of Dolphin 993 going down. By Ben Kennedy  Reprinted with permission.
PART III of III: FULL CIRCLE

Judy had moved from the Fort Rucker Army Base in Alabama (where she had lived with Hazen during his final helicopter training) back to her parent’s house on Long Island, NY. Rather than stay alone on the base, she wanted to be with family while she awaited the return of her husband from the war. On August 15, 1969, she kissed her newborn daughter and put her to bed and retired for the night. As she fell asleep, she had no way of knowing what fate had befallen her husband. Because she no longer used her maiden name, it took the Army officers three days to find her parent’s house. When Judy saw them approach the house, she thought they were coming to give her advice about being an Army wife. The thought of her husband never returning to his young family had never entered her mind. To this day, Judy has blocked the memory of how the officers had told her that Hazen had been killed.

On the way to the crash site trek launch-point on April 20, 2008, the group drove past the PZ where the helicopters had picked up six grunts each. One could picture and feel rumble of the four helicopters idling on the ground, rotors spinning, while loading their troops.

Starting from a small village a mile from the Route 515’s paved road, the group geared up. Wearing backpacks bulging with plenty of water, they set out to find the crash site where WO Robert “Hazen” Shields and 9 other Americans perished on one fateful day in 1969. Making the trek even more poignant, Judy was wearing Marcie’s hiking shoes.

Following a stream for 2 km, the little group of explorers suddenly entered a wall of tropical forest and mountain. Skirting a herd of very large water buffalos that were eying them curiously, the group pressed on, carefully negotiating the rough terrain. The going was tough and frequent stops were necessary for hydration and rest. The tropical forest trapped heat and humidity and the elements became oppressive. But the intrepid group trudged on, ever deeper into the jungle. After three and a half hours march, the GPS readout told them they had arrived at the crash site.
Judy and the group were now standing on hallowed ground. The bush guide dropped to his knees and used his machete to dig a small hole to accept what was brought. Into it, Judy nested a white cross with the dates of birth and death of husband and daughter. A longtime neighbor and friend of Judy’s, T. Lee Byrd, had fashioned the cross as his gift for this occasion. A friend at ADCO, a local sign company, had done the lettering. The cross will forever grace that small, hidden place in the jungle.

A few reverent words were said and two of Marcie’s much-loved poems recited. Judy placed a favorite stone of Marcie’s at the base of the cross. They also held a memorial service for all ten Americans who perished that day. Each name was read and a memento of each was left at the site. Standing at attention, the veterans saluted their fallen brothers to the playing of Taps – a heartbreaking, yet healing, sound that wafted through the jungle in the middle of the mountains. And then Judy opened a small glass vial and poured the ashes of her daughter around the cross.

Marcie was finally with the father she never met.

End.
Following the stream

Entering the jungle
The cross, map, and GPS

No help here
3 hours in – half hour more to get to the crash site

Cross placed at the crash site
Judy reflecting on her family as Marcie’s poems are read

Ten veterans remembered
Final resting place of Dolphin 993

Judy wearing Marcie’s hiking shoes
The following is a short biography (taken from government archives) of each American who perished in the tragic incident of August 15, 1969. May their souls rest in peace.

THE HELICOPTER CREW

Flight Commander: WO1 ROBERT HAZEN SHIELDS II

Hazen was a Caucasian male from Kensington, Maryland. He was born on June 19, 1943 and is listed as a Congregational Christian. He was married. Hazen arrived in Vietnam on April 9, 1969. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 47. Hazen was 26.

Co-Pilot: WO1 JOHN MICHAEL BOZINSKI

John was a Caucasian male from Superior, Wisconsin. He was born on July 14, 1947 and is listed as a Lutheran and Missouri Synod. He was single. John arrived in Vietnam on July 1, 1969. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 43. John was 22.

Crew Chief: SP4 SANCHEZ ALEJO DEL VALLE

Sanchez was a Hispanic male from Bayamon, Puerto Rico. He was born on November 2, 1948 and is listed as a Roman Catholic. He was married. Sanchez arrived in Vietnam on January 10, 1969. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 44. Sanchez was 20.

Door Gunner: PFC JOHNNIE GRAHAM, Jr.

Johnnie was a Negro male from New York City, New York. He was born on December 3, 1949 and is listed as a Baptist. He was single. Johnnie arrived in Vietnam on March 30, 1968 and extended his stay in Vietnam after his one-year tour had ended. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 44. Johnnie was 19.
THE INFANTRYMEN

SP4 DAVID BURNETT LENTZ

David was a Caucasian male from North Bend, Oregon. He was born on November 24, 1948 and is listed as a Protestant. He was single. David arrived in Vietnam on November 18, 1968. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 45. David was 20.

SP4 RAYMOND GEORGE MASSE

Raymond was a Caucasian male from West Springfield, Massachusetts. He was born on May 15, 1948 and is listed as a Roman Catholic. He was single. Raymond arrived in Vietnam on November 18, 1968. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 46. Raymond was 21.

CPL TERRY KEITH McDONELL

Terry was a Caucasian male from Sapulpa, Oklahoma. He was born on November 5, 1945 and is listed as a Baptist. He was single. Terry arrived in Vietnam on July 1, 1969. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 46. Terry was 23.

SP4 RONNIE LEE ROBERTSON

Ronnie was a Caucasian male from Old Fort, North Carolina. He was born on August 18, 1948 and is listed as a Baptist. He was single. Ronnie arrived in Vietnam on September 20, 1968. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 47. Ronnie was 20.

CPL JOHN GERDES SMITH

John was a Caucasian male from Hico, West Virginia. He was born on August 3, 1949 and is listed as a Methodist. He was single. John arrived in Vietnam on May 14, 1969. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 47. John was 20.

CPL WILLIAM HAROLD SOMERVILLE

William was a Caucasian male from Charlestown, Indiana. He was born on April 8, 1949 and is listed as a Protestant. He was married. William arrived in Vietnam on May 15, 1969. His name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Panel 19W, line 48. William was 20.
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me;
Shall be my brother.

— William Shakespeare

*************************************************

VIETNAM BATTLEFIELD OURS (VB )

VBT is America’s premier tour company for Vietnam travel. As a non-profit organization (they pay no salaries), VBT specializes in Vietnam and therefore has intimate knowledge of the people, terrain, and locations. Their dedicated, highly-experienced guides are Vietnam combat veterans and have been back to the jungles, mountains, firebases, and battlefields dozens of times.

They pride themselves on their ability to get veterans and family members to the special places they need to be. They customize all their tours to the participant’s needs and will also create new tours specific to any group requirements.

In addition, they are expert in Professional Military Education, Battlefield Staff Rides, and Film Tour Expeditions. They have served as Location Manager for Towers Productions which produced National Geographic’s *Inside the Vietnam War*; Day of Discovery Channel’s *(The War Within)*; Visionalist Entertainment’s *(Our Vietnam Generation)*; and Hesperus Films’ *(Once Enemies)*.

VBT tours are all-inclusive with no hidden costs.

For more details, see their website at: [www.VietnamBattlefieldTours.com](http://www.VietnamBattlefieldTours.com) or call 1-877-231-9277.