

Searching for Heroes: finding friends of my big brother, SGT Lyle Schroeder

Perry Schroeder

January 27, 1969, started out as just another day in Minnesota. That changed when an Army Major knocked on the door of my parent's home. My big brother Lyle Schroeder, was reported as "missing in action" the day before in Vietnam. Following that visit there were Western Union telegrams reiterating the Major's announcement. Twenty-four hours later, the Major knocked on the door again and told us that SGT Lyle William Schroeder had died from small arms fire in a country far from home. Western Union telegrams again verified the Major's words.

I, my family and friends were devastated. We waited for Lyle's remains to be brought back home to St. James, Minnesota. It took several days, but seemed like weeks, before a small aircraft landed at the local airport. Lyle was home and was accompanied by an Army Sergeant First Class who was with Lyle since landing in California. He had volunteered for this duty, what a terrible assignment. The funeral home visitation was for two nights with hundreds of people coming to pay their



Lyle Schroeder in Vietnam

respects. The day of the funeral, the streets of St. James were lined with US Flags as a tribute to a fallen soldier. I remember my father saying that he would have never dreamed that flags would be flying for one of his sons. So, the end of public and private mourning was over, and now life was supposed to get back to normal for me. Like 58,000 plus other families in the United States, normal would never take place.

Shortly before Lyle was returned to us, a box arrived from the Army with Lyle's personal items. There were letters he had saved from those who had written him, many miscellaneous items, some Kodak film that was not processed and also a few pictures of Lyle and others with whom he served. On the back of those pictures Lyle had written their names and in some cases, their hometowns. I often wondered who packed that box and if they did know him, or was it someone who just had the terrible task of packing away memories of dead soldiers. Either way, I suspect it was not easy for whoever had to do it.

Fast forward ten years. I had moved back to Minnesota after serving in the Army for three years and then working in Phoenix. My father had passed away in 1978 from complications of surgery (I always thought he died of a broken heart, as he was never the same af-

ter losing Lyle). My mother did not want to live on our farm site by herself. I quit my job in Phoenix and my wife, daughter and puppy moved to St. James.

I was in the attic one day and found the box that contained Lyle's personal items that arrived 10 years earlier. The pictures were there along with letters.

Fast forward another 20 years. My oldest brother was visiting from Colorado and we were talking about Lyle. I mentioned the pictures in the attic. We went up there to retrieve the pictures. I opened up the box and the pictures and letters were gone. I just could not believe it. Where did they go? Did I place them somewhere and don't remember? I asked my mother and she did not know where they might be. What did I do? My link to the past was gone.

In 2002, my mother passed away at the age of 88 exactly. She died on her birthday. Several months later, my brother from Colorado and our wives had to clean out mother's house which was quite a task. On the last day, I was in the basement and found a box in a cupboard with Lyle's name written in my mother's handwriting. I opened it up and there were the pictures, the missing letters, Western Union telegrams, letters from the US Army and other items of Lyle's that my mother had kept. She must have removed them from the attic at some time but did not remember.

It was after that discovery, my quest began in earnest. I used the internet white pages to look up names in the areas Lyle had written on the backs of the photos. I sent many letters, mostly with no replies. But I did get a few letters back and some phone calls. But none were the individuals I was trying to find. Most of the calls or letters were people who wished me well in my quest. I do remember a phone call from a lady in Iowa, whose husband had the identical name of a Lieutenant I was looking for in Waterloo, IA. She had just lost her husband who was a WWII veteran. She wished me well and hoped I would find Lyle's comrades.

Sometime in 2004, I Googled the 506th Infantry because I remembered that was part of Lyle's mailing address in Vietnam. The first thing that came up was the "Band of Brothers" movie which was released in 2001. I did not make the connection while watching the series. Then to my shock, I found the 506th Infantry website. I soon became an associate member.

I signed the quest book one day stating that I was looking for anyone who had served with my brother. A few weeks later I received an email from Texas from a

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soldier who knew Lyle but was back in the States at the time of his death. He thought he had some pictures of Lyle, but as it turned out, he had a photo album stolen from his locker and those pictures must have been in that album. I also received a phone call from a medic who was also back in the States. We started an email dialogue that has continued to this day. Around Christmas of 2004, I received another email out of the blue. This was from a soldier who lived in California and was in the 2nd Battalion and the same base camp as Lyle, Camp Evans. The soldier had been with Lyle in basic and AIT. Just by luck they would be reunited in Vietnam. Lyle's death had taken a toll on him over the years. In the Fall of 2005, this California soldier and his wife drove to Minnesota and stayed with us for a few days. It was good for both of us.

The one thing that had bothered me over the years is that our family did not hear from anyone who was with Lyle when he died. I guess I just wanted to know that he was not alone when his last breath was taken. I knew what kind of a person Lyle was, a person that if you ever got to know, you would never forget.

About 1 ½ years ago, I received a phone call from a soldier in South Carolina who was with Lyle when he died. This was a real shock to say the least. The 506th Website again was the instrument of communication. We continue to talk frequently. I have received other notes and encouragement from those who have seen my messages on the 506th Website. The daughter of one Oklahoma soldier who had passed away recently, saw my note and we now have correspondence. I was able to send her a couple of pictures of her Dad. I also received a phone call from the Lieutenant I had been trying to find. I sent him some pictures of himself and others.

In December of 2008, I received another email out of the blue. This one was from Platoon Sergeant David Canter. After all these years, Dave had started his search for Lyle's family. Dave found the 506th Website and my note. I received 2 pictures of Lyle and pictures of others. Dave was with Lyle when he died. Lyle was Dave's RTO. Dave also was the guy who packed away Lyle's personal items. That mystery has now been solved. Dave has also corresponded with Lyle's 2 girls, who were quite young when he died. Thank you Staff Sergeant Canter.

So what is the point of this letter? The point is that I will be forever grateful to those who maintain the 506th Website, those who take the time and effort in keeping the 506th Association up and running. Although I am not a "Brother", the Association has treated me as one, especially Eugene Overton who has provided me with encouragement and understanding. Thank you Gene.

I know there are others out there and I will continue searching, maybe someone who might have pictures. The Vietnam Veteran has a special place in my heart and I consider them all heroes, especially the grunt. I was a Sergeant for 3 years (1970-1973), an Army Intelligence Agent. I was told I would be going to Vietnam, but was sent to Korea instead. That made my parents happy, but not me.

Many people were hurt by Lyle's death. We will all remember his sacrifice. Lyle Schroeder is not just a name on a Wall. He was a very real person at a very sad time.

Perry J. Schroeder
33655 725th Ave
St. James, MN 56081
507-375-4455
perryjs@rconnect.com