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Honoring Hero's Family Four Decades Later

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Event for Vietnam veterans features daughter of MIA

The memories of more than 40 years ago are a bit blurry. But for Teresa Schmitt and her five brothers and sisters, the name of their father on Huntsville's Veterans Memorial is a reminder of the loss they've lived with since they were children.

And now, during a "Welcome Home" Vietnam Veterans event this Friday, Huntsville's veteran community will hear the story of their loss.



The name of Air Force Tech. Sgt. Elbert Austin Phillips has been a part of Madison County's military history since Aug. 28, 1968, when the airplane he was traveling in from Laos to Thailand crashed in the Mekong River. The pilot and Phillips, a medic, were presumed dead, although their bodies were never found.

Phillips' name is one of two missing-in-action Vietnam veterans listed on the wall of the Huntsville/Madison County Veterans Memorial. In a way, his family has also been missing in action, with his wife and children quietly picking up their lives in Huntsville and carrying on after Phillips' death.

But a 2005 online posting by Schmitt at pownetwork.org recently led local veteran David Carney to the Phillips family. Carney, who is planning the "Welcome Home" Vietnam Veterans program on behalf of the event's host, Huntsville Chapter 1067 of the Vietnam Veterans of America, discovered Schmitt's post when he happened to do a search for Phillips' family.

"It's kind of ironic because all this time the entire family of six children has lived here. They've been here their entire lives," Carney said. "What happened to Tech. Sgt. Phillips and his family is still with us 40 years later. We want to honor this man and his family."

Schmitt will speak about her father at the event, which begins Friday at 1 p.m. at the memorial.

"I'm honored to be part of this," Schmitt said. "My purpose is to expose people to the importance of always remembering and not forgetting our history, and those who have served and sacrificed.

We can't let that go. We need to keep their service and sacrifice at the forefront of our minds.

"And we need to especially remember those who came back from war. They have fought their own battles every day. They are to be commended."

Schmitt was only 8 when her father was killed. He had joined the Army in 1953, switching to the Air Force in 1958. The family had lived in Germany and at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., before returning to Huntsville.

"When dad got orders to go to war, he moved us back here because mom's family was here and he had a brother here," Schmitt recalled. "He left for the war on my brother's birthday. He was gone about two weeks when he was killed. I remember when they came to our house to tell my mom.

"It's all kind of a blur. But family stepped in and helped us through it."

Back then, the U.S. military wasn't in the habit of keeping in touch with the families of servicemembers killed during the Vietnam War. With six children to care for, Schmitt's mother – Shelby Jean Phillips – got right to the business of living, going back to college to get her degree and then working 20 years as an office manager in a local doctor's office to support her family.

She never remarried and remained in love with her husband until her death in 2004.

"She purchased a house in northwest Huntsville in 1969 and we lived there for 10 years," Schmitt said. "Our friends knew about our dad, but that was as far as that went. Our home was where all of our friends would come. My mom had an open-door policy. She was a very selfless person. She was a saint."

After her mother's death, Schmitt traveled in 2005 to Washington, D.C., to attend a family briefing by the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, a task force within the Department of Defense whose mission is to account for Americans who are listed as prisoners of war or missing in action from all past wars and conflicts. Today, there are 1,833 servicemembers still missing in action in Vietnam.

"They told me there would be no more efforts to recover my father because it had become useless," Schmitt said. "The records will always remain that his body was unrecoverable."

As a result, she visited the pownetwork.org website, where she found an email written by Joseph Mosher in 1998 that said he had been wearing Phillips' MIA bracelet for 10 years. Schmitt responded to his post, leaving a personal note that described her family and mentioned his nickname – RC – that he was called because he loved to wear a yellow and white leather hat that carried the Royal Crown Cola emblem on it. Soon, she was being contacted by veterans who knew her father.

Her posting eventually ended up appearing in the Air Medic Commando Association's newspaper. And in 2006, Charles Buckley, who had been her father's immediate supervisor in Thailand, happened to see it. The two served together as members of the **56th Air Commando Special Wing Operations at Udorn Air Force Base.**

"He had been searching for me and my family for years," Schmitt said. "He had dinner with my dad every night when they were in Laos together. One of the last conversations they had, my dad told him that our mother was strong and if anything happened she would be able to deal with it. My dad had a strong sense of family and a strong sense of country."

Schmitt has met Buckley and his wife. Buckley has provided Schmitt with memories of her dad along with pictures, artifacts and a **Special Operations Detachment patch.** She has also talked with James Tieg, the medic who was supposed to be in the **T-28** aircraft instead of her father on the day it crashed. The two Vietnam veterans have helped to piece together the story of her dad's brief time in Thailand.

"He went on one set of orders and then they were changed," Schmitt said. "I'm sure my dad did not know exactly what his mission would be before he got to his station at Udorn Air Force Base."

The mission was to spend 91 days in Laos to provide medical care to U.S. and Laotian patients, and to teach Laotian medical personnel how to take care for the injured.

"Mr. Buckley asked my dad 'Are you OK with this?' My dad said, 'Yes, I'm ready to go,'" Schmitt said.

"Maj. Robert Miller was the pilot, and they flew to Vientiane (Laos) where my dad checked in with the U.S. embassy to get his U.S. civilian credentials. **He had no military ID with him because his mission was one of those covert operations. No one was supposed to be there and had they become prisoners of war they wouldn't be assisted. He probably had nothing on him but embassy credentials.** They stayed in Laos one night and then were on their way back to Udorn when they crashed right after takeoff."

Divers did an immediate search for the pilot and the medic. They did find a portion of the plane and a small brown bag that had belonged to Phillips.

"It happened during the flood season," Schmitt said. "It was very muddy and the water was murky."

"Over the years, we always had hope that he would be found. I'd have dreams about him coming home. We had hope for many, many years."

And so have others who have made contact with Schmitt through her online post. One servicemember, Air Force Master Sgt. Mark Cusimano of Louisiana, has worn her father's bracelet inscribed with his name, rank, location, date of death and home state since 1991.

"He's coming for the event on March 29 and he will speak as well," Schmitt said. "It was very emotional when he made contact with me. He purchased a bracelet with my dad's name on it when he became enlisted. They were being sold at the PX for \$2. He chose my dad because of the Air Force connection and because the date of death is the day after his oldest brother's birthday."

During those years, Cusimano has often wondered about the Air Force medic whose name had become a part of his life.

"To hear him speak fondly of wearing the bracelet and how he shared about it with so many people did more than warm my heart," Schmitt said. "He told me his little boy Jack always reminds him 'Daddy, here, don't forget the bracelet.' He and his wife have often talked about the name on the bracelet and have wondered what

happened to him. He's worn it for so many years, and he's had many people ask him who the name belonged to and what it stood for.

"Now that they know who my dad is, they feel a loss, too. They feel they've lost a friend. And now if he's asked about it, he knows the rest of the story."

Schmitt has been overwhelmed with the attention and appreciation she has felt from the local veterans community. She wasn't involved in the building of the Veterans Memorial and didn't know her father's name was part of it until she happened to visit it one day.

"The first time I saw his name there it was much like how I felt when I first visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.," she said. "I drove by to see if his name was there, and it was. It was very emotional.

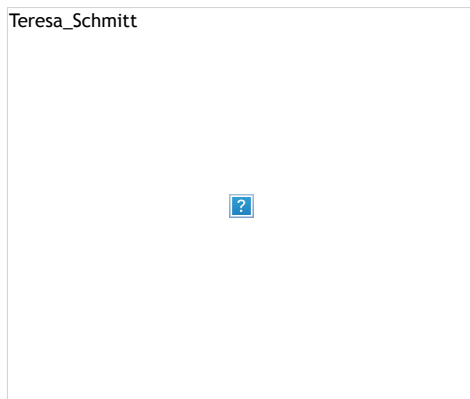
"It's hard to explain how it makes you feel that someone truly cared enough to keep your loved one's memory alive."

She was working in an office building nearby during the first "Welcome Home" Vietnam Veterans event and, after much hesitation, decided to attend. She joined up with her husband's co-workers, whose company Keller Williams is a memorial sponsor, and enjoyed the ceremony. Although she told her husband's co-workers that her father's name was on the wall, she didn't tell the event organizers of her association with one of the wall's two MIAs.

In November 2012, after Carney learned about Schmitt and her family, mementos from Schmitt's father were put in the Veterans Memorial time capsule. In addition, one of her nephews and great-nephews are members of the memorial's ambassador program.

Several members of Phillips' family will join his daughter at the ceremony on Friday, including Schmitt's father-in-law, who is a World War II veteran, and her son, who is a Huntsville police officer.

"My father was very caring and loving and patriotic. He was just a wonderful person. I've learned more and more about him since 2005," Schmitt said. "I really feel blessed by all of this."



Teresa Schmitt holds the encased U.S. flag that was given to her mother when her father, Air Force Tech. Sgt. Elbert Austin Phillips, was killed during the Vietnam War. He is one of two missing-in-action Vietnam veterans whose names are engraved on the wall of the Huntsville/Madison County Veterans Memorial.

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