



Gerald Peeler, sophomore, back row, fourth from left (collarless shirt), 1950 Tuscola yearbook – Gerald would soon join the Army and before the year was out he was an assistant gunner on a tank in Korea.

Military Month: 1SG William Gerald Peeler

By Carolyn Cloyd
“Not a day goes by that we don’t think of you and miss you. You will always be our hero.”
— Army SFC John Wesley Peeler (retired, Desert Storm), son of Army 1SG William G. Peeler (KIA, Vietnam)

An article in the May 9, 1951, Decatur Daily Review noted that May 15 would mark the beginning of the last round of activities for Tuscola High School seniors, starting that day with a trip to Turkey Run State Park for Senior Skip Day. There would also be a junior-senior reception and dance on May 19, followed by Honors Day on May 23, the class commencement ceremony was scheduled for May 26, and the whirlwind of activity would end with a baccalaureate ceremony for the senior class on May 27.

Absent from these rights-of-passage for the Tuscola class was onetime classmate William Gerald Peeler, although Peeler’s twin brother, Charles Harold Peeler, was a member of the graduating contingent. Gerald was a world away from his former classmates, literally and figuratively. Another article dated May 29, 1951, from the Decatur Herald, reported that the parents of Pfc. William Gerald Peeler had just received word he had been injured while serving with the U.S. Army in Korea.

William Gerald and Charles

Memorial Set For Viet Victim
Arcola (Special)
A memorial service for First Sgt. William Gerald Peeler, 36, a former resident of the Tuscola area who was killed Sept. 22, 1968, in South Vietnam, will be held at 2:30 p.m. Saturday in the First Baptist Church of Arcola. The Rev. John Danforth will officiate.
Sgt. Peeler's body was returned to the U.S., and burial was in the cemetery at Ft. Benning, Ga., with military honors.
He was a brother of Mrs. Ruth Drake of Arcola. Sgt. Peeler also leaves his wife and four children in Atlanta, Ga., his father, John Peeler, Kankakee, and four brothers.

Decatur Herald article, dated Oct. 17, 1968, reporting details about the Arcola memorial service for 1SG Peeler on Oct. 19.



Harold Peeler, or Gerald and Harold, as they were known, were born in Arcola on their mother’s 22nd birthday, April 5, 1932. Their parents, John Albert Peeler and Sylvia Lydia Connor were both born in Hindsboro, John in 1908 and Sylvia in 1910. They were married on March 2, 1929, and settled in Arcola. They would have five sons and two daughters in all, one daughter, born in 1937, died shortly after birth.

The growing Peeler family moved several times, most likely due to John Peeler’s work as a farm laborer. Census records show the family living in Arcola, Hindsboro, and Bowdre County. Gerald attended one year at Tuscola, his sophomore year, in 1950, where his classmates called him “Tiptoe.” Before the school year was over, on April 28, 1950, he enlisted in the U.S. Army.

In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, drawing the United States into another war, and by the end of the year, Gerald Peeler found himself serving with the 1st Cavalry Division in Northeast Korea. In December, the Peelers received word that Gerald was hospitalized in Pusan after his tank, in which he was assistant gunner, had taken a hit and the chief gunner was killed, and after escaping he had walked “until his feet gave out” and he was rescued by British soldiers. Word reached the Peelers about their son’s ordeal with the news he was recovering through the cooperation of international amateur radio operators who relayed the message to station W9PEK in Clinton, where it was then sent on to the Peelers in a postcard.

Gerald Peeler was injured five times in Korea, while at least one injury was serious, none were life-threatening, and he returned to duty.

After returning to the States, Gerald married an Alabama girl, Elizabeth Johnson, in Pesotum on July 17, 1954.

Having decided to make a career in the Army, he was soon stationed at Ft. McClellan near Anniston, Ala. where in 1955 their first child was born, a daughter they named Reba. In 1956, Elizabeth and her daughter traveled to Germany to join Gerald in a three-year assignment, and it was there the Peeler’s welcomed their first son, John Wesley, in 1957.

Upon their return to the States, Gerald was stationed at Fort Benning near Columbus Ga., where two more sons, Wayne and William Glen, were born.

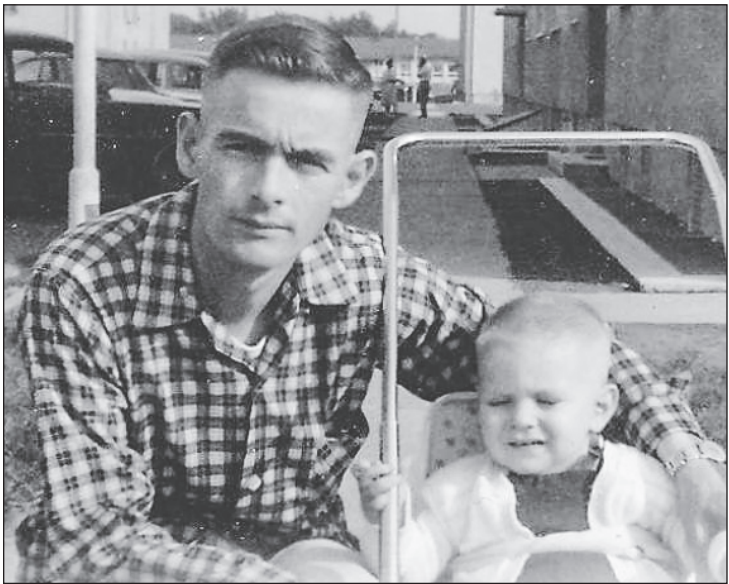
On Jan. 7, 1968, 1SG William G. Peeler deployed to Vietnam where he served with B Company, 3rd Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, USARV (U.S. Army Republic of Vietnam) based in Kiến Hòa Province. The regiment conducted riverine warfare in the Mekong Delta. (Riverine warfare involves joint operations between Army and Navy forces in waterways and near-shore.)

On Sept. 22, 1968, the base camp where Gerald Peeler was located came under hostile mortar attack and he was mortally wounded. He was taken to a hospital where he later died. He was 36 years old.

At the time of his death, his wife and four children were still living in Columbus, Ga., near Fort Benning. His father was living at 119 N. Sheldon St. in Arcola. His mother had passed away in 1964 after a short illness and was buried in the Arcola Township Cemetery. Three weeks before Gerald’s death, his father married Coleta Bird of Arcola. When John passed away in 1978, he was buried in Arcola next to Sylvia.

Gerald Peeler’s younger brother, SSG John Peeler Jr. (b. 1933), also honorably served the U.S. Army in Korea and Vietnam. He passed away in Texas in 1987.

Although newspaper articles detailing 1SG Peeler’s service and his death often



Gerald Peeler and his son, John Wesley, ca. 1958.



1SG William Gerald Peeler

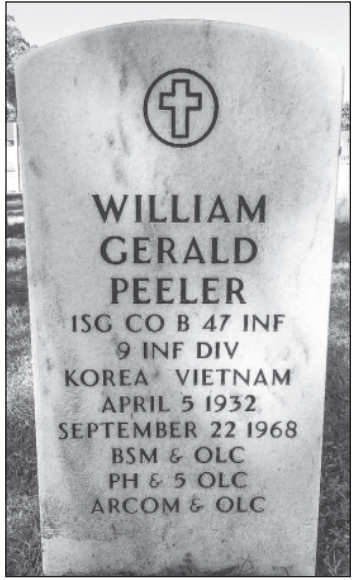
list him as a “Tuscola GI,” most likely because he had ties to Tuscola shortly before he joined the Army, he listed his home-of-record on his military papers as Arcola.

The body of 1SG William Gerald Peeler was returned to the States and he was buried in the Fort Benning Post Cemetery, where his listing refers to him as “1SG William Gerald ‘Top’ Peeler.” A memorial service for 1SG Peeler was held on Saturday, Oct. 19, 1968, at the Arcola Baptist Church in Arcola, with the Rev. John Danforth officiating.

Elizabeth Peeler never remarried and when she passed away on July 7, 2021, she was buried by her husband.

During his time in service 1SG Peeler earned the National Defense Medal, the Korea Service Medal, the United Nations Service Medal, the Korean Presidential Unit Citation, the Army of Occupation Medal, the Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation, the Valorous Unite Award, the Vietnam Service Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Army Good Conduct Medal, the Army Commendation Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster (the oak leaf cluster denotes an additional medal earned), two Purple Hearts with four Oak Leaf Clusters, and a Bronze Star Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster (one Bronze Star was awarded for Valor and one for Merit).

In the comment section of the Vietnam Virtual Memorial Fund Wall of Faces are com-



1SG William G. Peeler’s headstone in the Fort Benning Post Cemetery, Columbus, Ga.

ments left by Gerald Peeler’s three sons, such as the one by his oldest son John above. The comments remind us of the terrible cost of war, of wives left to carry on, of daughters and sons who barely knew their fathers, and fathers who never got to raise their children. Reba was just 13 years old when her father was killed, John was just 11, Wayne was 7, and Glen was just 2 years old.

When asked what he would like people to know about his father, Glen Peeler said he wished he could help but he was too young when his father died for him to have any real memories, and sadly both of his oldest siblings have passed away, his sister in 1982, and his brother, John Wesley in Nov. 2019. He said all he knew of his father were the stories he heard growing up.

Former Tuscola GI Killed
Tuscola (Special)
M. Sgt. Gerald Peeler, 36, a former Tuscola resident, was killed in action in Vietnam Sunday, according to word received by relatives.
The body will be returned to Atlanta, Ga. for burial.
Born April 5, 1932, at Arcola, Peeler was a son of John and Silvia Peeler. He attended Tuscola Schools where he was known to his classmates as “Tiptoe.”
He had served in the Army since about 1950. His overseas service included tours of duty in South Korea, Germany and Japan.
Sgt. Peeler went to Vietnam in January. His brother, John, also began an assignment in Vietnam recently.
Sgt. Peeler was married to Elizabeth Johnson in 1954. She and four children survive.
His mother preceded him in death.

Decatur Herald article, dated Sept. 28, 1966, reporting the death of 1SG William G. Peeler.

But then he added, “He was a great man who loved his country and most importantly his family.”

May has been designated National Military Appreciation Month to honor the sacrifices that have been made on our behalf by members of our military. In sharing the story of 1SG Peeler, a veteran of Korea and Vietnam, we hope to honor all of our service members who served in Korea and Vietnam.

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