Military Month: Aviator William Lassiter

By Carolyn Cloyd

"Well, we made a huge sacrifice. One that is still painful, but we are very proud of. I want to honor his name." — Beverly Lassiter Salerno, widow of William O. Lassiter III, KIA, Vietnam

Bill Lassiter was a determined young man who knew his own mind. He met his future wife while still in high school and according to his daughter he knew immediately that this was the girl he would marry. And he was determined to become a pilot. After graduating high school in 1966, he started training to become a pilot, and one year after leaving high school, and the day after his girlfriend graduated, they were married. Bill Lassiter was living his dream.

William Orrin Lassiter III was born in Miami, Fla. on Apr. 17, 1948 to William Lassiter Jr. and Betty Lassiter (née Dunning). His father, William Jr., was born in Georgia in 1925 and raised in Florida. His mother, Betty, was born in Terre Haute, Ind. where her father was employed. Betty's father, Ivo Dunning, was born in Mahomet and her mother, Nora Ward, was born in Greenup. William and Betty Lassiter also welcomed a daughter, Kathleen, in Dec. 1949.

Bill Lassiter was involved in scouting as a youth and achieved the rank of Star Scout (the third-highest rank) and had enough merit badges to become an Eagle Scout. He attended Southwest Miami High School where he played in the 165-piece school band. And according to his daughter, Betty Ann Wyman, he loved to fish and he was fascinated with the Native American culture and its people. And sometimes, he would even hunt rattlesnakes.

Wyman related one incident where her father, ever the fisherman, and living in Florida, had taken his future wife, Beverly Davis, and some friends to the Everglades to go fishing. Seeing a bee flying around his girlfriend he told her to stop so it would fly off, and as she did so, she noticed a rattlesnake coiled at her feet. No one else saw the snake, so even as the bee flew away and her friends told her the coast was clear she remained frozen. She finally managed to convey the more serious concern of the snake and Bill shot it and saved the day.

Bill and Beverly met in high school where he was the drum major and she was the featured solo majorette. They were married in June 1967. They spent their honeymoon fishing.

After graduating high school, Bill went into pilot training and attended Dade County Junior College.

Bill's parents had talked about moving to Illinois to be near Betty's family and after Bill's sister graduated in 1967 the Lassiters made the move, landing in Arcola where they built a Dairy Queen-Brazier near the interstate on Rt. 133.

It was a time of transition, said Wyman. The whole family moved to Arcola, including the newlywed Bill and Beverly. The couple welcomed a daughter, Betty Ann, in early 1969. And shortly after, Bill put his plan to become pilot into action.

"He had his fixed-wing license but the airlines weren't hiring young pilots who didn't have their military experience," Beverly Lassiter Salerno explained. "They didn't want to train the airline pilots and have them snatched away by the draft." The United States was heavily involved in the war in Vietnam, and before it was over about 2.2 million men would be drafted.

Bill Lassiter enlisted in the U.S. Army, leaving his wife and 8-month-old daughter in Arcola with his parents, and trained to fly helicopters, something Salerno said he did so well he was assigned to an AH-1G HueyCobra gunship, something she said was top of the line at the time.

An article in the Sept. 6, 1969, Mattoon Journal Gazette announced that William O. Lassiter III, age 21, had earned the silver wings of an Army aviator and was appointed a warrant officer upon his graduation from Army Aviation School at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Ga. On Oct. 24, 1969, he deployed to Vietnam.

"He didn't have to go to Vietnam," said Salerno. "Because he was a sole surviving son. But he kept that a secret, and he swore me to secrecy because he didn't want to stay behind. He could have gone to Korea, but he didn't want to stay behind while his fellow-soldiers went to Vietnam. And he went."

Bill Lassiter served with D Company, 229th Aviation Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division, which took part in the initial U.S. incursion into Cambodia. In simple terms, Cambodia, which was ostensibly neutral, had allowed troops of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Viet Cong (VC) to establish bases to launch operations against U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops across the border. The U.S. move was intended to eliminate the cross-border threat. U.S. ground troops were ordered into Cambodia on April 28, 1970.

On May 9, 1970, a request was made for someone to fly an Army journalist into Cambodia to cover a story and William Lassiter volunteered. After they completed their mission and were on their way back, Lassiter received a call from ground troops that were under attack and he turned back to help despite not having a gunner on board. Lassiter's helicopter was shot down by hostile forces while providing close air support for allied troops and crashed, killing Lassiter and his passenger, Army journalist SP4 Wiley D. Hooks, age 25, of Metter, Ga. William Lassiter had just turned 22.

Bill's father told the Arcola Record-Herald that three weeks earlier his son had turned down a commission as a first lieutenant because he didn't want to give up flying.

Beverly Salerno said the last letter she received from her husband had the dates for their R&R rendezvous in Hawaii on June 8. It would have been the first time they had seen each other in months.

"You know, back in those days you didn't have cell phones like they do now so you didn't keep in touch so, you know, they were going for a year of service without any communication with the family. He was a little over halfway, we wanted to wait until we were over the halfway point, so the tail-end of his service would be on the short end."

Betty Ann Lassiter Wyman was just 16 months old when her father was killed.

"Growing up, all I heard was how wonderful he was," she said. "In my eyes, from hearing what all of the family members told me, he was perfect. He was in scouts and he played ball and he had great friends and he was a great son and then he was a great husband, and he was wonderful."

WO1 William Orrin Lassiter III

When Wyman was in college she took a course on the rhetoric of war and peace and read the Stanley Karnow book Vietnam: A History and like many people found her mind struggling to understand what happened in Vietnam and wrestling with her loss.

"I felt like I'd grown up on this pedestal, I was Billy's daughter and he was perfect and I had a role to play, you know, I had to be Billy's daughter. He was an amazing, selfless, courageous, brave and incredible man."

That same year, one of her father's childhood friends wrote her a really long letter. In the letter he said the same things she had always heard, about how wonderful her father was. But then he told her that if she ever had the urge to get a spitball and spit it across the classroom while the teacher was talking, she got that from her dad.

"And that was the first time I realized he wasn't perfect, he was just a kid," said Wyman. "He was a regular kid."

She also wrestled with the "what-ifs" of how her father would have fared if he made it home, adding that, "Someone who was so compassionate towards people and caring, would have had a really hard time coming home to the climate, the political climate, that was in the country at the time toward the soldiers. I think he would have had a really hard time grappling with the things that he saw and the things he had to do when he was there."

But Wyman said her father died a hero, that he saved a lot of lives by getting a lot of men out of hotspots, and he did things he didn't have to do.

"He was very, very passionate about what he did," said Wyman. "And so he got to go down helping others instead of having to come back and live with the memories. And I'm really thankful for that."

When asked what she would like people to remember about her dad, she said, "He loved to fly. He wanted to fly, [and] he got to do what he loved. And he loved people."

After William Lassiter was killed, his body was recovered and returned to Florida. A memorial service was held at William Jr. and Betty Lassiter's church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in Mattoon. The funeral was held at the Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He was cremated and his ashes were scattered at sea.

William and Betty Lassiter left Arcola and moved to Glen Ellyn around 1980, and later retired and moved to Oregon to be near their daughter. Betty Lassiter passed away in 2016 and William Lassiter passed away in 2017.

It has been 50 years since William Lassiter III was lost in Vietnam, but for the family members he left behind the pain is still palpable and the urge to protect his memory is just as strong.

As a young widow, Beverly Lassiter Salerno suffered backlash from reporters intent on maligning her husband. A husband who, for all of his courage, was really little more than a child himself. She has not forgotten.

"I remember right after he was killed," said Salerno. "When we pulled out of Vietnam, everybody just, they didn't treat the soldiers well when they came back. You know, it was not one of those heroes' welcomes when they came back."

What she wants people to know about Bill Lassiter is that he was a good, Christian man, that he loved his fellow-man, and his sacrifice, as painful as it is, was not in vain.

William Lassiter III came of age at a difficult time in our nation's history. A war was raging in Vietnam and young men all around him were being sent into the fire, and it impacted his ability to do the job that he had always wanted to do, to fly. And like so many other young men, rather than wait to be drafted he enlisted so that he could choose how he would serve, and so he could fly. And he chose to go to Vietnam when he did not have to because he did not think it was fair to stay away when others were going.

Once in Vietnam, his daughter said that, like in all things he did, he was focused. He had a job to do, to save the lives of his fellow soldiers, and he felt the weight of that responsibility and did it to the best of his ability, even at the cost of his own life.

Bill Lassiter's time in Arcola was very brief, but his impact remains. His wife, daughter, and his sister remained in the community for a short time, his daughter said she left right before starting first grade, and his parents remained in Arcola for over a decade and are still very fondly remembered by the people who knew them. Their loss still resonates.

In sharing the story of William Lassiter III and his place in Arcola history, we hope to honor his memory and the memory of all of the young men who served in Vietnam.

Some people believe that in honoring our war dead and in building their memorials, we glorify war, but the real danger lies in forgetting their stories. When we fail to remember the people behind the names on the memorials they simply become monuments to wars. In remembering the people, we are reminded of the tragedy, the waste, and the sorrow of those wars.

Drum Major Bill Lassiter, 1966 Southwest Miami High School yearbook

Rejected Commission To Fly; Killed in Asia

In accordance with instructions he left with his wife before going to Vietnam last October, funeral services for W-1 William O. Lassiter III will be held in Miami, Fla., when his body is returned from Southeast Asia.

Lassiter, whose parents live in Arcola and operate the Dairy Queen-Brazier, was killed in Cambodia on May 9 when his Cobra helicopter crashed.

Lassiter Sr. said he has not received official word from the army concerning how his son died, but he did talk with a family in Gibson City whose son was taking part in the same military mission.

"They said their son reported seeing Bill and his co-pilot and gunner crash," Lassiter said. "He could not say for certain that Bill's helicopter was shot down, but presumed that it was."

WILLIAM O. LASSITER III

Story in the Arcola Record-Herald announcing the death of WO1 William Lassiter III