

Memorial Day Done Right  
Quincy, Mass., Veterans Honor Their Own

By Bernard Edelman

A nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers.

—President John F. Kennedy

It started out small. A fraternity of veterans in Quincy, Massachusetts, most of them Marines, would gather in late March to honor those who died in the Vietnam War.

Twenty years ago, they were blessed with a memorial: a clock tower built by the O'Connell Development Company—Billy O'Connell had served during the Vietnam War—and Forge Development Corporation. It rises some four stories at Marina Bay in the Squantum section of Quincy. Inscribed on one of the four panels at the base of the tower are the names of 47 local men who perished in Vietnam.

But since 2005, this band of hardies is small no more. The Vietnam Combat Veterans Combined Armed Forces of Quincy (named after Col. John Quincy and the home and final resting place of Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams) has been joined by hundreds of fellow veterans, their families, friends, supporters, and local elected officials to pay tribute to comrades, friends, brothers, sisters, and fathers lost to the war.

Among these fallen are Alan Brudno and Charles Bifulchi.

#### CAPTAIN ALAN BRUDNO

Two years ago, Brudno's name became the 48th on the panel. It occupies the top space in the left column. It's almost as though the space were awaiting him, said his brother Bob, whose persistence triumphed when Alan Brudno's name was added to The Wall in Washington on Memorial Day 2004.

The Quincy native had wanted to become an astronaut. He joined the Air Force but was shot down over North Vietnam October 18, 1965. He spent the next seven-and-a-half years in captivity, mostly in the Hanoi Hilton. He endured torture and solitary confinement. He was one of the longest-held POWs in American history.

Alan Brudno came home in 1973, one of 599 repatriated as part of the agreement crafted by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that led to America's exit from Vietnam.

But his war never ended.

"He just used up everything he had over those long years in captivity," a military psychiatrist told his brother Bob many years later. "There was no strength left with which to survive."

"He was proud to be a U.S. Air Force officer," said fellow prisoner Orson Swindle, who'd spent two-and-a-half years in the cell next to Alan and exchanged messages by tapping out code on the wall that separated them. "He was deeply burdened by what we all endured. We came back to a society that had

changed dramatically.” It was a society far different than the one Brudno left to go to war. The America to which Brudno returned was alien to him. Many of his countrymen no longer supported the war. Often, veterans were not welcomed into the bosom of a grateful nation.

Unprepared to live in this world, he took his life less than four months into his freedom, on the day before his 33rd birthday. Some said he had died in Vietnam, only to bleed out after he returned to America.

When the Vietnam Combat Veterans Combined Armed Forces of Quincy learned about Alan, one of their own who had been so long overlooked, they decided to honor his memory as well. Ed Murphy, who had retired as a colonel after “30 years, eight months, and 26 days” in the Marine Corps, Larry Norton and Tom Bolinder, diehard Marines both, Joe Brooker, one of the few Air Force veterans in the group, and their comrades determined that their next gathering would celebrate Alan Brudno’s life and commemorate his loss. They invited Debby Brudno and Bob Brudno and his wife, Sheila, to join them.

March 27 was miserable. It dawned raw and blustery across New England. It remained unrelentingly nasty all day. The sleet that drenched Quincy forced the cancellation of a Missing Man flyover. The ceremony at the clock tower was moved indoors, to the packed auditorium of North Quincy High School, Brudno’s alma mater.

Among those gathered in that ill-lit and leaky space were students and their teachers, a bevy of elected officials, Gold Star mothers in their white uniforms, and veterans from earlier wars, decked out in their uniforms. For many of those present, a profound change had occurred. Their city was ready to thank all who had served in Southeast Asia, not just Alan Brudno.

It was a heartfelt event, simple and sincere. Larry Norton served as the emcee. Elected officials read proclamations and offered good wishes. Bob Brudno spoke of his brother’s life and legacy. David Jacobs, who had been the Brudno family’s rabbi four decades earlier, offered warm recollections of Alan. Orson Swindle recalled his fellow cellmate. For many in attendance, it was a transcendent event, pure of motive, honest in intent.

“After Alan died,” Bob Brudno told those gathered in the auditorium, “many other POWs revealed their demons, and treatment was extended without the career-ending consequences that Alan feared. Programs are in place today for POWs and their families that will continue for the rest of their lives.”

#### THE HEALING BEGINS

It is veterans who do for themselves and in the process rehabilitate their image and take pride in their identities. In Washington, Jan Scruggs’s dream became, after many fits and turns, The Wall. It is sacred ground, a place of remembrance and reflection. Other memorials acknowledging the service and sacrifice of the men and women who served in Southeast Asia were conceived by veterans, created and constructed in small towns and big cities throughout the nation—and paid for through the efforts of veterans.

As The Wall was being built in 1980, Alan Brudno’s widow, Debby, approached officials from the Air Force. Could her husband’s name be inscribed on The Wall? she asked. No, they told her: He did not die in Vietnam.

In 1998, Bob Brudno, a naval officer during the war, began a journey that would change that. He knew Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, who invited him to a reception in Washington. They met and had a brief conversation with Everett Alvarez, who had spent more time in confinement than any other American POW.

“He was one of us,” Alvarez told Bob Brudno, which got him thinking: Did anyone think otherwise of his brother? Even though Alan Brudno was posthumously awarded two Silver Stars, the Legion of

Merit, two Bronze Stars, and two Purple Hearts, among a multitude of medals, could anyone believe that he had killed himself out of shame?

Bob Brudno wrote an op-ed article for Newsweek. "Unfinished Business" began his effort to tell his brother's story—and how all of those who had served in Vietnam were unfairly treated.

It wasn't until 2004, however, that Bob Brudno began a campaign that ended when the Secretary of the Air Force and the Secretary of Defense signed off on adding his brother's name to the others that grace the polished black granite of The Wall.

#### HONORING ALAN BRUDNO

It was not an event, however, that Debby Brudno had looked forward to. "I had feared opening up this vast personal sadness with a group of strangers," she said. "And we had no idea of the reception we were going to get."

Last year, the Quincy veterans were surprised by the outpouring of caring. The veterans, though, didn't let go of their fallen flier. The city of Quincy dedicated "E. Alan Brudno Square." In ceremonies at the clock tower memorial, the featured speaker was Joe Galloway, the journalist and co-author of *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young*.

Four A-10 Warthogs from the Connecticut Air National Guard passed overhead and executed the Missing Man maneuver to salute the memory of Alan Brudno.

Last year, too, a serendipitous identification gave Quincy veterans the next name to honor. The remains of Maj. Charles Bifulchi were finally identified, 38 years after his F-4 jet disappeared in mountainous terrain in South Vietnam. In October, he was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. This year, the Quincy veterans decided they would commemorate his life and loss.

#### MAJOR CHARLES BIFOLCHI

March 29 dawned crisp and sparkling; it would be a brisk day under a cerulean sky. The night before, the Quincy veterans hosted a dinner for the Bifulchi and Brudno families and special guests. In addition to Orson Swindle, these included Navy veteran Joe McCain, like Bob Brudno a POW brother; Ned Ramm, the instructor who taught Alan Brudno to fly; Al Cummings, VVA Massachusetts State Council President and a member of VVA's Board of Directors; and former Marine pilots Mike Fiorillo, Tom Papineau, and Ron Morosky.

In the morning, "Charles Bifulchi Square" was dedicated. Following a luncheon, a caravan of cars shepherded by a police motorcycle escort wended its way to Marina Bay. More than 300 people gathered for another brief and solemn ceremony.

Again, Larry Norton served as emcee. Minister J.C. Swanson, a one-time U.S. Navy lieutenant, gave the invocation. Police officer Donald Sautter sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." Quincy Mayor William Phelan commended the Vietnam Combat Veterans Combined Armed Forces "for annually conducting an incredibly powerful remembrance service.

"As the roll call of the 48 names is read," the mayor said, "I try and imagine what our lives would be like had they come home. What would their families and future families have been like had they returned?"

"I wonder about the careers that some of these men may have enjoyed as doctors, lawyers, astronauts, salesmen, policemen, or firemen. I wonder what the impact on our world would have been had these brave men been allowed to transfer their courage and willingness to sacrifice to other areas of our society."

Their loss, Mayor Phelan said, "is a profound loss for our society."

#### A TRUE AMERICAN HERO

Air Force Maj. Gen. Michael Lynch, a former F-4 pilot, called Charlie Bifulchi “a true American hero.” His name is on The Wall in Washington—and on the clock tower in Quincy— because Maj. Bifulchi “went to Vietnam and didn’t come home. He couldn’t come home,” Gen. Lynch said. “Charlie was in the back seat of an RF-4 that took off from Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon on the 8th of January, 1968, [on] an armed reconnaissance mission over very unfriendly territory.

“His airplane crashed into the side of a mountain near Dak To,” the general said, “close to the Laotian border. They found ground wreckage the next morning, but enemy ground fire and rough terrain made it impossible to look for any survivors.

“They tried. They tried hard for four days. But there was just no way to get in. Because they couldn’t check on Charlie’s status after the crash, he was declared MIA—one of some 2,500 Americans listed as POW or MIA during that war.”

Gen. Lynch recounted Charlie Bifulchi’s life: An honors graduate of Quincy High School in 1961. President of the National Honor Society. Awarded the Grossman Prize for leadership, scholastic achievement, and service. A top student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Rochester, New York.

Bifulchi had a tough job as a back-seater in the F-4, Gen. Lynch said. “But Charlie did his job and he did it well. We lost a future Air Force leader when we lost him those 39 years ago.”

Bob Brudno announced that \$20,000 had been collected from the Brudno family and friends for a scholarship in his brother’s name for students at North Quincy High School. Veterans Dominic Spada and Patrick Barnes read the names inscribed on the clock tower. Steven Kring played “Taps.”

At precisely 3:55 p.m., four F-15 jets from Otis Air Force Base streaked across the sky. As they roared above the clock tower, one peeled off in the traditional Missing Man maneuver.

#### BECAUSE IT’S GENUINE

“If one could find any good in the aftermath of my brother’s death,” Bob Brudno said, “it was that his story seems to have inspired people to recognize how poorly our returning soldiers from Vietnam were treated.”

Now, “by honoring the fallen so many years after their deaths, people are demonstrating long-overdue respect for all Vietnam veterans, who never got a real welcome home,” he said.

Retired Marine Col. Ed Murphy, whose phone call to Bob Brudno in 2005 gave impetus to the events of the past two years, explains it this way: “Guys have reached a stage in life when it’s about ‘we,’ not ‘I,’” he said. “Just to see the effects on the Bifulchi family, and the Brudno family, for them to see that others care,” is therapeutic.

At dinner after the ceremony, Orson Swindle spoke from the heart. “I’m thrilled to be part of your family,” he said. “It’s great that you do what you do. Because you are the heart and soul of what America is all about.”

For Debby Brudno, the day was bittersweet. “Coming back here,” she said, “pulls me back to 1973. But it’s comforting to know that so many still care.”

The Quincy veterans are already planning for next March, when they will honor Tommy Chiminello, a dustoff pilot who died when his chopper was shot down. Each year they want to tell the story of one more of their 48.