

# **“You Are Not Forgotten”**

By Belinda Hauger

In a sense, one dollar spent in 1968 bought me a virtual trip half-way around the world in 2008.

For much of my life I remember my mother, Jane, wearing a metal bracelet on her wrist that reads, “SP4 Wade Groth, 2-12-68.” In addition to writing to her own brother during the Vietnam War, my mom participated in various letter-writing programs during her high school years in which she sent notes and news from the home front to brighten the mail call for soldiers across the sea. The addresses for the soldiers often came from the newspaper, and it was through the “Dear Abby” column that she paid \$1 for a POW/MIA bracelet to wear in honor of a soldier missing in action in Vietnam. For her, this missing soldier was Wade Groth. She never knew much about Wade’s story, but the bracelet gave her the opportunity to teach my brother and me tidbits about a war that, to us, was miles and years away. In the late 1980’s, a traveling version of the Vietnam Wall came to our hometown, and I remember visiting this wall in the park and leaving flowers beneath Wade’s name. She was being true to what the bracelet asked of her—to keep thoughts and prayers with the missing soldiers. I grew up with an awareness about the complexity of the Vietnam War and knew that these veterans did not always come home to the heroes’ welcome that they deserved.

Fast-forward now to the age of the internet. In the fall of 2007, my mom heard of a website known as the Virtual Wall ([www.virtualwall.org](http://www.virtualwall.org).) We looked up Wade’s name, and for the first time there was a picture—and a story—to go with the name. Wade was from Michigan, we learned. He was a member of the 50<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment and was a crew chief on a medical helicopter. While flying a night mission on February 12, 1968, Wade’s helicopter, the Dustoff 90, went down in dense jungle west of Ban Me Thout in South Vietnam. Also missing in the crash were the other 3 members of the crew: 1 Lt Jerry Roe, CW2 Alan Gunn, and SP5 Harry Brown. Two years later, the chopper was found in the jungle mostly in tact, but no trace of the crew was ever found. They are the only full helicopter crew still MIA in Vietnam.

Along with this statistical information, there was a more personal side to the Virtual Wall site. In addition to entries from other people who had worn Wade’s bracelet, his guestbook included entries from relatives, friends, and even fellow soldiers who had known him and been a part of his life.

Fast-forward again to early April of this year. While visiting a friend on the East Coast, I was able to experience springtime in Washington, paying my first visit to Washington, D.C. My friend Brittany and I planned to visit as many monuments as we could, and I told her that I wanted to make it to the Vietnam Wall for sure to take a picture of Wade’s name for my mom. On Saturday afternoon, we went to the Wall. I had a name and I knew the date, but searching through the names was still a daunting task.

When we reached panel 39E, there were two pieces of paper and a red rose at the base of the wall. I was busy searching through names when my friend noticed that Wade’s name was on one of these pieces of paper, along with the words “Dedicated to the crew of Dustoff 90: You are not forgotten, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Remembrance.” On the other piece of paper was a picture of Wade, which I recognized because it was the same picture I had seen on the Virtual Wall last fall. We were awestruck. At various intervals there were flowers and wreaths scattered along the Wall, but there were only two pieces of

paper laid at the base of the Wall that day, and both of them were in honor of the very person for which I had come! “Who put this here?” I wanted to shout, because I would have loved to speak with them. My friend and I were quiet for a few minutes, soaking in the magnitude of our discovery. Finally I snapped a picture, and we moved on.

When I got back to Minnesota after my trip, this amazing coincidence was still on my mind. I decided to revisit the Virtual Wall website and perhaps post a guestbook entry of my own about my experience at the Wall. Before I got the chance to post an entry, though, I was reading through old postings and ran across a 2004 entry from one of Wade’s comrades that said, “...each time I go [to the Wall] I leave your picture and a remembrance of the Dustoff 90.” “It can’t be,” I thought, “but it has to be!” There was an e-mail address, and I sent off an email asking “nastanley” if he had been at the Wall in early April. I received an e-mail in return from Colorado saying that he had. And the rest is “living history.”

Neal Stanley is the veteran behind the posting on Wade’s Virtual Wall website and the papers left at the Wall. I have come to learn that he joined the Army in 1966 and chose to be trained as a medical corpsman. Wade Groth was the first person Neal met when he joined the 50<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment in September 1967, and he flew with Wade many times. In fact, he took the very picture that we saw on the website and at the wall on their first day in Vietnam. Neal has been kind enough to share with my family and me some of his stories and experiences as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment. From 1997-2000, Neal tracked down, via the internet, many of the guys that were in his Dustoff unit in Vietnam, and in 2000 they had a reunion in San Antonio. Neal sent us two DVD’s that they watched at their reunion: *Wings over Vietnam*, from the Military Channel, and *50<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment*, which he created for the reunion using personal pictures from Vietnam.

Watching these DVD’s with my brother, we commented within the first five minutes that seeing the pictures of the soldiers and the Vietnam countryside made a war that was miles and years away seem more real to us than it ever had. It became clear to us that these soldiers were young—just out of high school like my mom’s brothers. It became clear to us that 1960’s music such as “For What It’s Worth” means what it says. It became clear to us that although war may be hell, the relationships that are formed in the midst of it are powerful, profound, and lasting. Finally, it became clear to us that despite political thoughts on the war, soldiers living and dead deserve a heroes’ welcome and a “thank you” for all that they have been through and done to fulfill their obligations to their country. I am honored to be connected in a small way to this story. And I consider my mom’s purchase of an MIA bracelet in 1968 as \$1 well spent.

*“Here is a big Thank You, to you and your Mom, for caring about Wade all of these years. The Wall is an amazing place, a great healing place, helping Nam veterans and their families and friends find positive thoughts from a difficult time in our country’s history.” –*

*Neal Stanley to Belinda and Jane Hauger*