

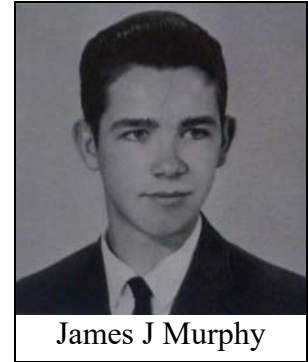
Childhood friends share fate

BY BORYS KRAWCZENIUK
Published: September 27, 2015

A North Vietnamese booby trap killed Army Pfc. James J. Murphy of Scranton, a death that wounded the heart of his best friend.

At Pfc. Murphy's funeral, Jackie McLaughlin vowed to enlist in the Army and avenge his buddy.

"When he came into the funeral home, he said, 'I'm going to go over and get them,' " said Pfc. Murphy's younger brother, Paul, 64, of Clarks Summit.



James J Murphy

They were best friends for years, Jimmy and Jackie. Pfc. Murphy was almost two years older, but they still hung out together all the time, often at pool halls or bowling alleys.



In 1966, a year after he graduated from West Scranton High School, the Army drafted Pfc. Murphy. At 5 feet 1 inch tall, he would have been rejected by the Army were he an inch shorter, the doctor giving him a pre-reporting physical told him, according to his brother.

"The chip on his shoulder was that, 'Even though I am small, I'm going to be tough,' " Paul said. Their father, Thomas Murphy, a vacuum cleaner salesman, did not think proving toughness should require going to Vietnam. He hated that his son had to join the Army. At age 40, as his son trained for war, Thomas suffered a heart attack and died. Paul attributes his father's death to the stress of knowing his son could die in battle.

Pfc. Murphy began his tour in South Vietnam on Sept. 22, 1967, Traveling to South Vietnam with Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 50th Infantry, which was attached to the 1st Cavalry Division on the Central Highland's Bong Son Plains.

Only 20 years old, Pfc. Murphy volunteered to serve as a "tunnel rat", using his size to his advantage while searching enemy tunnel complexes. On Halloween 1967, Pfc. Murphy's foot tripped a wire, setting off a blast that blew fragments of shrapnel into his body. He died five days later.

"He always said he was going to buy my mother a house," Paul Murphy said. "And then (with) the insurance proceeds (from his brother's death), she was able to put down a down payment."

After Mr. McLaughlin saw his friend's body and vowed vengeance, his brother, Jim McLaughlin, a Navy sailor, tried to talk him out of enlisting. When that didn't work, he tried to convince his brother he should join the Navy or Marines. "We all tried to talk him out of it, but he was determined," Paul Murphy said. "Most of us thought we should have never gone in" to Vietnam.

Determined to go, Mr. McLaughlin said he would join the Army because Pfc. Murphy was in the Army. A lot taller, at 5 feet 11 inches, he was a tough kid, too. “He was one of the toughest kids ever to come out of the city of Scranton,” Mr. McLaughlin’s brother said. “His main objective in life was to beat me up,” he said, laughing as he thought of his brother, younger by three years. “We’d fight, and my father would break us up with a broom handle. ... (But) he was a big-hearted kid. If somebody picked on somebody, he’d be the first one jumping in, (and saying) ‘Pick on me.’”

He was daring, too. One day, the McLaughlin brothers went swimming at Nay Aug Gorge in Scranton, and Jackie McLaughlin decided to jump off a cliff known as “the killer” — twice. “I was down there screaming at him, ‘Don’t jump, don’t jump,’” his brother said. “He went in, I’m watching the water, he popped up. I was so thrilled that he came up. He went right back up and jumped again. I said, ‘What’d you do that for?’ ‘I wanted to make sure I could do it,’ he says.”

Pfc. Jackie McLaughlin joined his Vietnam artillery unit on March 19, 1969. On May 11, Mother’s Day, a mortar hit his position, according to the Coffelt Database of Vietnam Casualties. He died right there.

Pfc. Murphy died in Vietnam after 45 days. Pfc. McLaughlin, 53 days.

Jim McLaughlin remembers standing at the airport in Pittston Twp. as the military plane carrying his brother’s body landed. “I remember seeing my brother’s body coming out of the freight section in a gray box, just a gray wooden box,” he said. “I’ll remember it until the day I die. It was pretty sad, you know? Just like a piece of freight.”

Joined in friendship and death on behalf of their country, the names James John Murphy and John Robert McLaughlin reunited Saturday on Courthouse Square on a new Vietnam War memorial honoring 55 Lackawanna County residents who died serving there like them.



“It hit me in the heart. I lost my mother and my father, which I could get over that. But my brother? We slept in the same bed from the time that I could remember until the time he left,” Mr. McLaughlin said.

“Certain things don’t leave you,” Paul Murphy said.

Contact the writer:
bkrawczeniuk@timeshamrock.com