

Fremont couple presented with flags for brothers' sacrifice in Vietnam War

COLLIN SPILINEK Fremont Tribune Jun 16, 2020

Before they married 12 years ago, Larry and Phyllis Steel realized they had much in common.

Shortly after getting to know each other, the Fremont couple discovered they both had brothers who died in the Vietnam War.

Kenneth Steel and Ernest Petty, who were remembered Sunday at a ceremony held by the Honor and Remember Nebraska chapter, had also coincidentally both died at age 19, less than six months apart in 1967.

"That was a first for these guys here. They had never heard of such a thing," Larry Steel said. "And yet at the same time, man, they sacrificed everything."

The Steels were presented with the 200th and 201st Honor and Remember flags in the state at the Veterans Memorial Park on the morning of Flag Day. The event was attended by members of the public, as well as Mayor Scott Getzschman.

"Pfc. Kenneth L. Steel and Lance Cpl. Ernest F. Petty gave their lives for our country," Honor and Remember Nebraska chapter Director Jim Meier said. "They are soldiers most worthy of having been honored and remembered today."

Laura Thomas sang the national anthem, while Bobby Figueroa performed a rendition of "Fallen Heroes" and Dennis Miller performed "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes.



vain, and number two, that the nation would never forget," Reid said. "These concerns led George to see if there was a universally recognized symbol that specifically acknowledges the American servicemen and women who never made it home. To his surprise, he found nothing."

The Nebraska chapter was formed in 2012, and has now presented more than 200 flags for those who have served in American wars. Those interested in joining, sponsoring a flag or helping with fundraising events can visit honorandremembernebraska.org.

The chapter has multiple events for the community throughout the year. In 2017, the Nebraska Legislature passed a resolution to adopt the flag as an official symbol of the state, allowing it to be flown at government buildings.

"Really, the core of what we do is what we are doing here today, and that is the presentation of Honor and Remember flags to the families who have sacrificed a loved one in service to our country," Reid said. "So again, we thank you for being here and we thank you for your support."

Kenneth Lee Steel was born on March 18, 1947 in Lincoln to Albert H. Steel and Betty L. McKittrick, who moved to Fremont in 1948. He attended Christian Missionary Alliance Church, now Fremont Alliance Church, and graduated in 1965 from Fremont High School, where he was a member of the wrestling team.

The ceremony took place in partnership with the Fremont Avenue of Flags, and the flags were sponsored by Eagle Distributing.

Honor and Remember is a national organization with chapters in 15 states across the country. Although it was formed in 2008, member Doug Reid said its creation began after Army Cpl. George Anthony "Tony" Lutz II was shot and killed by a sniper in Fallujah, Iraq, on Dec. 29, 2005.

After Lutz's funeral, his father, George, met with other families to create the organization.

"What those families wanted to know was two things: Number one, that their loved one's sacrifice was not in

A year after his graduation, Kenneth Steel was drafted into the Army and received basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and advanced training at Fort Polk in Louisiana.

Kenneth Steel was sent overseas that October and assigned to the airmobile unit of the First Cavalry Division and engaged in front line duty in South Vietnam.

On the night of Feb. 27, 1967, Kenneth Steel's dog, Duke, began to howl and screech loudly for several minutes, much to the confusion of the Steels.

"However, after receiving the news of Ken's death, the family traced the timing of his death to the moment that Duke started howling," a letter written by Larry Steel stated. "At that point, the family realized that Duke knew Ken had been killed before they did."

Larry Steel told the Fremont Tribune that his brother's relationship with Duke was stronger than any he had ever known.

"That meant a lot to us, the connection the two of those had and wherein Duke, we really didn't understand until we had the news, and then backtracked it to that time," he said. "I still get goosebumps over it. Ken was well loved. He was given to his nation."



The day that Kenneth Steel was killed during a combat operation in the Binh Dinh Province of South Vietnam, his brother said he volunteered to lead the squad after the leader chose not to.

After moving to California, Larry Steel said he met with the squad leader, who had survived, in the early 1980s.

"He was carrying so much weight over all these years because of what he had done by not going out with that squad," he said. "I had the honor of meeting him and setting him free, saying to him, 'We love you. You will not carry that burden with you anymore.'"

Larry Steel said that experience changed his life forever.

"It was to me a joy to be able to have him set free," he said.

"And when he left our place after we visited for a lengthy time, his feet were still on the ground, but he was very light."

Ernest Floyd Petty was born on Jan. 17, in Cincinnati to Anna Ruth Dunsmore Pittman and Allan Eugene Pittman. His mother later married Donald Petty, who adopted Ernest Petty with his siblings.

A soldier at heart, Petty joined the Civil Air Patrol for Youth in middle school along with Phyllis Steel, who he played war and soldiers with as a child.

"Ernest excelled in everything," a letter written by Phyllis Steel stated. "Even at that young age, he was a fighter, very patriotic and determined to 'go the distance' no matter what."

At age 11, Petty was attacked by a bobcat while exploring in Kentucky. He wrestled with the cat for a while before it became tired and ran away.

"Proudly, Ernest pointed to the deep puncture wound between his thumb and index finger, stating, 'That's my badge of courage and honor,'" the letter stated.

Although he was overdue for rotation out of South Vietnam, Petty was killed on July 5, 1967, which was the Fourth of July in the United States.

“While watching fireworks with my husband’s family, I suddenly knew that my precious brother, Ernie, — my best friend growing up — had been killed,” the letter stated. “I felt it deeply in my soul.”

Phyllis Steel told the Tribune that Petty was in intelligence, which meant that neither she nor anyone else could contact him.

“He was always isolated, and I really hated that,” she said.

News crews would interview soldiers, but couldn’t talk to her brother because of his work.

“I didn’t get to see him on the 10 o’clock news like so many families did,” Phyllis Steel said.

Larry Steel said he first met with Meier around three years ago, who took the information of the fallen brothers.

“The process is, we request the flag, and it goes in a national database,” Meier said. “The next step is ordering the flag, which requires funding. And Eagle Distributing funded the flags this week, so they stepped up that quickly.”

Getzschman was one of the speakers at the ceremony. He thanked the crowd for coming to the event and spoke to the soldiers’ sacrifice.

“They were fighting to preserve this country’s honor and our freedom,” Getzschman said. “Thank you all for attending and all you do each and every day to ensure our heroes are never forgotten.”

Avenue of Flags Commander Chris Madsen thanked the community for its patriotic support, including the construction of the park, which finished in May 2018.

“This is what this park was designed for, built for and I’m honored to be a part of it and have the Steel and Petty family be here to make sure that those who paid the ultimate sacrifice are never forgotten,” he said.

As many veterans of the Vietnam War received scorn upon returning to the United States, Larry Steel said his parents’ hearts would have gone “pitter-patter” if they had been at the ceremony.



“I thought it was not only tremendous, but I enjoyed letting the tears come, the sacrifice that our brothers made that we could have this freedom today to do this,” he said. “And so that was my way of expressing gratitude to them, even though it’s been over 53 years.”

Phyllis Steel said she thought the ceremony was beautiful and appreciated the public honoring her brother’s fight in the Vietnam War.

“We’ve changed and we’ve grown as a country, and hopefully individually as well, to know that life is precious and we are blessed,” she said. “And I just appreciate so much, this time devoted to honor the Vietnam vets.”

Meier urged attendees of the event to honor the memory of Kenneth Steel and Petty by being a force for good in all they do.

“Tonight, as you lay down to go to sleep, ask yourself, ‘What is one thing I can do tomorrow to be a better citizen,’ and please indeed as you wake up, do it,” he said. “Honor, remember and never forget.”