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Springfield honors a son lost in Vietnam

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By Rose Quinn

SPRINGFIELD — U.S. Army Capt. William G. “Bill” Chandler was on his second tour in Vietnam when he was killed in combat on Aug. 11, 1972, while serving as an intelligence adviser to Army of the Republic of Vietnam Regional Forces. He was three months shy of his 25th birthday.

Chandler’s grand plan of buying a house and filling it with children gave him and Bonnie Chandler-Warren, his devoted wife of four years, something to hold on to during their time apart. The couple was already parents to two beautiful daughters — 3-year-old Samantha and 3-month-old Abigail, both born with their dad’s trademark grin.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” Bonnie told the two uniformed soldiers tasked with breaking the news that she was a young widow. “He wasn’t in combat. He went as an adviser. Tell me, how this could happen?”

And later, when sympathy flowers arrived from her college roommate, Bonnie couldn’t breathe.

They reminded her too much of the box of two dozen roses she’d opened two weeks earlier – a final gift from her husband on her 24th birthday, which also was the last time they spoke.

“Happy birthday, Kitten,” Chandler wished his wife during an unexpected phone call from Saigon the night of her birthday. As Bonnie rambled on, she quickly realized the call had been disconnected.

“Bill, are you there? Bill! Bill! Dammit! Dammit to hell,” Bonnie wrote in an unfinished memoir. “I hung up, waited, watching the phone attached to the kitchen wall, willing it to ring. I hadn’t even said good-bye.”

Legacy of love

It was an especially emotional moment for Samantha Chandler on Monday as she read her father’s name aloud during the township’s Memorial Day observance. As she and her aunt Holly Cook, Chandler’s youngest of three siblings, read the names of each of the 42 township sons killed in either World War II, Korea, Vietnam or Iraq, retired Springfield Police Lt. William Clark sounded a bell.

For Bonnie and her three daughters, including Meredith Ehlers from a second marriage, who traveled across country from their homes in Washington, it was a bittersweet welcome as the Springfield American Legion Post 227 honored Chandler nearly 47 years after his death. Holly and her husband, Tim, drove in from New Hampshire. Four fellow Army captains who served with Chandler — John Haseman, Mike Delaney, Brian Valiton and Ed Blankenhagen — were also in attendance.

Family and friends walked in a mile-long parade, led by a Legion color guard and featuring the Springfield High School Band and apparatus from the Springfield Fire Co. The parade began at Memorial Park and ended at the Springfield Township Building, drawing an estimated 250 spectators along the route.

An outside ceremony included a brief prayer, a rendition of the Star Spangled Banner, Taps and a gun salute. There was also a wreath-laying at the township's memorial by Chandler's two grandsons, Tristan and his namesake William.

"Today is Capt. Chandler's day, but it's about all our fallen, too," reminded U.S. Army Col. Richard Debany, whose keynote speech inside the township building shared a glimpse into Chandler's life as a reel of photographs of him from infancy to adulthood flashed in the background.

"We don't just remember those killed on the battlefield on this day. We also honor their survivors; those that had to find the resilience to continue. They had to live on, first in pain and grief, then in loss and sadness. They have to live with the cancelled plans, the memories never made," said Debany. "Like Bonnie, they had to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives and figure out how to live again. Gold Star families have a special place in our society. Along with those who died, they too paid the tab for our security, our peace, and our nation's policies whether they personally agreed with them or not."

Chasing Adventure

Chandler spent his childhood in a brick home on Longview Drive. He attended Sabold Elementary and Springfield Junior High schools before he graduated from Springfield High School in 1965. Target shooting with rifle and pistol was his passion, and he was good at it. He loved animals, and enjoyed music and photography.

He was 12 when his father, William, a World War II veteran, suffered a fatal heart attack, leaving his mother, Jayne, alone to raise him and his three siblings, Cherie, Chris and Holly. A graphic designer with a can-do attitude, Jayne Chandler started her own advertising agency, designing ads and promotional materials for Breck Shampoo, Hershey and other familiar businesses. She also prepared Springfield Township's annual report.

Much like her own parents, Jayne Chandler, who died in 1998, encouraged her own children to be bold and independent.

“Jayne’s teachings resonated with her kids including Bill,” according to an extensive narrative authored by Debany on the American Legion Post 227 of Springfield’s website celebrating Chandler’s life and legacy.

Described as social and likable, Chandler had many friends. He was always up for an adventure, often letting his mischievous side show. Childhood friends like John Bean, and high school schoolmates like Lenda Gray and Kae Kalwaic, recalled his sense of humor Monday as they joined in Monday’s ceremony.

“He was just fun,” said Kalwaic, noting that on their commencement program she wrote that she would always remember graduation night because Bill and his friends kept her laughing all evening.

After high school, Chandler joined a crew of a tanker ship from the Port of Marcus Hook, chasing adventure as a merchant marine for about two. He then enrolled at Millersville State College for a short time. When he decided he’d rather volunteer for military service than be drafted, he enlisted in the Army in January 1967. After a year of training at Fort Bragg, N.C., and advanced infantry training at Fort Ord in California, he attended Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning in Georgia. Then in January 1968 he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry and assigned to Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, Wash., where he served as a counter insurgency/counter guerrilla warfare instructor.

‘Strangers are just friends waiting to happen’

It was the first weekend of March 1968 when a sophomore at the University of Puget Sound named Bonnie Monk got a phone call from a friend and fellow student who worked as switchboard operator for the campus.

“Her friend said she had a boy named Bill on the phone who had three friends and they were looking for dates,” wrote Debany. “I’m sure bemused and quite curious, Bonnie found three girlfriends and went on a quadruple blind date with Bill Chandler and his lieutenant buddies from nearby Fort Lewis.”

Bonnie, in a recent telephone interview, said she knew pretty quickly that Chandler was the guy for her. Not only did they share a passion for poet, songwriter and actor Rod McKuen — among whose famous quotes is “Strangers are just friends waiting to happen” — he was also very devoted to his mother.

Five months later, on Aug. 2, 1968, William and Bonnie Chandler married at Fort Lewis’ Evergreen Chapel, complete with saber arch salute to the newlyweds.

By October, Chandler received his orders to Vietnam. Bonnie withdrew from her education studies at Puget Sound, and they drove across country to Pennsylvania. Chandler moved his wife in with his mother and youngest sister, Holly, in Springfield.

“After a month of leave, two weeks of jungle warfare school in Panama, and another few days with Bonnie, now several months pregnant, Bill departed for his first tour in Vietnam on Dec. 19, 1968,” wrote Debany.

Chandler’s inaugural arrival in country was during the region’s dry season. He was assigned as a platoon leader in the 6th Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, at a fire support base, located 4 miles from Dong Tam in the Mekong Delta.

According to Debany, as an infantry platoon leader in a rifle company, Chandler would have been leading about 35 enlisted men.

“He and his platoon sergeant would have led their platoon on offensive and defensive operations from their firebase, usually as part of a larger company or battalion-sized operation,” the colonel wrote.

After only about a month in the 6th Battalion, on Jan. 15, 1969, the same day he was promoted to first lieutenant, Chandler was wounded, suffering shrapnel to his left arm from a booby trap.

When his wound was assessed as significant and requiring a long recovery, Chandler was returned to the United States for treatment at Valley Forge General Hospital in Phoenixville, a mere 45-minute drive from his very-pregnant wife.

When Bonnie went into labor at Delaware County Memorial Hospital, dad was there on Feb. 16 to welcome baby Samantha.

Because of his injury, Chandler’s tour was curtailed and he did not have to return to Vietnam. Instead, he was ordered back to Fort Lewis. During the year his family was at Fort Lewis, Chandler was promoted to captain.

“Although he wasn’t pursuing a career in the military (he jokingly said to Bonnie in a letter that he wanted to have 25 kids and raise dogs as a living) he did want to eventually become a field grade officer and maybe have an assignment for their family in Europe,” wrote Debany.

In anticipation of interesting and intellectually stimulating assignments that did not involve walking through rice paddies, Chandler transferred from infantry to military intelligence. The transfer meant a reassignment from Fort Lewis to the Defense Intelligence Agency with duty at the Pentagon. But beforehand, Chandler attended MI training for several months in the spring and summer of 1970 at Fort Holabird in Baltimore, Md. The family then moved to Hillcrest Heights, Md., southeast of Washington, D.C., for his assignment with the DIA.

As much as the Chandler family enjoyed their time in Baltimore, especially frequent trips to the beach, they disliked Hillcrest Heights. Chandler, too, found that he did not enjoy his work at the DIA, and sought something away from the D.C. area.

“Additionally, he wanted to be promoted to major and believed, probably rightly, that he needed the experience and credit of a full combat tour to be on par, competitively, with his peers. Finally, he made the reasonable prediction that, if sent to Vietnam as an MI officer, he’d likely serve on a staff in a battalion or brigade headquarters rather than have a direct combat role like he did as an infantry platoon leader,” wrote Debany.

A soldier’s thoughts

With Bonnie and Samantha settled close to her parents in Spokane, Wash., Chandler began his second tour on Jan. 26, 1972.

“Arriving in Vietnam in an environment of rapidly decreasing U.S. forces, Bill was assigned to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, known as MACV,” Debany told Monday’s crowd.

As advisor to MACV’s Advisory Team 88, which was led by civilian Albert Kotzebue, Chandler provided intelligence support. As a member of the provincial rather than a district team, Chandler lived and worked at team’s headquarters at its compound.

Kotzebue snapped a precious photograph of Chandler, taken just a few hours before he left the Ham Long compound for beleaguered Tan Loi village with the relief force that fateful day in early August.

The photo showed Chandler sitting on his helmet, holding the handset to what Debany would describe nearly 47 years later as undoubtedly his most important weapon at the time – his AN/PRC-77 radio on the ground next to him.

“He’s geared up for combat with two smoke grenades hanging from his load carrying equipment suspenders and a bandolier of ammunition visible around his chest. His 9th Infantry Division patch on his right shoulder indicating he wasn’t new to the Delta and knew the dangers ahead. Despite his sunglasses, you can see he has a resigned expression on his face; he seems to have accepted the day’s turn of events that brought him to Ham Long though I’m sure it’s now what he expected when he woke up that morning,” noted Debany. ““His head is slightly turned to the right and he has a pondering gaze into the distance. With the wedding ring placed on his ring finger by Bonnie clearly visible, one can only guess at his thoughts that moment.”

It was late afternoon when the relief force, two battalions in strength, set off for Tan Loi. As the lone advisor, Chandler was with the headquarters element, surely with Ham Long’s district chief on the planned 8 kilometer tactical movement to make contact with the enemy at Tan Loi.

About a kilometer out of the compound, just after crossing the little Tre Bong bridge, the force was ambushed from the cover of trees.

“There must have been a terrible cacophony of noise and confusion” as the relief force was attacked with intense small arms, mortar and rocket fire, and then returned fire with equal ferocity, said Debany. “At approximately 5 p.m., Bonnie’s, Samantha’s, and Abigail’s lives were shattered along with an exploding mortar round that instantly killed 24-year-old Bill – husband, father, son, brother and friend to many.”

One long, final kiss

While Bonnie stopped short of describing her first love as a pacifist, she said Chandler’s views of the war had changed.

“When he went in as an adviser, he no longer believed in the cause,” she said. “He went in as an adviser so he didn’t have to go into the rice paddies to secure our future.”

Much like the sun-kissed sky on Monday, Bonnie recalled lying in grass watching the sunlight flicker through the Lombardy poplars that life-altering Sunday afternoon in August 1972. With their 3-month old daughter who needed to be held or rocked after every feeding and only swaying in mom’s arms soothed her, and her precocious, energetic, 3-year-old chatterbox sister who needed cousins to entertain her, Bonnie had decided to pack up the crib, diapers, dog, dolls and water toys the day before and drove to her parents’ farm.

“The farm was the touchstone of my life, the only home I knew until college and marriage,” reads a portion of her memoir.

Six weeks earlier, her husband had taken leave to meet Abigail. Having been somewhere on the Mekong Delta when she was born, on May 16, 1972, it was a blessed visit for them.

While the community gathered for grilled steaks, fresh picked corn on the cob and apple pie on the Fourth of July, Chandler told his wife he had seen enough fireworks, and their little family escaped into the Colville National Forest.

“As they slept, we snuggled under the night sky, watching satellites passing through the Milky Way. We made plans to be alone in Hawaii. His 25th birthday was three months away and I vowed to lose more baby weight and be bikini ready.

“He was disillusioned about the pointless way and wanted to get out of the Army when his tour ended, finish his college degree. We discussed options of where we would settle down. East Coast near his mother? West Coast near my parents?” Bonnie shared in her writing. “He declared that was no hurry, for when he came home, when he became a civilian, when the war was over, we would have all the time in the world.”

A week later, Chandler was boarding a plane back to Vietnam.

“Be brave, Kitten,” he said to Bonnie.

“I will,” she promised as his hazel eyes and Cupid’s bow grin seared her heart.

For the last time, they hugged and kissed.

Both Bonnie - who was widowed a second time in 2017 by the passing her husband, Larry Warren, a pastor in the United Methodist Church - and Holly were pleased by Chandler’s recognition by his hometown.

Bonnie, whose familiarity with grief helped to motivate her to earn a Master of Divinity Degree in 1987, recently listened to some old cassette tapes she had received from her first husband during his tours of duty, instead of letters.

“What I heard was a very pragmatic, conscientious, committed man who wanted to make a good life for me and our children,” she said.