KEEPING the PROMISE

**The Story of MIA Jerry Elliott,
a Family Shattered by His Disapearance,
and His Sister's 40-Year Search for the Truth**

Donna E. Elliott

HELLGATE PRESS ASHLAND, OREGON

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Published by Hellgate Press

Hellgate Press
PO Box 3531
Ashland, OR 97520

email: info@hellgatepress.com

Editor: Harley B. Patrick
Cover design: L. Redding
Back cover photo: Rita Ward

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Elliott, Donna E., 1969-
Keeping the promise : the story of MIA Jerry Elliott, a family shattered by his disapearance, and his sister's 40-year search for the truth / Donna E. Elliott ; editor Harley Patrick. -- 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-1-55571-670-7
1. Elliott, Jerry William, 1948- 2. Vietnam War, 1961-1975--Missing in action--United States. 3. Elliott, Donna E., 1969- I. Patrick, Harley B. II. Title.
DS559.8.M5E45 2010
959.704'38--dc22
2010002220

Printed and bound in the United States of America
First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated to my son…

Happy 40th Birthday, Randy!

Naval Chaplain Ray Stubbe (standing) holds a field service for Marines during the Battle of Khe Sanh, which claimed the lives of over four hundred U.S. Army, Marine, Navy, and Air Force soldiers between January 20 and March 31, 1968. Stubbe recently donated over four hundred items to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum; included among the items was the brass crucifix shown in the photo. Photo credit: Dick Swanson.

"We can never forget our past—we are unable to do so…The well-wishers, those who tell us to, just don't understand. How could they?"

– Chaplain Ray Stubbe

Contents

Acknowledgments

I wish to recognize those who sustained me as I rambled through a labyrinth of potent, repressed memories. The journey was painfully unpredictable, but family and friends endured my mood swings and loved me anyway. Thank you all, I couldn't have completed this book without your much-needed support.

I sincerely acknowledge all the Vietnam veterans who provided me with information and esprit de corps, especially the 268th Pathfinders, the 282nd Black Cats, my Khe Sanh vet brothers, and the Run For The Wall family.

Special thanks to Anne Perry for her professional language skills and endearing encouragement. Heartfelt appreciation to Mick Powner for significant suggestions and proofreading copy as if he were breaking code. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my writing coach Sheila Cosper. Her encouragement convinced this reluctant writer that not only should the accounting process of my MIA brother be told, but there was also a valid need to chronicle the corrosive effects his situation placed on the Elliott family. Perhaps, as a result of sharing our story, history will not be repeated.

THE MISSING MAN TABLE: The six empty places set at this table represent the brave men and women from each of the five services—Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard—and civilians, who are missing from the Vietnam War.

Foreword

It is the dead who make the greatest demands on the living, and the return of our war dead is no exception. The bodies of those that perish in battle hold significance far beyond their mere physical properties. These bodies represent sacrifice, honor, and a pledge fulfilled to the people and government of the United States of America.

The dead themselves do not demand a proper burial, but the safe return of their remains is of paramount importance to the living. The survivors of the slain soldier need those remains to bring their grief to closure. We as a nation need to mourn our soldiers collectively and individually. Thus will soldiers risk their own lives to recover the bodies of the slain during and after a battle. The U.S. military follows a strict code of conduct concerning the retrieval of dead warriors and millions of dollars are spent every year to bring the fallen back home, with proper honors being rendered.

But what of those that are lost in battle without a full accounting? What of those Missing-In-Action (MIA) who left behind no body, no information, no hints as to their safety or death? What of those who leave behind only questions? For the families of these MIAs, the mourning never stops, and closure never comes. Jerry Elliott, a member of the 282nd Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) Black Cat rescue mission that attempted to come to the aid of my beleaguered garrison in Khe Sanh village, disappeared during that fight. His whereabouts are to this day still unknown. Jerry's sister, Donna Elliott, has devoted her life and resources to finding answers to her brother's disappearance. This is the story that unfolds in *Keeping the Promise*. America must remain faithful to the promise we make to every soldier in the United States military, an agreement of honor that if something happens to them while serving our great nation in a foreign country, they will never be abandoned.

While writing my own memoirs about Vietnam, *Expendable Warriors: The Battle of Khe Sanh and the Vietnam War*, my research took me to the 282nd Black Cat website where I met Donna. Her indefatigable search for her brother Jerry, who was MIA in the same place and at the same time as my own story, opened up volumes of information about the Agony of Khe Sanh—the seventy-seven day siege—that was invaluable to me in writing the book. Since meeting Donna and becoming part of her journey to find her brother, I have learned and participated in my own small way in her story which she tells so elegantly in *Keeping the Promise*. She is an excellent chronicler, researcher, and more importantly, she fights the hard fight for what she knows is right.

Donna believes we Americans must never forget our Prisoners-of-War (POWs) and MIAs. By writing *Keeping the Promise*, her goal is to achieve national support for the search for not only her brother Jerry, but all of America's POW/MIAs. The truth at the heart of Case 1000, and many, many other POWMIA cases, is that there is no truth…and if not yet, when?

What emerges from her description of Jerry's disappearance is the devastation of her family and her continuous fight with the POW/MIA bureaucracy to learn about his status. The reader immediately senses the clear image of Donna Elliott as the strongest of women—she fought through physical and psychological barriers to not only live this story, but to write it.

Keeping the Promise will generate more questions than answers about the POW/MIA bureaucracy—questions that need to be raised again and again until there are clear answers. Every reader of this book will find within its pages a renewed dedication to seeking answers to the whereabouts of our missing soldiers, and a clear understanding of the toll that war extracts from the families of all our combatants. When each American demands a full and accurate accounting of every POW/MIA warrior where evidence indicates suspected enemy knowledge, then Donna's goal of seeking understanding to all the unanswered questions about her brother, and all of America's POW/MIAs will have been accomplished.

Bruce B. G. Clarke

Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret)

Prologue

"Soldier Dead" is a collective phrase used to refer to military personnel who perish in battle. Among the highest and proudest of traditions is the ceremonial ritual with which the military repatriates its dead. When carried to their final resting place, the American flag, blue field over the left shoulder, nobly drapes the casket of the U.S. veteran.

U.S. service members simultaneously fire a three-volley gun salute. A bugler plays Taps, and calls the fallen warrior to the sleep of death. A service representative presents the burial flag, ceremoniously folded into a precise triangle, to the family. Inside are three spent shell casings to prove, now and forevermore, the deceased and the flag have received proper military honors.

Our family has never paid tribute to my brother, Army Staff Sergeant (SSGT) Jerry W. Elliott, in this manner. He's been missing in Vietnam for over forty years now, with no credible proof he's either dead or alive.

Since the age of sixteen, the POW/MIA issue has manipulated my life. The uncertainty strained relationships and resources to the breaking point, destroyed my immediate family, and tainted my son's life. Regrettably, the search for answers to Jerry's fate has at times caused me to doubt the political integrity and general accountability of the government of America, my homeland, the country I love. On the other hand, the POW/MIA issue has served to bond me with some of the most loyal and compassionate people on earth.

When I began to put pen to paper in the fall of 2003, I never imagined this manuscript would become such an immense mental, emotional, and physical challenge, and result in the most soul-searching, healing experience of my life. Through the process of writing down painful memories, old issues reconciled with new understandings, which reduced events to appropriate levels

Repatriation of U.S. soldier, Hanoi Noi Bai Airport, Vietnam, May 1999.

of significance. Ironically, in many ways I gained what I seek for the POW/MIAs: liberty.

I started to write *Keeping the Promise* as a legacy for my son, Randy, and my two grandsons, Sam and Max. I finished writing the book for myself, because completion became a mountain I felt compelled to climb. Hopefully, this chronicle will help my family and others to understand why I dedicate so much time, effort, and expense towards the investigation of the actual fate of my brother, last seen alive on January 21, 1968, in Khe Sanh, South Vietnam.

With the completion of *Keeping the Promise*, I am confident no one will ever again ask me, "You do know Jerry is dead, don't you?" Nor will they ask why I continue the search, even though the Vietnam War ended in 1975. I am optimistic readers will be motivated to ask questions and seek answers in support of American soldiers still missing in Southeast Asia.

Over the past forty years, I have met many other POW/MIA family members with stories similar to ours. Psychological problems routinely impeded family relationships, with depression disorders often exacerbated by alcohol and/or drug abuse. Regrettably, there have been many suicides within the POW/MIA families, and the ripple effect has been multigenerational.

I agree with General John Vessey, who said the POW/MIA issue is "...a human issue, a material human issue on this earth. And there are facts that will disclose the answer to the questions we are seeking. Let's find the facts and let the facts speak for themselves."

Introduction

The Fourth of July

My white dress, streaked pink from sticky cotton candy, reflected the significance of the day. The ringlets Mama carefully combed into my baby-blonde hair now hung limp, and a veneer of dust dimmed my black patent leather shoes. The July heat plastered Jerry's platinum curls to his head, and tiny bits of red-candy apple speckled his white shirt. In high spirits, my brother and I disregarded appearance to enjoy the thrill of our hometown Fourth of July parade.

The procession began on the east end of Main Street, passed along the levee, and ended near the railroad tracks on Washington Avenue. Although a sultry Mississippi Delta evening, every able-bodied person in Washington County lined the route. Everyone looked forward to this annual patriotic celebration where folks played yard games, ate a potluck lunch, churned homemade ice cream, and created family memories.

In 1955, still steeped in old Southern traditions, Greenville residents celebrated Independence Day with a grand parade and fireworks on the river. The Fourth of July was a day set aside for picnics, family reunions, and a nod to U.S. veterans. Ten years after World War II, folks remembered why America celebrated Independence Day and they were keen to acknowledge the blood and sacrifice that is the price for freedom; a sacred debt every service member felt privileged to pay in honor and duty. Dignified veterans of the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard peppered the crowd.

Jerry and I were proud our father, a Seaman First Class during WW II, had served his country. Although he rarely talked about his stint in the Navy,

The author's father, Apprentice Seaman William S. Elliott, 1944.

an old enlistment photo hung on the wall at Grandma Rosie's house. He smiled for the camera, optimistically young and darkly handsome in his sailor blues.

Mama and Daddy sat down and leaned their lawn chairs into the shade of the old brick buildings that lined South Walnut Street. They chatted with friends and neighbors about the cotton crop, what the fish were biting, and shared various theories of weather prediction. Daddy offered his opinion that fish tend to bite better right before a good rain. Mama and I glanced at each other and smiled at his expertise on the subject. Daddy had a fancy rod and reel with a fully stocked tackle box. Grandma used a cane pole and spit on her baited hook, but she always out fished Daddy.

Ten days shy of his seventh birthday; Jerry tried hard to act nonchalant about the upcoming parade, but he didn't fool me. The sun went down and the dying light lent a magical glow to everything. No longer able to hide his excitement, he radiated with expectation. I didn't know what to expect, but I found my older brothers exuberance contagious. In anticipation, we jumped up and down, stood on tiptoe, and impatiently leaned into the rope barrier to see what spectacle would come down the street.

First came members of the homecoming court atop a showy Kleenex-carnation covered float. Next, baton-twirling majorettes pranced down the avenue in red, white, and blue spangles that shimmered under the streetlights. Laughing at the audacious clowns, we gawked at the stilt walkers, and scrambled for the hard candy thrown by beauty queens perched atop shiny new convertibles. From a block away, Jerry and I could hear the music and feel the percussion under our feet. The high school marching band came into view and the muggy air resonated with the sounds of "Stars and Stripes Forever." The proud drum major, a tall boy with a plume in his hat,

led the snappily dressed musicians. The band, undaunted by the lazy Delta heat, played their shiny instruments with youthful gusto.

Suddenly, the cadence of a hundred and twenty feet striking the pavement drew our full attention. All starch and shine, they marched down the block with shoulders back, chin up, eyes straight ahead. Sharp in their olive-drab uniforms, every rifle balanced perfectly against a hard, lean shoulder - this was the Mississippi Army National Guard. Stopping directly in front of us, the soldiers began to perform precision movements with their weapons. The First Sergeant (1SG) directed his men: Order, ARMS! Right shoulder, ARMS! Port, ARMS! Left shoulder, ARMS! Present, ARMS! Order, ARMS!

Awestruck by this demonstration of military bearing, strength, and dexterity, Jerry and I watched in wide-eyed admiration. All too soon, the soldiers marched away, heads held high in acknowledgement of applause and cheers. They were shadows in the distance when Jerry, mesmerized by the ceremonial array of uniforms and weapons, finally broke the spell. My big brother leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Donna, when we grow up, let's join the Army!" We smiled at each other and nodded in agreement, a significant decision for a young boy and a little girl. We shook hands on our pact…a heart and soul promise.

Donna (*left*) and her brother, Jerry, 1954.

Black Cats en route to Khe Sanh. Photo courtesy Black Cat Assn.

Chapter One

Black Sunday

With a deafening roar, an "extraordinary lashing of thunder and lightning unexpectedly poured down" on the Khe Sanh Combat Base at exactly 5:15 AM on January 21, 1968. Hundreds of mortar rounds and rockets slammed into the U.S. Marine base situated on a red plateau seven miles east of the Laotian border in the northwest corner of South Vietnam. A direct hit on the main ammo dump ignited 1,500 tons of ammunition, illuminating the predawn sky for miles. A thick column of black smoke billowed into the air, as grungy soot fused with dense fog.

Lethal fragments of twisted metal whistled through space like chunks of red-hot lava, critically wounding many soldiers. Shrapnel riddled trucks, destroyed several choppers, leveled a mess hall, and demolished living quarters. Ignited barrels of powdered CS tear gas singed eyes and flesh on contact. Out of control flames "cooked off" ammo supplies and saturated the air with the stench of burnt cordite. Bru Montagnard and Vietnamese residents of the Xom Cham Plateau thought the world was blowing up. The battle for Khe Sanh had begun.

Over two miles away, in the village of Khe Sanh, the blast alerted U.S. Advisors at the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Huong Hoa District Headquarters. Darkness and haze had provided adequate cover for the camouflaged enemy to belly crawl within fifty-feet of the perimeter. American, South Vietnamese, and Bru soldiers fired everything they had at the attackers. Relentless, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) continued to

Khe Sanh Combat Base, October 1967. Photo by Larry Larsen.

charge in human waves. Hundreds of dead and wounded enemy soldiers gruesomely draped the concertina wire that encircled the compound.

Ensnared in a well-planned trap, part of Hanoi's Highway 9–Khe Sanh Offensive, fewer than two-hundred allied defenders abruptly found themselves running dangerously low on ammo while nursing wounded who needed immediate evacuation. Terrified, the brave men inside the compound fought desperately to survive. Outside the gates, 10,000 well-armed NVA 304th Division enemy soldiers prepared for siege warfare.

Black Sunday, January 21, 1968, marked the beginning of seventy-seven days of misery and bloodshed over a strategic scrap of ground U.S. troops refused to surrender. According to NVA General Nguyen Duc Huy, nearly 100,000 NVA soldiers had moved south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam to the Khe Sanh Area Front to fight in this critical theater of battle. Familiar with the topography, North Vietnamese military planners had observed the Americans at Khe Sanh closely in order to develop detailed battle procedures. Hanoi's key tactic was to draw U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) relief forces from locations east of Khe Sanh. Adept at subterfuge, well-armed NVA soldiers assigned to specific infiltration positions would attack reinforcements when they attempted to enter the confrontation. Within hours, Khe Sanh would become worldwide headline news and prompt General William C. Westmoreland to initiate a secret MACV study to evaluate the possible use of nuclear or chemical weapons in defense of the combat base.

Through the Hickory Hill radio relay located on Hill 950, Army Captain (CPT) Bruce Clarke, MACV Senior District Advisor, advised the Quang Tri Province Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Senior Advisor, Robert Brewer, he needed reinforcements and supplies; his men in the compound could hold out for another day if they had additional ammo. Unsure help

would arrive in time, CPT Clarke and ARVN counterpart CPT Tinh-A-Nhi resolved along with their men that there would be no surrender; they grimly prepared for a fight to the death.

Seventy miles from the battle, a single chopper from the Hue [Way] section of the 282nd Assault Helicopter Company (AHCC) Black Cats responded to the call for resupply of the MACV. Chief Warrant Officer (CWO) Tom Pullen and WO (Warrant Officer) Richard Gilmore flew their crew six miles southwest of Quang Tri to La Vang Airfield to pick up ammunition, medical supplies, water, and two South Vietnamese soldiers. Quang Tri MACV Deputy Province Senior Advisor, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Joseph Seymoe, also joined the mission to observe the situation in Khe Sanh.

Sent to analyze communications security, Tino "Chui" Banuelos, a member of the 101st Radio Research Company (Army Security Agency [ASA] cover) had briefed LTC Seymoe earlier that morning about breeches in the unit's radio transmission security. Seymoe, a P-51 fighter pilot who earned the Distinguished Flying Cross in Korea, but couldn't transition to jets due to an inner ear problem, believed speed during a mission tended to exceed security in importance.

Surrounded by tall trees on three sides, the single helicopter landing zone (LZ) bordered the MACV compound perimeter on the west. Fifty feet from touchdown, concentrated enemy fire blocked Pullen's efforts to land. A bullet struck Sergeant (SGT) Maurice Seghetti, in the foot, resulting in severe blood loss. Dodging green machinegun tracers, Pullen and Gilmore took evasive flight action while Seymoe administered first aid to Seghetti. At Seymoe's order, Pullen radioed his Section Leader, Lieutenant (LT) Bob Ford, to request additional helicopters for a combat assault (CA).

Back on the ground at La Vang Airfield, Pullen took care of Seghetti and attempted to locate another door gunner. No problem, the Marines were always looking for a fight, especially this day. Private First Class (PFC) Rick Brittingham, a Marine with the 3rd Military Police Battalion, was operating an M-60 machinegun on an Armed Personnel Carrier (APC). Pullen asked if he'd like to be a door gunner on an assault. After clearing it with his gunnery sergeant, Brittingham volunteered.

Lieutenant Ford decided to attempt the resupply. On entry into the compound, a radio voice exclaimed in Ford's earpiece, "Black Cat 21, you cannot believe what's coming at you!" Greeted with a barrage of muzzle

WO2 Gerald McKinsey, Jr. Photo courtesy Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF)

flashes, Ford acknowledged with two clicks on the radio transmit trigger as his crew tossed ammo crates out of cargo doors and loaded fresh cans of rounds into the M-60s. Twenty seconds later, he pulled in full power, low-leveled to the east, dove into a steep ravine, and climbed until distance took them out-of-range.

Crew chief Joe Sumner's helicopter was on call in Da Nang when word came to meet LT Ford in Dong Ha to help carry provisions to Khe Sanh. Sumner's assigned pilot was unavailable. Although not expected to fly with only nineteen days left in country, WO2 Gerald McKinsey, Jr. (Mac to his friends) volunteered to take the pilot's place. Sumner didn't think he should take the mission, but McKinsey had flown the area around Khe Sanh on a daily basis and knew the countryside well.

Lieutenant Colonel Seymoe, determined to get relief to the troops on the ground, waited with Ford and his crew in Dong Ha. Due to McKinsey's familiarity with the Area of Operation (AO), Seymoe changed aircraft and the ammo was loaded onto McKinsey's chopper for a third endeavor to resupply the men trapped in the compound. With Ford flying cover, McKinsey made three courageous attempts to land at the compound, but the ground fire was too heavy. Sumner, ten months in country, believed Khe Sanh village the hottest LZ he had ever seen.

At the Combat Operations Center (COC) in Quang Tri, LTC Seymoe reported to Brewer on the life and death situation in Khe Sanh, and requested ARVN troops in support of a combat relief mission. With 1st ARVN General Ngo Quang Truong's approval, Brewer called a Council-Of-War. Among those present was LTC Nguyen Am, Commander of the Quang Tri Province ARVN 1st Infantry Division; Major (MAJ) John Oliver, Jr., Chief Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF) Advisor; CPT Warren Milberg, USAF, Intel Advisor; James R. Bullington, Department of State; and John M. Uhler, USAID.

Captain Clarke communicated with Brewer via intermittent and scratchy transmissions on a single sideband radio. The NVA had the compound surrounded and continued to attack at full strength. Unsure how long they could hold out, Clarke was apprehensive he and his men would become "expendable warriors." The Council reviewed the dire situation. Brewer turned to LTC Am and requested he send the 258th Regional Forces, "a first rate company," on a rescue expedition flown by the 282nd AHC. Seymoe volunteered to lead the operation.

Over a hundred miles to the south, the Da Nang Section of the Black Cats gathered in a flight hangar at Marble Mountain Airfield to present CPT Tommy Stiner with a surprise cake for his thirtieth birthday. F**king New Guy (FNG) Jerry Elliott also celebrated; after eleven days as a door gunner for

Specialist 5 David Howington (*left*) and SGT Hill (*right*) at Marble Mountain Airfield in Da Nang prepare to crew the ill-fated Black Cat #027 prior to leaving for Khe Sanh on 21 Jan 68. Photo courtesy Black Cat Assn.

Black Cats arriving at La Vang Airfield. Photo by David A. Sciacchitano.

the 282nd he was promoted to PFC. Their party interrupted by a call for volunteers to conduct an emergency Combat Assault (CA), the Black Cats scrambled for the chopper revetments.

Rather than rely on alphanumeric identification, it was common to position, or chalk, temporary numbers on the sides of helicopters involved in an operation. Larry Elliott, NOIC (non-commissioned officer in charge) of the 212th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) S-3 (administrative section) made ready to door gun for Chalk #2 when Jerry boarded the chopper. Private First Class Elliott informed the NCO there was a mistake; he was to fly the mission. Surprised, SGT Elliott responded he was prepared to go. Jerry insisted he was "supposed to go." He climbed into the gunners seat, snapped the monkey strap into place, and smiled.

Captain Stiner took four slicks (helicopters with little armament), along with three Alley Cat gunships, and flew from Marble Mountain to the La Vang Airfield where Ford, McKinsey, and Pullen waited with their crews. At La Vang, the Black Cats picked up supplies and approximately seventy troopers from the Quang Tri 258th Regional Forces.

According to pilot WO Ronald McBride, the Alley Cats were "fully armed with rockets, machine guns, and grenades, plus our personal weapons which consisted of a variety of .45 cal pistols and M-16 rifles."

ARVN Regional Forces board Chalk #2. Photo by David Sciacchitano.

Ford and Pullen attempted to persuade LTC Seymoe to delay the combat assault until artillery and Air Force F-4 fighter jets prepped an alternate LZ close to the compound. Visibly upset, Ford ignored Seymoe's impatient stance to insist conditions were more than the gunships could handle. A large flight of Huey's would never be able to land without terrible consequences. He had made it in and out as a single ship only because of accelerated approach and full power take-off, impossible to achieve with a formation of several choppers. Lieutenant Colonel Seymoe emphatically told LT Ford he was out of line, end of discussion.

While they waited for the Black Cats from Da Nang to arrive, Sumner thought about the heavy fire they had encountered in Khe Sanh. He knew they were crazy to consider returning. When the Black Cats from Da Nang landed at La Vang Airfield, Sumner sought out his friend from back home, Specialist (SP) 5 David Howington, and told him, "I don't think we're all going to make it back."

Anxious to deliver relief to the stranded soldiers, Seymoe quickly briefed the Black Cat pilots, keeping details to a minimum. Much of the information about the tactical situation from a pilot's perspective came from McKinsey. He volunteered to pilot the lead aircraft and changed seats with MAJ Ronald C. Rex, which resulted in McKinsey and Stiner flying the lead heli-

copter, or Chalk #1. Seymoe moved into the lead chopper to command the assault. Pullen, nervous about returning to Khe Sanh, told McKinsey, "If we go back, somebody is going to get hurt."

The combat force, composed of seven UH-1D Black Cat helicopters escorted by three Alley Cat gunships, was en route to Khe Sanh by 4 PM. The Black Cats would attempt to make a minimum of two troop airlifts into the LZ before sunset. The flight west over mountaintops and jungle from La Vang to Khe Sanh was without incident. Problems began to surface, according to Brewer, when four flights of heavily armed USAF fighter-bombers went into orbit high above Khe Sanh. His requested air support to level the coffee orchard south of the MACV's compound perimeter waited eagerly in the sky for orders to lay down fire. The jets, running low on fuel, flew in formation as 20th TASS Air Force Forward Air Controller (FAC) CPT Leigh Cooper, over bad radio communication, attempted to contact FAC CPT Ward Britt. He needed to inform Britt to vacate the area for the proposed bombing assault. At the same time Cooper tried to notify Seymoe to delay the mission, "…the planned air strike couldn't be pulled off, yet."

Unaware he was in the high-range bombers path, Britt continued to pilot his O-1 Bird Dog over the Khe Sanh air space at low altitude in order to locate and mark targets while he directed five separate flights of Marine fighter aircraft; his Cessna a small, but unexpected hazard to jets on a bombing run.

Planning on the run en route to an LZ wasn't out of place; the 282nd pilots did it often, and did it well. Accustomed to fighting the Viet Cong (VC) in small, relatively unorganized groups, their radios buzzed with discussion about the slicks landing at the Poilane coffee orchard one at a time. Considered unfeasible without adequate bombing preparation, ultimately the organizers scratched the proposal. Diverted from the orchard to a new LZ, the Black Cats intended to fly approximately a mile east of the compound. The plan was to approach the flat hilltop known as the Old French Fort in a tight, stagger trail left formation. The slicks would hover a few feet off the ground in order to offload troops and supplies as swiftly as possible.

Dusk and low fuel had forced CPT Britt to land at the Combat Base between sporadic mortar attacks. On approach to Khe Sanh, Pullen spotted the O-1 Bird Dog departing the Area of Operations (AO) for Quang Tri. He radioed the pilot for a situation report. After withstanding more than three hours of intense fire that afternoon, Britt issued Pullen a blunt warning, "Turn around and go back, or you will die."

Chapter Two

Jerry

Jerry William Elliott was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, on July 14, 1948. He came into the world in respiratory distress, a "blue baby." The country doctor gave him up for dead and left the clinic delivery room, but the birthing nurse wouldn't let the little boy go without a desperate effort to get him breathing. Mama thought she might lose her firstborn, but to everyone's surprise the scrappy infant fought to live and gasped his first breath. From that moment on, Jerry was distinctively special to Mama, and she called her newborn son "a little miracle."

A two-year-old toddler when Daddy moved the family to his hometown of Greenville, Mississippi, he reluctantly shared the limelight when I came along a year later. My earliest memories of my big brother center around our old neighborhood on Daniels Street. Home was a modest two-bedroom house with polished hardwood floors. A Formica kitchen table with overstuffed handleback chairs was usually the center of activity, when we weren't outside playing on the swing set in our large, fenced-in backyard. Uninteresting, except for the young pecan tree planted one Arbor Day, the front yard was mainly our getaway path to exciting places we weren't supposed to go unsupervised.

When I was about three years old, I followed Jerry and our cousin, Charlie, to such a place not far from the house. It was an old tin building with straw on the floor, probably used as a holding area for livestock at one time. Long boards randomly nailed to posts created narrow chutes to prevent the cat-

Donna and Jerry, 1951.

tle from bunching up. There was barely enough room to crawl under the bottom planks. The boys must have played there often because they seemed to know their way around. To a little girl it was a confusing maze.

The owner kept a horse there that didn't like kids. The boys played a dangerous game of hide n' seek with the testy animal. Each time the gelding figured out how to reach them, they scooted under the fence to slip out of reach at the last minute. Infuriated, he snorted, reared, and pawed at the air with his two front legs, eyes wide and wild. I watched in horrified fascination, until unexpectedly the horse turned his attention in my direction. The massive brute charged towards me as I stood there, petrified with fear. All at once, my feet went out from under me as two hands wrapped around my ankles, and yanked me under the railing to safety.

The loco horse had almost trampled me. I wanted to run home to Mama, crawl up in her lap, and whimper. Familiar with the trouble my tattling could create for him; Jerry talked me out of telling. The only payback requested for saving my hide was silence. As he wiped away my tears, my brother convinced me I should keep this incident to myself, or he and Charlie would never let me play with them again. I kept that promise. I never told anyone, until now.

In May 1960, our sister Cindy Ann was born. Jerry was almost twelve, and I'd recently turned nine, just old enough to be excited about being the big sister for a change. Eager to meet the new baby, I didn't attend school that morning. Jerry wanted nothing to do with "just another girl." He went to class disappointed and disgusted. Shortly after our parents came home

Elliott Family, 1957. *Left to right*: Grandma Rosie, Jerry, Mary, Donna, and Bill.

from the hospital, the nurse's office called. Jerry had a toothache and needed Daddy to pick him up from school.

Moaning and holding his jaw, the patient came into the house. Our folks were furious; they had recently spent a lot of money for our dental care. Daddy was about to call the dentist and "raise cane" when Jerry asked Mama if he could hold the baby. Mama carefully placed the newborn in his gangly arms and showed him how to support her fuzzy little head. Once settled, Cindy Ann opened her big brown eyes, and grabbed one of Jerry's fingers with her tiny hand. Miraculously, his toothache disappeared forever.

In junior high, Jerry started to notice girls. They were certainly attracted to him. Girls would call the house for him everyday. They rang the phone so much Jerry often told me to say he wasn't home. Rather than hang up when they couldn't talk to him, some of the girls insisted on telling me how much they loved my brother. I always tried to listen sympathetically, even though I thought they were being foolish. I must admit, however, when I ran into one of his admirers at the local soda fountain, a free cherry cola was always a welcome treat.

Daddy and the kids, 1961. *Left to right*: Jerry, Daddy, Cindy (*center*), and Donna.

Jerry found it difficult to sit still in class. Although he had plenty of intellectual ability, he was restless. Besides sports and scouting, nothing seemed to interest him. Few academic subjects held his attention. At school conferences, his teachers always told our parents he was a bright boy. Their only complaint was Jerry exhibited more interest in what happened outside the schoolroom window than the lesson on the blackboard.

In 1964, the conflict in Vietnam intensified after the North Vietnamese attacked the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin. Although President Lyndon Baines Johnson privately cursed the Vietnam War, he believed in Eisenhower's "Domino Theory." In order to prevent America from appearing weak to the rest of the world, he escalated the war and called for more troops to serve in Vietnam to "fight Communism." In Johnson's 1966 Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union, he declared, "An America that is mighty beyond description—yet living in a hostile or despairing world—would be neither safe nor free to build a civilization to liberate the spirit of man."

Torn by the war in Vietnam, our country was animate with "love and peace" hippies. From upscale Greenwich Village, New York, to bohemian Haight-Ashbury, California, light shows danced around the heads of flower children in psychedelic t-shirts and bellbottom blue jeans who listened to rock music as the underground press preached "make love, not war." A counter culture was born as the nation's youth experimented with sex and drugs, while only an ocean away, our young soldiers killed to stay alive.

Greenville wasn't a "happening" place; we didn't tune in, turn on, or drop out. We pledged allegiance to the flag every morning in school, and sang the national anthem at community events. Being typical small-town teenagers, my older brother and I didn't have much interest in politics or the

news. Focused on souped-up cars, clothes, school, and boys, I knew very little about Vietnam, or really understood why America sent soldiers there to fight. The war became real for Jerry during the "Hanoi March."

On July 6, 1966, the North Vietnamese paraded fifty-two American prisoners through the streets of downtown Hanoi at the point of bayonets "to meet the people." Blindfolded and bound together in pairs, the "Rabbit" ordered the Prisoners-Of-War (POW) to bow their heads. The men chose to follow Commander Jeremiah Denton's order to "stand tall." Big trucks with cameras and floodlights kept pace with the prisoners as they were force-marched through a two-mile gauntlet of screaming, spitting North Vietnamese who tried to force their heads down. An angry mob of thousands viciously punched, kicked, and stuck the POWs with bricks and bottles. More than once the bloodthirsty crowd knocked our stunned and handcuffed men to the ground with a blow to the stomach or groin. This display of U.S. soldiers, tortured and suffering, struck a national nerve and served to ignite the American spirit.

Jerry didn't want to go back to finish his last year of high school; he wanted to enlist in the military. He argued with Mama and Daddy and threatened to run away and join without their permission. The shocking plight of the Hanoi POWs had flamed the fires of injustice; he was ready to join the fight. The United States Army was what Jerry wanted, and nothing else.

This was Jerry's nature; he tended to move in directions that continually surprised us all.

Jerry at boot camp,
Fort Polk, La, 1966.