

Our Sons, Our Heroes

Memories Shared by
America's Gold Star Mothers
from the Vietnam War

by
Linda Jenkin Costanzo



Given the subject matter, it continues to stir a wealth of emotions within me. The stories are sensitively written and the author sincerely cares about these mothers and their sons who died a half a world away. People need to know that the cost of war continues long after it officially ends. The pain and life-long struggles of these precious ladies and their families need to be told. I would wholeheartedly recommend this book for every American, especially those who served or had to deal with losing a loved one in a war. As a Vietnam Veteran, I am grateful that the author wrote this book.

Paul Fazekas, author of *Enduring Images: From the Trauma of War to Lifelong Healing*

Awesome...I'm lost for words.

Robert E. Wilczak, author of *Eye of the Eagle: Benedict Arnold*

This story brought back a lot of memories that seem to magnify how sad the times were. As I was reading, I kept thinking to myself— how would a person who did not live in these days react? Would it be similar to what the dark ages are to me? This is a great book.

Ted Wilkinson, Western Director, New York State Council, Vietnam Veterans of America

My wounded in action Vietnam veteran husband, Dexter Lehtinen, and I are so appreciative of Linda's efforts to document the stateside stories of our gold star mothers of the Vietnam War. You, the reader, will learn the definition of patriotism.

**Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Congresswoman, Chairman Emeritus,
Foreign Affairs Committee, 27th District, Florida**

These interviews and stories shed light on consequences of the Vietnam War that most Americans have never considered. Sharing these experiences and losses is indeed overdue. It is important for Vietnam veterans to finally get the respect they deserve. As a mother of two, these moving stories from the point of view of military mothers who experienced the greatest loss of all—the loss of a child—truly touch my heart. These women are incredibly strong and I want to thank the author for giving these gold star mothers a voice and providing the opportunity for their stories to be told.

**Kathleen C. Hochul, Former Congresswoman, House
Armed Services Committee, 26th District, New York**

Hidden deep in their hearts was a portrait each gold star mother held of her son. Linda Jenkin Costanzo framed each portrait for the mothers to lovingly display.

Father Paul Steller, Diocese of Buffalo, New York

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Dedication

To the 16 gold star mothers on my journey who took the time to share their memories and to all gold star mothers who never had the opportunity to do so. May our country come to know the chapter of American history that has remained deeply hidden in their hearts.

“You listen deeply for only one purpose - to allow the other person to empty his or her heart. This is already an act of relieving suffering. To stop any suffering, no matter how small, is a great action of peace.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*
(New York: Free Press, 2003)

Prologue ~ How it all began

In March of 2000 my young sons and I were attending a children's play in Buffalo, New York at the Theatre of Youth. Seated next me was a soft-spoken, white-haired lady with beautifully coiffed hair who had accompanied her daughter and two grandchildren to the play. While waiting for the play to begin, she introduced herself as Lillian and we soon became engaged in a cheerful conversation. She proudly spoke of her four children and then the conversation took a turn. Her voice lowered as she softly mentioned that she had lost her younger son, Mark, in Vietnam at the age of 19.

For an instant I stared ahead, unable to move as her words sunk in. I couldn't imagine losing a teenage son in a war. She also struck a deep nerve, as if a hand from the past had gently tapped my shoulder and taken me back to a time filled with memories of the Vietnam War.

At that moment the theater grew dark and the play began. I wondered what Lillian would have told me if time had allowed. She appeared to be a lady of incredible faith. I also wondered if her sacrifice for our country had ever been recognized. As the play ended and we said goodbye, I wanted to learn more of her experiences. In the days that followed, she often crossed my mind. I couldn't recall her or her son's last name. I only remembered that his last name began with a "V." I never thought we would meet again.

Shortly afterwards I visited the Vietnam Memorial located at the Erie Basin Marina in Buffalo. I scanned the last names of 514 servicemen from Western New York who had sacrificed their lives in Southeast Asia. As I approached the "V"s, one name caught my eye—Mark Vanderheid. That was it. I went home and checked the phone book, hoping to contact Mark's mother. There was no listing of that last name.

In April of 2000, our local newspaper commemorated the 25th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. As I read the series of articles, I felt that hand from the past gently tapping my shoulder once again. It took me back to 1967 when I was an impressionable 15-year-old. I remember watching nightly news clips of young men in combat. It astounded me to think that many of them were teenagers—only three or four years older than I was.

Memories surfaced of news articles about young men from our area who had sacrificed their lives. Many had just graduated from high school a year or two earlier. Yet what I did not give serious thought to at the time was the grieving mothers of these young casualties. My heart filled with compassion for them.

These women, whose children had served proudly and acted on the strength of their convictions, stood at a pivotal point in our country's history. Public support was eroding as U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia became more controversial. A storm of criticism surged when television and local newspapers showed military honor guards escorting flag-draped caskets off planes to their final resting place.

Questions raced through my mind regarding the 58,220 mothers of these fallen heroes. I wanted to know what had happened to these women after they lost their sons in America's unpopular war. I wondered what they would tell me about themselves and their sons. What would they say to their sons now if they could? Perhaps the most important question—how did they find the strength to continue on?

A chapter of American history had been left out about our involvement in Southeast Asia—the personal price paid by mothers who had lost so much as a result of our involvement there. I later learned that mothers who lose sons or daughters while in service to our country are referred to as gold star mothers. Despite all the reading I had done, along with inquiries I had made of librarians and Vietnam veterans, I was still unable to find any stories told by gold star mothers from the Vietnam War. I discovered that nothing was written about their struggles because *no one had asked*. It was time to give them a voice.

In my quest for answers, I learned about an organization located in Washington, D.C. called the American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. (AGSM). Most people are unaware of AGSM—it isn't a club that any mother aspires to join. It is a non-denominational, non-profit and non-political organization founded in 1928 by a group of mothers who had lost sons in World War I. It is a service organization whose goals include perpetuation of the memory of their sons and daughters, assistance to veterans of all wars or conflicts, and promotion of peace and good will for the United States and all other nations. AGSM extends assistance to all gold star mothers when possible. Members attend veterans' events, volunteer at Veterans Hospitals, and fundraise for homeless veterans or those in need. If a gold star mother

becomes a member of the organization, she is referred to as an American Gold Star Mother. Some gold star mothers chose not to become members for various reasons. Others were unaware the organization existed at the time of their sons' deaths. The following stories are told by members as well as non-members. All these mothers have served as models of strength and faith.

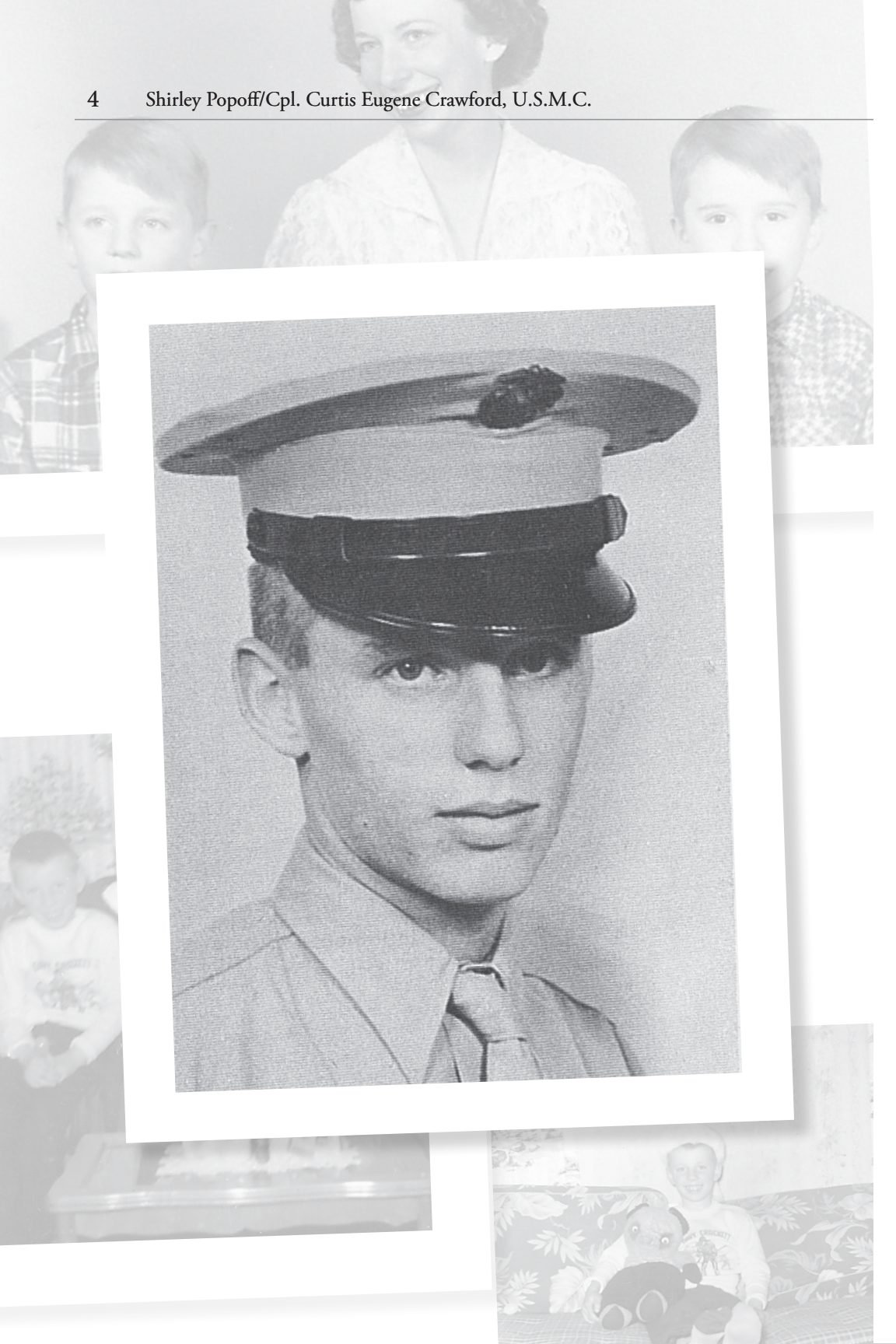
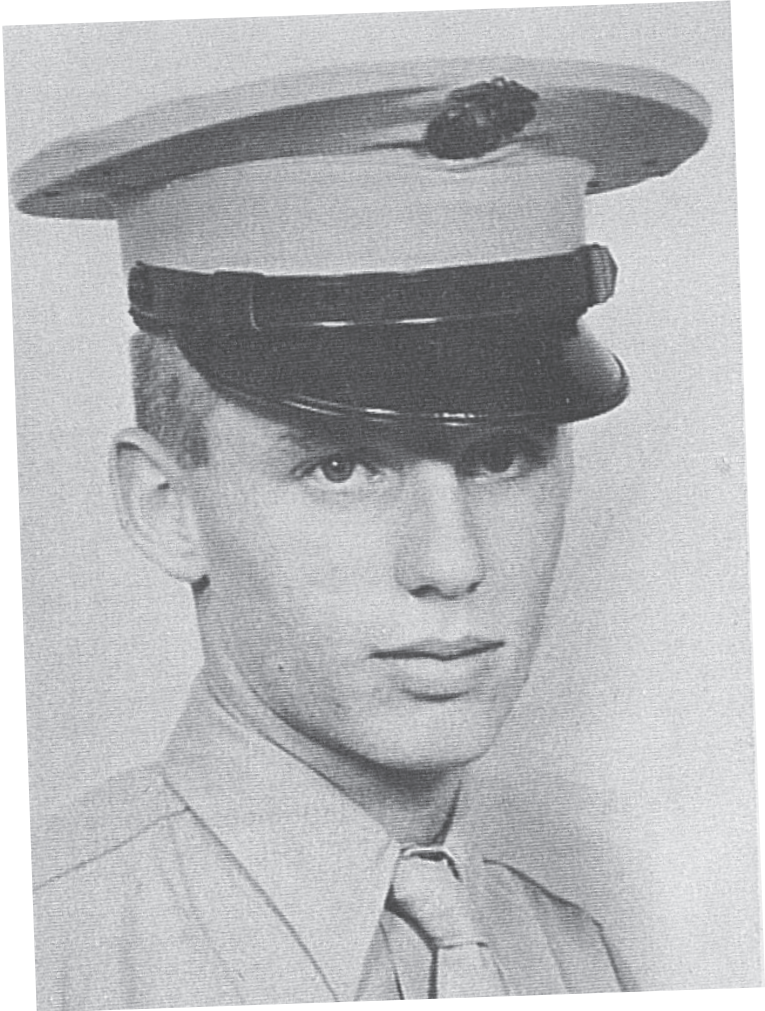
National headquarters gave me the name of an American Gold Star Mother in my area. After contacting her and listening to her story, I was introduced to others. My search led to mothers throughout the United States who willingly shared their stories.

All the mothers I interviewed expressed a deep faith in something larger that helped them endure one of life's most difficult trials. With the support of family, friends and community, they found the strength to move past their losses. Those who joined AGSM found much needed support, for who can know the pain a mother feels at having lost a child but another mother suffering from the same loss?

For 12 years I went about locating mothers who were willing to share their experiences. Memories, long-guarded in their hearts, came forth. I had finally uncovered our country's missing chapter, unaccounted for, never discussed, and deeply buried in the hearts of ordinary women with incredible strength and character. As I was drawing to the conclusion of this book, something remarkable happened. I reconnected with Lillian, the lady I met in the theater at the start of this journey. Her story is told later in this book.

The following stories are based on interviews I had with each of the mothers at their homes. They are not transcripts of the interviews, but retellings of their stories as I heard them, respecting all the facts and details I was given. Those whom I interviewed saw my account of our meeting before publication and gave me permission to tell their stories.

Linda Jenkin Costanzo



Corporal
Curtis Eugene Crawford,
U.S.M.C.

Dunkirk, New York

G Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Division

Quang Tri, Vietnam

KIA: February 28, 1967

Age: 19

"I could go home and cry my eyes out and become an old woman who no one wants around—or I could direct this energy in a meaningful manner."

- Shirley Popoff

I was nervous when I called American Gold Star Mother Shirley Popoff, mother of Corporal Curtis Crawford. Shirley was past president of Buffalo Chapter 26 of the American Gold Star Mothers organization. She became the first of many mothers who would tell me their stories. Shirley lived about 40 miles from me and was willing to share her story. She invited me to come visit on the following Friday. And so began my journey.

On a crisp October evening in 2000, I drove out to ski country in the southern tier of Western New York, and arrived at a small well-kept house nestled in the Boston Hills. I felt nervous as I walked up the sidewalk to the front door and rang the doorbell. A tall, silver-haired woman studied me through the storm door before unlocking and opening it. She was not smiling and I began to question what I was doing there. Shirley Popoff was formal and proper. Her stoic manner made me wonder if she had served in the military.

Shirley lived alone and the house was deafeningly quiet as I entered the living room. Faded photographs of a U.S. Navy sailor and a Marine adorned the fireplace mantel. She introduced them as her sons, Michael and Curtis Crawford. Six or seven medals surrounding a Purple Heart were displayed in a case on the wall. Along with them was a Gold Star lapel button, acknowledging the loss of her younger son, Curt, in Vietnam.

A scrapbook lay on the coffee table. Shirley picked it up and handed it over to me. I took it and stared at the cover for some time, feeling as if I were about to trespass on someone's heart. Her quiet voice drew my attention. She reassured me, "Go ahead. It's okay to open it." As I opened the cover and carefully turned each page, Curt's life unfolded before me.

At the beginning of the scrapbook was a piece of artwork—a house Shirley's son had drawn in crayon. He drew the house with a chimney. A section of paper where the smoke would have been was charred. Shirley smiled, recalling the day he showed the drawing to his father, who had been sitting in a chair with a lit cigarette. His dad's cigarette accidentally ouched the paper from behind. The drawing began to smolder exactly where the smoke rose in Curt's artwork. She laughed, recalling Curt's surprise and how he said, "Look! The chimney caught fire!" She then began her story.

Neither of my sons was drafted. They enlisted—in service to their country. My oldest son was Michael but we called him Mickey. He joined the Navy in 1964. My younger son, Curtis Eugene Crawford, enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps a year later.

The brothers were close. Growing up, they were never more than five minutes away from one another. One always knew where the other was. Curt was a good kid. He was quiet, easygoing and did anything I requested. If I asked him to take out the garbage, I didn't have to ask him twice. I was proud of Curt's athletic abilities. He enjoyed a challenge and was in constant motion. He was very agile, as if he danced when he moved.

Curt's main interest was baseball and we would go to the baseball stadium to watch the semi-pro games. He especially enjoyed watching his hero, Bobby Wine, a rookie shortstop for the Buffalo Bisons. My son expressed an interest to pursue college baseball training. Ultimately, he decided to leave high school and enroll in the Marine Corps.

Though he was good in school, I think he was bored with academics and felt an obligation to serve his country. We were all deeply patriotic. Curt's dad, my former husband, was a Pearl Harbor survivor. We divorced when the boys were young, but we shared joint custody. Without my knowledge, Curt asked his father to sign a paper giving consent for him to join the Marines at age 17. I never thought that he'd drop out of school, but he did.

My son trained at Camp Lejeune and later went to Vietnam. He was very busy and wrote infrequently. Weeks would go by before I heard from him. A letter from him was always a surprise since they came so few and far between. I later realized this was a blessing in disguise, because a lapse in his writing would have upset me to no end. I tried to keep up on events in Vietnam when I didn't hear from him.

I watched the nightly news to see the latest developments in the war. One evening I was crocheting and my boyfriend Michael was having a cup of coffee when the evening news ended. Even though he loved Curt very much, he turned to me and said, "Shirley, you can't look at everything you see on the news and think about Curt. Every time anything comes up about Vietnam, you come to attention. I think it's time you turned the television off and went to bed." We said goodnight and Michael left.

The room became very quiet after that. I was sitting in a chair past midnight, when there was a sudden presence of someone standing behind

me. It wasn't frightening at all or anything like that. It was as if someone was going to caress me. The feeling was one of incredible peace, of someone gently putting his or her arms around me—and holding me. My little feline friend Mr. Jiggs was on the floor nearby. Whenever the cat saw anything unusual, his tail would stand out like a pointer dog. Suddenly, Mr. Jiggs stood, staring right over my shoulder with his tail pointed up. I sat very still for some time. "Jiggysy, did you see it too? I think we'd better go to bed." The cat and I went to bed but we were up and down all night—until about 5:30 in the morning.

The following afternoon around 4:30, there was a knock on my door. It was my sister asking if I was all right. I assured her I was fine, but sensed urgency in her question. When I asked her who she had with her, she did not reply.

At that time, I lived in an apartment on the second floor of a double home in Buffalo. Leading up to my apartment was a stairwell that made a sharp turn on the second landing. I could feel that someone was coming up the stairs behind my sister. "Do you have Marines with you?" I asked her. Two men in uniforms stepped up to the landing. "You're here to tell me that Curt's dead, aren't you?"

They looked at me in surprise. "Did somebody call you?"

"No, nobody called me. I can't explain it. If I told you, you'd probably think I'm crazy."

The Marines gave few details about my son. I later pieced together what happened and concluded from one particular article that Curt was attempting to help an injured Marine. In my scrapbook is a news article containing the photo of another young serviceman. The obituary identifies him as a Marine from Cheektowaga, New York.

This young man lived about an hour from where we lived. Curt used to tell me of a comrade he was serving with in Vietnam who was particularly fond of sports. My son had asked me to cut out sports articles for his friend. He and my son were killed on the same day, February 28, 1967. I later received his Silver Star medal and this citation:

The enemy was well dug-in and was able to put out such a volume of small arms and automatic weapons fire that the company was pinned down. Under a hail of hostile fire, Corporal Crawford, a machine gun

squad leader, brought his guns forward and set them up on the left flank of his platoon's most forward positions, only 40 meters from enemy emplacements. From this position, he caught sight of a Marine who had been wounded during one of the earlier assaults. Unhesitatingly, he bounded forward, exposing himself to enemy fire to render assistance to the fallen Marine. As he cleared his cover an enemy sniper opened up from close range, wounding him in the leg and knocking him to the ground. Ignoring his wound, Corporal Crawford was able to whirl and send a lethal burst of rifle fire into the sniper's spider hole, killing him. He then continued to move forward to the Marine casualty. He had advanced only several more meters when he was fired upon again and mortally wounded.

I suspect the Marine who Curt was trying to save that day was his friend from Cheektowaga.

A week later, a U.S. Marine Corps body guard escorted Curt's body from Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to Buffalo. I followed the motorcade from Buffalo to Dunkirk. The Marine Corps major in charge of the procession said that it wasn't necessary for me to be there, but I felt it was. The hour drive was a long one. The shock of losing a son to war is something that no mother is prepared for. Thirteen days after he was killed, my son was buried on my birthday, March 13. He rests in St. Hedwig's Cemetery, in Fredonia, New York.

I think 1967 was the worst year of my life. After losing Curt in Vietnam in February, I worried about my oldest son, Mickey, stationed with the Navy in Norfolk, Virginia. He came home on emergency leave for Curt's funeral. When he left, I had no idea where he would be stationed. Shortly after, Mickey told me he volunteered to go to Vietnam. I was stunned. I had just lost Curt on February 28th, and now Mickey gave me this news. He shipped out on the USS Forrestal, first heading for the Mediterranean Sea and then on to the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of Vietnam.

Five months later, the morning of July 29, I was getting ready for work when there was a radio news bulletin. "We interrupt this program

to say that the third largest aircraft carrier, the Forrestal, is a holocaust of flames...”

I sat there in shock. I stared off for some time, thinking—Oh my God, not again. When I came to my senses, I looked at the table and realized that I’d poured two separate cups of coffee. I reminded myself—Hey! There’s only one person living here!

I remember wandering around the house putting my work clothes on over my nightgown. I collected my thoughts and called ship information. It was a futile attempt, but it was the only thing I could think of at the moment that might ease my mind. I told them I had a son on that ship and I asked how bad the fire was but it was too early to say. They couldn’t give me any information. They only said that the situation was bad. It turned out that 134 men died.

I contacted the Naval Department and gave them my work number. I told them where I was going to be, in case they needed to contact me. I had to work that weekend, so I proceeded to go in, but I waited desperately to hear from someone. It was agony. From the morning that I heard the news on the radio, I began a new routine. Whenever I had a short break at work I’d call the Naval Department to see if there was any word about Mickey.

During this time, I was training a new operator for the phone company where I worked in Buffalo. She must have thought I was strange because everyday for a week I left promptly at noon when my lunch hour began. I’d hurry off to mass at Saint Paul’s Cathedral, so I could be alone. It was a dark, uncertain time. As a person of faith, you don’t get through the difficult times like this unless you believe that God is with you.

After a week of waiting, I entered my apartment one evening and the phone rang. I walked over and picked up the receiver. I heard the operator say, “I have a collect call for you from Subic Bay.”

When I realized it wasn’t the Naval Department, I breathed a sigh of relief and accepted the call. Mickey was calling to say he was in the Philippine Islands while the Forrestal was in port for repairs. He was staying there with his friend Chris, a shipmate. Chris’s mother was going to prepare a “Christmas in July” celebration. Later, he would return to the States for a leave. It truly seemed like Christmas for me—my son was alive.

At work, the day after I received Mickey’s call, I was so joyful that he was alive, I had to share the news with someone. It was Friday and I called the newspaper. I spoke with the City Editor, hoping something would be

written about my son's survival on the Forrester. "We don't consider the Forrester as news anymore," the editor told me.

I asked that man for his name. When he told me, I thanked him and hung up. I went upstairs to tell the girl I had been training that she was ready to work the switchboard by herself. I explained I was going out on my lunch hour to take care of some business. I started out for the City Editor's desk, so incensed that I thought I was going to be arrested.

I was livid. I stormed into the lobby of the newspaper office and hurried over to the receptionist's desk. Acting flustered, I fibbed and told the receptionist I had an appointment with the news editor and I was running late. I asked for the quickest way to his office. She showed me to the elevator and ushered me in. I got off the elevator and proceeded into his office.

I introduced myself as the mother of a Forrester survivor and I continued, "So, this is what a 24-carat jerk looks like! In other words, since we still have young men on the Forrester who survived a terrible fire, you don't consider that news anymore? But you can publish fillers about how many potatoes are eaten in Czechoslovakia and things like that? Well, I have news for you! My son survived the fire on that ship and he's alive! There had better be something in the paper about it—a full-page ad."

"Lady, do you know how much an ad costs....," he said.

But I cut him off. "Don't even bother to ask! Do you know how much it costs to lose a son? My youngest son has already been killed in Vietnam, and I've gone almost a week thinking my other son had been killed too. And you have the gall to tell me that those who survived the ship fire aren't news! Well I've got news for you! There are people who think it is news! I expect to see something published about my son, a survivor of the Forrester." I stormed out. I don't know if an article was published, but at least I felt the satisfaction of giving that editor a piece of my mind.

Many people still harbored an anti-war sentiment, and they were quick to come forward with their opinions. I never imagined that I would encounter harassment over such a personal loss. During lunch hour, I encountered local college students protesting on the streets in downtown Buffalo. They belonged to an anti-war group called Students for a Democratic Society. They would read the obituaries and search for names of servicemen like Curt and then place calls day or night to the families, venting anti-war sentiments. I received many of those calls.

One day, I called the Marine Corps office downtown and explained the situation of harassment from the students. I told the officer that I was going to go down to the university the following day to take this matter up with officials at the administrative office. He or any other Marines were welcome to come with me if they cared to. He said they would be happy to accompany me.

That evening, before I had the opportunity to settle the matter, the phone rang. Michael Popoff was visiting and answered it. It was another harassment call from a protester, venting his sentiments about the Vietnam War. Sensing that Michael was upset, I took the phone from him and blurted out, "I know the group that you're with. I don't know exactly where you're calling from, but I do know where you go to school, and I'm coming up there tomorrow with the Marine Corps officers. I'm going to have the joy of beating the hell out of you. If you or any of your cohorts ever call this number again, you will find out what hell is because I am it!" That was the end of the calls at home, but I was extremely sensitive to the anti-war sentiment in public.

One summer evening, I got home from work and put my dress shoes on to meet Michael at our favorite little diner on South Park Avenue. Two men were there when we arrived. One man, seated at the counter near the entrance, had fairly long blond hair but was neat in appearance. Seated on a stool, at the other end of the counter, was a man dressed in a three-piece business suit. Michael and I took our seats. "There's a Marine laid out at Nightengale's Funeral Parlor down the street," he said.

"He must have been killed in Vietnam," I answered.

Upon hearing my reply, the man in the business suit turned to us and commented loudly from the other end of the counter. "He got what he deserved."

I stood up and walked over to him. "What did you say?" He quickly got up and darted for the door. I chased him down South Park Avenue! He got away from me so I turned and went back to the café. There's no telling what I would've done had I caught up to him.

Looking back on it, I'd laugh too if I saw a middle-aged woman in high heels chasing a well-dressed young man down the street. When I re-entered the diner, the blond guy was laughing so hard he could barely control himself. Still enraged over the businessman's comment, I turned to the blond guy. "And you, Goldilocks, what do you find so funny?"

The young man's polite response gave him away. "Not a thing, ma'am!"

I knew instantly that this young man was a former serviceman. He had let his hair grow out after his military discharge so he would fit in at home. If he went out in public with a military haircut, he'd be identified as a Vietnam veteran. He would've been ostracized and at the mercy of public criticism. This was the type of harassment Vietnam veterans lived with when they returned home.

The painful process of dealing with my loss had only just begun. In quiet moments, with no one around, I reflected on my son, Curt. After his death, I often went outside late at night behind my apartment and sat on top of the garbage cans. I used to stare up at Heaven and look at each individual star. I felt that I was able to talk with Curt. There was some communication. I felt that somehow he knew I could talk to him. I felt closer to him and that, somehow, he could hear me.

To deal with my grief, I placed Curt's Marine Corps photo, votive candles, an American flag, and some of his medals for heroism on a table in the foyer of my apartment. One evening Michael came in. "I'm going to tell you one thing. You're probably going to blow your stack, but I'm telling you this for your own good and for your other son, Mickey. The first thing that everybody sees when coming through the door is that shrine you built to Curt. Break it up. Put it where you want, but don't make a shrine out of it. What do people think as they come through that door? What do you suppose Mickey thinks?"

It never occurred to me that perhaps Mickey thought I had more feelings for Curt than for him. I suddenly realized how deeply parents' overwhelming grief impacts the siblings of war casualties. The parents are focused on dealing with their own loss. The siblings don't just lose their brother. They feel slighted—as if they've lost their parents' love and attention as well. I followed Michael's suggestion. I put Curt's portrait in my bedroom and I placed the other items throughout my house.

In 1968, about a year after Curt's death, my boss called me in at work one day and told me there was a doctor there to give me a check-up. This surprised me. I wasn't due for my yearly exam, but I went in to talk with him anyway. If I remember correctly, this doctor had served in the Navy and he had experience dealing with trauma. He asked me questions like whom I lived with and talked to at home. I told him I lived alone and I talked to Mr. Jiggs, my cat.

He replied, “No, I mean human. Whom do you talk to?” I told him I live my evenings quietly with no one around.

What he said next hit me hard. “You are in denial of your son’s death.” I was startled at such a statement and told him it wasn’t true. Ever so quietly he said, “Curt is dead. He’s not here. He’s never coming back. You’ll never hold him again. He’s not going to knock on your door.”

I just sat there, numb. I was in there for two hours and did I ever cry. I had always felt it necessary to keep my composure for Mickey’s sake. I thought I was coping well by keeping my thoughts of Curt to myself. But I don’t think I really acknowledged my grief until that moment.

He persisted, asking if I had a hobby, and I said I enjoyed painting.

“Painting what?” he asked.

“I’m doing a painting of Curt,” I replied.

“I want you to go home and put that portrait away. You paint anybody or anything that you want to, but you do not paint Curt. Do not bring it out. Pack it away and start painting something else, anything. But do not look at the painting of him anymore.”

I continued to cry in front of him for the longest time. He probably handled the situation in a fair manner, but it didn’t seem fair at the time. He touched on something that I had never spoken about with anybody.

But after that day with the doctor I started to come to terms with my loss. I went home, put my painting away and never took it out again. I never realized before how much I hurt inside. I spoke to the doctor occasionally after that. He said a boiling cauldron was buried deep within me and I kept it well hidden, but if I didn’t do something about it, it would tear me apart. He suggested I become involved in the American Gold Star Mothers organization. That was excellent advice because I recall clearly when I looked at Curt’s body for the last time, I told myself I could go home and cry my eyes out, and become an old woman who no one wants around—or I could direct my energy in a meaningful manner.

The AGSM organization isn’t well known. It receives very little publicity, which is understandable. My first recollection of American Gold Star Mothers was when I was a little girl, watching a parade during the 1930s. Seeing ladies dressed in white uniforms and caps, riding in parade cars, I asked my mother who they were, and why silence came over the crowd when the women passed by. She whispered, “I’ll explain to you later.” My mother later told me they were mothers who had lost sons in the

Great American War, now known as World War I. The silence was an act of reverence when the mothers appeared at events.

My son was one of 514 Western New York casualties from the Vietnam War. However, there weren't even 200 mothers actively involved in local chapters. I had to inquire at an American Legion Post before I was directed to the Buffalo Chapter. I joined and began doing volunteer work at the Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital. That was rewarding for me because I've always had a special place in my heart for those who served in Vietnam. They came home so traumatized and psychologically wounded, I felt it was an honor to help them in any way I could. They've accepted me like a second mother. My goal has been to be of service to those who have served our country.

The veterans have become like sons to me. One of the guys at the VA nicknamed me "Tough Mother," after seeing a billboard advertisement of a gray-haired granny wearing name-brand blue jeans. I had the demeanor of a rugged, independent woman—someone who could hold her own when necessary. As time went on, the name stuck. The guys at the hospital still call me that.

I remember when I learned that the water fountains on a floor of the VA Hospital needed repair. Water came up warm and then dribbled down the spout. The men were covering the fountain spouts with their mouth in order to drink. I blew my stack and inquired about the problem at the desk. They told me, "Oh, yes. We put in work orders to have the fountains fixed, but nothing's been done."

I insisted that the administration get bottled water immediately, before an epidemic broke out. These men were taking medication and to think that they didn't have access to fresh, cold water outraged me. It was immediately taken care of. I never would have known the needs of these young men and women if I hadn't volunteered there.

A few years later, a doctor at the VA Hospital asked me if I'd like to work in the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Unit with a group of eight or ten guys who had returned from Vietnam. I told him I wasn't qualified. I lacked a degree and counseling experience. He said I would be most qualified, having been through all that I had. I accepted the challenge and it was among the most rewarding experiences of my life. It gave me great satisfaction to see progress when I worked with those young men from 1968 through 2000. It was the least I could do for them. They were

just 18 and 19 year old kids when they went to Vietnam, and they wound up going through so much.

I served as president of Buffalo Chapter 26 and later served as department president for New York State. During that time, I attended national conventions where I met hundreds of other American Gold Star Mothers. They shared similar experiences to mine, and we gave each other support.

In 1976, nine years after Curt's death, I married Michael Popoff. He was most understanding of my loss. Michael and I made our first trip to The Wall in Washington D.C., the day after it was dedicated on Veteran's Day, November 11, 1982. The nine-hour drive felt like we were going to a major funeral. We didn't speak the entire trip and I didn't know what awaited us. It was a quiet, overcast day with few people in attendance. The grass had been flattened from the crowd attending the opening ceremony the day before.

After viewing The Wall, Michael and I traveled to Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. I noticed a group of young adults with Down Syndrome also sightseeing. I was standing outside a stable when I spotted a young man, about 19, looking in awe at the horses inside. I asked him if he had seen the big horses. "Oh-h yeah!" was all he could say in his hushed tone of excitement. I was drawn to the delight on his face as he saw such a large animal up close. I asked him if he had ever touched the nose of such a giant. He quickly replied, "Oh-h no." I explained that the horse wouldn't bite. I gently encouraged him to venture forward and touch the animal's velvet-soft nose, which he did. He seemed at a loss for words. "Oh, nice!" was all he could say.

He walked back to his group, said something to his group leader, then came back—and put his arms around me. The group leader looked shocked, but I assured her it was okay with me. I told her we had been on a solemn journey to The Wall, and it had been so quiet because I had been unable express how I felt ever since I lost Curt. But that young man's hug made my day.

He was so special. I marveled that he could feel such innocence and joy at something as simple as petting a horse. It was the touch from his hug that broke the ice forever, the ice that surrounded my heart after losing Curt 15 years before. The rest of that November trip was Heaven.

It has been 33 years and despite the painful loss, I can still feel close

to Curt. My life changed dramatically after I lost him, but by becoming involved and honoring his memory, many special events kept me connected to him.

Shirley's story of Curt had gone full circle. I still wanted to know what she would say to Curt now. She stared off for several moments as if in a trance. Silence descended in the room and I barely breathed. She carefully chose her words and then softly replied:

"I hope that I was the mother you deserved because I loved you very much. The ghosts in my bedroom came each night when I would go to bed worrying. They came for both you and Mickey. I wondered what situations you both faced. You did what you wanted. You fulfilled your duties honorably. Curt, you went out to save one of your fellow Marines. I couldn't have asked you to do more. In my opinion, you are my angel and my hero. Your brother Mickey is my angel and my hero, also. Someday we will be able to communicate. I love you both."

That evening cemented a friendship with Shirley Popoff. She became a close confidant as well as a "grandmother" to our sons who also refer to her as "Tough Mother." Shirley took me under her wing. Sensing that others would share their memories also, she invited me to a meeting of the Buffalo Chapter of American Gold Star Mothers held at a VFW post in South Buffalo. I gratefully accepted and later attended the meeting of six mothers. Like most posts, aging World War II veterans sat at the bar. Each one nodded respectfully to the American Gold Star Mothers as they passed through on their way to the meeting.

The meeting started with a candle lit in honor of those they lost. Shirley introduced me and I was warmly welcomed. The agenda that followed included a statement of my purpose for being at the meeting. After the meeting, three ladies said they would be glad to share their stories. But before I had the opportunity to meet them, I received a call and instead, accepted an invitation to meet two American Gold Star Mothers from New Jersey.

And so my journey continued and resulted in the writing of this book.



Shirley Popoff