

96 Years young, Shirley Luther recalls a Mother's Day she would rather forget

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI

When Shirley Luther and her husband, LaVerne "Bunny," the Town of Grand Island supervisor at the time, and their three girls attended services at Trinity United Methodist Church on Mother's Day, 1970, they offered prayers for their 21-year-old son and brother, US. Army Pfc. Robert B. Luther, who had been sent to Vietnam five months earlier.

After arriving back to their apartment in the family's big white farmhouse at the corner of Baseline and Bedell roads and preparing lunch to honor mom, Bob's fiancé, Ruth Lindelow, arrived with one yellow rose from Bob for his mother. According to Sue Berger, owner of The Flower A Day Shop on Grand Island Boulevard, a yellow rose signifies admiration, delight and remembrance. Shirley put the rose in a vase and placed it on the television set in the living room. The front window was open because it was a beautiful day.

Suddenly, a gust of wind outdoors knocked the vase and rose to the floor. "I looked at Ruth and said

something like, 'I certainly hope that doesn't signify bad luck,'" Shirley said during a recent interview over dinner in her home.

The Matriarch of Grand Island, who is 96 years young and whose husband, grandfather, Henry W. Long and great-grandfather Joaquim Long, were all town supervisors, served as the secretary to the superintendent of Grand Island Schools for 28 years until she retired in 1985. Her husband served five two-year terms as supervisor and one four-year term on the Town Board.

On the Monday after Mother's Day in 1970, she was seated in her office when someone came in and said: "Mrs. Luther, there is a major from the U.S. Army walking up the sidewalk with your husband."

"I immediately got up and walked into Mrs. (Veronica) Connor's office and they told me to sit down," she related in a hushed voice with her eyes watering. "They told us what had happened to Bob. That was an awful day. Bunny took it very hard because that was his only son. All I did was cry."

The major told the family their son could be buried at Arlington



Cpl. Robert B. Luther in Vietnam. (Luther Family Collection)

National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, but they wanted his remains returned to Grand Island for a service at Trinity on May 23, 1970, and burial at the family plot in the church cemetery on Whitehaven Road. The wake service at Kaiser's Funeral Home was three days to accommodate so many people. "That was an awful experience," she said.

Luther was killed at Khe Go Bridge in Vietnam. His unit, First

Battalion, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division, broke out from a 43-day siege at Base Fuller — a mountaintop camp they called "Hell," exhausted and weary and fleeing with the enemy in pursuit. As the Americans made their way down a mountain on a 5-mile dash in 90-degree heat, the North Vietnamese enemy continued firing mortars at them. About 100 yards from the trucks waiting to take them to the rear, a helicopter riddled with bullets from enemy ground fire crashed among them, killing all six Americans on board.

Luther was the lone soldier on the ground killed.

Awards presented posthumously to the Luthers by the Army were the Bronze Star Medal of Meritorious Service, the Purple

Heart, the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnamese Service Medal, the Vietnamese Campaign Medal and the Combat Infantry Badge.

"He was a loving son with great potential who was an extremely patriotic young man who is very much missed," his mom said as she paged through a scrapbook of memories.

She has the letters he wrote, including one while he was in Vietnam. "I know why we are here, but I wish it were for a different reason," he wrote. "It bothers me to see so much death and destruction."

Luther was engaged to be married but was drafted into the Army in June 1969. The draft board allowed him to stay home for his sister's wedding but he had to depart the following day for Fort Dix, New Jersey, where he became a member of D Company, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment of the 5th Infantry Division. He was sent to Fort Lewis in Washington and was supposed to go to Germany but orders were changed and in December 1969, he

was sent to Vietnam.

Back then, there were many who objected to the war and some were draft dodgers. The thought never crossed his mind, as he came from a family with a rich military history. The Henry W. Long and John Schutt Jr. sides of his family came to the Island in the late 1800s. His grandfather, Benjamin Kreger, served in the Army during World War I and his father was in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Even today, two of Shirley's great-grandchildren, Jagger Click, 21 (U.S. Air Force) and his brother, William, 18 (U.S. Navy) are serving their country.

Bunny and Shirley were longtime family friends of the DeGlopplers, and Grand Island war hero Pfc. Charles N. DeGlopper had his locker in Tonawanda High School next to Bunny's.

"I met Bunny when we attended Tonawanda High School and I knew the DeGlopper family from over here on the Island. They had a very big farm," Shirley said. "Bunny's family did not have a lot of money back then, so Charles's mother used to pack two sandwiches in his lunch bag and one was for Bunny."

"At the time I was 14 years old and I remember Charles as a tall boy but one who was shy," she recalls. "I do believe he would be taken aback by all they are doing for him at the memorial. On the other hand, I think it is a wonderful tribute to him and to all of our veterans, especially those killed in action."

During World War II, Shirley said her and her girlfriends got caught up in the Americana spirit in the country and they created a monthly 8x14-inch newsletter of Island news, birthdates, poems and other treasures, which was typed on colored paper and mailed to nearly 150 Islanders fighting for our country in World War II. Titled "The Islander," Shirley was the editor, Catherine Killian was the typist and Edna Schutt, Dorothy Phillips and Gertrude Cannon were the writers. The headline on its first anniversary, Jan. 11, 1944, was "We Did It." The story began, "We've actually kept going one whole year, although when we began, we had hoped the war would be over by now."

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Charles N. DeGlopper Memorial Statue and Killed in Action Plaques Unveiling Saturday, June 5, 2021, 9:45 a.m.

Grand Island Boulevard at the corner of Baseline Road



ROBERT B. LUTHER
October 9, 1948 - May 10, 1970



Corporal (Cpl) Robert B. Luther, a native Islander, was drafted into the Army on June 21, 1969, served six months in Vietnam and died on Mother's Day, May 10, 1970.

Bob's unit, the First Battalion, 5th Mechanized Division, broke out from a 43-day siege at Base Fuller, a mountain top camp, called "Hell." Enemy fire pursued them 5 miles down the mountain, hitting a helicopter which fell to the ground, killing all six Americans on board and one on the ground. Cpl. Luther was struck by the falling aircraft near Khe Go Bridge.

Cpl. Luther was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star Medal of Meritorious Service, Purple Heart, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnamese Service and Campaign Medals and Combat Infantry Badge.

Cpl. Luther was laid to rest at Trinity United Methodist Church, Grand Island, New York, May 23, 1970.

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