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## INSIDE

**PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE:**  
Two Lives: The Hero and the Killer ..... 2

## NEWS & FEATURES

TERRY BROOKS: Standing for the Fallen.. 4

The Generous Journey of RUSS FEIGNER .. 8

SEAN LUNDRY: Files notice of suit against City of Sandy, others..... 11

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR..... 12

STRANGE OREGON: For "Hermit of the Craggies," prison was luxurious..... 14

NEWS AND EVENTS ..... 18

Donivon McCord races to desert win .... 30

## COLUMNS

■ HUMOR 1 – Greg Rosen  
Lifetime commitment to get holiday off..... 23

■ LEGAL – Nathan Begley  
When you die without a will ..... 23

■ HUMOR 2 – D.B. Haverford  
Charlie doesn't love Toby ..... 24

■ MEDICARE – Leslie Parker  
Medicare prescription drug changes ..... 24

■ INVESTING – Jared Tjaden and Sam Sarkissian  
Financial traps to avoid..... 25

■ AUTOMOTIVE – Karen Johnston  
How does my fuel system work? ..... 26

■ PETS – Sam Mazzotta  
Removing ticks; Older cat's arthritis ..... 26

■ DENTAL – Dr. Russell Bird  
How white can your teeth get?..... 27

■ HEALTH – Dr. Keith Roach  
Are expired meds still OK?..... 28

■ FAITH – Pastor Dee Duke  
Facing the "fires" of life ..... 29

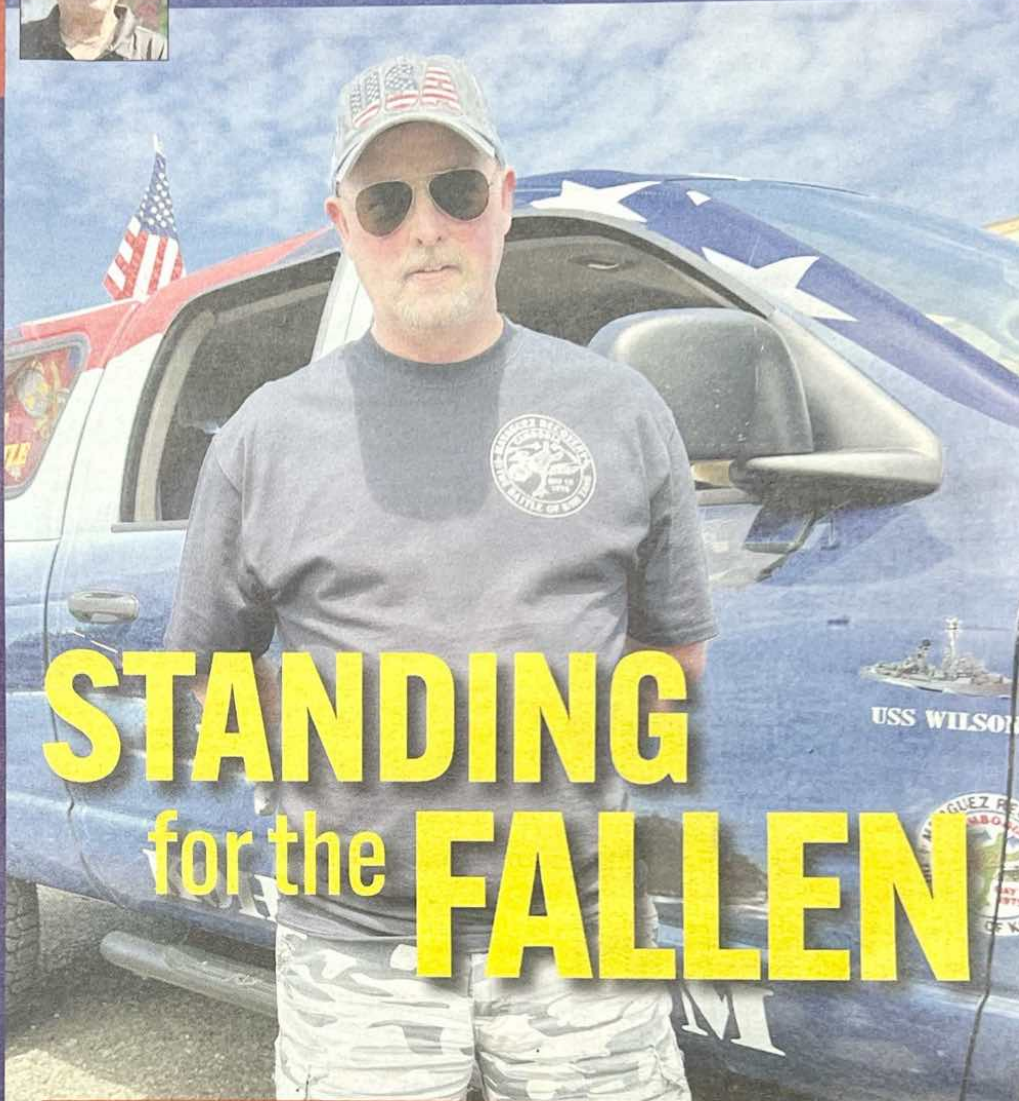
CROSSWORD..... 30

## PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE

A TALE OF TWO LIVES: THE HERO AND THE KILLER – PG 2



The generous journey of Russ Feigner – PAGE 8

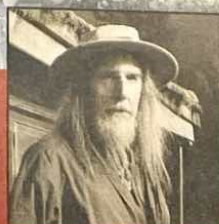


# STANDING for the FALLEN

Terry Brooks wants people to remember the "Last Battle of Vietnam." Forty-one Americans perished in the operation. Terry Brooks was there.

– Page 4

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# Standing for the Fallen

Terry Brooks wants people to remember the "Last Battle of Vietnam." Forty-one Americans perished in the operation. Terry Brooks was there.

By MIKE WLEY  
Publisher

**IT** was a hot Saturday in early July. In the expansive combination parking area and playground behind Good Shepherd Community Church in Boring, a large section was devoted to a car show featuring everything from restored Model Ts and 1930s Ford coupes, to 60s and 70s muscle cars, both original and restored. There was even a Lamborghini. Car aficionados and the curious wandered up and down the rows of shiny metal and motors, trying to decide which entry would get their vote for the best vehicle. Upbeat music was coming from a covered area featuring a large live jazz band. Braving the heat, the band played some live sets. In between, loudspeakers played alternating contemporary Christian songs and light secular pop hits. A few yards away, vigorous games of corn hole and water gun fights were taking place. Kids playing tag, chasing one another. Behind them, a dozen volunteers were serving free hot dogs and hamburgers with all the trimmings, including chips and potato salad. In the grove of fir trees next to the food station, attendees ate their fare at long tables in the cool shade. Despite the heat, the attendees wandered amongst the cars and booths, talked amongst themselves, made new friends, and seemed happy and content.

Terry Brooks and his wife Kathy were there, too. Terry and Kathy were long-time local residents of Sandy, Damascus, and Gresham. Terry had attended Orient grade schools and Sam Barlow High School. After Terry retired in 2019, they moved from Gresham to Amboy, Washington. On this hot July day, they had made the drive down from Amboy in Terry's customized, 2004 Dodge 1500 pickup to enter the car show. However, Terry wasn't there mainly for the car show, the music, the free food, or the games.

Terry was there so that people won't forget.

Terry's truck is nice, but it's not totally tricked out and doesn't have a fancy paint job. Instead, it's wrapped with images of a long-ago battle that is nearly forgotten today. That battle has been called, "The Last Battle of Vietnam." Terry often attends these kinds of events with his truck, so that people won't forget, so that they will learn and remember the sacrifices that Americans made in that last battle. For Terry, like the other survivors of the battle, it is still with

them. On the back of his truck is listed the 41 names of the men who died in the battle. It reads, "All gave some, 41 gave all." There is a tribute to Terry's friend, Sgt. David Fowler, who had died of brain cancer.

**A brutal battle**

In May, 1975, on a jungle-covered piece of rock called Koh Tang Island off the coast of Cambodia, contingents of U.S. Marines were delivered to two beaches by helicopter. In the preparations leading up to the battle, and in a harrowing, intense, 14-hour fire fight that stretched into a black moonless night, forty-one Americans lost their lives in what turned out to be a battle for no purpose. It seemed a tragic, but fitting, end to America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

On those fateful days in May, 1975, a young Terry Brooks from Gresham was there. He landed on the beach. He faced the bullets, worked to dig shallow trenches in shallow sand, threw hand grenades, saw the dead, and, somehow, despite the flying bullets and the yelling of men in the chaos of darkness, made it back onto a helicopter and got off the hell that was a beach on Koh Tang Island.

As part of the exhibit with his truck, Terry puts out an A-board telling the story of that day, and that night. It is written by Ruth Blough, wife of one of the heroes of the operation, chopper pilot Bob Blough. Here is what it says:

*On 12 May 1975, less than two weeks after the fall of Saigon (at the time considered the end of the Vietnam War), Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces captured the SS Mayaguez, an American container ship, off the Cambodian coast in the Gulf of Thailand.*

*Encouraged by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, President Gerald Ford ordered swift military action to liberate the Mayaguez, believed to be held off Koh Tang Island. Over the 78 hours following the Mayaguez's SOS, U.S. Air Force aircraft bombed, strafed, and sank Khmer patrol boats in the Gulf of Thailand. An Air Force helicopter crashed, killing all personnel being transported onboard. On 15 May, lacking current intel and expecting only light resistance, U.S. Air Force helicopters transported U.S. Marine forces to Koh Tang. Many of the young Marines had not even finished training*



During the operation, some U.S. Marines had to abandon one of their damaged helicopters in Thailand. (Photo: Public Domain)

*and had never been in combat.*

*As the helicopters reached the east and west beaches of Koh Tang, they were fired upon by heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms. Some were shot down before being able to land. When news of the crisis spread, a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, a destroyer escort, and other naval and Air Force units rushed to assist.*

*The bloody battle that followed lasted 14 hours before the decision was made to extract those on the ground. During those hours, U.S. forces were overwhelmed by nearly 200 well-equipped and experienced Khmer Rouge troops. Three U.S. helicopters were shot down and lost and others were so badly damaged, they could not return to the battle. Including pre-battle casualties, 41 U.S. Air Force, Marine, and Navy members died. Many others were critically wounded. Three U.S. Marines were accidentally left behind in the chaos of the nighttime extraction and*

*are believed to have been captured and executed.*

*Ironically, minutes before the first insertion helicopters landed, President Ford received word that the Cambodians had released the Mayaguez and its crew. Just as U.S. military operations got underway, the 40 members of the Mayaguez crew were safely recovered by the USS Wilson. By the time the announcement was verified however, it was too late. By then, the rescue mission was underway. Remaining U.S. Air Force helicopters made multiple attempts to land "blind" under heavy fire in darkness. Dodging bullets and grenades, 198 survivors helped each other and the wounded as they scrambled aboard rescue helicopters.*

*In the weeks that followed, those rescued attributed their survival to individual acts of heroism and decisions made on the ground and in the*

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**The Last Battle**

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

air by those who were there. Over the years since the crisis, military analysts concluded that poor planning and communications for a joint operation, intelligence failures, and clashes at the highest levels of government over military control of the operation were responsible for the calamity. The Mayaguez Incident is still used in military classrooms as a teaching tool, in hopes that future leaders will learn its valuable lessons.

**The final names**

The names of the Americans killed, including three Marines left behind on Koh Tang after the battle and subsequently



The back of Terry's customized truck lists the names of the 41 personnel who died in the operation. (Photo Joan Wiley).

executed by the fanatically communist Khmer Rouge, are the last names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

**To prove a point?**

Mission planners misjudged the situation right from the beginning. Based on faulty and incomplete intel-

ligence, they assumed that only about 20 Cambodian irregular troops armed with light weapons, meaning just rifles and machine guns, were on the island. Later this was revised to between 20-30 Khmer Rouge fighters, which still vastly understated the opposition the American troops would face. In fact,

150-200 experienced, well-trained Khmer Rouge soldiers armed with heavy weapons were holding the island. The mostly inexperienced American Marines were being delivered to rocky beaches with little natural cover, defended by experienced, determined communist fighters who were determined to give a bloody nose to the Americans. For their part, President Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the rest of the Americans were determined to show that in the wake of the fall of Saigon two weeks before and the ignominious end of the Vietnam War, that the United States was not going to be pushed around.

Problems with the operation seemed to be three-fold. First, the SS Mayaguez itself was not at Koh Tang Island, though it was nearby. Neither was its crew. Second, planning for the mission reached all the way to the White House, where, in the days leading up to the operation, President Ford held four high level national security meetings with top military advisors and cabinet members, including Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who recently died at age 100. By this point in Kissinger's career, in 1975, he had achieved almost mythical status as a foreign policy



National security briefing as the Mayaguez Incident is happening. President Ford is second from left, Henry Kissinger is second from right. (Photo in the public domain)

savant and his advice was often considered the last word. Third, the objectives of the mission were simply not well defined. To this day, Terry Brooks is not exactly sure why the mission was authorized and launched. The only stated objective seems to be Kissinger's less-than-precise observation that "taking the island if [the Mayaguez crew] are not there is easier to explain than failing to take it if they are." What "taking" the island meant did not ever seem to be clearly defined.

What quickly became clear was that the landing troops were immediately facing extremely heavy resistance. Of the eight large, well-armed helicopters used

for the assault and landing on Koh Tang, three were destroyed and four others were damaged too badly to be used further in the operation.

**The day it started**

After Marine basic training, Brooks had been stationed on the American base on Okinawa in the Pacific, near Japan. Brooks describes his own experiences that day.

"It started on Okinawa. We were out in the bush [doing training]. I happened to be next to the radio man who got the call to get everybody together. [We were to get back to Camp Schwab and

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An Air Force pararescue soldier guides U.S. Marines to an HH-53 during the daylight part of the chaotic extraction from Koh Tang Island. (Photo in the public domain)

**The Last Battle**

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

load up all our gear. We're heading down to Kadena Air Force Base. Nobody is to call home. Nobody is to write letters. We needed to go. But, you just think, 'Okay, it's just another game. You know, see how quick we can be.'"

"But it was happening. We went to [Camp] Schwab, went to Kadena [Air Base]. At Kadena, they put us on a C130, flew us to U-Tapao [airfield in] Thailand. They separated us into our companies and platoons and then the Gama Goat [supply trucks] came out with live ammunition and the jungle face [paint]. They handed it all out to everybody. We each got our share. Then Golf company, their helicopter took off. I'm not sure which chopper got shot down first. I believe 25 people were killed on the first one. But the chopper that did come back when I was still at U-Tapao had a big hole in its side. That's when I realized that this wasn't a game. When it was our turn to load up on the choppers, my buddy and myself were the last in. That means we were the first to come out of the chopper. As we're flying it was daylight, and we're getting closer to the island. Then all of a sudden they said, 'Lock and load.'"

"The chopper turned around and started coming down backwards towards the beach on the island and as we landed the big back hatch came open and my buddy Steve ran out. He fell within 10 feet and I thought, 'Oh, he's dead because you don't fall that quick. You

got to go out further to set up a perimeter. So I went past him... [emotional] and finally took my position and just kept yelling his name. [It turned out] he was okay," said Brooks.

Brooks continued, "So everybody got off the chopper and then the Staff Sergeant said 'Let's go, get down the beach. We've got to make it through to the other side to hook up with Golf company.' That's when

*"At nighttime, it's just quiet. They came at us at night. You can just hear them. You hear them coming. They're crawling at us."*

— Terry Brooks

we start trying to go through the jungle. No machetes. No nothing. We couldn't even get through the jungle very far, it was so thick. Then we were told to go back to the beach and dig in. That's when I saw the first casualty that I'd ever seen. I believe... he was from Golf company. They were taking all of his gear and putting him in a body bag. Then we went back to the beach and we're told to start digging in. My buddy [and I], we started digging. It's kind of hard to dig into the island because it's solid rock. We're able to dig down maybe a foot through the sand. Then we just start grabbing logs to put up in front of us because

we couldn't get down to six feet. As we were looking for logs, my buddy Steve, he, he found a foxhole — the bad guys' foxhole. Being young and dumb, he went in the foxhole. He started handing me out all of the M16 ammunition — stuff that we had and the Khmer Rouge had. That's when the Captain came up looking for volunteers to go capture a 90mm cannon. First, he told Steve how stupid he was for going in that foxhole because it could have been booby trapped. We took about four or five of us and we went down the beach and took out the 90 millimeter cannon [that was] sitting there with a couple bad guys."

"We captured the weapon and took it back to the LZ [landing zone] where we had come in on the beach.

"We put it out in the bay. One of the staff sergeants took a hand grenade and threw it down the barrel and blew it up. Then we went back to our foxholes and waited and waited," said Brooks.

The Marines waited on the two small exposed beaches as it got dark.

"At nighttime, it's just quiet. They came at us at night. You can just hear them. You hear them coming. They're crawling at us.

"Then we're told the 15,000 pound Daisy Cutter bombs were going to be coming in. 'Get down, get down!' So we did. [The bomb] shook the whole island.

"Then we're told to open fire. We opened fire and threw our hand grenades. You see the tracer rounds going out. [I say] to myself, 'Geez, I

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Terry's 2004 Dodge 1500 with the photo-wrap memorializing the "last battle." It tells the story wherever he goes. (Photo Joan Wiley)

**The Last Battle**

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

wonder if that's going to be the one that gets me."

"Then it was time to go. We're told to get up and start moving to the LZ. The [evacuation] choppers were coming in. [It was] maybe the third chopper. I finally got in to get out. After that, they flew us to the [aircraft carrier USS] Coral Sea. The Navy gave us fresh clothes. We went to the head of the chow line to get some food. They treated us really good. The next morning we all went up onto the bow of the aircraft carrier. We had formation and then that's when we found out how many were lost. And, we found out we had left three behind."

Three members of a machine gun squad had been accidentally left behind. It was feared that they were already deceased. A decision was made to not attempt another incursion onto Koh Tang Island for a possible rescue. Instead, search planes overflew the island and Navy boats patrolled the island coast line for several days, but saw no signs of survivors. In the 1980s and 90s, interviews with some Cambodian veterans indicated that the three were captured and executed. Some remains were eventually recovered and returned to the U.S.

**Battle aftermath**

Brooks summed up what happened afterward.

"They took us to the Philippines and we had a one night of R and R. Then it was back to [regular] business. I never talked about it again. Never. Never. [Later,] I was [stationed] in California. In my last year they told me, 'Brooks, get squared away. You're getting a medal.' I got promoted to Corporal and I got the Navy Achievement Medal for helping capture that 90mm [cannon]. The rest of my days [in the service] was being a clerk till it was time to go home. Then, I drove up Highway One all by myself, all the way home, and found out that the Trailblazers had won the championship."

**Life afterward**

In the years since, Terry's experience in those two days on Koh Tang Island and the days after have had a significant impact on his life, illustrating what soldiers often face in the aftermath of combat. He has experienced periodic depression, post-traumatic stress (PTSD), and challenges with controlling his anger, which he attributes to his experiences on Koh Tang.

Still, Terry has carved out a successful life — a tribute to his determination to succeed in life despite the challenges, and just maybe to help make it up to the guys who didn't come home from the last battle.

In 1982, he married Kathy, and they have four children, daughters Jamie and Misty, and sons Brandon and Ryan. After some initial odd jobs, he found success working as a carpenter. For nine years, he owned his own business. Later, when he needed a steadier paycheck, he worked for a local construction company. At various times, Terry and his family lived in Sandy, then Damascus, then back to Gresham, but always in the local area, until he and Kathy moved to Washington in 2019 after Terry retired.

About her father, daughter Misty Preston proudly says, "My dad is the most important man in my life, like most dad's are to people. I admire his dedication to the lives lost in the last battle he fought in. He dedicates his truck as a memorial to those who lost their lives in

that battle."

Kathy continues to work for the Oregon Department of Emergency Management, helping to coordinate response to various public emergencies, including forest fires.

Through it all, Terry has been determined that the men who died in "The last battle of Vietnam" would not be forgotten by the public.

**Organizations and reunions**

Terry has been involved with the Koh Tang/Mayaguez Veterans Organizations. The group has a website (kohtang.com) where information about the battle is available. The organization also holds regular reunions at various places. They have held several reunions in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, as well as Branson, Missouri, Washing, D.C., and most recently, in Las Vegas in 2022. In 2015, several of the battle's survivors held a reunion on Koh Tang Island. They dedicated a Memorial with a list of the names of those who were lost on the island in the battle. One side lists the soldiers who died and another side lists the Air Force security personnel who died when their helicopter crashed during preparations for the battle on May 13th, 1975. On the website, the 2015 Koh Tang visit is described as "A trip of a lifetime as described by some, certainly a healing trip for most."

There is also a memorial in Phnom Penh, Cambodia at the U.S. Ambassador's residence. Another small private memorial was dedicated in 2008 in DePaw, Indiana.

**"A battle that never should have been"**

Brooks said, "I survived a battle that no one even knew about and most of the people still don't know about it. When I was on the island [pause], I'm probably gonna cry [pause]. When I was on the island, all I could say is, 'I'm coming home. I made it home. I raised a family. I survived the battle that should

have never been.

Brooks continued, "Unfortunately, that battle has been with me ever since. And I didn't even realize the PTSD [I had] until after my friend Dave Fowler had called me. He was the first one to call us when we built our house in Gresham. He asked me how I was doing. Have I had any treatment? [I asked] what's PTSD? What are you talking about? I didn't know that all my symptoms were PTSD... That's when I started to go to reunions..."

"So, war sucks. It affects everybody different. I'm fortunate that I have all my limbs. My hearing is not good. But my anger... I've gone through all the treatments, all that taking pills. It doesn't do anything but make me feel like a zombie. And that's why I told the wife we needed to [move to a different area]. So we bought this property [in Amboy], and I've landscaped for the last four years on two and a half acres. I've done it because this is what my PTSD does for me. [It] keeps me going."

Brooks' wife Kathy has seen the effects of the experience on Terry.

Kathy said, "I could say that we've dealt with a lot of mood changes over the years. Sometimes, to be



Terry and his wife Kathy have been married since 1982. They have four children, eleven grandchildren and three great grandchildren. (Photo courtesy Terry and Kathy Brooks)

honest, I never knew which Terry was going to wake up." Kathy also said that the reunions were not always easy. "There was always a lot of anger at those reunions. A lot of blame. And it seems like each year they rehash the same things."

**Take aways to remember**

When asked what people should take away from his experience, Brooks said, "You just have to do it, you know, because you're a Marine, you're serving your country. You do what you're told. And, no matter what my experience after the fact was, the intel should have been better. Then, in this situation, people wouldn't

have lost their lives. We had the ship [the SS Mayaguez] back already. They could have just called the choppers away, instead of showing these people how powerful we are. Everybody knows how powerful we are. But, it doesn't mean that Americans had to die because of it." **HVN**

Terry is looking to donate his truck to an organization or museum which will put it on permanent display. If you know of an organization or museum that would be interested, you can contact Terry through Hoodview News at info@hoodviewnews.com.



In 2015, several of the battle's survivors held a reunion on Koh Tang Island and dedicated a Memorial with a list of the names of those who were lost. (Photo Kohtang.com)

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