

Originally published Sept. 3, 2006

In search of Calumet's lost soldier

A journey to the UP reveals the life behind the name on an MIA bracelet worn for 2 decades

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Reader comments: Requested by Michael Madden, Davison.

On her right wrist she wears a stainless steel bracelet. She takes it off only at airport security checks, where some agents, too young to remember the Vietnam war, ask what it is. They read it, then gently hand it back.

Otherwise, she wears it sleeping, working, washing dishes, showering, swimming, painting her house. She has worn it every day for a quarter century, long after many people have forgotten its purpose.

"It's part of my arm now," she says. "I can't just throw it in a drawer," because etched on it is the name of a man she never knew but does not want to forget.

She's done research on her own family history. She knows: To be remembered is to stay alive.

She is Lorraine Garcia-McGlynn, 54 years old, a business analyst for EDS who lives in Ferndale.

He is Marshall Frederick Kipina (KIP-in-uh) of Calumet, who was 21 years old, an Army soldier, when he was lost flying a reconnaissance mission over Laos.

He and the plane's pilot vanished 40 years ago this summer.

Lorraine wrote me in an e-mail: "I don't mean to stir up old hurts for any remaining family, but I've often wondered what this young man looked like, and what he was like. I wrote the local paper years ago, hoping their archives had a picture or article about him, but never received an answer.

"On the off chance you stop in Calumet on your travels this summer," she wrote, "tell whomever that I haven't forgotten."

I am astonished that anyone still wears a bracelet for a stranger in a war so many wars ago

From the Wall

One evening after work, Lorraine and I sit together on her back deck, overlooking a small yard with a pool covered in a blue tarp. She grew up four blocks away, but has traveled in 47 states and Europe. She's nervous, publicity-shy. This isn't about her, she says, but about Marshall.

Like me, she wore a POW or MIA bracelet in high school, then discarded it for a prettier bracelet bought by a boyfriend. She feels guilty about that. She doesn't remember the boyfriend's name, or the soldier's.

That, she thinks, is why she never removes Marshall's bracelet.

She slides it off her wrist, though, to show me. It is so badly nicked and scratched that its words are barely visible: SSGT Marshall F. Kipina USA 07-14-66 Laos.

It has been her companion since 1982, when she visited the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., just after its dedication. At what's now known as the Wall, seven years after the war's end, she listened to activists angry that our government had done so little to find POWs and MIAs.

She signed a petition and gave them some money, maybe \$10. They invited her to reach into a wooden barrel -"like a big old beer keg"- and pick out a bracelet commemorating one of those men. Each bracelet rested in a Ziploc baggie a little bigger than an index card, with a yellow sheet of paper, folded three times then three times again, holding details of the loss of that soldier.

That she pulled one out for a man from Michigan, her home state, stunned her. He was shot down two weeks before her 14th birthday.

She says: "It was 1966, and he was a kid, and I was a kid."

Vietnam was not a war that tore her heart out. She didn't lose anyone she loved in it. But she feels bound to her bracelet, and to Marshall.

She stores the yellow paper, folded and refolded many times, in the same baggie, in a metal lockbox that holds her birth certificate, her will, a piece of her son's artwork as a child, and all the most important papers of her life.

A mission to Calumet

Ferndale, where Lorraine lives, is a tight-knit old suburb of Detroit, lively with bungalows, eateries and coffee shops, population 22,000.

Almost 600 miles north, over the Mackinac Bridge and west to the UP's Keewenaw Peninsula, Calumet is a town hanging tight to its vivid, tough past.

A century ago, when copper mining was huge, 100,000 people lived here. Decades after the last mine closed, only about 800 remain. In the desolate neighborhoods that surround Calumet, where Marshall Kipina grew up, streets are still lined with small, stocky homes built by the mining companies.

I knock on the front door of one of those homes, hoping to meet someone who remembers. Phone calls I made from downstate, to Kipinas in the area, suggested everyone who knew Marshall was dead, except one guy.

The woman who answers the door is scowling, her arms folded over her chest. I talk fast. Then Carl Bessolo comes to the door, steps outside onto the porch and says yes, yes, he knew Marshall. Marshall was his cousin.

Carl's face is wizened. He wears a cap, always. He looks toward the ground and shakes his head.

"The Army said he was missing in action. The CIA said he was a POW. Follow me. My brother-in-law knows more."

As we pull away, I see the woman inside, on the phone, alerting relatives that a reporter is curious about Marshall.

We follow Carl for a handful of blocks, pulling behind him onto the skimpy lawn of a gray-painted duplex. Inside, two people are waiting with big manila envelopes in their arms, packed thick with memories that do not make them smile.

It takes me a while to figure out the complex family tree, and the tangled tale of Marshall's life.

We are in the living room of Bob and Cecilia Nardi. The Cartoon Channel is on in the background, because their grandkids are visiting. Cecilia is Carl's younger sister, a younger cousin of Marshall's, a slim blond woman with stress showing on her face. Her husband, Bob, was a pal of Marshall's, a former Marine who went to Vietnam, too.

When we first sit down, the three empty the manila envelopes in a hurry, passing each paper around: photos, letters, official documents, newspaper clippings. They talk among themselves in a rush, as if they had just discovered this trove of insight into Marshall's life.

A rocky start

Marshall, I learn, was a mistake.

His father, Fritz, met a woman during World War II while stationed with the Coast Guard in Maine. He later told Carl he knew Irene just two weeks.

When Fritz came home to Calumet, to work in the mines, Irene tracked him down. One cold winter night, when cousin Carl was about 8, "we heard a noise outside, and looked out on the porch, and there was a baby, crying, covered with sores and no shirt on, just a diaper full of you know what."

It was the second time she had dumped Marshall on the porch, Carl said. The first time, she came back to pick up the baby. This time, she would not.

Irene settled just 15 miles away, in Houghton. But the boy never saw his mother. He was raised by his grandmother, his father and a shifting collection of uncles and aunts and nearby cousins.

Carl frowns to remember Fritz's doubts about the boy. "More than once he said he didn't think Marshall was his kid. Marshall's skin was so dark. And my dad always complained how hard it was to cut Marshall's wiry hair."

But he grew up embraced, they say, and happy. He loved to fish and play cards. Shy with girls as a teenager, he won a bit of attention by playing an electric guitar on the

sidewalk outside the bowling alley on Saturday nights. He was a stand-up guy, loyal, dependable. He joined ROTC as a freshman. He played football for the school team.

He joined the Army right after graduation in 1964 because that's what every young man did back then. Says Bob, who joined the Marines: "We were believers."

Cecilia can barely speak of Marshall without tears in her eyes. He was her dear older cousin, who taught her to play cribbage. She remembers him laughing like crazy when they watched "The Three Stooges" on TV on Saturday mornings. He treated her like a peer, even though she was 7 years younger.

"When he was in the Army I wrote to him, little girl things, like my favorite rock groups, and 'I really like Ringo Starr.' But he wrote back to me."

She was 14 years old the day her mother got the first call, the one that said Marshall was dead. She ran sobbing to the meadow where she and her friends had been playing baseball, and the other kids, she remembers, threw down their bats and gloves and joined her in tears.

But when the town funeral director made phone calls about Marshall's body, the news changed.

There would be no body.

There would be no funeral.

There would never be a service for Marshall.

MIA or POW?

For 12 years the Army sent monthly checks, a portion of Marshall's pay, to another cousin, raised by the same grandmother, whom he had named as a beneficiary. For many years she put each check into a bank account, in case he should come back.

In 1978, though, 12 years after his plane vanished, the Army declared Marshall Kipina dead. Carl and Cecilia's mother, who helped raise Marshall after his grandma died, got \$20,000 from his life insurance policy, and used it all to put a new roof, siding, porch and garage on her house.

It's the house Carl lives in now.

Their hurt might have scarred over and healed, except for a man from Indiana, a zealous MIA researcher. Almost 20 years after Marshall disappeared, the man sent the family CIA documents he'd discovered that say Marshall lived in a POW camp for at least three years after his plane went down.

The Daily Mining Journal, the Houghton newspaper, wrote a three-part series that year about the UP's only Vietnam POW.

The revelation infuriated some of Marshall's relatives, including the aunt who helped raise him. She thought it cruel for anyone to drag him back from the dead and hated to think of him tortured.

Cecilia remembers her mother saying, over and over: "Oh, that poor little boy."

Neither Carl nor his brother-in law Bob believes Marshall is alive. But Cecilia takes some small comfort imagining him imprisoned in China, eventually freed to marry a nice Chinese girl and bear children and never return to what would have been a bleak future on the Keewenaw Peninsula.

"I like to hope," she says, "that he has 13 little Chinese grandchildren."

He would be 61 now. Cecilia, at 54, helps run a gas station and has 11 grandchildren of her own.

Bob concedes, "He didn't have a lot to come back to." Even the mines, by then, were gone.

'Thank you for remembering'

I'm surprised to learn that Bob, like Lorraine in Ferndale, keeps all the Marshall memorabilia in a metal lockbox in his bedroom.

Among the keepsakes are three bracelets with Marshall's name, returned to them by distant relatives and a stranger, a woman in Arizona. In 2002 she sent it back, wrapped in a small American flag, secured with a white ribbon.

Another treasured piece of paper is a pencil rubbing of Marshall's name from the Wall in Washington. Bob and Cecilia's oldest son made it, before such rubbings were forbidden. He also took a photo of his great-uncle's name on the Wall, although even with a magnifying glass it's hard to distinguish from the names around it.

The Wall holds 58,249 names of men and women killed in Vietnam, including 1,200 who, like Marshall, are still missing.

At Arlington National Cemetery, the family was told, Marshall has a stone, although no one has seen it.

Closer to home, two miles away at the Lake View Cemetery outside town, another stone was placed a few years ago, in the veterans' section. Carl had to approve it, and sign papers for it.

"I figured even if he ain't there, what the heck."

It reads much like the bracelets do -- his name, rank, birthdate and the day he vanished. But it also says, because nobody's quite sure, "POW MIA."

Every week, someone from the family stops at the black granite stone. Carl sweeps it clean with a paintbrush. It is far from the Kipina plot, which includes the graves of Marshall's uncles, aunts, grandparents and his father, who died at 43 after a life in the mines and the bars.

His mother, who bore no other children, is gone, too, the family says.

Before sundown, we all visit Marshall's stone. Bob and Carl wander among the nearby graves, talking about the many dead they know, men killed in Vietnam or who came home from that war maimed in body or spirit or both.

Bob himself, at 60, is 100% disabled from lung and hip damage in Vietnam.

Cecilia kneels to tug out the weeds that, left to creep, would cover over Marshall's name. Her husband had told me that usually she cries or curses when she talks about Marshall, but tonight she is quiet.

"I found a four-leaf clover," she tells me. "Would you believe it? So I stuck it down in the dirt by his flag. That's for him."

Then she stands, in the cooling air, ready to leave the past that I've dragged her back to. She stares down at the stone.

"There's nothing here," she says. "If you want to feel like you're with the person, this is it. This is all we've got."

Her husband speaks up. "This isn't about us, though. It's about Marshall. And that woman with the bracelet."

Her brother says, "Tell her we say thank you. A lot of people just threw their bracelets away, and wouldn't think of him no more."

"Tell her thank you for remembering."

POW-MIA BRACELET HISTORY

Vietnam POW and MIA bracelets were conceived in 1970 by Carol Bates Brown, a California college student. She took inspiration from a simple metal cuff given to an antiwar activist by hill tribesmen in Vietnam.

She estimates her organization, Voices in a Vital America (VIVA), sold about 5 million before VIVA folded in 1976, a year after the war's end. By then, she has written, "The American public was tired of hearing about Vietnam and showed no interest in the POW-MIA issue."

The first 1,200 bracelets were produced, she said, with donated brass and copper, engraved free by a Santa Monica company. They sold for \$3 to adults and \$2.50 to students, a price chosen because it equaled a movie ticket.

Bracelets were subsequently made, by VIVA and others, in brass, copper, stainless steel, silver and even gold. At one point VIVA took orders for 12,000 bracelets daily.

Some efforts exist to return bracelets to family members: Click on "bracelet exchange" at www.thewall-usa.com

By Susan Ager