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THE **GRIEVING**

Peace came for Vietnam and the U.S. nearly 40 years ago. It has not yet come for the family of John Fitzgibbons ’67

By Zachary Jason ’11

PHOTOGRAPH: Gary Wayne Gilbert

MEMORIAL DAYS

For 45 years after John Fitzgibbons ’67 was killed during a night patrol in Tây Ninh Province, Vietnam, his family seldom spoke of its shattering loss. Then a package arrived

By Zachary Jason

The medals of John F. Fitzgibbons and the package in which they were returned.

On an afternoon in 1996, beneath clothes stashed under the rear seats of a rusted blue Ford woodie station wagon they had just acquired from a friend, John and Debbie Benedetto, a middle-aged couple from Wakefield, Massachusetts, found three small, weathered black leather boxes, one containing a Purple Heart, another a Bronze Star Medal, and the third an Air Medal and Vietnam Service Medal. The medals were unblemished and inscribed with the name: "John F. Fitzgibbons." The Benedettos looked through phone books and talked with the car's previous owner, seeking clues about Fitzgibbons. They turned up nothing, and for 17 years, the medals sat in a desk drawer at their auto repair shop. Occasionally, the Benedettos brought them out to show to clients, particularly those who had served in Vietnam. But still no clues.

Then, one morning in the spring of 2013, John Benedetto took the medals from the drawer and he and his wife began another search for John F. Fitzgibbons, this time using a tool not available to them in 1996, the Internet.

They found him on the Boston College Veterans Memorial website, a member of the Class of 1967, and learned that he too had been a Wakefield native, had grown up four blocks from their shop, and had been a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army and was killed on November 25, 1968, two weeks after his 23rd birthday, in the province of Tây Ninh, in what was then South Vietnam. Below his name, they found a brief remembrance from Jack DeVeer '63, who was his cousin. It read: "He was a wonderful person/cousin. The oldest of 11 children. There are no winners in war." The Benedettos turned back to the Web, and though they did not find Jack DeVeer, they did find his older brother Richard, a priest at St. Francis Xavier Church in South Weymouth, Massachusetts. They mailed the medals to him, wrapped in a miniature American flag

Rev. DeVeer had never seen the medals. They had not been on display at John Fitzgibbons's funeral Mass, which DeVeer, then 29 years old, had presided over, though he does not remember today what he said in his homily.

On Saturday, May 25, 2013, one week after he received the medals, and on what happened to be Memorial Day Weekend, Rev. DeVeer, now 74, during his homily at the 4:00 P.M. Mass and before a full house of 400 parishioners, lifted a small box from the credence table and opened it to expose the Purple Heart. He then recounted the story of his cousin's sacrifice, and talked of those he left behind. "One of his friends and track teammates at Boston College is here in our parish today," he said. DeVeer set the medal back and walked in his green vestments down the aisle to Paul Delaney '66, a congregant DeVeer has known for years. DeVeer told the congregation that Delaney had trained with Fitzgibbons in Boston College's ROTC program, and he then hugged him and returned to the altar, as Deacon Joseph Canova, whose brother was killed in Vietnam, played "Taps" on the French horn.

On the following Wednesday, DeVeer drove 40 miles from South Weymouth to the prim white home of Joyce Fitzgibbons, in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. Sixty-six years old, she was 18 months younger than the first-born, John—the sibling closest to him in spirit as well as age.

Joyce could not recall having seen the medals since 1980, when the house in which she and John and their brothers and sisters grew up was sold. She set them, wrapped in the flag the Benedettos had provided, on a side table in her living room, a place her 92-year-old mother, Jean, who lives six months a year in an adjoining guesthouse owned by Joyce, never visits. Joyce did not intend to tell her about the medals.

But on July 4, the *Boston Globe*, which, with the family's consent had been alerted to the story by Boston College (which itself had learned of the story through Delaney), ran an article. The headline read "Fallen Soldier's Lost Medals Returned to His Family." Joyce, who spoke to the reporter for the family, began to receive calls, emails, and letters from John's old friends, members of her extended family, and military personnel who knew John during training and in Vietnam. A nearly 45-year silence was broken.

Named after his paternal grandfather—a butcher's apprentice who migrated from County Cork to Boston at the turn of the 20th century and went on to found the Bristol Coat & Apron Company, a uniform supplier to hotels, hospitals, restaurants, and mechanics—John Francis Fitzgibbons was born November 8, 1945, three months after VJ Day and two months after Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent from France.

He was raised in a three-story stucco Georgian house at

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The Fitzgibbonses at the Colonial Restaurant in Lynnfield, Massachusetts, on Mother's Day 1961. Clockwise from left: Dan, Bryant, Jean, Daniel, Sr., Joan, Corinne, Maryanne, Joyce, Lisa, Andrew, Jean, Lane, and John.

the edge of Wakefield's Lake Quannapowitt, 15 miles north of Boston. There were five bedrooms on the third floor that eventually accommodated Daniel and Jean Fitzgibbons's children. At six each weekday evening, with Daniel still at work in the South End, Jean (a native of Arlington, Massachusetts) served plated dinners—never buffets—and sat in the middle of a custom-made horseshoe-shaped Formica table, five children to her left, six to her right. In descending order of age: John, Joyce, Corinne, Maryanne, Dan, Bryant, Lisa, the twins Jean and Joan, Lane, and Andrew. After dinner and on weekends, the children sometimes staged impromptu musicals, or put on *Howdy Doody*-inspired puppet shows, or sang Irish folk songs (including "Danny Boy" when their father returned from work) for their parents and family friends. John was invariably the guitarist. He also played his acoustic guitar—bent over his Beatles songbook—in one of the family's two station wagons as they drove down I-95 to Florida each February: Cape Canaveral, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Springs.

"It was a party all the time," says Joyce Fitzgibbons, who has the same blue eyes and pert nose that John and many of the children inherited from their mother. Over lunch last fall beside Boston's Fort Point Channel (near the law office where she worked as a secretary until retiring in November), I asked her questions about John's death. She turned the conversation back to childhood stories. Neighborhood hockey games on the frozen lake. Pool parties in the backyard. Fish platters at The Ship, in Saugus. The Fitzgibbons family sat in the first two pews at St. Joseph's Church every Sunday morning (admiring congregants invariably asked Jean Fitzgibbons, "How do you keep them all so well-behaved?"). I asked Joyce if her mother would be willing to talk about John. She replied that Jean had once told her, "God was very kind and took most of my memories of John away from me."

John was the peaceful, tender, merry, quick-witted leader of the Fitzgibbons children. "He was a third parent, but also the pied piper. You always wanted to be where he was," said Joyce. He helped craft his siblings' art projects, taught his four brothers how to throw a football and flick a wrist shot with a hockey stick, snuffed out arguments, broke up casual chatter with memorable darts of dry humor.

As a young teenager, Fitzgibbons determined to attend Central Catholic High School, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, instead of the local public school. He rose at five in the morning to travel 20 miles, sometimes hitchhiking, some-

PHOTOGRAPH: Courtesy of Joyce Fitzgibbons

times taking a train and bus to the then all-male Marist Brothers academy, where he joined the cross-country and track teams and made a friend in Terence "Terry" Flynn, now a semi-retired superior court judge in New Jersey. "When you push yourself and you sweat day after day, you get to know the depths of your character and the character

His cousin Jack DeVeer told Fitzgibbons about football games in Alumni Stadium, brotherhood in the dorms, and Army ROTC's annual ball. "I don't like to think about if I influen ed him at all into signing up [for ROTC]. But that haunts me," DeVeer says.

of those who you run with," Flynn said in a phone interview. "When I think of him now, I think of running beside him. . . . He was so remarkably stable. Quiet, never flashy." Not until he stayed one night at the Fitzgibbons's house during senior year—when Fitzgibbons was track co-captain—did Flynn learn that his friend had allergies and needed to sleep sitting up before each race day.

Her brother "had a self-confidence, yet a deep humility," says Joyce. Twice Fitzgibbons won Central Catholic's Legion of Honor award, granted to students for character, academic performance, and contributions to school life. He didn't tell his parents on either occasion. He didn't want to disrupt their busy lives to attend the ceremonies, Joyce says.

Daniel Fitzgibbons, their father, was born and raised in Medford, Massachusetts. When World War II broke out, he was 24 years old and wanted to enlist. His father, the Irish immigrant, prevailed upon him to wait until the military called for him. After he was drafted and had begun bombardier training, Daniel Fitzgibbons suffered an accident and served the rest of the war as an Army instructor in Washington state and Florida. Soon after marrying Jean in 1944, he took over the linen company—as he was meant to.

The Bristol Coat & Apron Company was to be John's to run after he earned his Boston College degree. During summers throughout high school, Fitzgibbons and his cousin Jack DeVeer (now a retired financial advisor living in Georgia) delivered sheets and towels to motels in a company station wagon. "Work was a lark with him," says DeVeer. "Hey, Pierre!" Fitzgibbons would call out to a beret-wearing housepainter they often passed as they drove along Route 1 north of Boston. It was during these summers that DeVeer, a Boston College student four years older than his cousin, told Fitzgibbons about football games in Alumni Stadium, brotherhood in the dorms, and Army ROTC's annual ball. "I don't like to think about if I influenced him at all into signing up [for ROTC]. But that haunts me," DeVeer says.

Fitzgibbons was offered a track scholarship to Providence College, but enrolled in the College of Business Administration at Boston College in September 1963.

On September 9, 1968, having completed a year of infantry training, beginning in Fort Benning, Georgia, First Lieutenant John Francis Fitzgibbons, "Fitzy," to his friends, boarded a commercial airliner for a stopover in San Francisco. From there he would take an Army transport plane. His final destination was Camp Evans, a wire-bordered base of tents and helicopters that supported 10,000 U.S. soldiers, some 40 miles south of the North Vietnam border, along Highway 1 in the South China Sea's coastal plain. His parents and siblings drove him to Logan Airport in East Boston to see him off. And after he boarded, they stood in the terminal and scanned the airplane, hoping for a glimpse of his face in a window.

"I was the last in my family to see him alive," Maryanne (Fitzgibbons) Pagnotti wrote to me in December 2013 from her home in Gloucester, Massachusetts. She had moved to California with her boyfriend in 1967 at age 17, after graduating from high school. She hadn't spoken to her family since, and had unknowingly booked the same flight as John after a brief visit to Boston. John Fitzgibbons noticed her a few rows ahead, she wrote, and asked a stewardess if he could sit with his sister, whom he had not seen since reporting to basic training a year earlier. Pagnotti remembers his despondence throughout the six-hour ride. At one point she suggested they explore the cliffs and Redwoods in Big Sur when he returned. He touched her hand and said, "If I come back, Maryanne." Pagnotti, today a retired hairstylist, wrote, "He knew. He was trying to prepare me."

They spent the afternoon at the house where she rented a room, in Palo Alto, and in the early evening she drove him onto the tarmac at the Oakland Army Base, where the transport plane's engines were already roaring. John was running late. "I always blamed myself for dropping him off. . . . I cannot remember if I told him I loved him, or if we hugged.

Did I kiss him goodbye? I have no memory of that, only the constant regret."

Seven months and 10 days earlier, on January 30, 1968, the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had launched a surprise offensive in the first hours of Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year, storming American Army bases, military airports, and more than 100 cities and towns in a single night, including the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, where the U.S. embassy was attacked. While the Tet Offensive ultimately stalled, it became a strategic victory for the communists, as Americans at home came to see the war as unwinnable. War correspondent Michael Herr would describe the impact of the Tet Offensive in his award-winning 1977 book *Dispatches*: "Vietnam was a dark room full of deadly objects, the VC were everywhere all at once like a spider cancer, and instead of losing the war in little pieces over years we lost it fast in under a week."

By the time Fitzgibbons landed on September 11, some 30,000 Americans had been killed in the war and more than 100,000 wounded, and protests boiled, even at Fitzgibbons's relatively apolitical alma mater, where students shouted "Baby Killer" at fellow students in military uniform. Fitzgibbons set foot in Vietnam just after Gallup polls revealed that 65 percent of the country believed the United States made a mistake in sending troops and only 26 percent approved of President Lyndon Johnson's handling of the conflict

A Dean's List graduate with a major in economics, Fitzgibbons joined the Army Reserve through ROTC on June 3, 1967, two days before Commencement. He signed up for as much training as possible—to prepare for his inevitable deployment to Vietnam, he said at the time—jumping with the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, rappelling down mountain faces, studying venom-

Images provided by Tortolani from the fall of 1968 (clockwise from top left): Black Virgin Mountain (Núi Bà Đen) in Tây Ninh Province, as seen from an American fire base; Tortolani, beside an ambulance; the barracks at Camp Evans; a platoon heading out for a nightime patrol in Tây Ninh.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Courtesy of Robert Tortolani

The quiet and slyly funny Fitzgibbons—six feet tall and 150 pounds—shocked his friends and family by volunteering for the infantry. His elite assault division, the 1st Air Cav., would suffer more casualties than any other American division in Vietnam.

ous snakes, and practicing ambushes at Ranger School in Georgia and Florida. The Army showed Fitzgibbons footage of American soldiers hanging upside-down from trees and the Viet Cong pouring sand down their noses.

The quiet and slyly funny Fitzgibbons—six feet tall and 150 pounds—had shocked his friends and family by volunteering for the infantry. By contrast, nearly all of his fellow ROTC cadets signed up for support branches when they entered the reserves. Moreover, Fitzgibbons was assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), known as the 1st Air Cav., an elite assault division that would suffer more casualties than any other American division in Vietnam: 5,464 killed and 26,592 wounded of out of more than 90,000 who served, according to the division's records. With a 20-round M16 and seven-round Colt M1911 sidearm, he would lead a 20-man rifle platoon as a first lieutenant. (A common joke told him by his commanding officers was that "the average lifespan of a first lieutenant in Vietnam was 38 seconds.")

Days after he touched down 13,000 miles from Boston, Fitzgibbons jumped from a helicopter, landed awkwardly, and injured his ankle. A tall, thin, dark-haired 27-year-old physician and Army captain who had arrived in Vietnam only a week earlier treated Fitzgibbons in a tent-clinic at Camp Evans. The two found each other kindred souls.

"He was one of the two or three most outstanding people I've met in my life. And I knew him for two months," Robert Tortolani said last fall. Now 72, he is a family medicine physician in private practice in southeast Vermont, and while the dark hair that appears in photographs taken when he knew Fitzgibbons has turned gray, it is still thick, and he still stands upright at his full height of six feet, three inches.

A framed photograph that he took of Fitzgibbons's name etched on the Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C., hangs on the wall of an exam room in Tortolani's clinic. Few patients ask about it, he says, and he only brings up Fitzgibbons when fellow veterans talk about lost friends. Carrying a cardboard box containing books on Vietnam, a slide projector, and a steel briefcase full of 35-millimeter Kodachrome images he'd shot in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969 and pulled from his attic the night before, he led me through the parking lot to a conference room at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, next door to his practice. He'd also wanted to show me his Vietnam diary, in which he had written on the night Fitzgibbons was killed, but hadn't been able to find it. "Probably a good reason for that," he said. Tortolani was at the base clinic tending to wounded when Fitzgibbons's body and those of the six men killed in the same action were brought to him in green canvas bags. His duty was to open the bags and write up what he saw.

As he flicked on the projector fan, he said, "Before you land, you know you're in Vietnam from the smell: ordnance, artillery, and we burned our excrement." Moving through images he was revisiting for the first time in decades, he paused at a photograph of a few hundred men in green fatigues sitting in rows of folding chairs in the shade of tarpaulins. It was taken in An Khê, a town in the Central Highlands that served as the 1st Air Cav. division headquarters, where he and Fitzgibbons first landed to learn their assignments. "These men here are waiting for a freedom bird [a plane that returned soldiers to the States] to take them home. It's one of the first things I saw when I arrived. They'd been there a year. They looked tired."

While Fitzgibbons hobbled on crutches, the 1st Air Cav. worked at clearing NVA troops from the populated rice-growing lowlands and raiding NVA strongholds in the mountains in the area west of Camp Evans. During the day, he helped plan nighttime missions for his platoon. The monsoon season had arrived and, along with it, mud. Tortolani flashed through slides of the camp. A portrait of the young doctor in fatigues and an M1 helmet: "That's me in a sandbag bunker. A lot of places to dive if you've got incoming rounds. It was frustrating because you never saw the enemy there. But men were getting booby-trapped at night." A row of Army outhouses: "You had to be careful. Every once in a while they'd get hit by a rocket."

Almost every night, Fitzgibbons and Tortolani met for a couple of hours in the officers' club—a tent—for beer and soda. Fitzgibbons and the doctor—a native of Plainville, Connecticut, who'd joined the Army to avoid being drafted in the midst of his residency ("If you wanted to have any control of your [military] life as a doctor, the thing to do was sign up," he said)—recounted their days' tasks and chatted about sports, their hometowns, and the kind of cars they'd like to drive when they got back to "the world." Fitzgibbons talked about missing his wife, Linda, whom he had known

Fitzgibbons (center) at 16, training with the Central Catholic High School cross-country team in the fall of 1962. Terry Flynn is to his right.

for less than two years.

"He was very unusually kind and humble. Did it make sense for him to be a leader? Yes. To be in combat? No. He was a very gentle soul," said Tortolani. Some men, he said, were clearly in Vietnam to exorcise demons and kill, but Fitzgibbons "saw his only task as keeping his men alive."

"We [never] said anything about if one of us died, would you try to say something to our families?" Tortolani said. "You don't think you're going to die when you're that young, even in Vietnam."

In his tent later in the night, Fitzgibbons would write to Linda, to an old roommate from Boston College, and to his father, Daniel Fitzgibbons, who read his son's reports and relayed the less dispiriting details to Jean and the children.

On September 24, 1968, Fitzgibbons wrote from Camp Evans to his friend Bob Murphy '67.

Hi Robert,

The reason I addressed the letter to you was due to the fact that I may chance to use a few four-letter words and wouldn't want to offend Betty. Well how goes it back in the World?

I've been over here a little over two weeks now and got assigned to the 1st Air Cavalry (Division Airmobile) and you wouldn't believe where we are located—47 miles south of the DMZ, right in between the mountains and the coastline surrounded on four sides by 30,000 VC & NVA.

I'm going to be platoon leader for the weapons platoon for one more week and then I take over the 3rd platoon (their leader was just killed last week by a booby trap).

We have a Division Base Camp up north here called Camp Evans. It contains all the headquarter sections of the various brigades and battalions plus a small airfiel and some supporting units and one unit for base defense.

The 1st Cav. is unique for its airmobility, we are still the old ground-pounding infantry but we have an ability to be transported from one area to another by choppers (birds).

For instance my platoon has an area of operation (AO) 10 miles outside of Camp Evans. We conduct search and destroy operations and cordon and search villages. If I ever get pinned down or in heavy contact by Charlie I can be reinforced by another platoon in about 15–30 minutes by the use of "birds." This gives us the

PHOTOGRAPH: Courtesy of Terry Flynn

ability to work more independently and in larger areas.

Last night we got the shit mortared out of us by Charlie, however we were very lucky and took light casualties. This coming Sat. or Sun. I'll be going on my firs Charlie Alpha i.e. combat assault. These are made from the air by birds on an LZ. We try and catch "Charlie" off guard. (By the way if you ever write or talk to Linda don't mention about the mortars or assaults. I write to her daily but I don't necessarily give all the details, otherwise she'd worry too much.)

Anyway this northern area is real bad up here. The people are mainly V.C. sympathizers, which create [sic] many problems. This is also the second greatest rice-producing section in Vietnam and "Charlie" desperately wants it. Another bad thing about this area is that the monsoon season is setting in. From now until mid March all we get is constant rain and drizzle and it rains like you've never seen before, and gets cold at night.

I'd better stop complaining.

These Peace talks are getting on my ass. If they ever stop the bombing this area is definitely in a world of hurt [because] all the work that's been done and the lives lost will be wasted[.] [E]ven with the bombing going on Charlie still infiltrates over 1,000 troops per month.

I just got a 10-day-old *Boston Globe*, which headlines stated "HHH [Democratic Party presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey] sees '68 Viet Cutback," which is a lot of B.S. if troops are ever moved, but you better believe they'd be short-timers located in the least strategic position in Vietnam.

By the way I haven't showered in two weeks either. We have a water shortage problem. We just can't drink out of the river or no telling what we'd catch.

Had quite a coincidence when I got to the 1st Cav. The chaplain in my Brigade over here is the same one who married Linda and I at Ft. Bragg. We're real good friends.

Well that's it for now. I'll write to you occasionally. Looks as if it's going to be a long shitty year. If you're in Boston during Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc., I'd appreciate if you might call Linda for a few minutes if you get the chance. I feel bad for her[.] [S]he's going to have a rough and lonely year.

Of course if I look on the bright side of things I'll be in Hawaii in another six or seven months with Linda on R&R.

Enjoy the football season.

—Fitz

John Fitzgibbons arrived at the Heights as a freshman just as Boston College was pivoting from its role of educating Boston-area Catholic men to a being university with broader ambitions. During the previous March and April, the school's Centennial celebration had featured symposia on "The Knowledge Explosion," 20th-century American drama, and change within the Catholic Church, and President John F. Kennedy had set off Centennial-day festivities with a keynote speech in Alumni Stadium. Admission counselors, under instructions from President Michael Walsh, SJ, were recruiting at out-of-state Catholic high schools, courting valedictorians and salutatorians with a new honors program, merit scholarship offers, and new dormitories on the Upper Campus. Still, like half of the freshmen, Fitzgibbons commuted daily to the University, rising at five to dress—his was one of the last freshman classes required to wear a coat and tie—carpooling 20 miles from Wakefield, and staying until six each evening.

A track walk-on as a middle-distance runner, Fitzgibbons jogged with his teammates around the Chestnut Hill Reservoir in the early afternoons and then ran intervals on a wooden track just outside the stadium's chain-link fence. He "was always positive, and always pushing us to turn in good times," recalls Paul Delaney, a fellow runner and ROTC cadet, who would also serve in Vietnam. "And he had that great dry sense of humor." In the winter, team members often had to remove snow from the track. "Run for BC?" Fitzgibbons would call out, "Here's your shovel."

A retired IBM executive and the driving force behind creation of the Boston College Veterans Memorial on Burns Library Lawn in 2009, Delaney recalls the moment when Fr. DeVeer approached him at Mass last Memorial Day weekend: "I just melted," he says. Fitzgibbons's death had always perplexed Delaney. "He wasn't the gung-ho type who would go into infantry and the airborne," he says. "He was so quiet and conscientious." Cadet Noel Schaub '67, today an office manager in Hingham, Massachusetts, also recalls a reserved Fitzgibbons: "I remember seeing John walk on campus in his uniform, and you knew he was a cut above. He wasn't gregarious or loud, just everything he said was thought out, and you wanted to listen."

Through his first few weeks at Boston College, Fitzgibbons remained undecided about Army ROTC, which at the time was one of the most prominent organizations on campus. Two hundred freshmen—some 15 percent of the class—signed up that fall. "None of us were hawks," says Harry Fish '68, now a retired salesman. "We were just taught that if your country calls you're expected to serve. You're supposed to march up the hill. We grew up with our dads' and uncles' stories of Iwo Jima and Midway." Fitzgibbons's parents neither encouraged nor discouraged his joining. As many of his new friends enrolled, John reached his decision sometime toward the end of his first month on campus. "It was a fait accompli by then, says his sister Joyce.

When Fitzgibbons entered ROTC in the fall of 1963, the

likelihood than an enlisted infantryman, much less a commisioned reservist, would die in a war in Indochina seemed remote—even inconceivable. Some 16,000 American military advisors were then serving in South Vietnam, training the South Vietnamese Army and providing defoliation support using Agent Orange and other herbicides. In the 13 years since U.S. military advisors first arrived in Vietnam to support the French, exactly 200 Americans had been killed.

Fitzgibbons turned 18 on November 8, one week after South Vietnam's president, Ngô Dinh Diêm, was murdered in a coup sponsored by the United States and two weeks before Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy. Fitzgibbons and fellow ROTC cadet Peter Osmond '67 were in a French class in Lyons Hall, practicing verb conjugations,

In October 1965, months after California students burned draft cards at the Berkeley Draft Board, 4,000 Boston College students and faculty signed a statement supporting the war and mailed it to "our fighting men in Vietnam."

when, Osmond says, "someone came to the door and told the professor that Kennedy was dead." Hundreds of students gathered around stopped cars on College Road to listen to the car radios.

The following August, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the USS *Maddox*, a Navy destroyer patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin. After the *Maddox* reported a second attack two days later (doubted by many in government and the press at the time and thereafter), Congress passed a resolution granting President Johnson authority to use military force without formally declaring war. The United States began bombing North Vietnam at the end of the month. The first American ground troops—two Marine battalions assigned to defend the Da Nang airbase—arrived in South Vietnam on March 8, 1965, per request of General William Westmoreland, commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

Dissent in the States began to grow. At the end of March 1965, some 3,500 students attended a two-day antiwar teach-in at the University of Michigan. By the end of 1965, more than 75 chapters of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had formed. Students began staging sit-ins—at the universities of Chicago, Berkeley, Kansas, and Maine.

Response at Boston College was slower to coalesce and also mixed. Sentiment against the war was first raised in the *Heights* on April 2, 1965, when a junior wrote an op-ed decrying the Pentagon's decision to use incendiary phosphorus bombs against the NVA. In October 1965, months after California students burned draft cards at the Berkeley Draft Board, 4,000 Boston College students and faculty signed a statement supporting the war and mailed the three-pound letter to "our fighting men in Vietnam." A year later, as the American death toll approached 10,000, a band of Boston College students harassed four members of the Greater Boston Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam and drove them from the campus. "You preach non-violence, I preach violence," one heckler shouted. The first student-organized anti-Vietnam protest on record at the Heights took place on October 20, 1966, when half a dozen students picketed outside as Vice President Hubert Humphrey spoke in the Roberts Center, the basketball arena that later made way for the Merkert Chemistry Center. But even earlier, in the spring of 1965, as the number of troops in Vietnam reached 100,000, Boston College students stood and mocked cadets as they drilled with their rifles outside ROTC headquarters in the Roberts Center.

May 1965 was a point of decision for Fitzgibbons and other sophomore cadets. They were required to declare whether they would continue with ROTC's advanced course for upperclassmen and then enter the Army Reserve. At the time, a reserve commission, as compared with a draft notice, seemed to improve the odds of serving in the States and not in a war zone—Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford didn't mobilize the Army Reserve until April 1968—and the $27 monthly stipend that upperclassmen received would likely have influenced Fitzgibbons's decision as well. That spring, he and his friends Noel Schaub, Pete Osmond, and D. Michael Ryan were among 48 of some 100 cadets who signed a contract with the Army, committing to ROTC through graduation.

In late October of 1968, Fitzgibbons—his leg cast rotting from the damp—flew with his battalion 600 miles due south from Camp Evans to Tây Ninh, a province of fla farmlands and rain forests that juts into Cambodia some 50 miles northwest of Saigon (now, Ho Chi Minh City). In the weeks before, the NVA and VC had assembled an estimated four divisions along the border, and U.S. Army General Creighton Abrams, who had succeeded Westmoreland as

Linda Pickett and Fitzgibbons in 1967, a few months before they wed.

MACV commander that June, feared an attack on Saigon, comparable to the Tet Offensive. Under Operation Liberty Canyon, Abrams ordered the 1st Air Cav. to relocate 11,500 troops and 3,400 tons of cargo in two weeks (it would remain the largest American combat deployment of the war). Major General George Forsythe, just two months into leading the Air Cav., asked if he could veil the move from the NVA as much as possible. Could they stagger the operation? Could they remove the yellow Cav. insignia from planes? No. Abrams wanted to send a message, and ordered Forsythe to "leave the patch on to show them . . . you could move a division 600 miles overnight."

Stretched along a 150-mile arc of the unfamiliar Cambodian frontier, the Air Cav. force built a strand of fir support bases "similar to the forts used in fighting American Indians," Army Captain Shelby Stanton writes in *Anatomy of Division: The 1st Cav in Vietnam* (1987). From these bases, 100-man companies ran "screening missions" with three objectives: monitor enemy movement, destroy small forces, and block large forces from advancing. Stanton writes that the NVA responded to these screening missions by developing "well-fortified, superbly camouflaged bunkers built for mutually interlocking fire and always designed in unique arrangements. Fields of fire, invisible to advancing cavalrymen, were cut in the thick overgrowth only a few feet off the ground. Caught in such killing zones, entire platoons could be wiped out in a matter of seconds."

Tortolani, who traveled south with the division, said of life in Tây Ninh: "All you could do was try to stay focused, try to stay healthy, try to eat, try to duck, try to sleep at night, and try to get home." He clicked through slides of the area: pink smoke billowing through a thicket, a distress signal calling for medics and resupply; a Chinook helicopter raising a destroyed surveillance helicopter from the tall grass where it fell; a half-dozen wounded soldiers on stretchers on the ground.

Tortolani flew to the front each morning to treat the wounded and ill, and caught the day's last helicopter back to base camp. "You did not want to get stuck out there overnight. That was for the real soldiers. Every sound you hear in the field at night is too eerie," he said. He clicked to a photograph of a tree-covered mountain in the distance, above an expanse of rice fields. "That's Núi Bà Đen, Black Virgin Mountain," Tortolani said. The 3,200-foot summit was a strategic prize during the war, with the American military controlling the peak, and North Vietnamese claiming the jungle mountainside.

"John would have seen this the night he was killed," said

PHOTOGRAPH: Courtesy of Joyce Fitzgibbons

Tortolani, looking at the screen.

Fitzgibbons was cleared for combat in late November, a month after arriving in Tây Ninh.

In early December 1968, as Bob Murphy was preparing to attend his former roommate's funeral, a letter from Fitzgibbons arrived, addressed to him and his wife. The envelope was dated November 8, Fitzgibbons's 23rd birthday. Murphy wouldn't open it—not for 30 years. Then one evening in the late 1990s, Murphy watched news footage of a belated welcome-home ceremony for Vietnam veterans. Later that night he opened Fitzgibbons's letter in private.

Hi Betty and Bob,

Thanks a lot for your letter. Glad to hear everything is normal back in the world.

As you know the 1st Air Cav. was located up in the northern section of Vietnam just south of the DMZ. Well this past week the entire Division moved about 400 miles south and we are now just off the Cambodian border.

We've been brought down to work in the jungle area and stop the vast infiltration system and seek out enemy base camps and recuperation areas.

We are now on LZ [aircraft landing zone] Custer, which has been overrun 5 times (Custer is a bad omen anyway). I've only had small contacts up north and never had to tangle with a superior force. It may be a little different down here. I hope to hell not.

It's a great characteristic of the human being to be able to adjust to his environment and make the best of it. However, it's getting to be a pain in the ass.

I've certainly developed a keener appreciation for the simple things in life. I'm definitely looking forward to returning to the good life.

Oh by the way Bob I must have given you the wrong impression about Linda being pregnant.

I was only kidding around saying we're working on it—Haven't had much opportunity lately.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Yours,

Fitz

During their junior year at Boston College, Fitzgibbons and Murphy lived together in a Cleveland Circle bachelor pad: fresh sheets and towels courtesy of the Bristol Coat & Apron Company, an eight-inch black-and-white TV they found on the street and seldom turned on, and a refrigerator full of Pabst Blue Ribbon and Schlitz. "There were about 20 guys and 400 girls in the neighborhood," says Murphy. At parties they hosted, Fitzgibbons serenaded women guests with songs by the Beatles, Kinks, and Rolling Stones. "Fitz was always a bit of a throwback," Murphy says.

Murphy's then-girlfriend, Betty Brown (Fitzgibbons was an usher at their wedding in 1966), often set Fitzgibbons up with students she knew from the nursing school. During winters, John and his girlfriend of the season went on weekend double dates to Maine and New Hampshire, sometimes with Betty and Bob, often with his friend from Wakefield, Greg Smith, and his young wife, Judy. "He was very calm, but a tough SOB," said Smith. "He always wanted to ski the trails that scared the crap out of us."

By late 1966, when junior cadets chose which Army branch to enter after graduating—they ranked their top three, and the Army selected based on its need and their merit—more than 380,000 American troops were in Vietnam, and tens of thousands more were on the way. Many students chose intelligence or signal corps over infantry. "I thought he would end up in supply," says Harry Fish '68, who signed up for the Marines in his senior year and would later serve in the infantry. "Fitzy was quiet, very erudite and friendly. If he wasn't an altar boy, I'm going to stop guessing who was an altar boy. . . . When he ended up with the ground-pounding grunts, I said 'Jesus Christ.'"

Fitzgibbons was one of six in his class to enter the infantry. Of the 48 cadets commissioned in McHugh Forum on June 3, 1967, he was the only one to die in Vietnam.

Murphy says he does not recall what led to Fitzgibbons's choice, or whether infantry ranked in his top three. "I just remember him saying that if he was going to go to Vietnam, he was going to get the best training he could."

One night in late November 1968, Dan Fitzgibbons, a high-school senior, fell asleep in the room he shared with his absent older brother, and had a dream. He was hacking through a thicket, following the sound of a man crying in pain. When he reached a clearing he found John, charred and bloodied from a grenade blast. The news arrived in Wakefield days later. Now 63 and the owner of a uniform service company in Worthington, Massachusetts, Dan remembers the dream more clearly than he remembers the weeks that followed. "John sent out a laser beam of energy that night. I believe that, that I was there with him."

On November 25, Fitzgibbons led his 20-man rifle platoon into the field for the first time, lugging full combat equipment for the first time since his training in Georgia. On an unseasonably balmy and clear day ("A downpour would have snuffed the action that night," Tortolani said), Fitzgibbons's platoon, two other rifle platoons, and a heavy-weapons platoon left their

fire support base late in the morning to set up for a screening mission that night. They would stay within a 15-mile radius of support artillery at the base. Around seven in the evening, the soldiers stopped to eat. Under the cover of full darkness around nine, they began to probe for NVA units. An hour or so later, the company commander, a captain, concerned about the possibility of an ambush, ordered John to take his platoon out and reconnoiter. The platoon moved forward, and NVA troops, hidden in the trees, allowed them to pass, then attacked with machine gun and mortar fire. "To this day I don't know why his commanding officer put him in that vulnerable position," Tortolani says. Seven men were killed within minutes, according to the doctor. Francisco Alvarez, 22, from Rio Grande City, Texas. Melvin Bevier, 20, from Willard, Ohio. Larry Hetzler, 20, from Westlake, Louisiana. Florentino Martinez, Jr., 20, from Edinburg, Texas. Thomas Whitfield, 20, from Quincy, Illinois. George Young, 20, from Gainesville, Georgia. The rest, Tortolani remembers, were wounded. John was the oldest of the dead, at 23. A grenade knocked him unconscious. He bled to death from his wounds.

Recalling his examination of Fitzgibbons's body the following morning, Tortolani says "My training as a physician did not help me cope." Fitzgibbons was "the one and only friend I had over there. After that, you put up an emotional barrier. You're cordial, you're pleasant, but you don't let yourself get close to anyone."

Through the front-door window Daniel Fitzgibbons, Sr. saw two men in dress blues and berets. When they asked for "Mrs. Fitzgibbons," he sent them upstairs, too shocked to understand that they meant John's wife, Linda. The offi ers entered Jean Fitzgibbons's bedroom, and she knew.

Army tradition allows for an officer to escort the body of a deceased officer from the same unit to burial. Tortolani—the lone medical officer in the battalion—considered returning to the States, but says, "I didn't feel comfortable leaving the unit. I wouldn't have even felt comfortable leaving if there was an illness in my family. I felt an obligation not to go." Fourteen men in the 1st Air Cav. died that night. Over the next eight months, 90 of 900 men in Fitzgibbons's battalion were killed. Hardly two days passed, Tortolani recalls, during which his uniform was not stained by American blood. "I was pretty well beat up. I kind of always have forgiven myself [for not accompanying his body] because I was just a kid myself."

Robert Tortolani has practiced medicine in Brattleboro for more than 40 years, and has treated Vietnam veterans for decades. Since returning from Tây Ninh in 1969, he has run counseling programs through the Vietnam Veterans Association of America. In 1986 he hosted discussion groups for veterans who were upset by Oliver Stone's depiction of the war in the movie *Platoon*, and today he occasionally counsels local Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. He thought about John Fitzgibbons more than he thought about anyone else he served with, but had "pretty much given up hope that I'd ever get in touch with his family." A few years ago, a medical colleague was helping to plan the dedication of a Vietnam veterans memorial in western Massachusetts, and Tortolani told him about Fitzgibbons. That doctor happened to spend July 4, 2013, in Boston, happened to pick up the *Globe*, and happened to read the story about the lost medals and their return. He telephoned Tortolani. "That's impossible," Tortolani recalls responding.

That same day, nearly 45 years after he identified his friend's body, Tortolani telephoned Joyce Fitzgibbons. "I wanted [the family] to know that he had a good friend in Vietnam, and I had a good friend in him. And I was able to tell her, rightfully so, that he did not suffer."

In late fall 1968, Fitzgibbons's high school running mate Terry Flynn, recently graduated from Georgetown, was training with the Marines in California, preparing to leave for Vietnam two months later, when a friend called with the news. "For years," he says, "I had these dreams that it was all a mistake, that I was misinformed."

Ozzie MacCaughey, another of Fitzgibbons's childhood friends, had recently completed the Army's jungle school and was packed to leave San Francisco for Vietnam the next day. "I called my mother in Wakefield to say goodbye, because of course you don't know what's going to happen," he said in a phone interview from his home in Winchester, Massachusetts. His mother told him, he recalled, "John was killed on the Cambodian border and Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgibbons are looking for you to escort the remains home." He could have flown to Tây Ninh to retrieve the body, then flown home to be alongside his family at Fitzgibbons's funeral in the parish church where he used to see John and his brothers in their matching blue suits. A

graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and an enlistee (he reported for basic training days before he received his draft notice), MacCaughey, like Fitzgibbons, had been trained to lead a rifle platoon. "I just was, I couldn't deal with it. Or think about it. It was just too much. I was too locked in at that point. Everything pointed to *that* assignment, *that* mission in Vietnam." He flew to Vietnam, but with his platoon. Over the course of his posting, he deliberately kept the shock and pain of Fitzgibbons's death fresh. "It was lingering in my mind the entire time I was over there: Don't do anything stupid that's going to get somebody hurt here and more people hurt back home. We all just wanted to stay alive."

"These kids, *kids*, conscripted into the military service and they get killed," he says today over the phone. "What a waste. What the hell is that about? And for what? What was John's death for?"

The Fitzgibbons children had all left the house for the last day of school before the Thanksgiving vacation. Daniel Fitzgibbons, Sr. walked downstairs to prepare breakfast in bed for his wife, as he did every morning. Through the front-door window he saw two men in dress blues and berets.

When they asked for "Mrs. Fitzgibbons," Daniel sent them upstairs to the bedroom, too shocked to understand that they meant John's wife, Linda. When the officer entered Jean Fitzgibbons's bedroom, she knew. It was Joyce, living on her own in Wakefield, who drove the officers to Linda, then working as a secretary at an auto-body shop in Allston, across from railroad and truck yards and the Massachusetts Turnpike. As Joyce and the officers entered the building and moved in her direction, Linda ran out and down the busy street. Joyce ran after.

No one recalls how John Fitzgibbons happened to meet Linda Pickett. Cousin Jerry DeVeer used to go on double dates with the pair and believes that they met through a mutual friend in mid-1967. She was from Seekonk, Massachusetts, on the Rhode Island border, the middle of five children, hadn't attended college, and was two years older than John. Tall, brunette, freckled, "just a knock-out. She looked great in everything she wore, especially a bikini," remembers Judy Smith. "A real head-turner, and very sweet," says Ozzie MacCaughey. Greg Smith recalls a "very fun-loving [couple]. They were just kids. We were all just kids." Joyce met Linda only a handful of times before her brother was killed, and remembers that from early on, Linda and John carried themselves "with quiet seriousness."

Fitzgibbons's parents urged him to wait on marriage until he returned from Vietnam. "John knew what was going to happen," brother Dan believes, "and he wanted to do the best possible thing for her." They married while John was stationed at Fort Bragg on February 23, 1968, and told John's parents when they returned to Wakefield

When the Fitzgibbonses returned with John's body from Logan Airport on December 3, police had blocked off every intersection along Wakefield's main road, and stood to salute. The 10 surviving children and John's parents filled the first pew at the wake. Fitzgibbons's paternal grandparents and maternal grandmother sat behind them. The rest of the church was filled by a crowd that included Fitzgibbons's Boston College friends, former teachers from Central Catholic, Wakefield's police and fire chiefs and their families, and the Fort Devens color guard. Soldiers stood in dress uniform, sabers drawn, on either side of the open casket. A sheet of glass covered the body. Why? Bob Murphy asked the undertaker. "All servicemen coming back from Asia have to be covered like this, to protect from infection spread," he recalls being told. Hundreds stopped to pray and gaze. Fitzgibbons's sister Maryanne, who flew back from California to attend, remembers she did not recognize him. Like Terry Flynn, she says she had repeated dreams "of someone telling me it was the wrong person, a case of mistaken identity, that it wasn't John. I would say, 'I knew it!'"

John was buried at Forest Glade Cemetery in Wakefield, a mile from his parents' home. During the funeral, Judy Smith stayed at her husband's childhood house in Wakefield to look after their one-year-old son. "I could just hear those 21 guns go off. That was all I could handle," she says. John is buried in the cemetery's veterans section. Beneath a cross are his name, his rank, the dates of his birth and death, and abbreviations of his medals, awarded posthumously: BSM, Bronze Star Medal, for "bravery, heroism, or meritorious service"; AM, Air Medal, for "meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight"; and PH.

Bob and Betty Murphy returned from the funeral to their infant son in Wethersfield, Connecticut. "I went from being a hawk to a dove," Murphy says. "In my 68 years, I have never met a better person, and have always felt cheated that he wasn't with us. His death was the trigger for me to really rethink. As time went on I considered Vietnam a total waste and mistake. Still do today."

A few months after the funeral, Judy Smith helped Linda clean out the apartment, north of Boston, in which Linda had lived with John. "She was packing up the life she thought she was going to have," says Smith. They came across the medals. Linda decided to give them to John's parents. None of John's family or friends has seen or spoken with Linda since early 1970, nor was she ever in touch with them. She lives in New England. I wrote to her and asked if she would be willing to talk to me about John, whether in person, on the phone, or in written correspondence. A brother spoke with me on the phone and said that she now lives in a nursing home, unable to speak. She still goes by Linda Fitzgibbons.

I had talked with Joyce Fitzgibbons about half a dozen times by phone and once at an outdoor restaurant amid honking ferries and I-93 traffic. She had guided me to Terry Flynn, Bob Murphy, and Robert Tortolani. But she always offered to speak on behalf of her family. Her siblings, and especially her mother, hadn't talked much about John's death in the four and a half decades since, she told me. Then, in mid-October, Joyce called, unprompted. Her younger brother Lane, nine when John was killed, was visiting from Georgia, and wanted to see me.

Joyce Fitzgibbons's white colonial stands on a quiet cul-de-sac not far from where she was raised. The house contains few artifacts that trace to her older brother. When the Fitzgibbonses sold their Wakefield home in 1980 after their youngest child, Andrew, turned 20, they packed up 30 years and 13 lives and left many things behind. Joyce has kept one photograph that shows John with the family. It hangs in her first-floo hallway: a black-and-white taken at a dinner at the Colonial Restaurant in Lynnfield, Massachusetts, on Mother's Day 1961. It was a time, Joyce said, "when life seemed to be on one big upswing. Dad's business was great, kids were being educated, everyone growing strong. We were a thriving, young, very innocent, protected family." The parents sit in the middle, Daniel, Sr. stout and smiling in browline glasses on the left, Jean appearing tall in a floral hat on the right. In spite of the uneaten ice cream before them, the children stare at the camera. The six girls wear matching dresses that their family seamstress sewed, the two youngest boys are in flannel overalls, and the three oldest boys wear dark suits, white socks, shined shoes, and buzz cuts. John sits at the front right, grinning just enough to show his braces.

"He was always our protector, our mentor," says Lane, looking at the photograph. At 55, he has the same slim frame as his three brothers. As we sat in Joyce's dining room, Lane—who owns a commercial cleaning business—said he has just a few memories of his oldest brother: John home for Christmas, John playing football with the brothers, and searching fruitlessly for John's face in the window of the plane at Logan Airport. He has two distinct memories of John's death: eating a different cake each day they waited for John's body to be returned (it took eight days), and seeing Daniel, Sr. when he got home from school the day the news came. "I remember my father crying."

Joyce keeps many vivid memories of her brother, and she said he still often visits her in dreams. It's always the same. "He's there, and I'm going to go over to him. There's always something I'm going to tell him or ask him, but I can't quite get there. And he can't respond to me."

In waking life, the family kept their anguish sealed. "You lose trust in an awful lot," says Joyce. "You had to trust his training. You had to trust the people in charge of John. And the people in charge of the people in charge. And the people in charge of the country.

"It's still difficult to lay it open. I peek at the memory. I peek and I test and I open a little more, open a little more, and then sometimes I have to back away and tell myself, 'Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.' It's hard to think about without thinking, Why? And what if?"

"And it was never the right time to lay it open," Lane adds. More than 20 years after John died, Lane visited his parents, who had retired to Florida, and brought a videocassette of *Born on the Fourth of July*, the movie version of the best-selling autobiography by Marine sergeant turned antiwar protestor Ron Kovic. "We don't watch those movies here," his father, usually patient, snapped at him. "But that's how I started finding out about Vietnam, and getting madder and madder," Lane says. "Vietnam was never over. It's still not over."

In the last year of his life (he died in Palm Beach in 2005, at 87) Daniel Fitzgibbons, Sr. began to lament what he seemed to see as his own culpability in his son's death. "He told me he felt guilty," says Lane. "When all his buddies were signing up for World War II, his father said no—to wait for the military to draft him. He said to me, 'Why didn't I say no to John? Why didn't I say, Wait until they call you? Why didn't I say, No volunteering on this war?"

As for their mother, she avoided all talk of John's death. "We were never allowed to really grieve," Joyce says. "My mother never discussed any of this," says Lane. "She never said anything."

Jean Fitzgibbons, 92, has been sitting at the dining room table and listening to Lane and Joyce speak for most of an hour. She has deep blue eyes and a strong thatch of white hair and exudes the same quiet, almost patrician pride she showed in the 1961 photograph with her children. "I didn't have the time to feel sorry for myself," she said of raising 11 children born within the space of 14 years.

When John died, she said, "My husband just went kaput. He was like I'd never seen him before or since." As she consoled her husband, she remained resolute in front of her children. She ordered the six funeral dresses for the girls, arranged for the Mass at St. Joseph's, where John had served as an altar boy, and handled the calls—sympathetic and not. For weeks after an obituary for John appeared in the *Globe*'s Thanksgiving Day edition, angry strangers, men and women, called to berate Jean, asking, "How could you send your son to Vietnam?" After the funeral, she scheduled a two-week trip to Florida for the family, to spend Christmas and New Year's away from the home John had always returned to for the holidays.

"He was too good to live," she says. "But he's right where I want him to be, up there."

In the years since John's death, she has remained skepti-

cal about the competence of the American military. She told her children at the dining room table that, when she learned that two of the men killed in the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, were former Navy SEALs, she said to herself, "Just like John: another million-dollar training down the tubes."

"I didn't know you followed that story, Mom," said Joyce.

"I stay in touch with a lot of things that disgust me. I just don't tell you about it."

Jean Fitzgibbons said that she and her husband stored the medals after Linda delivered them to the family. But it was only storage. "There was no such thing as a replacement [for John]," she said. When the family sold their house, "I was instrumental in them going missing. We had put them in a container in the children's room on the third floor. I didn't even want to see them. They meant nothing to me."

Twenty-nine Boston College alumni died in Vietnam. John Fitzgibbons knew many of them, and ran track with two. Marine helicopter pilot Lucien Tessier '65, a team captain when John walked on, was killed in a CH-53 Sea Stallion crash in February 1968. Fellow commuter Mike Counihan '67, a member of the freshman 800-meter relay team with Fitzgibbons, left to serve in his senior year. He was a radio operator in Bình Đinh for a year, and then agreed to extend his tour by six months. He died in an accident on November 1, 1968, three weeks before Fitzgibbons was killed. Friends who were in Vietnam learned of their deaths weeks later in the *Stars & Stripes* listings, or months later when they read *Alumni News*.

"When I flew home from Vietnam, they told us that we'd be more comfortable landing in civilian clothes," says Bob Wilde '67, who also attended high school with Fitzgibbons. "There were no parades, you just had to get on with being back in the world." Paul Delaney remembers that "people wanted to forget the war. We just wanted to acculturate to whatever life was going to be in the Seventies." There was little sharing of stories, or of grief.

Enrollment in ROTC plummeted nationwide (and at Boston College) toward the end of the 1960s and it began to rise only in the mid-1980s, a dozen years after the Vietnam peace accord. In October 1970, the University cut its ties with the program. In 1984, assistant dean of students D. Michael Ryan '67, one of six ROTC cadets in Fitzgibbons's class to fight in the infantry, helped reinstate the program, with Northeastern University serving as Boston College's Army ROTC host school, as it does to this day.

Beginning in 2005, Delaney co-led with Vietnam veteran Paul Lufkin '64 a committee to erect the Boston College Veterans Memorial on the Burns Library Lawn. The low, 70-foot-long, polished granite wall is inscribed with the names of alumni killed in wartime military service throughout the country's history—209 in all. During the dedication ceremony on Veterans Day 2009, ROTC students read aloud the 209 names. After the fallen of each conflict World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Afghanistan/Iraq wars—were declaimed, a cadet called out "Who will stand for those who gave their lives for their country?" and for each conflict family members and friends came forward and lit candles. Delaney and his team contacted hundreds of families and friends, seeking a representative for each soldier. More than 300 attended. Eight of the 29 Vietnam–era dead were represented by family members. Delaney and Rev. DeVeer, who served as a concelebrant at the Mass before the dedication, had invited Joyce Fitzgibbons. Joyce asked her mother if she'd like to join her. "The day before the event she announced she did not want to go, she could not go, period," says Joyce. "No luncheon and the shaking of hands and the thanks for service were going to make her feel better." Joyce did not attend either.

Terry Flynn visits John Fitzgibbons's grave every time he returns to Wakefield. After the *Globe* published its story on the medals' return, he telephoned Joyce Fitzgibbons. The two have met and exchanged many letters since. They visited John's grave together last fall.

In the middle of January, as she was searching for childhood photographs of John, Joyce wrote me an email. She noted that she rarely visits Forest Glade Cemetery. "It's just a place. There's nothing there," she wrote. "I also don't need any photographs to remember my brother. John is right here, in my heart." She also doesn't need the medals. They "may end up on a shelf or in a drawer again, because we do not pay tribute to false idols," she wrote.

Flynn had written to Joyce a few days earlier. "He mentioned," Joyce wrote, "that so many people had to do just the right things at just the right time and in just the right way over so many years to have the medals end up being delivered back to our family." She added: "The medals have been a vehicle to open discussions that have long been put aside."

In his 1990 book about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*, former infantryman Tim O'Brien wrote, "In the end, of course, a true war story is never about war." The story of John F. Fitzgibbons, his medals, his family, his friends, his wife, though colored by war, is, in the end, also not about war. It is about how the dead as we knew them never leave us. And about how grief, even when shared, remains untouchable. John Fitzgibbons's friend from Wakefield Greg Smith, a man now approaching 70, laments never seeing John "at our age." He puts it this way: "You're frozen in time with him." ■