

‘It Was Just the Right Thing to Do’

An 18-year-old Marine gave his life in Vietnam in 1967 to save his fellow leathernecks, so his platoon leader bequeathed his own Navy Cross to the Marine’s family

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Sometime in 1999, Rich De Lotto walked the park at 1600 Main Avenue in Clifton, New Jersey, and stopped to gaze at the Clifton War Veterans Monument. On the erected monument, De Lotto read the 29 names of Clifton’s sons who perished during the Vietnam War.

Among the 29 names whom De Lotto researched and found photos of, there was one that stayed with him above the others — Marine Pvt. Robert Kruger, who, at 18, had paid the ultimate sacrifice.

“I went down this rabbit hole with Bob [Kruger], who was the fifth guy from Clifton killed,” said De Lotto, 69, a retired Clifton firefighter and amateur historian. “I reached out to the local VFW Post, 7165, and participated in a memorial service and all. But I still couldn’t get over Kruger. He reminded me so much of my best friend Jimmy, who looked just like him. Unlike Kruger, Jimmy made it home from Vietnam.”

De Lotto delved into more research, finding Kruger’s surviving family and learning all he could about the young Marine, a Clifton High graduate who played soccer and enlisted after graduation in 1966.

“He was the youngest from Clifton to be killed in action,” De Lotto said. “Bob didn’t have money for college, so he figured he would join the Marines and go to college on the GI Bill when he got back. He got there on Jan. 3 or 4, and by May, sent to the hottest place to be. He was in the heat of the battle when he died.”

Learning all he could about Kruger from his sister and her husband, an Air Force veteran and friend of Kruger’s who also served in Vietnam, De Lotto began expanding his search.

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For De Lotto, it was beginning to seem clear that Kruger deserved more than just a Purple Heart.

‘YOU BET I REMEMBER’

For a few years, De Lotto wrote and tracked down leads pertaining to Kruger’s last days. He expanded on the brief sentences on Kruger’s Purple Heart citation, his own way of seeing the bigger picture.

In April 2003, De Lotto caught a break. He came across Edward Murphy’s *The Hill Fights: The First Battle of Khe Sanh*. In the book by Murphy, a Vietnam War veteran himself, there’s a mention of Kruger’s unit — E Co., 2nd Bn., 3rd Marines, 3rd Marine Div. — that details the night Kruger was killed on Hill 881 North on May 3, 1967.

Though there’s no mention of Kruger, De Lotto figured he could call Murphy in hopes of getting another lead.

“Ed [Murphy] said he hadn’t heard of Kruger, but turned me onto Fred Monahan,” De Lotto said. “Fred was platoon leader and a scout at 19 years old. He told me nobody had seen the action Fred Monahan had seen. He was a real life John Wayne.”

De Lotto tracked down Monahan and called in 2003.

Monahan, a lance corporal who was awarded the prestigious Navy Cross for his actions during the same night Kruger died, picked up and listened from his home in Altoona, Pennsylvania, where he’s a Life member of VFW Post 3.

“I asked him if he remembered Pvt. Robert Kruger, and I’ll never forget what he said to me,” De Lotto recalled. “He says, ‘You bet I remember. I put him in the body bag.’”

‘HE ALSO SAVED THE LIVES OF MANY MARINES’

Monahan can recall the night of May 3, 1967, as if it were yesterday.

It was a pitch-black night riddled with rain, and Kruger along with another Marine had been assigned to a listening post near Hill 881 North in Khe Sahn.

From where Monahan was atop the hill, he and others heard yelling and then a grenade went off.

“Upon hearing the grenade Robert exploded, I knew what had happened,” said Monahan, who was one of 38 Marines who faced an ambush of more than 200 NVA troops that left only eight of the original leathernecks in fighting condition.

At the time, the Marines had been told that to evade capture, they should keep a grenade in

the front of their belts, according to Monahan.

“Fred said when he got to Kruger’s position to recover the body, he saw three dead NVA soldiers with their feet touching Bob’s body,” De Lotto added. “He had shrapnel all over his face and chest. You can tell they were trying to drag him back to their base for interrogation. He let it off and killed the three NVA, preventing the sappers from taking him or charging the hill.”

For that, according to Monahan, Kruger was more than deserving of the Navy Cross despite the unfortunate circumstances that followed.

“We were based on three ships in the South China Sea and the Marines who witnessed Robert were in hospitals or on the other ships,” Monahan said. “This made it impossible to put together a citation regarding Robert at that time.”

Instead, according to De Lotto, Kruger received the Purple Heart that cited his being killed by mortar fire as opposed to sacrificing himself to save others.

“It’s a real shame because Bob killed those three sappers and himself instead of letting them take him,” De Lotto said. “He also saved the lives of many Marines by setting off his own hand grenade to save his buddies. This alerted all the other Marines in the unit, including Fred.”

A SELFLESS ACT

For the next eight years after their initial conversation, De Lotto and Monahan grew active in contacting and writing to local lawmakers, military institutions and veterans’ organizations in hopes of getting Kruger a posthumous Navy Cross.

“I helped Rich with some people to contact and some advice on how to proceed,” Monahan said. “But Rich did all the work, like writing the Navy Department of Awards and Medals in the Pentagon, as well as his local congressman in Passaic County, New Jersey, among others.”

When the pair finally met in person in August 2018 in Arlington, Virginia, they had discussed the remaining possibilities despite the ongoing roadblocks to get Kruger the Navy Cross.

“The government said he was killed, but Fred could prove he did more than just that,” De Lotto said. “All the letters went nowhere. They all would say ‘to the best we could try,’ which is to say nobody is saying no, but nobody is saying yes.”

With their efforts waning by early 2020, De Lotto was surprised when Monahan contacted Post 7165 in Clifton to set up a formal ceremony to present Kruger’s sister with his own

Navy Cross.

Unfortunately, Monahan had to settle for mailing his Navy Cross and a written citation with Kruger's heroics as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"By the end of March 2020, the plan to meet at the Clifton VFW was scrapped, then it kept getting pushed back because of COVID," Monahan said. "That not happening, the best thing to do was to write out a citation to be mailed with my Navy Cross to Robert's sister close to Robert's 72nd birthday in July 2020."

Though De Lotto remains adamant in his plans to upgrade Kruger's citation to a Navy Cross, he was struck by Monahan's selflessness in giving his own to Kruger's family.

"I've known Fred for some time now, and we've grown close," De Lotto said. "I genuinely believe this is among the proudest moments of his life as a Marine. To have it, and then to give it. It was something he did for Robert's two nephews to remember their uncle's sacrifice."

Monahan, however, added his own humble answer to what prompted him to share his hardware with that of another deserving Marine lost to the wrath of war.

"It was just the right thing to do," Monahan said. "I couldn't keep it a day longer, and besides, I have told very few people outside of close family that I was ever decorated with the Cross. I was only 10 years old when my uncle, who fought in the South Pacific during World War II, told me something I have always remembered — a medal and 10 cents will get you a cup of coffee. Nobody has ever bought me a cup of coffee because I fought in Vietnam."

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