

Soldier *Stories*

Alum Nancy Lynch's new book shares stories and war correspondence from Delaware Vietnam vets

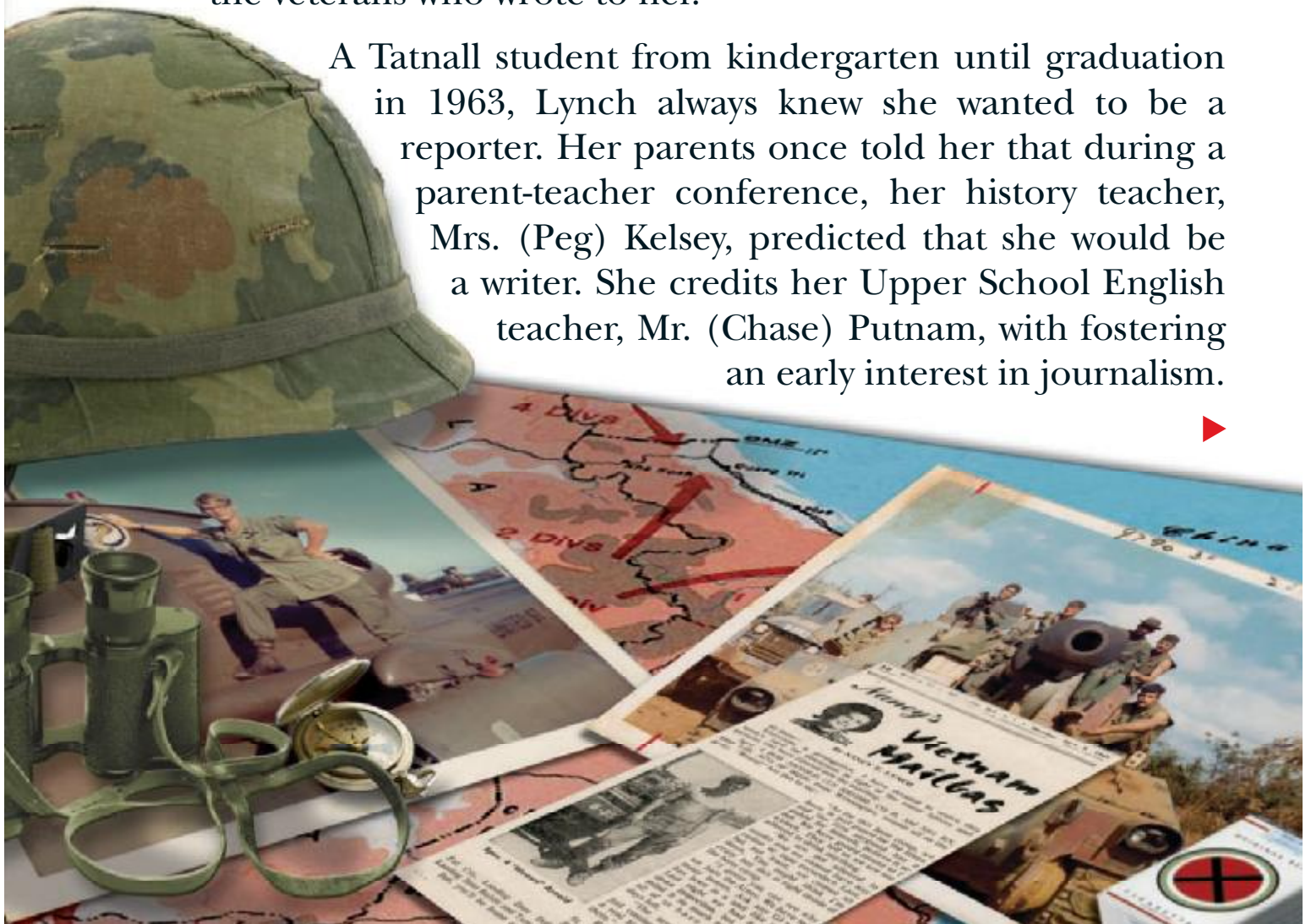
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Long before the Internet and imbedded reporters enabled us to see war as it happens, Nancy Lynch was telling soldiers' stories.

For five years, during the tumult of the Vietnam War, she shared letters and photographs from Delaware soldiers in a column she wrote for the Wilmington Morning News.

Forty years later, she's telling their stories again in a new book, *Vietnam Mailbag: Voices from the War 1968-1972*. The book revisits the letters she received from the front lines and follows up with some of the veterans who wrote to her.

A Tatnall student from kindergarten until graduation in 1963, Lynch always knew she wanted to be a reporter. Her parents once told her that during a parent-teacher conference, her history teacher, Mrs. (Peg) Kelsey, predicted that she would be a writer. She credits her Upper School English teacher, Mr. (Chase) Putnam, with fostering an early interest in journalism.



She went to the University of Delaware where she worked on *The Review*, the university's student newspaper, and was hired as a reporter by the Wilmington Morning News right after graduating in 1967. In March, 1968, her editor offered her the opportunity to write her own column, corresponding with soldiers in Vietnam. "At the time I was single; what girl wouldn't want to?"

Delaware soldiers received free subscriptions to the paper. Using the addresses from the subscription list, she sent a form letter to the soldiers asking them to write to her. The year 1968 was pivotal, both nationally and locally. Civil unrest in Wilmington resulted in National Guard occupation of the city. Against that backdrop, the soldiers began to write. "Letters just started pouring in," said Lynch.



A clipping of Nancy Lynch's column in the Wilmington Morning News.

After six weeks, the column increased from once a week to twice a week. And in 1969 it increased to three times weekly

and remained so for 14 months. "This column gave them a voice direct from combat zones," said Lynch.

Some wrote about the war, others talked about the weather or their buddies. There were opinions—some favored the war, others were against it. Through the column, they celebrated birthdays and Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. The column served as a bulletin board, helping the Delaware soldiers to find each other. By the final column, Lynch had received 900 letters. She tried to answer each one personally.

What struck Lynch most about the soldiers was their willingness to tell their stories. "They were enthusiastic from day one," she said. "I was grateful to them. They took time out from fighting a war to write." She said that



Army Sgt. Ronnie Morrow of New Castle sent this picture of his artillery unit taken aboard an M-109 self-propelled howitzer near Khe Sanh in 1971.

That's Morrow in the center, directly behind the howitzer.

they often started their letters with, “Sorry it’s been a while...”

She still speaks of the soldiers with much respect and evident fondness, referring to them as “my guys” who “made the most of a bad situation. They were humble and gracious and accessible.”

The column was recognized by the Veterans of Foreign Wars twice and Lynch appeared with veterans on Channel 6, WFIL in Philadelphia, twice as well. She is unaware of any other column of its kind from the time period, which would make the 900 letters one of the largest collections of primary source material from the war.

As the war started to wind down, so did the column, which ended in December 1972, a month before the war officially

THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

Among the Tatnall alumni who served during the Vietnam era, one made the ultimate sacrifice.

Warrant Officer Eric Wycoff Taylor, member of the Class of 1966, was killed in action on February 18, 1970. The helicopter he copiled was shot down while supplying troops in Cambodia.

He and four other crew members were killed.

ended. “I remember writing in that column ‘who knows, maybe someday I’ll write a book,’” she said.

Lynch moved onto other assignments, eventually leaving the paper and moving to Bethel, in

downstate Delaware. She and her husband, Lawrence B. Steele, III, raised two sons, L.B. Steele IV, and Wilson, and she launched a successful career as a freelance writer. All the while Lynch kept it in the back of her mind to write a book about—and for—her guys. The box of letters and photographs from the soldiers followed Lynch to Bethel where they sat in a barn for 20 years. In October 2006 she opened the box and remarkably the materials were largely intact, despite a mouse that used the box for a nest.

The book is structured with a chapter for each year of the column. Lynch introduces each chapter with a description of the national and local news. Then she lets the soldiers speak for themselves through their letters and photographs. “Their letters are as relevant today as they were

Four soldiers who dubbed themselves “the Wolfpack” manned the bunkers outside Chu Lai Air Base in 1969.

From left, Private First Class Richard Kennett of Menomonee Falls, Wis., Specialist Thomas Menacher of Oshkosh, Wis., Private First Class Lenny Scrantz from New Orleans, and Private First Class Frank Szczerba from Wilmington.





Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Alan Marc Solomon of Wilmington on the deck of the USS Constellation in December 1971.

Army Specialist Rick Lovekin of Wilmington, a Cobra helicopter crew chief, stands on the wing stores of his pride and joy.



“This book is my thanks to our Delaware servicemen for the sacrifice they made”

views with some of the vets who wrote to her. “I just hope that at least people will have appreciation of what these guys faced without complaint, without reservation, and they were there for their country.”

The book is slated for a fall 2008 release. It is being published by Kevin Fleming, a noted photographer with whom she has collaborated on six coffee table books. U.S. Senator Thomas R. Carper, a Vietnam veteran, is writing the foreword. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to a veteran’s organization.

“This book is my thanks to our Delaware servicemen for the sacrifice they made,” she said. “To do it once was an honor,” she says of the opportunity she had 40 years ago, “to go back, it’s quite an honor, all over again.” ▼

To learn more about
Vietnam Mailbag:
Voices from the War 1968-1972
go to www.vietnammailbag.com