

Family finally hears how man died in war

Soldier at the scene calls Bucks man a hero.

By Oshrat Carmiel
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

For 30 years Bill Mebs avoided talking about his oldest brother Frank, an Army private who died in Vietnam when the bulldozer he was driving rolled onto an ammunition dump and exploded. Frank was just two weeks away from going home to Bucks County, and his death was too painful to remember.

For the same 30 years, Don Aird just couldn't forget that explosion. Not the strange boom that awoke

him May 27, 1970, as he slept underneath a truck at Fire Support Base Veghel. Not the hot orange flashes he could feel against his face. And certainly not the sight of bulldozer parts — wheels, pipes, shards of metal — raining on his battalion.

"I still see the flash with my eyes closed," he said. "It's still coming back. I say 'Here's that ammo dump again.'"

Aird didn't know Francis Martin Mebs, the 20-year-old man on the See **VIETNAM** on A16



Francis Martin Mebs died in a blast in 1970 in Vietnam, the result of an accident. Until Tuesday, his family only knew he "got blown up."

A Bucks family finally learns ...

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bulldozer. But he believed that man had thwarted a fire that could have blown away the 600 men stationed on that hill near Hue. And he wanted so desperately to tell that man's family.

Tuesday, he did.

That day, Bill Mebs got a letter from Aird saying that the brother he lost died a hero.

It was news to Mebs and his six remaining siblings, who had long presumed that Frank Mebs' death was just an accident they could not explain.

"I accepted it," Bill Mebs said of his brother's death, which was followed a year later by the death of their grief-stricken mother. "But I thought it was a waste. Because he just got blown up."

Aird told the family there was more to Frank Mebs' death. Mebs, an engineer in Company A of the 27th Engineer Battalion, was helping to contain the fire, using his bulldozer to push dirt on the burning heap of ammunition. He gave up his life, but he saved others, Aird wrote.

"There were three artillery batteries and a company of infantry on that hill," he wrote. "I think that if the dozer hadn't contained the explosion, one or more of the artillery batteries would have gone up, maybe even the whole hill."

Fire Support Base Veghel, like hundreds of others, was set up as a warehouse of ammunition and manpower for American forces.

Aird had arrived that week as a member of the First Battalion of the 83d Artillery. Already on the hill were another artillery battalion, a company of infantry, and Frank Mebs' engineering battalion.

Mebs was a bulldozer operator, and a proud one, his family said. Mebs, who left Council Rock High School in 1966 to enlist, wrote home nearly monthly, sending dozens of photographs of the D-7 dozer that the Army entrusted to his care.

Fire support bases were common enemy targets, said William Donnelly, a historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington. And around 1 a.m. on May 27, 1970, the infantry battalion at Veghel suspected that just such an attack was under way.

Battalion crews fired two mortar rounds, but did not fire them with sufficient charge to reach their target, according to archives of an Army investigation that labeled the



LA SHINDA CLARK / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Fred Mebs holds the letter that told how his brother, Frank, died a hero in Vietnam. Fred was 13 in 1970 when Frank, 20, was killed in an explosion.

incident "friendly fire."

The rounds instead fell short and ignited an ammunition dump on the hill.

The engineering battalion leaped to action, trying to contain the fire, according to documents filed at the National Archives. Among them was Frank Mebs and his bulldozer.

Twenty minutes after the fire started raging, the shed exploded, killing Mebs and Sgt. Edward M. Miller, who Aird said was hit by a piece of the bulldozer debris.

Aird heard the pieces hit the truck he was under, and rushed to slide from under it to see what had happened.

Everyone around him was talking about the man on the bulldozer.

The potential for catastrophe was there. Aird's artillery battalion alone had enough gunpowder for

160 rounds for each of four guns. For one type of gun, a round equaled 90 pounds of powder. That alone had a "killing radius" of 120 meters — about 130 yards, Aird said.

"I think this guy might have saved our lives," Aird, now 56, said last week in a telephone interview from his Minneapolis home.

The survivors decided they would find out the man's name, his rank, and who his family was. But they got sidetracked — by the war, by the Army's sealed records, and by distance.

The Mebs family would know few of the details that Aird would share three decades later.

Fred Mebs remembers that May day 1970 when two Army officers walked into the family's home in Newtown Borough.

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... how the Vietnam War claimed a brother

VIETNAM from A16

The 13-year-old, who was in the front yard, leaned toward the door to hear. They were talking about Frank.

"They told my mom and dad he was blown up on a dozer," Fred Mebs, 44, said last week.

Their mother, Dorothy Elizabeth Mebs, died of an aneurysm a year later on the anniversary of Frank's death.

The family did not speak publicly about the death. They kept Frank Mebs' Vietnam photographs. They had an artist make oil paintings, one of which hangs at Council Rock High School on a memorial wall.

Each year, the school commemorates students who fell in the line of duty, said William Mauro, high school assistant principal and Frank Mebs' gym teacher.

"The Mebses come every year," he said.

All those years, Don Aird was searching. Without a name to go on, getting information was very hard. Aird tried the obvious routes: the Veterans Administration, the Army.

"They bump you from office to office until they run you into a complete circle and then you get so frustrated that you quit," said Aird, now a public relations officer at the Minneapolis office of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The Internet eventually helped Aird do in weeks what he could not for decades: reach veterans across the country in discussion groups.

Aird posted inquiries on several veterans Web sites. One response pointed him in the right direction.

Aird was told that the man operating a bulldozer must have been an engineer, then the Internet source located the only engineer he could find who died on that date and in that area.

When Aird got Mebs' name, he started calling all the Mebses he could find. The first call was July 5, to Deanna Mebs, ex-wife of Frank Mebs' brother Martin. He left a message on the machine saying he was looking for the family of Frank Mebs, but left no number.

He called Bill Mebs' home July 7, asking for the family's address. Bill Mebs' 15-year-old daughter dutifully dispensed it to the stranger, initially to her parents' dismay.

Finally on Tuesday, the letter came. It told a tale that the Mebses are still too shocked to absorb.

"I was crying until the end," Bill Mebs said.

Fred Mebs has yet to read it — his hands shake when he holds Aird's letter.

Fred sat in Bill's kitchen last

week, while Fred's fiancée, Midge Grabowski, helped him manage the bittersweet tears.

"Now the family knows that his death was due to a hero's effort," Grabowski said. 'And not just ...'

She paused for words.

"Blown up," Bill said.

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Inquirer staff writer Larry King contributed to this article.

For More Information

You can search the following Web sites about Vietnam Veterans:

- www.vietvet.org
- www.gisearch.com/info/linktous.asp
- www1.thevirtualwall.org