

...children of the Vietnam War  
New Rochelle will bring parents to the  
battlefields that claimed their children

# Mothers & Sons

Their boys made the ultimate sacrifice ...

**LAURA SEIGLE**  
The Journal News

**YONKERS** — Footage from Vietnam lighted the television screen in the living room at Bruce Geiger's home one evening in September 1967. The speaker emitted sounds of war.

As images of U.S. Marines falling near the Demilitarized Zone filled the screen, Geiger's father looked away and turned toward his son.

"Boy, I'm glad you're not going to be there," Saul Geiger told his son.

Geiger knew his son was about to leave for South Vietnam with the U.S. Army, but assumed he was not going to the battleground shown on the news that evening. Bruce Geiger knew that was exactly where he was going, but he never told his father.

Saul Geiger was lucky, though. A year later, his son returned from Vietnam to their Jersey City, N.J., home.

Today, Bruce Geiger, who now lives in New Rochelle, is one of five veterans making a pilgrimage back to Vietnam with a small group of mothers who were not so lucky: Theresa Davis of Holbrook, Mass.; Irene Tschan of Temple Terrace, Fla.; Mary Wheeler of Utica, N.Y.; and Valerie May of Midland, Minn.

Geiger is part of a group of Vietnam veterans called the National Dusters, Quads and Searchlights Association, which raised more than \$12,000 for Operation Gold Star, a project to take the four mothers to Vietnam. The five veterans will pay their own way — \$2,500 each. The group is named for three battalions that operated special anti-aircraft equipment.

Please see VIETNAM, 2A



Chae Kinn/For The Journal News

**MARY WHEELER** of Utica, N.Y., lost her son, Marine Pfc. Joseph Keith Wheeler, at Khe Sanh in March 1968.



**THERESA DAVIS**  
Holbrook, Mass.  
Her son, Spc. 4 Richard Shirley Davis Jr., died near the Cambodian border.



**VALERIE MAY**  
Midland, Mich.  
Her son, Cpl. Rollie M. Morthouse of C Troop 3/5 CAV 9th Infantry, died in April 1968 in Khe Sanh.



**IRENE TSCHAN**  
Temple Terrace, Fla.  
Her son, Marine Pfc. Ryland W. Drawdy of Company E 2/4, died near Chu Lai on Aug. 18, 1965.

For more information about the trip, visit [www.operationgoldstar.org](http://www.operationgoldstar.org) on the Web.

# Seeking closure in Vietnam

VIETNAM, from 1A

The trip will take them to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital during the war; to the national cemetery and to the former Demilitarized Zone that divided north from south. Two of the four mothers also will go to the battlefields where their sons were killed.

"It's not going to be an easy trip," said Bruce Geiger, secretary of the organization. "But we'll be there to support each other."

One mother, Mary Wheeler of Utica, said she will carry a photo of her son, Joseph Keith, taken when he was an 18-year-old Marine in boot camp. Beyond that, Wheeler said she will carry "my love for him and my faith in God."

About 2.7 million Americans fought in the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973. More than 58,000 were killed, along with as many as 2 million Vietnamese.

Geiger, a fourth-grade teacher at P.S. 112 in the Bronx, began thinking of making the trip back with members of the American Gold Star Mothers Inc., an organization of mothers who lost sons in the war, seven years ago.

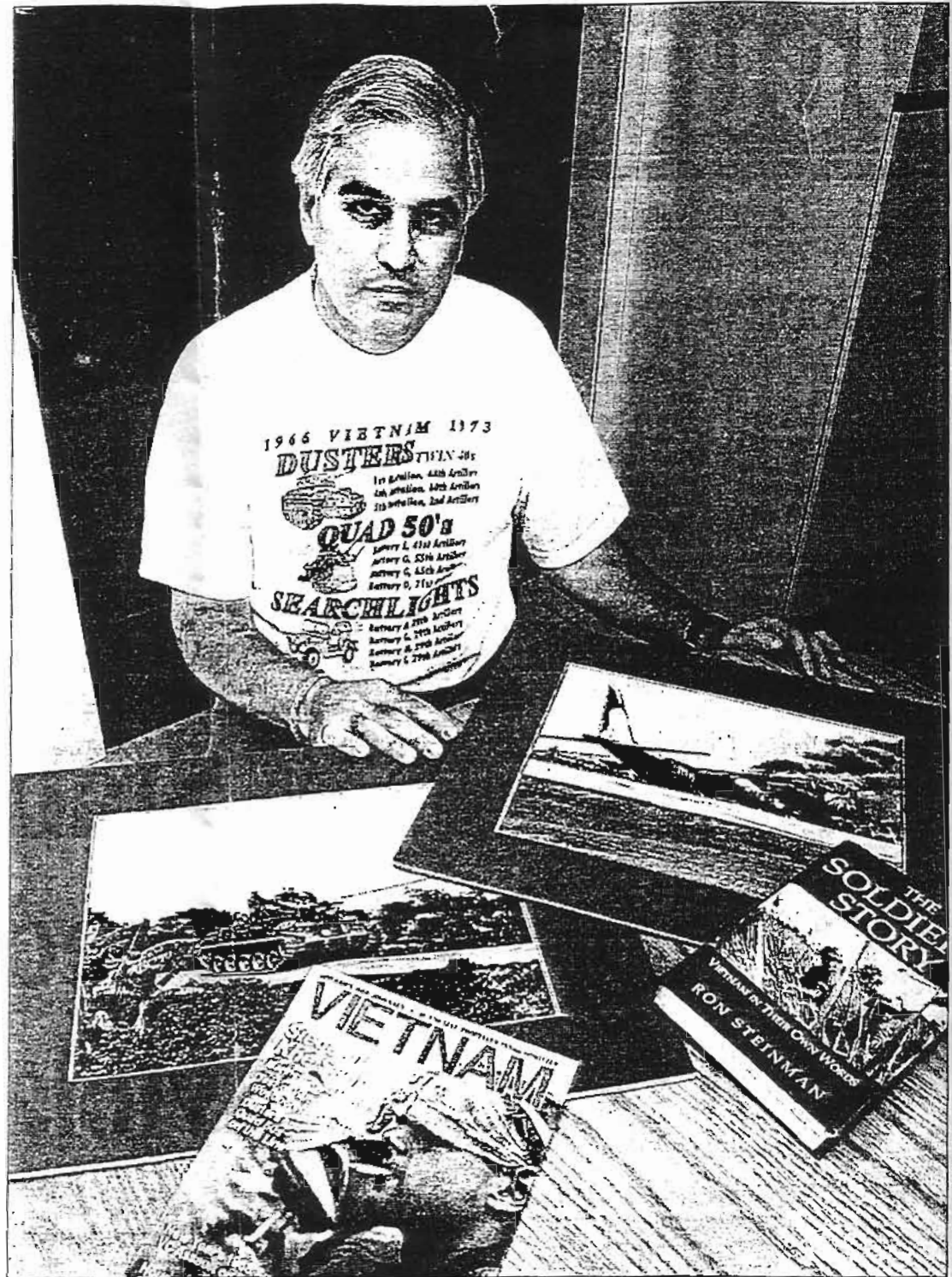
The group collected donations primarily from other veterans and from friends of vets. They hope this will be the first of many trips to Vietnam, with as many Gold Star Mothers as wish to go.

"It's something I've wanted to do," Geiger said. "A lot of my friends have gone back. I remember it like it was yesterday."

Geiger joined the ROTC at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and after graduation went on active duty as a second lieutenant at the Army Air Defense Artillery School in Fort Bliss, Texas. He returned home for a brief visit, and shipped off to South Vietnam in October 1967.

Last week, sitting at the kitchen table in his home in New Rochelle — while his two grown sons, David and Andrew, and his wife, Dianne, who teaches elementary school, wandered in and out to listen — Geiger recalled his own experiences in Vietnam and how he sanitized them in his letters home.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to Con Thien for five to 10 days," Geiger wrote in his first letter to his father. "Give my



Mark Vergari/The Journal News

Bruce Geiger raised \$10,000 to take four Gold Star Mothers whose sons were killed in the war, back to Vietnam. He will give them a tour of the former Saigon and will show them some of the battlefields where their sons fought.

love to everyone and please don't worry. If you worry, it only makes me worry, too."

His first battle was at Con Thien, which means Hill of Angels in Vietnamese.

"I've been here now since the morning of the 16th and this is the real thing," Geiger wrote in his second letter to his father. "It's been

quiet considering it's Con Thien."

Last week, he used other words to describe it.

"It was a diabolical place," he said. "A deadly place."

His father saved every letter Geiger wrote during his 12-month tour of duty. Bruce Geiger learned after his father died. Now, Bruce Geiger's own sons read them.

The letters are mostly a history lesson for his sons. But to Geiger, they're evidence of the ties that exist between a son at war and his parents. Twenty-five years after the war ended, Geiger said parents less lucky than his own still feel the pain.

"It isn't something that's going to go away just because the war's over," he said.

# Bereaved mother recalls gentle son's yearning to be Marine

LAURA SEIGLE  
The Journal News

Mary Wheeler stood in the kitchen of her Utica home that Sunday morning, March 31, 1968, packing appliances after returning from church. Her living room had been painted the night before, bringing disorder to her normally well-kept home. The kitchen would be next.

That was when she heard the knock at the front door.

"I could see straight through to my front door, and I could see a Marine, and my husband was out there with my pastor, and I wanted to get away," Wheeler said. "I tried to get out our back door and run away, but I couldn't get the door open."

After a moment, her husband came into the kitchen and told her that their 18-year-old son, Marine PFC Joseph Keith Wheeler, had been killed on a battlefield in Khe Sanh in what was then South Vietnam.

Today, Wheeler will fly from San Francisco with three other Gold Star Mothers who lost children in the war for a pilgrimage to Vietnam, where the four will attempt to "have closure" with their loss, said Bruce Geiger, a Vietnam veteran from New Rochelle who is helping organize the trip.

"For 30 years, they've wondered what (their children's) last days were like," Geiger said.

Keith Wheeler had wanted to be a Marine from the time he was a child, his mother said. But he was not the most macho kid on the block.

"He could get upset over a cat or a dog or anything being hurt or misused," Mary Wheeler said.

Yet Keith had no trouble reconciling his gentle ways with becoming a Marine and engaging in the business of war.

"He wanted all people to have the same opportunities he had," Wheeler said.

She remembers a day in about 1965 when she was unable to find her son. He was supposed to be attending his ninth grade classes, but the principal told Wheeler that he had been absent for several days.

"We couldn't find him and we couldn't find him and when we finally did discover what he was doing — he was going to one of the schools where they teach retarded children," Wheeler said. "He would go and help these kids."

She told him doing good work was



"I want to walk where he walked and stand where he stood," says Mary Wheeler of her son Keith, who died in 1968 at age 18.

no excuse for disobeying rules and grounded him for a week. Then he worked out a system where he could continue volunteering at the school but only when his own school day had ended.

After another few years, at 17, Keith Wheeler dropped out after 11th grade and enlisted in the Marines. The following year, he died from shrapnel wounds at Khe Sanh.

"I want to walk where he walked and stand where he stood," Mary Wheeler said as she prepared to leave one day last week, "and be where he was during his last few days on Earth."

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