



Thomas W. Steele

Final journey reunites mother, son

By Terry A. Fye
Of The Spirit

PUNXSUTAWNEY

Heartstrings that bind families know no boundaries. Love can stretch across a continent or around the world, as the lives and deaths of a mother and son with local ties dramatically illustrate.

This weekend, the body of Thomas W. Steele, a young Marine who died on the battlefields of Vietnam in 1968, will return from the Evergreen Cemetery in Colorado Springs to be interred with his mother, Mary Steele, in the family plot at the Perry Cemetery near Frostburg.

The touching story of this chapter in the Steele family's history covers several decades and thousands of miles.

It is a demonstration of love, as well as the power of friendship to bring closure to a husband and father.

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Journey

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May 13, 1949, William W. (Bill) Steele and Mary Elizabeth (Gaffney) Steele, Punxsutawney, became the parents of their only son, Thomas W. Steele.

When the child was four, health problems which afflicted Mrs. Steele caused the family to leave this area and move to Pueblo, Colo., and then to Colorado Springs.

Though he was active in school and enjoyed fishing and hiking in the mountains of Colorado where he loved to see the first snows in September on Pike's Peak, Tommy (as his grandparents called him) spent his summers back in Jefferson County with the late Walter and Twila Steele of R. D. 4, Punxsutawney.

Here he helped his grandpa put in hay and milk the cows and do other things a town boy couldn't do. Tommy also liked to help his grandma harvest the garden.

"Tommy was back and forth to Pennsylvania practically every summer," Tommy's aunt, Peg Anthony of Punxsutawney, said.

Following his graduation from Colorado Springs High School, 18-year-old Tommy joined the United States Marines, through the Buddy System.

According to Anthony, Tommy became angry after witnessing a draft card burning.

"He wanted to fight for his country," she said.

After completing his basic training at San Diego, Tommy was sent to Vietnam in April 1968.

Four months later, he died on the battlefield Sept. 11, 1968.

According to Anthony, Tommy was a "radio man," which means he had to carry a communication device with a large, visible antenna.

"He was one of the first targets," she said.

Tommy and the fellow members of his platoon were ambushed by the Viet Cong, Anthony said. Of the 16 members of the platoon, only

two survived, according to Anthony.

Tommy's body was shipped back to Colorado, where in a service with full military honors, he was interred in the Evergreen Cemetery in Colorado Springs.

The pride Anthony has in her nephew is evident in her voice, even over the phone lines.

Tommy's parents moved back to Punxsutawney in 1979; with their son still in Colorado, the Steeles felt a great void in their lives.

When Mary passed away in 2002, moving her remains back to their cemetery plot in Colorado was a daunting challenge. Mary was cremated; Bill had the desire to sometime carry her ashes back to the west so she could be buried with her son.

In recent months, however, through the efforts of some Vietnam veterans from this area, a plan was formulated to bring Tommy back to Punxsutawney, so mother and son could be interred together at the Perry Cemetery on Route 536 near Frostburg.

Other members of Tommy's family include Elaine Steele and the late C. Robert Steele of Sprankle Mills and their family; Clifford and Peggy Anthony and their families, of the Marchand area, and Jim and Shirley Steele of Janesville, Wis.

The Steele family is grateful to all who assisted with the reunion journey, especially Bill Titus and the Richard L. Falt Funeral Home of Punxsutawney, that handled the arrangements and transportation.

Saturday, Oct. 15, at 2 p.m., friends, relatives and any military personnel from this area are welcome to attend the graveside services for Mary Elizabeth Steele and Thomas W. Steele. The Rev. Frank Stoner of the Grange Church of God will conduct the services.

Now, William Steele and his family can find comfort and peace because mother and son are together forever, just as they were in life.