

## A 44 Year Love Story

by James Ulinski

I'll begin this story with a question. Was it fate, the situation, or just plain dumb luck? You decide after reading this. Forty-four years ago this coming August 2nd, I married the most beautiful and wonderful person I could have ever imagined being with, my wife Linda Ulinski. We met through letters while I was in Vietnam. I was a young Marine on Hill 861 Alpha overlooking Khe Sahn in 1968, and she was a senior in Ambridge High School, located near Pittsburgh, PA. My younger brother Tom was a junior at the same high school.

Tom asked Linda if she would write to his brother who was in Vietnam, and she replied she would if he would write her first. Linda was not a believer in what was happening in Vietnam, but she supported the troops.

I wrote my first letter to her and, amazingly, she wrote back. During the several months that we corresponded with each other, she would tell me about her family, her dog "Charlie," what was happening with my family, while attempting to bring just a brief smile to my face. I, in return, described the wondrous beauty of the land, in between the ugliness of war and death. I once wrote a letter while looking at two beautiful mountains in the distance and described the scene to her. This was in my early years, before I temporarily lost my gift for seeing the beauty in the world. I also told her about the sadness, loneliness, and the war: living with rats (Hill 861 A), going into the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), my "jungle rot," how my boots had to be cut off along with the socks because my feet were in water for so long during an operation that they bled and coalesced with my socks and then the boots, my treatment for worms—I carelessly drank bad water, what it felt like to be blown off a bunker by an incoming rocket round, and other stories so that she could understand what war was like. I also told her how I got so drunk drinking wine and beer while watching "Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine" while "in the rear" (means away from action) that the tent was going in circles when I woke up.

Linda's letters and those from my family and a few (very few) friends, helped my time pass fairly quickly—then it was time to go home.

On my third day of twenty that I had for leave before going to my next duty station at NSA (National Security Agency), in Fort Meade, Maryland, I called Linda and asked her if she would like to go see a movie called "Where Eagles Dare" (I thought it was a cowboy movie, and turned out it was an Army movie). She asked me if I would like to



*James Ulinski in Khe Sahn, Vietnam, 1968.*

come and meet her family first—I hung up the phone.

I thought to myself, "I don't want to marry her, just take her out on a date."

I called her back a few minutes later (after thinking about my options for that evening) and said that I would love to meet her family.

The date went great. I would sneak peeks at her (discreetly, of course) when I could, since I could not believe the person I had been writing to was so beautiful, intelligent, and funny.

We went on many dates during the next 16 days—drive-ins (we both love them), bowling, roller skating, amusement parks.

Toward the end of my leave, I asked Linda if she would go with me shopping for a bit. She said yes, and I took her to a jeweler. I honestly went in with the intent to purchase a "friendship" ring—and then the jeweler asked if I wanted to see engagement rings.

I blurted out, "Yes."

Linda gave me this incredulous look and just stood there.

I said to her, "Pick it out. It's your ring."

After what seemed like a lifetime, she did. Believe it or not, that was my proposal (I never was the brightest bulb in the package with women).

In case you are wondering, Linda later told me she thought that at the moment I asked about rings, I had brought her to pick out a ring for someone else.

We dated during the next couple months and were married about

four months from the time we met.

Linda later told me she knew I was the man she wanted to marry from the first time I stepped out of my car on that evening of our first date, and she told her sister so. We were married on August 2, 1969.

A couple of months later, while I was sleeping in our first apartment in Laurel, Maryland, Linda approached me to wake me so that I could get to the base in time for work at the NSA, Marines provided the security. As she approached, I pulled her head toward me, and with my other hand holding my survival knife from under my pillow, I put it to her throat. She screamed and I woke up. Needless to say, I got rid of that knife quickly.

After my injuries (I'm a 20% disabled Marine), I went from a 156-pound dynamo with a 28-inch waist to a 244-pound bed ridden, 44-inch waist (had to learn to walk again) pathetic excuse for a Marine (my thoughts at the time).

I tried to have pity parties for myself, and no one came. I thought about suicide (I've never talked about this until the last year or so) but decided it was a "teachable moment." I could only think about how I was told by the doctors I would never run again, lift anything of significance, be limited in what I did—and I had a young son and beautiful young wife who had not "signed on for this." My wife (in case you have not already noticed this, is the wiser of the two of us) told me to "suck it up" and "get over myself."

Smart advice!

By now you may be wondering where this story's going. Well, I have two fantastic sons (Jay will be 42 in August and Mike will be 34), three absolutely beautiful and fantastic grandchildren, and a wife who has continued to love me as I have her for over 44 years. She is my perfect 16 (that's Australian for a perfect 10 who has a six-pack of my favorite beer!)

Linda is brilliant, funny, and wise beyond her years, supportive when many other women would not have been and more beautiful now than when I was lucky enough to marry her. In case you are wondering about what I've done to correct my really poor way of proposing to Linda, well, I have since proposed under a bridge and numerous other locations and renewed our vows (at my request); we both used our own words and I told her that I would "love her forever." I have given her a "key to my heart" necklace that was delivered in a bottle, similar to the ones thrown into the ocean with messages, an enhanced wedding ring (took the original and had modifications reflecting the old and the new) for our 40th anniversary. If there *is* such a thing as reincarnation, I would seek her out again, so we could continue this love affair.