

# Brad Braughton's 40-Year Shadow

## A soldier's gift to his high school still inspires

BY GARY L. KNEPP

**A**melia High School Athletic Director Tom Jones read the letter from 1966 graduate Brad Braughton. He was surprised—stunned actually—by the letter's content. By the time he had finished reading it, he was crying his eyes out. Jones immediately took the letter to Principal Vince Gilley. Both men knew Brad well.

Braughton had lettered in football and volleyball. He was chosen as the "friendliest boy" by his classmates and was selected as Prom King. But neither man knew the depth of Braughton's devotion to his school until they read his letter.

Sergeant Braughton, now a squad leader with the 101st Airborne Division, had informed Jones in his letter that he was naming the Amelia High School Athletic Fund as the beneficiary of his \$10,000 government insurance policy. In his letter dated October 27, 1967—he asked Jones to excuse his poor handwriting because he was "scared shitless"—Braughton wrote:

Things are getting a little hot over here....I've seen a lot of guys die here and quite a few were good friends....It's a lot different over here than when I was in high school. I mean I used to think football games were rough but dam I'd give almost anything to be back in high school....Some of the seniors had better realize that in a year or less they might be here in my place dodging bullets instead of going out every weekend.

I sure hope that I have good luck for the next 9 months—if not the school can buy some new uniforms or something.

That weekend Brad's former football team, the Amelia Barons, was playing their cross-town rivals, the Goshen Warriors. Things weren't going well. The Warriors had a big lead at halftime when they went into the locker room, and the Barons players expected an "in your face" chewing out.

Instead, Coach Frank Conyers closed the locker room door and began reading Braughton's letter to the team. It was dead quiet as emotion filled the room. Years later, team member Archie Wilson remembered the evening well: "That letter was a real eye opener. All of us knew guys going into the service, but it didn't mean a lot until we heard Brad's letter. The war in Vietnam became real to us. It meant a lot that he wrote to us with everything he had to deal with over there. The letter really pumped us up."

The Barons stormed back from the halftime deficit to win a



Brad Braughton, 1966

smashing victory, spoiling Goshen's homecoming. It wasn't the last time Brad Braughton would inspire others.

When Braughton graduated in 1966, Amelia, Ohio, located 12 miles east of Cincinnati, was a traditional American community with a long heritage of military service. It was only natural that the patriotic young man would enlist in the Army. He left for Fort Knox from the Old Armory Building in the Clermont County seat, Batavia. He sailed through basic until he was confronted by the gas chamber. He wrote to his parents about it in August 1966:

I'm not kidding it was so bad that it seems like you are going to die. Your eyes burn like hot peppers, your skin burns! I vomited so much that I didn't think I had any insides left. It was pure hell.

While undergoing training as a mortar man at Fort Gordon, Ga., Braughton was summoned by his captain. He wrote that he was "scared to death" when he was called into the captain's office, but instead of a dressing down, he was motioned to take a seat and was invited to attend Officer Candidate School. While honored, Braughton turned the captain down, explaining that he wanted to stay with his platoon.

Three months later, he volunteered for jump school at Fort Bragg. Despite his natural athleticism, jump school was no picnic for Braughton. He wrote his family:

Well I'm here and boy is it shit. They beat the crap out of us as far as exertion is considered. I already feel like I've been here a month.

Braughton finally arrived in Vietnam aboard USNS *General Weigel* at Cam Ranh Bay on October 22, 1967, as a member of the Curahes, the "Stand Alone Battalion" of the 506th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. Red Cross Donut Dollies greeted them with refreshments before they were convoyed by truck to their base camp at Eagle's Roost.

Braughton's first impression of Vietnam was that it was wet:

It's not real bad here in the South, but is sure raining here. The only thing I hate is being wet. I don't think I've been dry any longer than a 10 hour period since we've been here.

Braughton was promoted to sergeant, and the responsibilities of leadership began weighing heavily upon him. He wrote that his men thought of him as "a god or something":

We get into a fire fight, they look at me and say "what now sarge?" I've been lucky so far and only lost four men.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEBBIE SMITH

**HOMETOWN HERO** Always looking to get a laugh, Brad Braughton had his picture taken posing as a machine gunner on a Huey, even though he was strictly a “ground pounder.” Few of his friends back home in Amelia, Ohio, had any idea how devoted Braughton was to his high school football team.

In the middle of January 1968, Braughton’s battalion moved to LZ Betty, near Phan Thiet, to provide security for engineers working on Highway 1. It was good duty. Braughton had plenty of time to sleep and swim, but his nose was constantly sunburned. “It’s peeled so many times I don’t know where all the skin is coming from,” he wrote to friends.

**O**n January 30, Braughton was out on a night patrol with his company when a trooper was killed in a Viet Cong attack. It had been a very rough night, and the next morning a haggard Braughton inspected the dead trooper’s pistol. He handed the .45 over to Sergeant Mike Herrington, who hadn’t noticed that Braughton had put the clip back into the pistol.

As the two friends stood there talking, the pistol suddenly discharged. The slug tore through Braughton’s stomach. Forty-five minutes later, cradled in Herrington’s arms on board a dustoff en route to the hospital, Brad Braughton died. A distraught Herrington blamed himself for Braughton’s death, but a subsequent investigation ruled the shooting an accident.

Brad Braughton was the first soldier from Amelia to be killed in Vietnam. The grief for this beloved son was palpable. For Braughton’s family, the next few weeks were a blur as friends, neighbors and family converged on their modest home. Braughton, who was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart, was buried with full military honors.

The town’s grief turned into awe and great pride when Braughton’s generous gift to his old football team became known to the community. Braughton had suggested that Amelia High School buy new football uniforms, but Principal Gilley wanted to make sure that the young man’s gift would be spent on something more permanent, assuring the community “that it would be something that will stand.”

Amelia High School created the Brad Braughton Memorial Foundation, made up of students, teachers and community members, to figure out what to do with the \$10,000. After consultation with the community, the foundation decided to refurbish the stadium where young Braughton had played football. It planned to add a set of bleachers, a press box, a fence and possibly a new track.

The project’s cost was larger than Braughton’s gift, so the foundation started a fundraising drive to buy materials, and community members across Amelia stepped up to help with the labor. Amelia High School Athletic Director Tom Jones spent every spare moment he had on the construction project. The father of one of Braughton’s friends volunteered to build a brick memorial to honor Braughton. Amelia athletic booster member Charles Ludlow took his vacation time to work on it.

Even with all the effort, however, in the fall of 1968, it appeared they couldn’t finish up everything in time for the Barons’ first home game. That’s when more than 100 students, including Braughton’s former teammate Archie Wilson, stepped forward to finish off the job and stain the bleachers.

The night of the stadium dedication ceremony, October 25, 1968, was cold and rainy. A student reporter noted “tears as well as drops of rain fell” that night. Braughton’s sister, Debbie, remembers the excitement: “It was electric. When the name Brad Braughton Field was read I swelled up with pride. I’ll never forget that night.”

Four decades later, the short life of Brad Braughton still inspires his community. In 2002 he was inducted into the Amelia Sports Hall of Fame, and students from his high school produced a powerful documentary of his life. Today, the Grant Career Center High School in nearby Bethel offers a class titled “The Brad Braughton Story.” A local professional fundraiser invokes Braughton’s example to inspire others to pre-plan gifts to charities.

Braughton’s sister remains amazed by all of the honors and recognitions her brother has received in the last 40 years. More than that, she is proud that her big brother continues to inspire others. “He is still my hero.” ☆