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Staunton classmates honor memory of fallen Vietnam soldier 50 years later: Class of '64

CINDY CORELL

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When he wasn't working at Burger Chef on Greenville Avenue, Victor Ellinger had a job at the Men's Store in downtown Staunton. He was well suited for the work because, as his best friend Tom Erskine said, Ellinger was a well-dressed kind of guy.

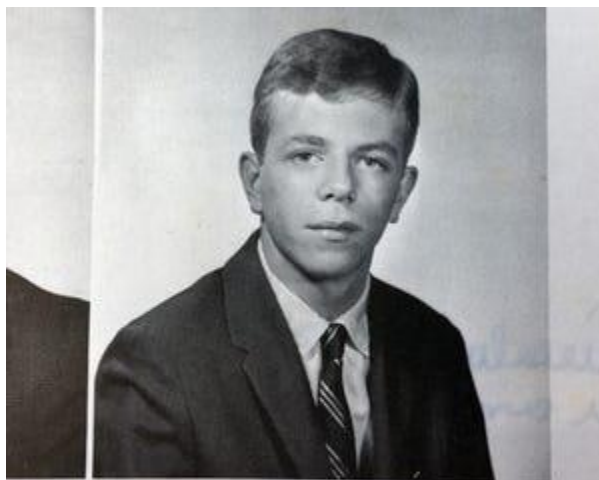
Bass Weejuns, no socks, madras shirts.

“It was the uniform of the cool,” Erskine said Tuesday, standing near Ellinger’s gravestone at Thornrose Cemetery. Tuesday marked the 50th anniversary the day Ellinger was killed in action in South Vietnam, and Erskine and other members of the Lee High Class of 1964 were there to remember.

The 165-member class graduated under the pall of a coming war. The conflict in Vietnam was building in intensity, and with it, U.S. involvement. Born in the years immediately following World War II, the class of ’64 understood the likelihood that there were battlefields before them.

And with war as an overarching concern, they enjoyed life.

Erskine offered a litany of the fun they shared: “We shot pool, played basketball and baseball. We listened to music. We double-dated. Went to the drive-in, went to prom. Took road trips. We went to Virginia Beach, attended concerts: James Brown, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez. And Johnny Cash, at Mary Baldwin, of all places. We had a lot of fun.”



Victor Lee Ellinger
Vic
Pharmacy
Assistant treasurer of the Senior
class, 12 . . . likes to shoot
pool . . . homeroom treas-

In fact, Erskine and Ellinger were so close, Ellinger’s family knew where to find him.

“When Vic wasn’t home or at work, we knew where he was,” his sister Vivian Ellinger Lowman said. “He was at the Erskine’s. He was always with Tom.”

When graduation came, they went in different directions, some to college and others straight into jobs. Ellinger graduated from University of Richmond with a business degree and afterwards, joined Officer Candidate School.

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He was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant and assigned to the 25th Infantry Division. In August 1970, he left for Vietnam where he served as a platoon leader. Within three months, he was gone.

Several of his classmates by then also had been drafted or joined the armed forces.

Erskine was an Army officer when he learned of Ellinger's death. He came to Thornrose Cemetery to witness the full military rites given at his best friend's graveside.

And 50 years later, it was important for all Ellinger's classmates to remember.

Not long ago, Erskine lost another friend, this one to cancer. Shortly before his death, the man thanked Erskine for his friendship. “I hope our friendship has added value to your life,” he said.



“His friendship did add value to my life,” Erskine told those gathered on Tuesday afternoon. “And so did Vic’s. Vic left a legacy of love and friendship from a life that was cut way too short.”

Classmate George Rodon and his wife, Rene, drove from Florida to attend Tuesday’s memorial.

He came to Lee High as a young teenager from Cuba, speaking no English and trying to fit in. Ellinger, Erskine and others made that happen for him. “It was here in Staunton that I became an American,” he said. He said it was the sacrifice of people like Ellinger that make America’s freedom possible. “I needed to be here today.”

Lowman said her brother had visited her family in Chicago in September 1969. “That was the last time I saw him,” she said.



Classmate Steve Faidley presented her with an American flag in honor of Ellinger’s service. She wiped tears away when classmates unveiled a wreath with ribbons vowing that her brother never was to be forgotten.

“When I look back on it, it’s heartwarming that his friends have such memories of him after all these years,” Erskine said. “He’s still part of us today. There’s still a connection.”

— *Cindy Corell is a former editor with The News Leader. She now serves as a Presbyterian Church (USA) mission co-worker in Haiti. She can be reached at ccorell10@gmail.com.*



VICTOR LEE ELLINGER

1st Lt US Army

25th Infantry Division Vietnam

23 1946 - Nov 24 1970

KIA

Purple Heart