



Robert Dean Stethem, Jr., is honored throughout Southern Maryland for his bravery during a 1985 terrorist hijacking.

ROBERT D. STETHEM EDUCATIONAL CENTER

Remembering a Local Hero

30 Years Later

Story by Judy Colbert

"He was a hero who believed in his Navy and believed in his nation. He had the courage and the fortitude of a lion, and he showed it on that day in June of 1985," says Ken Stethem of his younger brother, Robert Dean Stethem, Jr.

You may recognize the name from the Robert D. Stethem Memorial Sports Complex in Waldorf, a facility comprised of ten little league and big league baseball fields, a football practice area, a playground, and a picnic pavilion. The Stethem family lived on Dennis Road in the Pinefield neighborhood off Mattawoman Beantown Road, next to the park.

Or, you may have heard of the Stethem Educational Center in Pomfret, the Charles County Public Schools alternative education center. Male and female students in grades 6-12 attend the center for alternative services, with a special focus on automotive repair services; interactive media production (graphic design and video production); heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC); horticultural services; and pharmacy technician training.

They are both named for Stethem, a Navy diver and passenger on TWA Flight 847, which was hijacked by Lebanese

Hezbollah terrorists on June 14, 1985 with 153 passengers and crewmembers on board. Stethem was flying from an assignment at Nea Makri, Greece, where his team had been sent to repair a Navy communications facility, when the commercial flight was hijacked. The flight was scheduled to travel from Athens to Rome before flying to the States. Instead, the hijackers ordered the flight to Beirut, Lebanon, where they tortured and killed Stethem the next day, and dumped his body on the airport tarmac.

The Navy wrote of the incident, "Stethem was singled out by Lebanese hijackers because of his military status and was badly beaten and ultimately murdered after their demands were not met. Throughout his ordeal Stethem did not yield; instead, he acted with fortitude and courage and helped his fellow passengers endure by his example."

Stethem was born on November 17,

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A tile mural of a ship named after Stethem is displayed at the Stethem Educational Center in Pomfret.



Flags fly at the Stethem Memorial Sports Complex in Waldorf.



Stethem's grave is at Arlington National Cemetery.

— STETHEM LEGACY —

HONOR COURAGE COMMITMENT



STETHEM FAMILY COLLECTION

HONORS AND AWARDS

- SW2(DV) Robert D. Stethem was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart in 1985 and the Bronze Star for heroism and bravery in 1986.

His citation for the Bronze Star reads:

"For heroic achievement on 15 June 1985 while assigned to Detachment NM-85 of Underwater Construction Team One, deployed to the Naval Communications Station Nea Makri, Greece. Petty Officer Stethem displayed exceptional valor and professional integrity while a hostage of militant Shiite hijackers of TWA Flight 847 at Athens International Airport, Algiers, Algeria, and at Beirut, Lebanon. Exhibiting physical, moral, and emotional courage beyond extraordinary limits, Petty Officer Stethem endured a senseless and brutal beating at the hands of his fanatical captors. He drew upon an unwavering inner strength and absorbed the punishment. The hijackers were infuriated by his refusal to succumb, a symbol to them of the strength of the United States of America, and in their cowardly desperation, shot him to death. Petty Officer Stethem's courage, steadfast determination, and loyal devotion to duty reflected great credit upon himself and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. Signed by John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy."

- Robert D. Stethem Memorial Park in Waldorf was dedicated in his honor in 1990.
- The USS Stethem was launched on June 17, 1994 and was christened on July 16, 1994 by his mother, Patricia Stethem.
- The U.S. Navy Seabees named the Port Hueneme Naval Construction Training Center Headquarters Building and a street on the base in Oxnard, Ca., in his honor.
- A memorial to Robert Dean Stethem sits at MDSU ONE in Hawaii as a reminder of his bravery.
- The Robert D. Stethem Barracks, Training Support Center Hampton Roads in Virginia Beach, Va., and Stethem Memorial Navy Lodge, Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport, Miss., are named in his honor.
- On August 24, 2010, 25 years after his killing, Stethem was frocked to the honorary rank of Master Chief Constructionman Petty Officer in a ceremony onboard USS Stethem in Yokosuka, Japan, by order of the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. His brother, Kenneth, accepted the certificate and decorations on behalf of the Stethem family.
- The Stethem Educational Center in Pomfret is renamed in his honor.
- On April 24, 2015, Stethem and the five surviving members of the 1985 terrorists attack on TWA 847 were presented with Prisoner of War Medals by Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus.
- Stethem is interred at Arlington National Cemetery, Plot: Section 59, Lot 430, Grid EE-25, near a number of other Americans who were victims of international terrorism.

HISTORY LESSON



STETHEM FAMILY COLLECTION

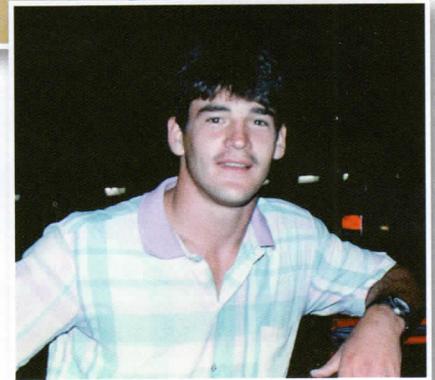


STETHEM FAMILY COLLECTION

Above: Left to right, Patricia Stethem, Richard Stethem, Kenneth Stethem, Robert Stethem, Sheryl Stethem and, front and center, Patrick Stethem, on the day Richard retired from the Navy.

Above: Stethem in second grade, at age 8.

Right: Stethem at age 22. His family remembers him every day, and is grateful for the ways Southern Maryland has honored him.



STETHEM FAMILY COLLECTION

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1961, the third of four children of Richard and Patricia Stethem. He grew up in Waldorf, where he attended the Charles County Career Vocational-Technical Center for the Industrial Electricity program. In 1980, he graduated from Thomas Stone High School, where he played defensive back on the junior varsity and varsity football teams. On May 4, 1981, Stethem reported for duty in the U.S. Navy, as had his father and older brother before him. (A younger brother, Patrick, joined after him.) His mother worked for the Navy as a civilian administrator.

Attending recruit training in Great Lakes, Ill., Stethem was trained as a diver, a steelworker and a Seabee. He was assigned to the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 62, home-ported at Gulfport, Miss., and then assigned to Navy Underwater Construction Team No. 1, in Norfolk, Va. He had reached the rank of Petty Officer at the time of his death at the age 23. Twenty-five years later, he was frocked to the honorary rank of Master Chief Petty Officer.

He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star for heroism.

In 1995, the U.S. Navy commissioned an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, DDG-63, the *USS Robert Dean Stethem*, in his honor. As part of the Pacific Fleet, it's home-ported in Yokosuko, Japan, the front line of our Forward Deployed Naval Forces in the Pacific.

More recently, Stethem and five Navy Seabees who survived the hijacking were awarded the Prisoner of War Medal by the Secretary of the Navy, an honor that did not exist when Stethem was killed.

While the *USS Stethem* has a memorial service every year, flowers are placed on Stethem's Arlington grave periodically, and his name is borne on buildings and ships, the family "remembers him every single day, as much on the anniversary or his birthday as an ordinary day," says Kenneth. He adds that the family is "very grateful that Southern Maryland has honored [him] in the way that they have." ■