

VIETNAM CASUALTY DATABASE PROVES INVALUABLE

A Handful of Dedicated Vets Made It Possible

BY JANIE BLANKENSHIP

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If you have ever looked up the background of an American killed in or around Vietnam, you can thank these vets for the information. The *Coffelt Database* is unlike any other in the types of details provided on Americans who died in the Vietnam War. Here is a look at how it all began and where it is today.



VIETNAM KIAs

LEFT PANEL, TOP TO BOTTOM:

John Schmitt, Daniel Neuburger, Marco Baruzzi, James Pence, Odell Dickens, Robert Morris and Phil Valdez.

RIGHT PANEL, TOP TO BOTTOM:

Rene Salazar, Gary Maloy, Samuel Rodriguez, Donald Skinner, Bedford Drinnon and John Brewton.

It all started with one name: Gary Lee Binder. A Hays, Kan., native, Binder died in Vietnam in 1967, and his family had very few details. Attorney and veteran Richard Coffelt, also of Hays, took notice of the lack of information provided by the Defense Department with regard to Vietnam War casualties.

In 1980, Coffelt set out on a mission to track complete unit information for every American killed in the Vietnam War. This was before personal computers, let alone the Internet, so his work was completed via library research, travel and note-taking on his legal pads. He got his hands on nearly every book written up to that time on the war. His collection would grow to nearly 300 books.

Coffelt traveled around the country when time permitted to further his research. He even purchased a microfiche reader for his home.

"I was about half mad to do this," Coffelt told the *VVA Veteran* before his death in 2012. "But it became a personal thing, something I wanted to do."

Although he had no ties to the Vietnam War, Coffelt, an Army veteran, felt compelled to complete his quest. He often said it was something he "needed to do."

With the '90s came the Internet. Coffelt took his research to the Web and that is where he found Dick Arnold and David Argabright. Both Vietnam vets were independently conducting research on those killed in their respective units.

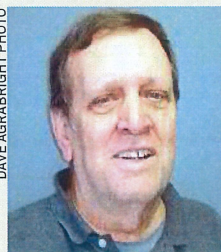
In 1998, the three researchers became a team, compiling records from around the country and capturing those in a computer database operated by Argabright, who later retired from the group in 2006. Arnold, an at-large VFW member in Indiana, remains a key player today.

"I have always loved history of most any type," said Arnold, who served in Vietnam from 1967-68 with A Co., 1st Bn., 35th Inf., 25th Div./4th Div., as a machine gunner. "Inherently, I knew Richard's work was something I wanted to be involved with. In about four years' time, we had brought a seemingly impossible task to fruition."



ABOVE: The late Richard Coffelt began compiling his one-of-a-kind database of Vietnam casualties in 1980. Today, the database contains 58,953 records.

BELOW: David Argabright and Dick Arnold joined forces with Coffelt in 1998.



DAVE ARGABRIGHT PHOTO



DICK ARNOLD PHOTO

The one-of-a-kind database had complete or partial unit and ship identifications for some 50,000 Americans killed in the war.

"No one had remotely attempted to do what we set out to accomplish," Arnold said. "There was a smattering of individual unit web sites, but few of them had comprehensive or accurate killed lists."

Argabright became a team member while trying to compile his unit history. He served in Vietnam's Mekong Delta from July 1968 through July 1969 with the 2nd Bn., 60th Inf., 9th Inf. Div.

"It didn't take very long to discover that most roads led to Richard Coffelt," said Argabright, a member of VFW Post 2377 in Glendale Heights, Ill.

Argabright is credited with converting the paper records to an electronic file with backup. He conducted count-

less research trips to archives facilities in Austin, Texas; St. Louis and College Park, Md.

Coffelt, Arnold and Argabright deeded their database to the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., on June 5, 2002. The database is officially known as the *Vietnam War Combat Area Casualty Database*. However, when Archives officials asked what it was to be called, Arnold and Argabright agreed it should be called the *Coffelt Database*.

DATABASE HITS THE INTERNET

With thousands of names yet to add as well as filling in some missing information, the database was not complete and those involved argue it might not ever be. As the database grew, so did the number of people contributing individual expertise.

Navy Vietnam vet Ken Davis is a self-described "computer geek" and was already working on a similar database. Beginning in November 2000, he created the memorial pages for www.VirtualWall.org, which is a website dedicated to all the names listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. However, *The Virtual Wall* is not affiliated with the physical memorial.

Davis and Coffelt found each other on the Internet. Soon, he would be an integral part of the group.

"Ken Davis is an electronic genius and is solely responsible for converting our work to the Internet," Arnold said. "He has put in untold hours and continues to do so."

Davis, a bombardier-navigator during the Vietnam War, previously owned a software company before selling it in 2002, so his computer skills were in demand with the *Coffelt Database* project.

"We set about consolidating our separate databases," said Davis, who served with Attack Squadron 85 aboard the *USS America* in 1968 and again in 1969-70 aboard the *USS Constellation*. "Unit of assignments is the key element ... without that, there's little hope of determin-

ing circumstances.”

Living in Toccoa, Ga., where he is a member of VFW Post 4346, Davis has never met in person any members of the group. All communication has been via phone calls and e-mails.

Today, the 58,953 individual database records include everything this research team—which includes Gary Roush and Robert Sage—gets their hands on. There are maps and photographs of pertinent documents. Davis said that in 2010 they

decided to further expand and include the place of burial for each vet.

Davis maintains the database and created www.CoffeltDatabase.org, as well as the software that updates the online database nightly.

Arnold credits Davis for making the current database more user-friendly in terms of search mechanisms and the ability to download documents.

“The *Coffelt Database* is now a much, much better product,” Arnold added.

“Not a perfect analogy, but maybe like saying Henry Ford’s Model T was the basis of the modern cars we drive now.”

Davis agrees that today’s database is vastly different, but says the 2002 version was the very best thing available at the time.

“I remain astonished at the basic accuracy of the 2002 *Coffelt Database*,” he said. “It really was a work of art.”

Davis said his experience in working

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THE MAN BEHIND THE MISSION

BEFORE RICHARD COFFELT would create the first-of-its-kind listing of America’s Vietnam War dead, he studied from 1950–52 at the University of Kansas. Unsure of what to do with the rest of his life and not too thrilled about school, he entered the Army in February 1953 and was stationed at Camp (now Fort) Polk, La., where he was a personnel management supervisor. He was discharged in 1955.

He returned to the University of Kansas and completed his undergraduate degree in 1956. Then he went on to law school also in Kansas, graduating in 1959. In addition to having a private practice in Hays from 1960–1997, Coffelt taught business law at Fort Hays State University.

When Jo Ann Jennings married Coffelt in 1979, she entered a world of Vietnam War research. At that time, Coffelt was just beginning his research on the war’s casualties. So throughout the next 30 years, the database was an integral part of the couple’s life, something Jennings encouraged.

“I was always his supporter, cheerleader and sounding board,” Jennings said. “We traveled everywhere so that he could do research.”

When Jennings was at Ohio State University completing her graduate studies, Coffelt came for a visit and they spent a day at the campus library. Jennings recalls that was the first time she actually helped him in his research.

A teacher at the time, Jennings said her spring breaks were usually spent at the Johnson Presidential Library Archives in Texas, where Coffelt would hand copy letters of condolence.

Those who later became involved with Coffelt’s research would puzzle over why this Cold War-era veteran would be doing this. Not one to promote his accomplishments, Coffelt would point out that a listing of Americans who died in Vietnam, complete with unit and date, did not exist. Rather than try to get someone else to do it, he had decided to do it himself.

In doing so, he became somewhat of a research expert. His knowledge of Vietnam War battles and units involved was immense.

“I have often exclaimed to fellow Vietnam veterans, ‘He knows more about the damn war than we do, and he was not even there,’” said Dick Arnold, one of the original database researchers.

Even after the *Coffelt Database* was deeded to the National



Archives in Washington, D.C., in 2002, Coffelt’s work was still unknown in his hometown. It wasn’t until 2011 when Hays Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 939 honored Coffelt that his neighbors were aware of his accomplishments. March 24, 2011, was proclaimed “Richard Coffelt Day” by the city of Hays.

“He was a very modest man,” Jennings said. “He never dreamed anyone would be interested in what he was doing other than maybe the families of those who died in the war.”

Regrettably, in 2008 Coffelt was diagnosed with Lewy Body dementia, a multi-symptom disease similar to Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. Next to Alzheimer’s, it is the second most common form of dementia. Jennings, 18 years younger, retired a few years earlier than planned so that she could care for Coffelt herself.

Not long after his diagnosis, Coffelt told his wife he wasn’t going to feel sorry for himself. He asked her, “Why should I be exempt?” He would rely on Jennings toward the end to speak on his behalf because he didn’t want others to be embarrassed by his slow thinking.

“Although it is a small piece of time in the totality of his life, he dealt with it in much the same way he faced all obstacles,” said Jennings, who still lives in Hays. “He was not ashamed or embarrassed by the diagnosis.”

Coffelt died on Jan. 25, 2012. All Vietnam vets and the families of the dead owe him a debt of gratitude.

"IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT OUR HISTORY [VIETNAM WAR]

is accurately portrayed for future generations. The more that groups like the VHPA and Coffelt engrain our true history in the national consciousness and archives, the less likely the academics will be able to rewrite our history to their liking."

—GARY ROUSH

with *The Virtual Wall* taught him that families want to know the circumstances of their loved ones' deaths more than anything else. And that is why he remains so focused on the *Coffelt Database*.

"I cannot change what happened back then," Davis said. "What I can do is to help document what happened to the men and women who died as a result of their service in Vietnam. They did only what their society asked of them and we have an obligation to remember that."

PRESERVING VIETNAM WAR HISTORY

Living in Austin, Texas, Sage has a key role in this remembrance as well, though he downplays his part by saying he "just" makes copies of records for Davis to add to the database.

Indeed, he has copied nearly 45,000 casualty reports from the Johnson and Nixon presidential libraries. Furthermore, he acquired more than 30,000 DD-1330 forms (applications for headstones) as well as thousands of death certificates and incident reports from various unit archives.

"My very small part has been to go to the National Archives and take digital pictures of all these and then give them to the database to use as needed," said Sage, who served 20 months in Vietnam as a combat engineer. (He served from 1968-69 with A Co., 15th Eng. Bn., 9th Inf. Div., and then eight months from 1969-70 with the 571st Combat Eng. Co., 3rd Bde., 9th Inf. Div.). "Ken Davis is the brains and knows what to do with them."

Sage, a VFW at-large member in Texas, added that this database is important for families looking for closure. He's had children of those killed in Vietnam contact him asking what happened to their



Left to right are Ken Davis, Gary Roush and Robert Sage.

fathers, and he has been able to tell them.

Roush, who flew 940 combat hours from May 1968 through February 1969 in his Chinook helicopter with the 242nd Assault Support Helicopter Company, provides a crucial piece to the database. Davis recruited Roush because of his research and data collection for the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) throughout the past 27 years.

"My research working with the Pentagon, National Archives and the military made it very clear to me that government agencies were not preserving our history," said Roush, a VFW member in the state of New York. "I was very pleased that the Coffelt group was doing that. I provided helicopter incident reports that included killed (crew members and passengers) along with more details."

Those incident reports and other Roush-collected information have proved invaluable for a variety of officials from the FBI looking at phony veteran cases to congressional committees seeking answers. And in other cases, the helicopter information has provided long-overdue closure for some.

Roush recalled being at a VHPA reunion and giving information to a former helicopter crew chief. He had not gone out on a scheduled mission and the entire crew was killed in a crash. In all the years following the crash, the chief had thought he hadn't properly checked everything on the helicopter or had done

something wrong. However, it was pilot error on a densely clouded day during Vietnam's monsoon season that caused the crash.

"When I told him that, it was like a weight had been lifted," Roush said. "This has been very rewarding for me."

Roush, who retired from Corning Glass Works after

31 years, says he continues to refine the helicopter and death data because he wants history to be written correctly. So far, he believes this hasn't happened with respect to Vietnam.

"The Vietnam War is the most misunderstood war in the history of the United States," said Roush, who lives in Painted Post, N.Y. "It is extremely important that our history is accurately portrayed for future generations. The more that groups like the VHPA and Coffelt engrain our true history in the national consciousness and archives, the less likely the academics will be able to rewrite our history to their liking."

For Arnold, who has been with the group the longest, his reasons for pushing onward are simple.

Were it not "for fate, pure blind luck, the grace of God, or whatever, my name would be on that Wall," said Arnold, who was wounded twice in Vietnam. "So this is my humble way of keeping faith with those we had to leave behind."

But what about Gary Lee Binder, the name that started it all? The *Coffelt Database* unearthed that the 20-year-old Binder died as the result of head injuries after he was struck by a dump truck on Oct. 13, 1967, in the vicinity of Phu Bai, while working on a road crew. He is buried in Mount Allen Cemetery in Hays, Kan. ★

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Richard Coffelt's Mission:

Developing a Database of Vietnam War KIA's

BY ROBERT WILHELM



Why were Americans who died in Vietnam ignored?

That was the question uppermost in the mind of Richard Coffelt. A lawyer in Hays, Kansas, and a U.S. Army veteran who served during the Korean War, Coffelt had no direct connection to the Vietnam War. However, he had become acquainted with the mother of Gary Lee Binder, a Hays resident who died while serving with the Navy in Vietnam, and Coffelt wanted to learn more about the circumstances of Binder's death.

There must be some book, Coffelt thought, in which he could find something. He began his search in the early 1980s at the Hays Public Library and the library at Fort Hays State University, but few sources were available. So he began to collect books, hoping that one might list the Vietnam War dead. He quickly amassed a library of hundreds of titles, but still there was no one source with all the information.

But Coffelt persevered. "I was about half mad to do this," he said, "but it became a personal thing, something I wanted to do."

As his database slowly grew, Coffelt decided that he wanted more than just names and dates. He began to gather information on unit identifications down to the company, battery, and troop level. He began a long association with the National Archives.

"I felt that if I just looked long enough, hard enough, I would hit the mother lode," he said. "I still felt that there had to be some government source that would have all this information. It became kind of a game to try and locate the information in some government repository somewhere."

Richard Coffelt was still practicing law but would spend anywhere from fifteen minutes to fifteen hours at a stretch, working at night and on weekends, gathering information from microfilm and microfiche. After ten years of study, he finally realized there was no single source. By then, though, he was on a quest, something he had to do.

In the 1990s he began to use the Internet for research, just as many veterans also were beginning to conduct their own online searches. Two of these men were Dick Arnold, a veteran of the 35th Infantry, and David Argabright of the 9th Infantry Division. Each was conducting his own independent research on KIAs in his unit. Each also had heard about Richard Coffelt through the Internet grapevine and contacted him via email. In 1998 the three researchers joined forces. From then on, it was a team effort to correlate and integrate information from such disparate sources as the National Archives, mortuary records in Hawaii, and tombstones in cemeteries across the country.

The Presidential Library of Lyndon Baines Johnson contained the most helpful records. “I wasn’t any great fan of Lyndon Johnson,” Coffelt said, “but his library had copies of letters of condolence.” The president had sent a letter to the family of every servicemember who had died in Vietnam. His term of office, 1963-69, saw some of the heaviest fighting—and the majority of casualties—of the war. The letters were filed alphabetically by last name and included the unit.

The Army sustained about two-thirds of the Vietnam War KIAs, and that is where Richard Coffelt concentrated his research. Casualties of the Marines and Navy were compiled by others. With Arnold and Argabright’s help, Air Force KIAs were integrated into the database. Combining all these sources covered nearly all of the 58,245 American Vietnam War dead.

In 2001 an archivist with the National Archives and Records Administration approached Arnold about making the database part of the Archives. This surprised Coffelt. “I didn’t think anyone would want it,” he said. But the document that Coffelt, Arnold, and Argabright had compiled preserved historical records that might otherwise be inaccessible. The team agreed to deed the document to the Archives. But they had one condition: They did not want anyone to have to pay to get this information. It had to be offered free of charge.

So, in June of 2002, in a ceremony at the NARA reception center in Washington, the database was deeded to the National Archives. Officially, the database is known as the Vietnam War Combat Area Casualty Database. But when Michael Kurtz, Assistant Archivist of the United States, asked what the database was to be called, Arnold and Argabright quickly replied, “It should be called the Coffelt Database.” This was a surprise to Coffelt, but one he humbly accepted.

Coffelt is retired now and doesn’t do much research anymore, but the hard work has already been done. He and his wife of thirty-two years, Jo Ann Jennings, live a less hectic life on a quiet, tree-lined street in Hays. When asked what his thirty years’ worth of research accomplished, what he hoped the legacy of this monumental task would be, Coffelt paused for a moment.

Then, as a tear rolled down his cheek, he softly replied: “I hope that Vietnam veterans will be treated with respect.”

This project has come to mean much more than Coffelt had envisioned. He has become the source of the information he had hoped to find so many years before. His work is for the families and descendants, as well as the veterans of the Vietnam War. It was personal at first, something he wanted to do. Then it became a quest, something he felt he had to do. In the end, it was a mission, something he was born to do.

Hays VVA Chapter 939 honored Richard Coffelt with a plaque “for his dedicated service in preserving the history and truth of the Vietnam War through his many years of work” at its January 2011 meeting. March 24, 2011, was proclaimed “Richard Coffelt Day” by the city of Hays, Kansas.

Accessing The Database

The Coffelt Database is on the National Archives website, aad.archives.gov/aad. Scroll down to “Records with Unit Information on Military Personnel Who Died During the Vietnam War” and click on the “Search” button next to the line that reads “The Coffelt Database, December 2005 Update.” This will display a page labeled “Fielded Search.” It contains a search field, in which can be entered a name, unit, location, or home of record. Once the search results come up, click on the “View Record” icon to read the entire record.

Robert Wilhelm is a U.S. Air Force veteran of Vietnam and a life member of VVA Chapter 939 in Hays, Kansas. He can be reached at rjwilh@gmail.com





Membership Notes, September/October 2016

Richard Coffelt: A Private Life for Public Good

BY ROBERT WILHELM

WELCOME TO HAYS, KANSAS
THE HOME OF




RICHARD COFFELT
1932-2012
ATTORNEY, EDUCATOR, KOREAN WAR
VETERAN, HUSBAND, FATHER, PATRIOT

WHO, THROUGH THIRTY YEARS
OF DEDICATED WORK, CREATED THE

COFFELT DATA BASE

THE AUTHORITATIVE AND OFFICIAL RECORD OF THE 58,220
U.S. MILITARY MEMBERS WHO DIED IN THE VIETNAM WAR
AND IS NOW MAINTAINED BY THE U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES
AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
WWW.COFFELTDATABASE.ORG
HAYS CHAPTER 939
VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA



Richard Coffelt lived quietly in Hays, Kansas, for nearly his entire life, and his neighbors knew nothing about his secret passion. They had no idea he worked diligently through Vietnam War chronologies cataloging American casualties. They had no idea he was the architect of a document that veterans, their families, and friends will use for decades to come. They didn't know because he was an intensely private man who talked with almost no one about his work, other than his wife.

He was not motivated by ego but rather by curiosity about a local man who died in the war. That curiosity, however, grew to include the many who perished. "I never thought anybody would ever be interested in this," he once said. But the full story of Richard Coffelt and what has become the "Coffelt Database of Vietnam KIAs" might never have come to light were it not for a member of VVA's **Hays, Kansas, Chapter 939**, his dog, and their daily walks.

Gary Brown moved to Hays in 2002 and began walking his dog around his neighborhood where, by chance, he met Coffelt walking his dog. Striking up a friendship, they walked together, sometimes as often as three times a week, talking of many things, including their jobs—Richard an attorney and Gary the city fire chief—and their military service—Richard in Korea, Gary in Vietnam.

In 2004 Chapter 939 was formed, and chapter members decided to have guest speakers at their monthly meetings. Coffelt was not among the first. In fact, it would be six years before the chapter learned his story.

In 2009 Coffelt developed Lewy body dementia complicated by Parkinson's disease. The following year his condition worsened to the point he could no longer walk his dog, so the chore fell to his wife, Jo Ann Jennings. As her husband had done earlier, she met and talked with Brown during these walks.

One day Brown wore his Chapter 939 polo shirt with the VVA logo, and Jennings—who had not known he was a Vietnam veteran—asked if he knew about the work her husband had been doing. As she told him about Coffelt's thirty-year odyssey documenting Vietnam War KIAs, Brown was flabbergasted. In all the years they had walked their dogs, Coffelt had never hinted at his project. Brown asked if Coffelt would speak to the chapter. He agreed, but his illness left him with an inability to speak for any length of time, so his wife became his voice. They appeared at the meeting on the evening of January 25, 2011.

When Coffelt began his research in the early 1980s, he considered it an obsessive hobby. But in 2001, when he deeded his database to the National Archives and Records Administration, he finally realized the significance of his work. "I never imagined it would be this important," he said.

Chapter 939 decided to create a tribute to Richard Coffelt and display it prominently. The spot chosen was at the Hays Regional Airport. It was dedicated June 11 in front of a crowd including his wife Jo Ann, Chapter 939 members, Hays city officials, and many friends and family.

Coffelt never lived to see the tribute. He died on January 25, 2012, exactly one year after speaking to the chapter. But the Coffelt Database lives on at the National Archives website, free to all who wish to use it, just as its creator wanted, at www.nara.gov or www.coffeltdatabase.org/about.php

For more information on Richard Coffelt and his database, see Robert Wilhelm's "[Richard Coffelt's Mission](#)" in the January/February 2012 issue.