

MEMORIAL DAY

Rock Island's Desert Storm hero

Family honors legacy of Captain Stephen Phillis

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Captain Steve Phillis cemented himself as a war hero 35 years ago. But to the siblings that simply knew him as their big brother, he was a hero all along.

Stephen 'Steve' Richard Phillis was born to Dr. Richard 'Bud' and Diane Phillis, on May 17, 1960 in Chicago. The family of three moved back to the Quad-Cities and became a family of seven by 1970, with Steve the oldest of the five children. Diane predeceased her son in death in 2021. "He was a strong willed child," Bud said of his oldest. "He was a do-er. I don't remember how old he was, maybe 10,

when he started to mow lawns. We had a push mower at that time, and he couldn't reach the top handle, so he would be about halfway down. But he mowed lawns and shoveled snow." Bud was working as a physician when was drafted into the Air Force in 1966. By this time, the Phillis family had expanded with their four oldest children all under the age of six.

They were stationed in Cheyenne, Wyoming and Bud worked about 30 hours a week, giving him plenty of time to spend with the children, he said. Two years later, in 1968, the family moved back to the Quad-Cities and settled in Rock Island where all the kids were raised.

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Phillis

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Steve was especially close his only sister, Cathy Raines, the second of the Phillis clan. He wasn't super protective like some big brothers, she said, but they complimented each other in their own ways.

"The man was very smart, but he could not do English. And I could do English but I could not do math," she recalled.

They helped each other out through homework pages and as they grew up, Steve started coming to his only sister with normal teenage life questions: Do these pants match this shirt? Will my date like this? Is a trunk full of roses too much for a prom?

"Whatever he did, he was good at. He never made it feel like he was better than you," she said. "He was just a funny guy. He had a really good sense of humor."

Eyes to the skies

As the years, Steve moved up the social ladder and became a senior at Alleman High School when he told his parents one day in mid-October that he knew what he wanted to do with his life.

"He came home and said, 'I think I want to go to the Air Force Academy,' which was the first indication we had that he might have some interest in the academy," Bud said. "I believe one of the reasons he wanted to go to the academy was so he could learn to fly."

Sending their son off to the military wasn't a big concern, Bud said, because he and Diane always believed their children would find their calling and do what they wanted.

"Give the kids a foundation at home and assist them if you can. They'll find their way in the world. We call that roots and wings," he said.

The road to those wings started with a 14-hour drive to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. All seven members of the Phillis family packed into the station wagon and headed west.

Diane packed a cooler full of sandwiches, snacks and drinks. Bud warned the kids not to over indulge — the only thing he was stopping for was gas.

A classic dad move.



Captain Stephen 'Steve' Phillis was a 1982 graduate of the Air Force Academy who eventually went on to fighter pilot school and fought in Operation Desert Storm. He ultimately sacrificed his own life to protect a fellow wingman who was shot down during the war.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE PHILLIS FAMILY

study, too.

At that time, there was no concern at all of the U.S. going to war, Bud said. It wasn't an easy sentence to hear, but the Phillis kids were all raised on the roots and wings system. This was the wings part of it.

"It's what he wanted to do, so we just accepted that," Bud said. "He said, 'I can't believe they pay me to have so much fun,' which was flying, particularly the A-10. He really loved flying that plane."

Steve moved around to various bases, learning new things along the way. In July 1986 he ended up in Korea and worked on his skills to be selected for fighter weapons school at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. He graduated in 1988.

"He was number one in his class. He was Top Gun," Bud said.

Steve went back to Korea afterward to finish out his assignment, then headed for Myrtle Beach in November of 1988, a three-year assignment. In those years, he purchased a home, met a girl and fell in love. Life was looking up.

In August of 1990, Steve learned he was going to be



Phillis, and buried at home in Rock Island. Number three out of the five, Steve and Mike got along as well as cats and dogs or oil and gasoline, Mike said with a chuckle.

They had a typical, older brother, younger brother relationship, but that improved as they got older. That's something Mike misses now.

As they moved into adulthood, Mike joined the Navy and the pair started to have more in common. Also deployed to Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm, Mike was called into his commanding officer's office one day and given the news.

Mike spent the rest of his deployment wondering what happened to his brother. Eventually, he was sent back to base in California when he got another call. Steve's body had been found, and mom and dad would like him to accompany Steve home.

"There was no question in my mind. My parents asked, and I would do that for them," Mike said.

The next few days were spent at various airports, accompanying his brother from one airport to another. At one point they

A classic dad move.

On the day Steve entered the academy, his family dropped him off early, probably 8 a.m., Bud estimates. They didn't see him again until the afternoon when everyone filed into the auditorium to announce the new cadets.

"We were sitting in the auditorium at the academy, and the freshman walked in, and we tried to pick him out, and we really couldn't, because they all looked the same in their cadet uniform, and they all had short hair, except the girls, and there weren't many girls at that time," Bud said.

During his time in the academy, Steve never forgot about his siblings at home. Tim Phillis, the youngest of the Phillis five, was 10 years old when Steve went off to Colorado.

"He was always kind of larger than life. Kind of mythological," Tim said of his big brother. "He started my love of comic books. He would ship comic books back from the store at the Air Force Academy."

Tim's favorites were the first 20 episodes of *Shogun Warriors*. He still has them in a box. Somewhere.

Steve graduated from the Air Force Academy in June of 1982 and on Aug. 4, 1983, earned his Air Force Pilot wings — figuratively and literally in the form of a pendant. Following tradition, he took the pendant off his chest and broke it in two, giving the other half to his mother.

Bud still has it in a shadow box on his bedroom wall. The box is filled with all the other medals and patches Steve earned: a silver star, the medal of honor, a purple heart. The list goes on.

Following pilot training, Steve was given a choice to rank his choices on which plane he would like to fly next. He chose the A-10, Bud said, because it was a single seat plane and he didn't want to be responsible for anyone else.

"He told us when they were making their selection, he said he wanted to fly that, and he said that it flies low and slow, and if we ever go to war, I probably won't come back," Bud said.

Bud has a model of that plane, too, on a shelf in his study. The A-10, nicknamed the Warthog, it carried a massive gun that fired bullets at an incredibly high speed.

One of those bullets is in Bud's

learned he was going to be deployed. Tim, who was 20 at the time, was the last family member to see him before he left. Although they were 10 years apart in age, they were the closest in demeanor, and ability, Tim said, both having an engineering mindset.

"He was Yogi Berra and I was Boo-Boo," Tim said. "I don't have any memories of him being snappy or short or condescending. If there was such a thing as a hero or an idol, from a human perspective, he was definitely mine for a long period of time."

Right before he flew out, Steve proposed to his girlfriend. The promise of a future was heavy in the air, but his parents remembered what Steve told them about the probability of his return.

"Diane and I had a premonition, or she had it probably, that he wouldn't come back, and the girl was looking for a wedding dress, because he was going to be over there for a period of time, come home, and get married," Bud said. "She was starting to look for a wedding dress, and Diane and I agreed that would be nice for her to choose it, but she'd probably never wear it."

The saying 'mother knows best' was proven right.

The Storm

On January 17, 1991 Operation Desert Storm began in the early hours of the morning. Steve had been sending letters and cassette tapes home to his family and fiancé, updating them on what was to come.

He knew he was going to war, and he was scared, but this is what he signed up for, he said. This was his life's purpose.

On Feb. 15, 1991, Steve got out of his bunk bed and looked at his roommate with a grim prediction.

"He said, 'I won't be coming back today' and they said nonsense, because he was the best A-10 pilot they had, and they thought there's nothing going to happen to him," Bud recalled.

That day, Steve and his wingman went up in their separate planes when the wingman's was shot down. He pulled the ejection handle and tried to parachute to safety, a five minute commute, while bullets flew all around him. Steve attempted to fly down to cover him, using himself and his plane as a human shield, to protect him until a



rescue team could get to the area.

Steve stayed by his wingman for three minutes and 45 seconds.

"But it was during that, that (Steve) got shot down," Bud said.

Captain Steve Phillis died on Feb. 15, 1991. He was 30 years old.

Back home in Rock Island, Diane heard the dreaded knock at the door. It was Friday afternoon and two uniformed Air Force Officers informed her that Steve was missing. That was all they knew.

The officers asked Diane if there was someone she could call. She tried Bud, but he was at work. So then she tried her son Tom, the fourth in the bunch.

"I was working a second shift job at the time, I would go into work at six o'clock, and I was getting ready for work, and the phone rang," Tom Phillis said. "I remember this like it was yesterday. I was shaving, and it was mom on the phone, and she said, 'Can you come over?'"

Tom had just spent the day with her and was confused, but when she asked a second time, he didn't hesitate. When he walked in, Diane told him what happened and eventually Bud came home to learn the news himself.

"It's hard to explain what that's like. They didn't say he was gone, they said he was missing. He was shot down. We lost radio communication with him. That's the other piece that we don't talk about a lot. That eight weeks where we didn't know that was going on was horrible."

"The families that have people missing in Vietnam that never got closure, I cannot imagine what that's like, because it's such an emotional roller coaster. Some days you think they're going to find him. He's going to walk through that door. And then, other days, you think you just know in your heart that they're not, but you never want to lose hope," Tom said.

In early March of 1991, Iraq began releasing prisoners of war

over the course of two days. The Phillis family waited anxiously to see if Steve would be part of the group.

"His wingman was one of the people released, so when we saw that, part of you was hoping that they were keeping a couple of them back as bargaining chips or something," Tom said. "But then part of you had that sinking feeling that since he wasn't released today and his wing man was, there might be a reason why. Because he wasn't there."

For Bud, that hope remained until the very last soldier was accounted for. In the end, none of them were his son.

"We had high hope that he would be in that group. It was really when the last one was accounted for, and he wasn't there, when the reality of his death really, really hit home with us," Bud said.

Steve had warned his parents ahead of time that he may not come back, Bud said. His son's death was unexpected and upsetting, but it wasn't a surprise. Now, they just wanted to bring him home.

"They didn't find him right away," Bud said. "We had an Air Force colonel that would call us everyday with a progress report, and after about so long of a period of time, we said, 'Well, there's no reason for you to call to tell us they're still looking!'"

Two months later, in April, the dreaded call came. The Air Force had found Steve's plane, and what remained of the pilot.

"There were a few fragments of bone that weighed 'X' number of grams, and I said, 'Well, that's about the size of five nickels,'" Bud recalled.

Five Nickels serves as part of the title of a biography on Steve, written by Brigadier Gen. Jim "Boots" Demarest. The pair graduated from the Air Force Academy together and Demarest also served in Desert Storm.

A hero honored

Steve's remains were escorted back to Rock Island, accompanied by his brother, Mike

to another. At one point they had a five-hour layover in St. Louis, where it finally hit home, he said.

Back at home in Rock Island, preparations were being made for a full military funeral, with specific instructions from Steve to be followed.

"The other thing he said as he started to fly that plane, was 'If I ever go to war, I probably won't come back, and do not bury me in the National Cemetery,'" Bud recalled. "That was his choice. So, when we had to bury him, a friend of ours was the manager of Memorial Park in Rock Island, so we got a choice spot for him."

The funeral was held at St. Pius X Catholic Church in Rock Island. When it was all over, Bud said, kids from school stood outside to watch as a line of cars stretched all the way from the church to Memorial Park.

Every year, the Knights of Columbus hosts a Memorial Day mass at Calvary Cemetery in Rock Island. The Phillis family takes up the gifts, the bread and wine, to the altar.

It's been 35 years since the Phillis family has been able to talk to the oldest sibling. He would have been 66 this year, Mike said.

Memorial Day for their family has a face, and it looks like Steve's. It looks like bravery, honor and sacrifice.

"I think people really forget there's a true hero in the Quad-Cities," Raines said.

Outside of his Rock Island home, Bud has an American flag proudly hanging in the wind. There's another flag on his refrigerator. There's the plane in his study and medals on his bedroom wall.

There's memories each sibling keeps dear, like the time he flew to California from South Korea to attend his nephew's baptism. Or working on projects together at his Myrtle Beach Home.

But one thing they'll never forget is the legacy Steve left behind. And the hero he always was to them.

"Seldom a day goes by that I don't think about him, and what might have become of him," Bud said of his eldest son. "He was moving up the chain of command, and certainly he would have been material to be a general. He had all the things it takes, but he was a captain. Who knows what would have happened?"