

Rediscovering a lost brother, Wheaton connection

By Jill Hunting '72

In 1965, Jill Hunting's brother Pete was killed in Vietnam, becoming one of the first civilian casualties of the war. The questions surrounding his death ultimately led her to write Finding Pete: Rediscovering the Brother I Lost in Vietnam (Wesleyan University Press, October 2009). Here, she reflects on Pete, the war, and her Wheaton experience.

Forty-five years ago this summer I saw my brother, Pete, for the last time.

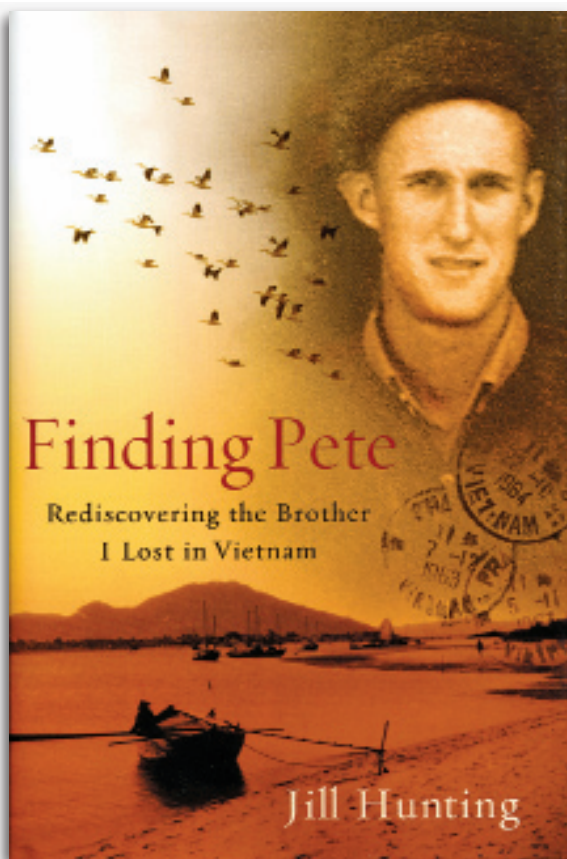
He was home on leave from Vietnam, where he worked with a Peace Corps-type group called IVS. Two years earlier, in 1963, he had graduated from Wesleyan. Martin Luther King and Pete Seeger came to campus and he saw them both. John Kennedy was president. Combat troops had not yet been introduced in Vietnam.

Pete's homecoming is as clear to me as yesterday. I was crossing the lawn, carrying a load of schoolbooks, when he stepped onto the porch. I ran and embraced him with both arms. My father captured the moment on film.

Thinking about Pete's homecoming has led me to reflect on my coming home to Wheaton.

We were a New England family transplanted in Oklahoma City by Dad's career. He attended Wesleyan and Boston University. Mom (Mary Russell Hunting '39) started at Smith, then transferred to Wheaton after the dean told her parents she needed to learn to study. She loved Wheaton so much, she didn't return to Smith. When I followed her to Norton 30 years later, my senior-year room, in Stanton, was next to what had been her "salon." Warmhearted and outgoing, Mom earned the nickname Madame de Rambouillet, after the 17th-century literary hostess.

She was once confined to the dorm—a disciplinary action after she bolted from class one day to wave at a pilot. He had told her to listen for the sound of his engine and to watch when he dipped his wings. I could imagine her running out of Mary Lyon and into the Dimple. I could imagine it, but I only half-believed it. Mom's word



was not reliable.

(In 2004 I learned how unreliable. That year, my sisters and I were packing up her house when I saw my old camp footlocker sitting in a corner. I raised the lid and parted a layer of papers. Then I saw them—Pete's lost letters from Vietnam. My mother had said they were destroyed in a basement flood.)

I entered Wheaton in January 1970 so unprepared; I didn't even have snow boots.

Afraid I'd flunk out, I studied French like a fiend for a B. I was years from realizing that in my college years, my brother's death—which Walter Cronkite reported as a murder by Vietcong agents—was never far from my thoughts. But ironically, while the world knew my family's story, Mom treated it like a secret.

If we didn't talk about it at home, who at Wheaton would?

My roommate, for one. Ginger Witmer Miller '72 and I probed our family dynamics and the war. We joined protest marches and didn't tell our parents. We also hitchhiked to Brown and drove to Prince-Tiger Homecoming Weekend, added blonder streaks to our blonde hair, and tied white strips of cloth, symbolizing peace, on the sleeves of our graduation gowns. I'm sorry to say I had little to give the Wheaton family in those years.

What finding Pete's letters meant to me, where they led me, and how they changed me is too long a story for here. As what I discovered became a book, I met my brother's friends and girlfriends (including Mary Marsh Adams '64). I reconnected with one Wheaton friend, Leslie Sawyer Bascom '72, after she saw my article about Pete in the *Washington*

Post Magazine, and made another, Charlotte Strick '95, when my publisher chose her as my book designer.

Many of us who lived through the Vietnam War years feel that our country lost something there. I'm lucky. I found the connection with my brother again. And last fall, when I returned to Massachusetts on my book tour, Wheaton warmly welcomed me back. When I say I'm ready, finally, to take my place in this

family, you can imagine how far I've come.



Writer Jill Hunting is the founder of the Book of Remembrance campaign to create a sculpture in Washington, D.C., honoring civilians killed in war. Her web site is www.jillhunting.com. Last November she spoke at a Wheaton alumnae/i event in Boston.