

**The Curator Says...** “Poet and Soldier” is a stirring tribute to all who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our nation, but especially to Billy Stelpflug, who died in the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. This account is especially poignant for it is told by his mother, Peggy Stelpflug. Revealed here is a picture of bravery and courage but also of a sensitive and caring heart. Billy’s letters and poems provide a deep personal insight into the life of a Marine infantryman.

## **Poet and Soldier**

### **Peggy Stelpflug**

*Excerpts from a speech presented at Camp Lejeune, N.C., on October 23, 2015, for the 32<sup>nd</sup> Beirut Memorial Observance to Honor U.S. Marines and Fellow Servicemen Who Died on October 23, 1983, in a Terrorist Bombing Attack of Their Barracks While Assigned to The International Peacekeeping Mission in Beirut, Lebanon. You can listen to Peggy deliver her remarks at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbHgFXpQdHk>.*

As a proud representative of the Beirut families, and the mother of Lance Corporal Bill J. Stelpflug, the youngest of our five children, I would like to recognize Billy’s brother Joe, his three sisters Laura, Kathy, and Christy, their spouses Catherine, Al, Mike and John, and my nine grandchildren – Billy’s nieces and nephews. Billy always wanted to be an uncle, but at 19 he wasn’t sure about marriage. He once wrote from Beirut, “I dreamed I got married last night. I woke up in a cold sweat. Maybe someday...”

I also want to remember my husband Bill, a retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. (and former blue-eyed fighter pilot) who came to these ceremonies until his death in 2011. As you, who with busy lives came today, we will continue to hold dear the memory of these honored men.

Billy, like all these men, has a story, a story that relates to many young servicemen. His story is told in his letters and poems, and the writings of others, especially those Mary Ellen Jackowski and I collected in our book, *Voices from Beirut: The Peacekeepers Speak*. As a former English teacher, I encourage all of you to write or record your stories. Writing is a distinct human endeavor that allows us to decipher the past, capture the present, and envision the future. Billy’s story is a part of that human history and military legend....

Billy’s “lively imagination” led him to poetry. One of the poems he wrote in high school was “Alabama Night.”

The air is still  
Thick and hot,  
Drenched with the fragrance  
Of honeysuckle and freshly cut grass.  
The dull yellow lights

Of the fireflies  
Dance to the constant tune  
Of the crickets.  
A dog barks, somewhere.  
Small, invisible animals noisily  
Make their way through the scrub and pine.  
Lazily, we sit back,  
And listen to the music  
Of an Alabama night.

With a poet's heart and a warrior's attitude, Billy wanted to be part of the strongest and toughest. He chose the Marines.

After watching his brother and sisters study hard at Auburn University, he decided "to see the world" and serve his country before he settled down to a formal education. After graduating from high school, Billy left for Boot Camp at Parris Island, September 1982. He was a good and faithful letter writer.

On January 22, 1983, Billy wrote his brother Joe: "Hey, how are ya'll doing? I'm doing pretty good considering that I'm in the Marine Corps Infantry.... To top it off we got our next duty station orders, and I got the 1/8 which is going to Lebanon.... Don't worry about me. I am doing what I enjoy.... I am glad that I'm in the Infantry. We have a lot to be proud of."

Billy wrote from Beirut in October 1983, "Well, I've always dreamed about being in combat and here I am a teenager giving them hell.... We take a lot more than we give though.... I think when I return stateside I will take a bus back just to see what it is like to come home so slow and happy instead of leaving so fast and sad. I hope you won't get mad at me if I lie on the sofa too much. See you soon. Love, Bill."

With Marines now in military action, letters home became more reflective. Sgt. Michael D. Mercer wrote his parents, "You may think me pessimistic but tonight there is something I must say. I think you misunderstand prayer. It isn't order and delivery. You pray for my safety as I am sure the families of the Marine fatalities probably prayed for them....Chances are slim that I will be killed or even wounded. If I am, try to accept it....Trust in God's wisdom and mercy. I am not afraid to die....I just can't stand to think that your life would be embittered by my passing. Dry your tears and smile."

On Saturday, October 22, Saturday, I stayed up late. Sometime after 12:00 a.m. a great sadness engulfed my body, and I squirmed in my chair, trying to break loose, finally becoming exhausted. When I turned on the TV on Sunday morning, I heard the news of the bombing....

Billy's death was confirmed three days later. Together, our family worked its way through the awful anguish, pain, and sadness. A few months later, I received a call from Danny Joy's mother. She said Danny had found one of Billy's poems when Danny, Father

George Pucciarelli, and Reverend Danny Wheeler, the last survivor rescued from the ruins of the building, attempted to salvage personal things. The 46-line poem was titled "The War King Calls." This is the refrain:

And the War King calls his subjects to battle  
To hear the rockets whistle  
And the very ground to rattle.  
When the War King calls everybody listens.

The trucks are revved.  
The knives all glisten.  
The desert sun shines on a million guns.

Many will die.  
Many will die  
And will give their soul  
To the War King's call.

This desert of tragic loss, watered by the human spirit, bloomed with healing and hope. Beirut Marine mothers Joan Muffler and Judith Young organized a support group that produced *Beirut Connections*, a newsletter "with information on ceremonies to be held, plaques to be dedicated, monuments to be built, and scholarships to be founded, all in memory of our loved ones."

The healing from the loss of those related to the Peacekeeping Mission continues. Another of Billy's poems expresses the complexity of healing, the complexity of life.

#### There is No Need to Know

I slept under the Heavens and saw the  
Stars in the endless black of the night.  
I explored thoughts of the vast unknown,  
Things I did not understand and of  
Possibilities my mind could not grasp.  
But I do understand.  
There is no need to know.  
Only the need to wonder.

Today it is not only our duty to remember but to celebrate life with the courage needed to face daily living. We must accept the hurt with the glory, the anguish with the pride, the despair with a duty to live life – while we have it – to the fullest, with love, hope, and compassion.

Billy will always be what he wanted most to be—an uncle—and a United States Marine.



**Peggy Stelpflug Says...** When I attended Marquette University, I signed up for an English major along with Secondary Education and French as my minors. My aim was to write the great American novel while living in Paris, but instead I married a blue-eyed USAF fighter pilot stationed in Chaumont, France. We created five beautiful children (with a present day bonus of nine grandchildren).

After Bill's retirement from the Air Force, we moved to Auburn where we both taught. Bill taught in Engineering Departments of Auburn University and Tuskegee University. I taught in English Departments at Auburn High School and Auburn University. The university also provided me the opportunity to teach for six months at Hunan University, Changsha, China.

After losing our son Billy, a USMC Lance Corporal, in the 1983 Beirut terrorist attack, my family, my teaching, my travels, and my writing helped me deal with my grief and anguish. Some of these writings include *The Roger Hall Phenomenon: The Creation of a New Zealand Mainstream Theatre*, *Home of the Infantry: The History of Fort Benning*, *They Came in Peace*, *Letters from Beirut*, *The Peacekeepers Speak*, poetry published in *Chinaberries and Crows: An Anthology* and in *The LLI Review* (OLLI Journal) as well as articles and poems in periodic *Writing Our Lives* anthologies.