



(AI-assisted rendition on what Maj. Basil Heth Jr. may have looked like in the time he returned to the Yankton Sioux Reservation, S.D.)

Mission of Valor Leads to a Final Salute: Couple Honors a Forgotten Marine Hero

Dr. Kevin P. Wallace
Van of Valor

YANKTON SIOUX RESERVATION, S.D. – The journey to the quiet, windswept cemetery in South Dakota began with a simple request: a buddy

check on an Iraqi Freedom-era Marine. It ended with a profound act of reverence for a hero most of the world had forgotten.

Dr. Kevin P. Wallace and his wife, Lauren W. Wallace, the co-founders of the veteran-focused mission Van of Valor, recently stood before the gravesite of Maj. Basil Heth Jr., a decorated Marine helicopter pilot, who flew more than 1,500 missions in Vietnam and was shot down twice. Heth, a member of the Yankton Sioux Tribe, passed away on Sept. 17, 2023, and is buried near the reservation he called home.

For the Wallaces, the pilgrimage was an unplanned but deeply meaningful detour in their ongoing mission to connect with, and support veterans across America.

“We came here looking for one warrior, and along the way, we discovered the story of another,” said Dr. Wallace, a retired combat photojournalist and Purple Heart recipient. “Basil Heth’s legacy is exactly the kind of valor we travel to honor. It’s a story that demanded to be heard.”

The couple’s initial mission was urgent. An old Marine comrade of Dr. Wallace’s, who asked to remain anonymous, had reached out with concern for a mutual friend last known to be living on the Yankton Reservation.

Answering the call, the Wallaces deployed their unique skillsets: Kevin’s decades of experience navigating complex and often emotional situations as a former Air Force One photographer, and Lauren’s practiced anthropological approach as a current Harvard University history graduate student.

Their search involved multiple visits to the reservation, building trust and making local contacts. After three days of determined effort, a breakthrough came. A contact located the missing Marine, safe and content, living of his own accord in Manitoba, Canada.

“The best news you can get on a buddy check is that your buddy is happy, healthy, and wants his privacy,” Mrs. Wallace explained. “We relayed that message back, and Kevin’s buddy was relieved. We completely respect the man’s wish to be left alone. The mission was a success.”

But it was during those days on the reservation that the name Basil Heth Jr. began to surface. Locals spoke of a legendary pilot, a native son who had served with incredible bravery only to return home and live a quiet, humble life. His story resonated deeply with the Wallaces.

“Hearing about Major Heth... it immediately brought to mind the incredible aviators we’ve been honored to know,” Dr. Wallace said, referencing friends from the 1st Cavalry Division’s 9th Cavalry Regiment, like Col. Larry Brown, Warrant Officer Bob Zahn, and Sgt. Barry McAlpine. “These men shared the same breed of courage—the kind that flies into the fire over and over again. To learn that a man of that caliber was laid to rest here, it felt necessary to pay our respects.”

Standing at Heth’s grave, the couple offered a moment of silence, a veteran’s salute, and a profound sense of gratitude. For Dr. Wallace, a fellow recipient of the Bronze Star with Valor, it was a salute between brothers-in-arms across generations. For Mrs. Wallace, it was a powerful

connection between her academic study of history and the living, breathing legacy of service she documents firsthand with Van of Valor.

"This is what our project is all about," Mrs. Wallace reflected. "It's not just about the missions you plan, but the history you uncover along the way. We set out to ensure one veteran wasn't forgotten, and in doing so, we helped ensure another hero's story is remembered and told."

Leaving the cemetery, the Wallaces carried with them the story of Basil Heth Jr.—a story of immense valor and quiet humility. Their van, a mobile tribute to service, now holds one more story for the road, a testament to the unbroken line of courage that connects warriors across time.

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