

# Thomas Roy Grover: A Hero to All

Karen Yang

West Windsor Plainsboro High School South

West Windsor, NJ

Paper Length: 1528 words

Everyone who enters Thomas R Grover Middle School will pass a picture of the school's namesake. Dashing even in black and white, Thomas R Grover looks ethereal, curly hair resting atop a shy smile. In the photo, he wears a suit and stares off to the right, looking beyond the camera lens and into the distance, possessing a secret unbeknownst to anyone else.

## **An Idyllic Childhood**

Born on August 22, 1946, a year after the end of World War II, Thomas Roy Grover grew up in Dutch Neck, New Jersey, just outside Princeton. Devoted to learning through Cub Scouts, Grover enjoyed helping on his family's farm as well.<sup>1</sup> At Princeton High School and eventually, Rider's college, Grover went by "Tom."<sup>2</sup> After graduation, he worked at the local post office, never straying far from home. According to Mike, Grover's friend since their grammar school days, "the area... was a close community; everyone knew everyone else."<sup>3</sup>

Summers were long and the farms bustled with activity all season, "the air always scented with the smell of the earth."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Grover lived in a bucolic, blissful town, with "a wonderful family... some especially nice parents."<sup>5</sup> To Mike, "Tom was a friend I saw almost every day through grammar school... and occasionally when we moved on to different

high schools. I didn't see much of Tom after that, but I didn't have to... he was always there, he was part of home itself.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Vietnam War Begins**

Even so, everything would change with the start of the Vietnam War. During World War II, some Vietnamese began pushing for independence and Communism, attempting to break free of the French subjugation that had existed since 1887.<sup>7</sup> Soon after, political leader Ho Chi Minh emerged and formed the Viet Minh or the League for the Independence of Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> These forces later overtook the French supported Emperor Bao Dai, and the northern city of Hanoi, declaring the area the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The French immediately set up Saigon as South Vietnam’s capital in 1949.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, both sides wanted a unified Vietnam under their ideals, leading to frequent fighting and active conflict.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, the fateful battle of Dien Bien Phu would oust French forces in 1954. As a result, America would push for South Vietnam’s primacy<sup>11</sup> and on March 8, 1965, three thousand five hundred United States Marines would enter Da Nang, signaling the start of over a decade of combat.<sup>12</sup>

Back in Dutch Neck, Grover prepared to do his part. On June 12, 1967, when he was not yet 21 years old, he enlisted in the US Army<sup>13</sup> and nearly a year later, began his tour in Vietnam on May 4th, 1968. Grover was assigned to the army as a Specialist Class 4.<sup>14</sup>

Vietnam was a different landscape compared with Dutch Neck; instead of vegetable gardens and the hum of home, lush hot jungles and constant fighting persisted day and night. Still, Grover did his job well, leading his squad around South Vietnam and building camaraderie with his squadmates. However, his life would change in February 1969.

## **The Fateful Day**

February 2nd, 1969 began like any other day. At night, Tom and his squad were sent on a night ambush patrol. In the shade of the swaying jungle trees, the majority of the night ambush patrol came under intense fire from a concealed enemy force, bullets flying left and right.

Grover, who was then in a safe position, immediately and unhesitatingly left his place and entered the exposed jungle area where most of his comrades were located, providing suppressive fire and directing them to safety. Only after his squadmates reached a safe area did he seek cover for himself. However, a blast from the enemy meant that in the dark, shady wilderness of Hau Nghia Province, Grover was fatally wounded. He was a squad leader at the time of the fatal attack.<sup>15</sup>

The following Tuesday, his parents received a telegram that their twenty two year old son was missing in action.<sup>16</sup> The next day, another telegram came. This one said that Spec 4 Thomas R Grover was dead, killed Sunday in a rocket attack north of Saigon.<sup>17</sup>

His family and friends were devastated. When Mike heard of Grover's death, "the war became very real and personal for me that day. How tragic that such a nice person, from such a nice family, would have to die so far from the farm on Village Road East. But he did and I am sure the people who knew him over there would agree with me that Tom was truly one of the nicest people you would ever want to meet."<sup>18</sup>

According to his brother, Ted, Grover's tour in Vietnam would have ended in three weeks following his death.<sup>19</sup> At the time of Grover's death, Ted was home on leave waiting to be deployed to Vietnam. "Since I was also an infantryman, Tom oftentimes expressed his concern regarding my service there. He was well aware of the perils of trying to survive day to day in a jungle war. He was also aware that if he was killed in Vietnam, the Army would not deploy me

to a war zone.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Grover’s Heroic Act**

Grover had spent forty five weeks in the field and had been so close to coming home, to seeing his family. Nonetheless, he ran into the danger zone without hesitation, intent on defending his men, regardless of the consequences.

Like Arthur Ashe, a fellow United States army veteran and groundbreaking tennis player said, “True heroism is remarkably sober, very undramatic. It is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost.”<sup>21</sup> For Grover, this sentiment proved true. He could have quietly turned away, choosing to live, choosing to survive. He was in the prime of his life, youthful and optimistic, not even twenty three years old. But he was selfless; he realized that he had to protect his men even if he had to die. He was willing to give his life up to serve his men, distinguishing himself as a true hero.

Previously wounded in action in November 1968, Tom had already received the Purple Heart for shrapnel wounds suffered in a battle near the area when he was to be killed.<sup>22</sup> Soon after his death, he was awarded the Silver Star award, the highest award for combat valor,<sup>23</sup> and another Purple Heart.<sup>24</sup>

His Silver Star Citation read: "The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to Specialist Fourth Class Thomas Roy Grover, United States Army, for gallantry in action while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force on 2 February 1969... His unselfish actions contributed significantly to the defeat of the enemy force. Specialist Fourth Class Grover's valorous actions and devotion to duty, at the cost of his own life, were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army."<sup>25</sup>

## **The Legacy of a Hero**

Afterward, Grover's body was recovered and buried at the Presbyterian Cemetery in Dutch Neck. The Vietnam War would continue for two years further, officially ending with the fall of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, on April 30, 1975 – nearly seven years after Grover left his sleepy pastoral town to join combat on the other end of the planet.<sup>26</sup>

In 1999, a middle school was constructed next to Grover's farm. It was named after Grover and in memory of his service. There, every year, over a thousand students attend school day after day, fondly referring to it as "Grover."

As the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear, heroes are all around us; the doctors, the nurses, teachers who give up so much to serve the community, the neighbors and friends sacrificing comfort and safety to help the less fortunate. They are our family, the people in the pictures on our walls. They are the soldiers protecting their squadmates in the face of death, willing to devote themselves to save the greater good, running into danger fully aware of the risks but persevering anyway.

These heroes inspire us to keep going, to keep trying our hardest. As a former student at Thomas Grover Middle School, I see Grover's legacy in my peers; we help one another when the world seems bleak, giving our friends a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen to any problems. We understand that to help others is the greatest honor of all, as evident by Grover's smiling portrait in the front hall.

Nearly every year, veterans from the Vietnam War come to speak in the school named after their friend, discussing the tactics, the experiences, the bravery, and selflessness they saw in Grover. His memory remains in these presentations, in the classrooms, the laughter, and most

importantly, the inspiration he gives to generations and generations of students and community members to work harder, treat each other kinder and be a hero every day.

## Endnotes

1. West Windsor Historical Society. "Vietnam."

<https://www.westwindsorhistory.com/vietnam.html>

2. Ancestry Database. "U.S., School Yearbooks, 1880-2012"; School Name: Princeton High School; Year: 1964.

3. West Windsor Historical Society. "Vietnam."

<https://www.westwindsorhistory.com/vietnam.html>

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "Wall of Faces: Thomas Roy Grover."

[https://www.njvvmf.org/faces/bio/1463/?fbclid=IwAR1CfBaCecMTefbxyQH-3sIyGu38sZqceIDyy-eWE\\_EkjJAnXWpWIYgFt9w](https://www.njvvmf.org/faces/bio/1463/?fbclid=IwAR1CfBaCecMTefbxyQH-3sIyGu38sZqceIDyy-eWE_EkjJAnXWpWIYgFt9w)

7. West Windsor Historical Society. "Vietnam."

<https://www.westwindsorhistory.com/vietnam.html>

8. History.com Editors. "Vietnam War." Oct. 29, 2009. Updated Aug. 19, 2020.

<https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history>

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. West Windsor Historical Society. "Vietnam."

<https://www.westwindsorhistory.com/vietnam.html>

12. Ibid.

13. National Archives at St. Louis, MO; St. Louis, MO, USA; Applications for Headstones, 1/1/1925 - 6/30/1970; NAID: NAID 596118; Record Group Number: 92; Record Group Title: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General
14. West Windsor Historical Society. "Vietnam."  
<https://www.westwindSORhistory.com/vietnam.html>
15. Honor States Editors. "Thomas Roy Grover."  
<https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=275764>
16. Trenton Evening Times. "Dutch Neck GI is Killed in Red Attack Near Saigon" Feb. 7, 1969.
17. Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
19. Grover, Ted. Vietnam Memorial Dedication Statement about Thomas Grover.  
<https://westwindsornj.org/images/american-legion-memorial/Star-23-Thomas-Grover-upd2.pdf>
20. Ibid.
21. The Arthur Ashe Legacy. "In His Words." Feb. 2009.  
<https://arthurashe.ucla.edu/black-history-month-2014-2009-in-his-words/>
22. Honor States Editors. "Thomas Roy Grover."  
<https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=275764>
23. Home of Heroes. "Silver Star." <https://homeofheroes.com/silver-star/>
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.

## Bibliography

Ancestry Database. "U.S., School Yearbooks, 1880-2012"; School Name: Princeton High

School; Year: 1964.

[https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/1265/images/sid\\_6030\\_1964\\_0058?usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=rzJ26&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=576832367](https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/1265/images/sid_6030_1964_0058?usePUB=true&_phsrc=rzJ26&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=576832367)

Grover, Ted. Vietnam Memorial Dedication Statement about Thomas Grover.

<https://westwindsornj.org/images/american-legion-memorial/Star-23-Thomas-Grover-upd2.pdf>

History.com Editors. "Vietnam War." Oct. 29, 2009. Updated Aug. 19, 2020.

<https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history>

Home of Heroes. "Silver Star."

<https://homeofheroes.com/silver-star/>

Honor States Editors. "Thomas Roy Grover." <https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=275764>

National Archives at St. Louis, MO; St. Louis, MO, USA; Applications for Headstones, 1/1/1925

- 6/30/1970; NAID: NAID 596118; Record Group Number: 92; Record Group Title:

Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General

[https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2375/images/2375\\_09\\_00021-03313?usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=rzJ27&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=2943113](https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2375/images/2375_09_00021-03313?usePUB=true&_phsrc=rzJ27&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=2943113)

New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum. "Wall of Faces: Thomas R

Grover - SP4."

[https://www.njvvmf.org/faces/bio/1463/?fbclid=IwAR1CfBaCecMTefbxyQH-3sIyGu38sZqceIDyy-eWE\\_EkjJAnXWpWIYgFt9w](https://www.njvvmf.org/faces/bio/1463/?fbclid=IwAR1CfBaCecMTefbxyQH-3sIyGu38sZqceIDyy-eWE_EkjJAnXWpWIYgFt9w)

The Arthur Ashe Legacy. "In His Words." Feb. 2009.

<https://arthurashe.ucla.edu/black-history-month-2014-2009-in-his-words/>

The Central New Jersey Home News. "Obituary for Thomas Le Roy Grover." 11 Feb. 1969.

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/67240443/obituary-for-thomas-le-roy-grover-aged/>

Trenton Evening Times. "Dutch Neck GI is Killed in Red Attack Near Saigon." Feb. 7, 1969.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "Wall of Faces: Thomas Roy Grover."

<https://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces/20245/THOMAS-R-GROVER/>

West Windsor Historical Society, "Education."

<https://www.westwindsorhistory.com/education.html>

West Windsor Historical Society. "Vietnam."

<https://www.westwindsorhistory.com/vietnam.html>