



**Seventy Years Ago ...**  
Excerpts from *Bringing Davy Home*  
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In Memory of **David Daniel Steward**  
*January 29, 1934 – September 21, 1950*  
KIA September 21, 1950



Seventy years ago, the lives of every member of our family changed forever. On September 21, 1950, sixteen-year-old David Steward gave his life in defense of a country he never knew and a people he never met. I never knew “Uncle Davy,” but I always loved him. For more than fifty years, I saw him every day in my father’s eyes.

As one of last living members of my Gold Star Family, learning the details of young David’s death seemed insurmountable. I examined faded Army camp and frontline letters. I probed Army medical reports, memos from graves registration units, official records, and remains recovery reports. Slowly, I began to unravel David’s confusing maze of transfers from one unit to another. After seventy years, I finally traced his footsteps from Texas to California to the Pusan Perimeter of Korea—and ultimately, back to his piney wood home in Texas.

Little David was born on January 29, 1934 at the old Steward homeplace in the small East Texas town of Atlanta, Texas. There would be no celebration to welcome the tiny newcomer into a nation devastated by poverty. Born during the Dirty Thirties, he made his unfortunate arrival amid the Great Depression and the devastating Dust Bowl. He was born at home during the first of three waves of crippling drought that left American families desperate for food—for themselves and what little livestock they had left. To help feed livestock, the government provided corn and hominy deemed inedible for humans. Their livestock long gone, the Steward children were happy to eat it. Along with thousands of impoverished families, David’s father moved his family to the promised land of California—a move that would seal the fate of the boy called, “Tex” by his classmates.

Tex never liked the desert. He missed the beautiful woods and bountiful creeks where he fished. Mostly, he missed the Texas gatherings where neighbors played gospel and country music. An accomplished musician, he sat for hours on his grandfather’s porch, singing and playing his beloved guitar. The young people in California were different; they laughed at his southern drawl and his love of country music. Decades later, his sister remembered the day her family left the old Texas farmhouse in hopes of finding work and a better life.

*“He was wearing his hand-me-down government relief overalls ... and he had tears in his eyes. Little Dave just turned around for a last glimpse of our piney wood home.”<sup>1</sup>*

The promised land was full of empty promises for David and his brother, William [my father]. Although they missed their Texas home, the poverty and misery they had endured dissipated with the excitement of a fresh start. But as they bathed in the perennial sun of their new Southern California lives, a fierce and violent storm was brewing in the ancient land of Chosun—Korea.

David’s father and brothers served in World War I and World War II, and Tex couldn’t wait to become a soldier. An elite military Cadet Corps at El Centro’s Central Union High School caught his eye. It required good grades, determination, and an after-school community job, for which he needed an “official” birth certificate.

Estimates for underage soldiers during WW II and the Korean War are well over 200,000. The consequences of fraudulent enlistment were often severe. Many were stripped of their medals, thrown in the guardhouse, and given a dishonorable discharge. Like most underage soldiers, the circumstance of David's falsified birth record was fiercely guarded and remains unknown. For young Tex and thousands more, the only certainty was the savagery of the Forgotten War—a war that could not be called a war.

Decades later, I uncovered the answer to a haunting question I had pondered for years. How did David escape the fate of his young buddies, with whom he arrived aboard the U.S.S. Walker on July 20, 1950? A faded, yellow letter home provided the answer—and what lay in store for the 400 hastily assembled U.S. recruits.

*“Dearest Family: Arrived in Okinawa at noon today and two hours later was alerted to go to the battlefield in Korea. Please don't worry about me. I'll be ok.”*<sup>2</sup>

The two Okinawa battalions of green “fillers” joined the “Tragic 29th” Regimental Combat Team. On July 27, just seven days after transport from the U.S and only three days after arriving on the Korean battlefield—the raw, unprepared teenagers of David's unit were overrun by an entire division of well-prepared enemy soldiers and Russian tanks. But David Steward was not among them; instead, he lay in an Okinawa base hospital suffering a high fever from an episode of acute rheumatic fever he developed aboard his ship. Twenty years of research into the boy soldier's death laid bare the tangled labyrinth of the Korean War—and the misery it heaped upon our young men and their families.

The timing of young David's arrival on the battlefields of Korea could not have been worse. On the day he first touched Korean soil, August 31, 1950, the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) launched a five-pronged “do-or-die” attack against UN forces in the Pusan Perimeter. Colonel T.R. Fehrenbach, a Korean War veteran and historian labeled the first two weeks of September, “*the heaviest fighting and heaviest casualties of the war.*” By the end of September, American battle casualties in the Pusan Perimeter totaled nearly twenty thousand.<sup>3</sup> On September 1, young Tex hurriedly scribbled a last letter to his family:

*Dearest Mom & Family, I arrived in Korea yesterday. I haven't seen any action yet. Please try not to worry about me, Mom. Just pray for me. Maybe this thing will clear up soon, and God will let me go home to my loved ones ... All my love, Tex*<sup>4</sup>

Fighting hill to hill and hand-to-hand in the steep mountains near Taegu, David's First Cavalry Division was in a “*fight for its very existence.*”<sup>5</sup> As they took hill after hill, they found their fellow soldiers bound and tortured. The green soldiers of the First Cavalry began to fight with a new ferocity—they became soldiers. By nightfall of September 21, the NKPA had collapsed. Recklessly hurled through the gates of Hell, the outgunned and understrength men of the First Cavalry began to believe in themselves. And for a brief moment, the sound of boyhood laughter echoed through an ancient valley in the Land of the Morning Calm.

For young David Daniel Steward there would be no celebration, no laughter, no victory. On that day—a rare day on which his First Cavalry buddies dared to smile—young Tex lay at the brink of a steep ravine near the small village of Kumhwa dong, just north of Taegu. On September 21, 1950, just nineteen days after arriving on the front line, David was killed in action. His body would lie nameless in a half-shelter grave for months, deepening the grief and despair of his family.

Nearly thirty years later, the niece he never knew had a towheaded baby boy—and I named him David. And like his Uncle Davy, endowed with the gift of music—when life allows, he sits on the porch and plays his treasured Martin guitar.

*Seventy years ago, the boy soldier who gave his life for the freedom of others—lives on today ... not only in my son, his namesake, but in each and every Korean, who lives today in freedom.*

**16-Year-Old Missing in Korean War**

Sixteen-year-old David D. Steward, son of Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Steward, La Casa Courts, El Centro, was reported missing in action in Korea since September 21, the secretary of the army informed his parents this week.

The youth, whose birth certificate had incorrectly listed his birth date as January 29, 1932, rather than 1934, his mother said, enlisted January 28 of this year, one day before his 16th birthday. He took basic training at Fort Ord and arrived in Korea August 31. He was reported missing three weeks later.

David's father is an employee of the Imperial Irrigation District.

Steward attended Central Union High School part of the 1948-1949 year and then withdrew. He has three brothers and two sisters.

**Former Spartan Killed In Action**

David D. Steward, 16-year-old former C.U.H.S. student, has been listed as killed in action in Korea.

The boy had earlier been reported missing in action.

An incorrect birth statement allowed him to enlist in the Army on January 30.

Mr. and Mrs. Steward were informed two weeks ago that he had been missing since September 21. On Saturday they received a telegram from the defense department informing them that the young soldier had been killed.

David belonged to the Cadet Corps during the short time he was a member of the student body here at Central. He was more widely known among last year's freshmen as "Tex."

He had not completed his freshman year when he enlisted.

=HQ DEPT 6004 ASU POC FT MCARTHUR CALIF=  
DAVID MISSING IN ACTION SINCE SEPT 21=  
=W H STEWARD PO BOX 625 EL CENTRO CALIF=

July 29, 1950

Dearest Wandy,  
Arrived in Okinawa at noon today, and tomorrow later was alerted to go to the battle front in Korea. I'll be here about 30 days. These pictures and the certificate I want you to keep for me until I return.  
Please don't worry about me, because I'll be O.K. (I hope) but at least I have a part in this war too. I must do all I can.

For seventy years, David's official Army records and the American Battle Monuments Commission continue to list him as nineteen years of age at the time of his death. And while his official Cass County, TX birth certificate and Cass County Census records acknowledge his true age of sixteen—like thousands of underage soldiers, his Army records were never contested or changed.

Sources:

T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*<sup>3</sup>

Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War*<sup>5</sup>

Sherri Steward, *David D. Steward Private Collection*<sup>1, 2, 4</sup>