

# Kenneth Lee Olson (1945-1968)

Compiled by Karrie Louise-Norenberg Bles <familyhistory@bles.com> July 21, 2016  
Greysolon Daughters of Liberty Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution



uncredited photo from  
*Paynesville (MN) Press*

Name: Kenneth Lee Olson  
**Born:** May 26, 1945, Willmar, Minnesota  
Entered Service: June 20, 1967,  
Hennepin County, MN  
Branch: United States Army,  
Co. A, 5th Battalion,  
12th Infantry,  
199th Brigade  
Rank: Specialist Fourth Class  
**Conflict:** Vietnam  
**Death:** May 13, 1968,  
Long An, Republic of Vietnam  
Burial: Paynesville (MN) Cemetery  
Medal of Honor  
Presentation Date: April 7, 1970  
Vietnam Veterans  
Memorial: Panel 59E - Line 28  
Descendants: None  
Next of Kin: Brother Philip Olson  
Brother Daniel Olson



photo by Don Morfe



photo by Daniel P. Bles  
July 21, 2016, St. Paul, MN

*Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ~ John 15:13 ~*

Kenneth Lee "Ken" Olson believed these words. In the jungles of Vietnam in 1968, while a soldier in the U.S. Army, Olson died by these words while saving the life of a fellow soldier.

### **Early Years**

The youngest of Ben and Lydia Olson's three sons, Ken grew up on the family farm on the Meeker-Kandiyohi county line, south of Lake Koronis. With older brothers Philip and Daniel, he grew up loving to hunt and fish.

He attended country school through the eighth grade and then attended Paynesville High School. At PHS, he graduated cum laude, belonged to the National Honor Society, served as senior class president and president of the FFA Chapter, played trumpet in the band, played intramural sports, was a Homecoming candidate and starred in a drama production. As a young man, Ken was chosen as the Paynesville delegate to the Minnesota American Legion Boys State program.

"He was one of my top students," recalled LeRoy Hillbrand, who taught agriculture and was the advisor for the FFA Chapter in Paynesville for over 30 years. Olson had outstanding scholastic ability as well as a friendly, outgoing personality, according to Hillbrand. Ken was an active member of the Paynesville Gospel Tabernacle and served as president of the youth group.

### **War Years**

In June 1967, Ken was the first person in his family to graduate from college, earning a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture and the School of Business. He had planned to continue his agriculture studies in graduate school at Purdue University, but the Meeker County draft board informed him that his student deferment would not be extended.

On the basis of his college degree, Ken expected to get a desk job instead of being sent to the front lines in Vietnam, recalled his sister-in-law Juanita Olson. Just before shipping out to Vietnam, Ken had one last visit home to Minnesota. Soon after shipping out, he ordered Mother's Day flowers for his mother.

Specialist Fourth Class Kenneth Olson arrived in Vietnam around April 1, 1968. Six weeks later, on May 13, 1968, his unit was reinforcing a reconnaissance platoon that was engaged by an entrenched Viet Cong force.

Sp4c. Olson and a fellow soldier moved forward of the platoon to investigate another suspected line of bunkers. As the two men advanced, they were pinned down by intense automatic weapons fire from an enemy position ten meters to their front. With complete disregard for his own safety, Specialist Olson exposed himself and hurled a hand grenade into the Viet Cong position. Failing to silence the fire, he again exposed himself to the intense fire in preparation to assault the position. As he prepared to hurl the grenade he was wounded, causing him to drop the activated device within his own position. Realizing that it would explode immediately, Specialist Olson threw himself upon the grenade and pulled it into

his body to take the full force of the explosion. (Kenneth L. Olson Congressional Medal of Honor, 1970)

By taking the full force of the grenade, Olson saved the life of Gary Lindley, the fellow soldier who had advanced with him to that forward position.

Olson's sacrifice was not a surprise to people who knew him, his giving nature and his deep religious beliefs. "Hopefully," Edwin Schaumann, Jr. told the *Paynesville Press* in 1995, "we all have that in us."

Ken Olson died on Monday, May 13, 1968. Since Vietnam is across the International Date Line, it was still Mother's Day in Minnesota when he died. Perhaps his mother was wearing the flowers Ken had shipped to her. A week later two soldiers came to the family farm to inform Ben and Lydia Olson that Ken was missing in action. Because his body had not been recovered, he was not initially reported as deceased. However, family members were certain of Ken's death because of eye witness accounts from fellow soldiers.

In April 1970, President Nixon presented Congressional Medals of Honor to 22 American heroes. Ken's family accepted the Medal at the White House ceremony. Ken Olson is the only Paynesville, Minnesota High School graduate to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor. He is the only University of Minnesota graduate to earn the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War.

### **Post War Years**

Olson's sacrifice and service are honored in several ways. At the University of Minnesota College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences, there is a Ken Olson Memorial Scholarship Endowment. In 2004, Ken was in the first class of inductees into the Paynesville High School Distinguished Alumni. Two identical bronze memorials designed by the late Minneapolis artist/veteran Rodger Brodin were cast. One of the plaques is displayed inside the front lobby of American Legion Post 271 in Paynesville, Minnesota. The other is on display in the Minnesota Commons Room on the first floor of the St. Paul Student Center on the University of Minnesota campus. Featuring a bas-relief portrait of Ken, the inscription reads:

*Kenneth L. Olson, Paynesville, MN, graduated June 1967 with a BA from the College of Agriculture and the School of Business. Ken was drafted into the US Army on June 20, 1967.*

*On May 13, 1968, in the Republic of Vietnam, Specialist Fourth Class Olson was serving with Company A, 5th Battalion, 12th Infantry, 199th Infantry Brigade. During a firefight with an enemy force Sp4c Olson threw himself upon a grenade and pulled it into his body to take the full force of the explosion. By this unselfish action, Sp4c Olson sacrificed his own life to save the lives of his fellow comrades-in-arms.*

*Greater love hath no one than this  
that a man lay down his life for his friends.  
John 15: 13*

Documentation for Kenneth Lee Olson (1945-1968) research

Brodin, Rodger. *Kenneth L. Olson Memorial.* n.d. Bronze. University of Minnesota St. Paul Student Center Minnesota Commons Room, Falcon Heights, MN.

*Congressional Medal of Honor Society*, database (<http://www.cmohs.org>: accessed 21 Jul 2016), recipient page for Kenneth L. Olson.

*Find A Grave*, database and images (<http://findagrave.com>: accessed 21 July 2106), memorial page for Kenneth L. Olson (1945-1968), Find a Grave Memorial no. 7861505, citing Paynesville Cemetery, Paynesville, Stearns County, Minnesota; accompanying photograph provided by Don Morfe.

Jacobson, Michael. "Medal of Honor recipient honored posthumously as distinguished PAHS alumni." *Paynesville (MN) Press* .5 May 2004. Web. 21 Jul 2016. Accompanying photograph uncredited.

Stelling, Linda. "Legion rededicated Olson memorial plaque at open house." *Paynesville (MN) Press*. 24 May 2000. Web. 21 Jul 2016.