



Merrill "Bo" Lee Russell Jr.

January 15, 1951 - January 5, 2026

Merrill Lee Russell, Jr., affectionately known as "Bo," a resident of Okinawa, Japan, and formerly of Spencer, North Carolina, triumphantly entered the Gates of Heaven on January 5, 2026, after a long-persevering battle with Parkinson's disease.

Bo was born on January 15, 1951, in Albemarle, North Carolina, and was one week shy of his 75th birthday. He was the son of the late Merrill Lee Russell and Rena Blalock Russell. He graduated from North Rowan High School in 1969, where he served as student body president and became a legendary state champion wrestler. Bo earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Western Carolina University, continuing his success as a collegiate wrestling champion. Following his retirement from the United States Marine Corps, he received a Master of Divinity from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

Bo lived a life defined by his unwavering faith in Jesus Christ, as well as his strength, integrity, resilience, and passion. He proudly served his country and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Marine Corps. He later became Senior Pastor at Koza Baptist Church in Okinawa, where his leadership was instrumental in the relocation and construction of the new Koza Baptist Church in 2008. This work was his greatest JOY unto the Lord. Meticulous by nature and driven by vision, Bo approached every venture with

creativity and integrity, earning him the admiration of those who worked and served alongside him. It was a profound honor to him to serve and minister with Americans and the Okinawa Christian community and fellowship.

A gifted artist, Bo leaves behind a beautiful gallery of artwork for others to appreciate and admire. He also loved history, sports, research, writing, and engaging conversation, always marked by his wit and sense of humor.

In addition to his parents, he was preceded in death by his sister Rita Ammons.

Bo shared more than 54 years of marriage with his wife, Betty, his high school sweetheart. She devoted herself faithfully to his care through the challenges of his illness, loving him steadfastly until the end. Together, they shared a deep love of travel, especially collecting memories in Japan, shared friendships, and gratitude to God for walking life's journey side by side. They are united in love forever.

Left to cherish his memory are his wife, Betty; his son, Daniel of Okinawa, his brother, Todd Russell (Becky); nephews Adam Russell of Salisbury, North Carolina, Rick Ammons (Dana); and Rick's son, Tristan, of Wesley Chapel, Florida.

Summersett Funeral Home is serving the Russell family. A celebration of Bo's life will be held at a later date in Salisbury, North Carolina.

Online condolences may be made at www.summersettfuneralhome.com.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to Koza Baptist Church by check, mailed to:
Koza Baptist Church

686 Noborikawa
Okinawa City, 904-2142

Bo enjoyed beachcombing for sea glass in the Nagahama Bay. Included below is a poem he wrote:

LESSON OF THE SEA GLASS

From the ocean or shoreline, true sea glass takes time.
Tossed through the grit of the sand, at the Master's hand;
Once jagged edges made round, now waits to be found.

When facing times that are hard, remember the shard.
In that which was once broken, there is a lesson,

A truth best not to forget; life's grit is a gift.

In summary of his life, Bo's words are reflected in 2 Timothy 4:7:

I have fought the Good Fight,
I have finished the Race,
I have kept the FAITH..... All to God's GLORY.

Betty wishes to thank family and friends worldwide for their love and support over the years, and especially toward the end of Bo's Parkinson's journey. Your prayers were cornerstones for strength. The Okinawa medical team of doctors and staff were incredible in their compassion and medical expertise, and we are so grateful.

Betty wishes to express her heartfelt gratitude to family and friends around the

world for their love and support over the years, especially during the final season of Bo's Parkinson's journey. Your prayers were cornerstones of strength. She also extends deep appreciation to the Okinawa medical team—doctors and staff—whose compassion and medical expertise were extraordinary, and for which they are so grateful.

Tribute Wall

BG

“ *Bonnie Goodson lit a candle in memory of Merrill "Bo" Russell*



Bonnie Goodson - May 11 at 11:21 PM

SF

“ *1 file added to the album Funeral*



Summersett FH - January 20 at 03:45 PM

MF

“ *Betty,*
I can't imagine how much you are missing your sweetheart of so many years. Your marriage and life remind me of Jane and mine. We were childhood sweethearts just like you two. You must be so proud of him with the memories you have well over 50 years together.
May God be very close to you during this time and in the future. I am very impressed with the life Bo lived. It's easy to see that he took life very seriously and gave the best he had in every area.

Love,

Mike and Jane Fesperman

Mike & Jane Fesperman - January 16 at 04:20 PM



“ *Pastor Bo and Betty welcomed me with open arms into the Koza Family which ministered to my heart and soul at a much needed time in my life. Walking through those doors in Sept. of 2003 changed my life. I will not grieve his passing because I know he will meet me at those pearly gates someday. Thank you for your lifetime of service.* ”

Kaye Dail - January 15 at 09:38 PM

MG

“ *Too many memories to share in this one location. I will share “All Things Bo” at the service, once it’s scheduled. Bo was truly a presence in any room he entered. My deepest condolences to Betty and his family.* ”

Monty Grubb - January 14 at 08:04 PM

RP

“ *Burnie and I worshipped and served at Koza Baptist alongside Bo and Betty from 1992-1995. We know that God has welcomed home his faithful servant. Becky Parker, Fredericksburg, Virginia* ”

Rebecca Parker - January 08 at 08:20 PM

SP

“ When we put on the Music Man at North, Bo painted the scenes and I mixed the paint in the band room. It was such fun working to make all the colors he needed and we made a good team. Later in 1982 when my dad passed away, my mom and I with my son Sam went to Camp Lejeune to see the place were Mom and Dad met and we lived for several years after the Korean War until my dad retired from the Marines. And as we were leaving I went into the cafeteria to get a drink and there was Bo sitting at one of the tables eating lunch. It was so good to see him and we had a good time talking about high school. He said I was lucky to have my dad for so many years after he retired because a lot of retired military don:t live a long time after retirement . I am so thankful for the memories of working with Bo.

Sarah Krohn Presson - January 08 at 08:17 PM



“ I never had a chance to meet Bo but felt that I knew him. I worked with Merrill, Sr for many years in the City of Salisbury WW Lab. I often visited with Merrill and Rena across the street. Merrill did a lot of renovations on my house after retirement. I also had the opportunity to visit with him and Rena when they moved to Florida. I saw Merrill for the last time when he moved back to Salisbury at Oak Park Retirement. When we visited he always talked about his children and how proud he was of them. What a reunion Bo is having in heaven with his parents and sister. I pray for the family that they have the peace and comfort that God provides.

Carol McCall - January 08 at 10:18 AM

SS

I was so blessed to know Bo during our years together at North Rowan!! He was such a wonderful friend who always made us laugh and enjoy our classes together! He left such a wonderful legacy for all of us and I am so very blessed to have such a close friendship with his brother and sister-in-law, Todd and Becky. I pray that God will continue to guide and bless his family and loved ones.

Sarah Lloyd Smith - February 13 at 03:46 PM