

To Honor Our Fallen

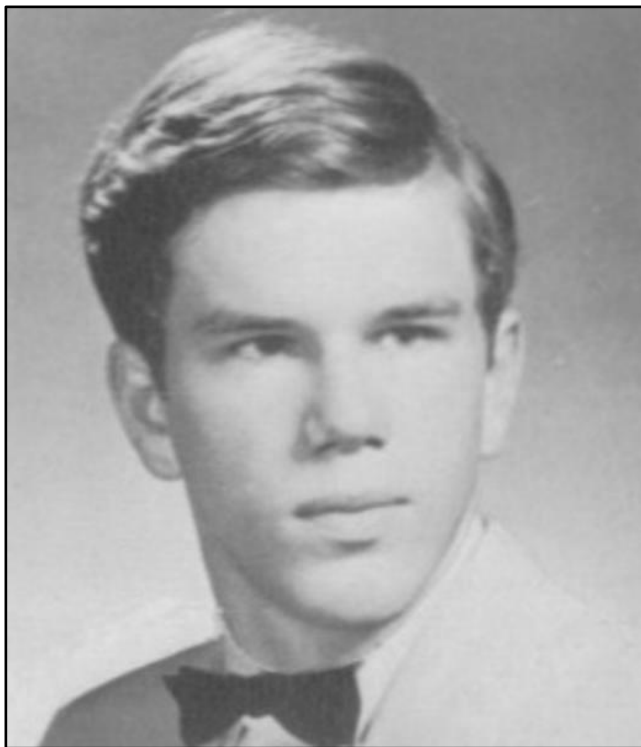
Robert Compton's name is engraved on the Pacifica Memorial Monument, located at the western end of the parking lot of Pacifica's American Legion Hall—555 Buel Avenue, Pacifica, California. Robert is one among fourteen remembered. The monument, dedicated on November 11, 2021, at 11 a.m., was built to honor Pacifica's Vietnam and Iraq fallen. Finis Vitae Sed Non Amoris.

November 11, 2021

The Story of Robert Compton

1949-1969

BY JEAN BARTLETT



Robert Compton, Terra Nova High School senior photo. Class of 1967.

Tim Perry could talk for days about his cousin, Bob Compton, and never run out of stories.

Both cousins grew up in the Linda Mar area of Pacifica. Bob's mom, Ramona (Perry) Compton, and Tim's dad, Bud Perry, were siblings and lived about a mile apart – with Bob's family on Perez Drive and Tim's family on Adobe Drive. Bob's dad Marvin owned Pacifica Lumber on Highway 1 and Tim's dad managed it.

"Bobby was three years older than me," Tim began, "and we were always close, but we really bonded when I got to Terra Nova High School."

That's when Bob had his "racecar."

"It's a Friday night and I'm over at Bob's house," Tim recalled. "His parents, his sister Maureen, and his brothers Ross and Matt are all sitting at the dinner table. Bob and I are getting ready to go out and his mom stood up and walked over to us and said, in a very parental way, 'Bobby, Tim is with you.' Then she shook her head and gave him a look. 'Okay, Mom,' Bobby said, 'I understand, Mom. I'll see you later.'"

Mrs. Compton held onto that look while her son and nephew walked out the door. The duo then climbed into Bob's Chevy Impala with the 409 engine and headed out of Pacifica to the King's Highway – El Camino Real – for some Friday night drag racing. [In the 1960s and 1970s, El Camino Real running from about midway in (the city of) Burlingame to about 31st Avenue in (the city of) San Mateo, was the top teen pick for cruising.]

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"Bob had header pipes on that car," Tim said. "As soon as we got to the El Camino, he pulled the header pipe caps off and we drag raced. Moments later, we got pulled over!"

"We would go out and get into so much trouble," Tim continued, "and his mom would just shake her head at him. She never screamed at him. It was just that look. Then the next day, he'd be in even more trouble!"

"The thing about Bobby was he was not afraid of anything or anyone. He was fearless. However, he would take the punishment for something he did and never talk back, and never explain why he did it. That wasn't true of me back then. I was a rude ass. But Bobby was never mean or disrespectful to people and he never complained about being reprimanded. He would stand up and take it. He would do all this 'stuff,' but everyone forgave him because you saw something in him. He was a bit of a James Dean."

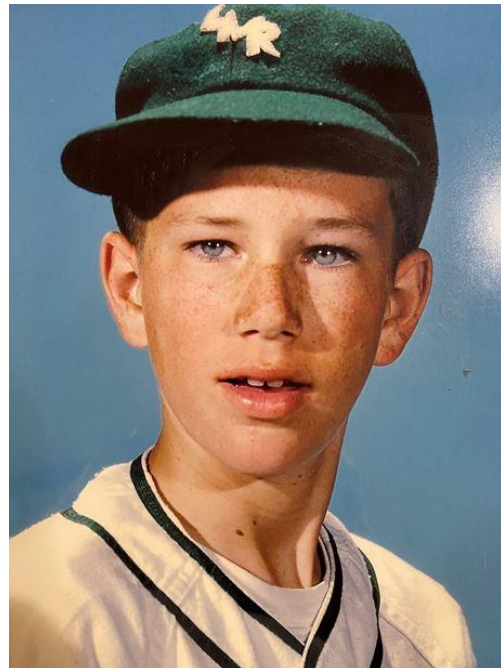
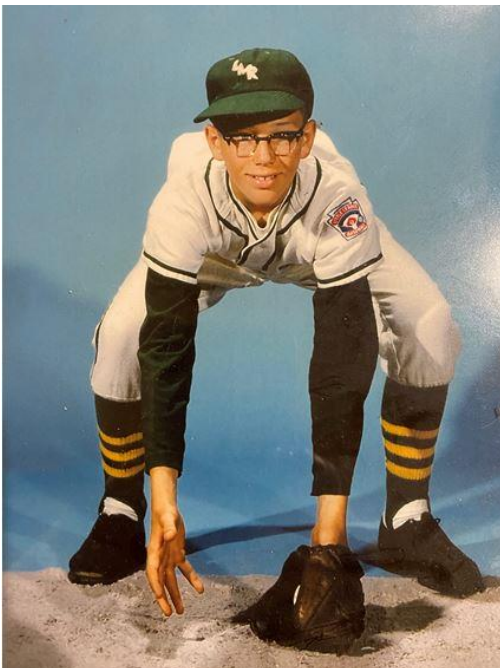
Robert William Compton was born in San Francisco on August 2, 1949 to Marvin Boyd Compton and Ramona Joanne (Perry) Compton. His dad was from Chugwater, Wyoming and his mom was from Duluth, Minnesota. When Ramona was 18, she decided to head out to San Francisco by train and the rest of her family followed not long after. In 1948, Ramona met Marv Compton. The couple married that same year in San Francisco on All Hallows' Eve.

"My dad wasn't in the service during WWII," Bob's younger brother Ross Compton said, "but he worked as a contractor for the Navy during the War installing radar for ships. After the War he got into the construction business."

Marv would go on to own three lumber companies in Pacifica. There was Sharp Park Lumber. Marv opened that in 1952 and his brother-in-law, David "Bud" Perry, managed it. There was Suburban Lumber Company which Marv owned with his brother-in-law Donald Perry. Ten years after opening Sharp Park Lumber, Marv and Bud changed the name to Pacifica Lumber and relocated it to Highway 1.

It was also in 1952, that Marv and Ramona moved to Pacifica. Along with 3-year-old Bob, their growing family now also included Bob's little sister Maureen who was born on April 28, 1951. (In 1956, Bob and Maureen's little brother Ross was born and in 1959, their little brother Matt was born.)

Bob went to Linda Mar Elementary. Always good at sports, he had a particular affinity for baseball and played it throughout his youth and into high school. His dad sponsored his Little League team.



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Freshman year, Terra Nova High School player Bob Compton, bottom row, center.

"When my brother turned 16 and started driving, something changed for him," Ross said "He still followed his San Francisco Giants but he stopped playing baseball."

"Once Bobby got a car he went wild," Tim said. "Before that, just like all of us, he enjoyed the picnics the family company had every year at Memorial Park. We also went camping every year at Mount Lassen (Lassen Volcanic National Park) when we were young. We did fishing and hiking."

"But then that driver's license thing happened," Tim added, shaking his head. "His parents had a brand new 1967 Cadillac and Bob and I went to the steepest part of Adobe Drive, where there are two steep hills, and Bobby flew off the top part of the first hill and hit the bottom part of the second hill and tore the mufflers right off. He was an all-American terror as a kid!"

Then there was the infamous Compton/Perry Halloween Pumpkin Escapade, October 31, 1966.

Both Bob and his cousin Tim worked for their dads at Pacifica Lumber, and on that day, they took the company truck, which had Pacifica Lumber written all over it, drove it to Half Moon Bay and filled the back of that truck with stolen pumpkins (stolen by them). Tim reports below on the latter part of that day and the follow-up to their Halloween activities.

"We went to the top of Crespi Drive that night and rolled those pumpkins down on trick-or-treaters. My dad received 100 phone calls at the shop the next day from parents. When Bobby showed up to work, my dad walked out into the yard and walked up to Bobby and goes, 'Are you kidding me? You really did this?' Bobby shook his head, 'Yes,' and my dad said, 'Go home and you are never driving these trucks again.' Bobby turned around and walked home from Vallemar to Linda Mar. His father Marv is in the office and doesn't even know that my father fired his son."

Just out of curiosity, was Bob ever a scout? "Not unless they had a hotrod chapter," Ross laughed.

Bob's younger brothers remember Bob's first car, a Chevy Biscayne.

"He would take Matt and me out in that Chevy and we would steal those Union 76 antenna balls off all the antennas in town that had them," Ross said. "He had his cigarettes rolled up in his sleeve when he drove that car around. He'd

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turn the car off before we got to my parents' house and push it up to the house. Like my cousin Tim said, Bob was like James Dean."

"Bobby was always really nice to his brothers, before and after he had a car," Tim said. "He'd help them out and let them hang with him as much as he could. They were so much younger, but he was protective of them and very sweet to them."

Because his brothers were so much younger, they just don't have that long list of memories with their big brother that they wish they had. They were little guys when Bob joined the Army and left for Vietnam – though every memory is cherished.

Matt remembers the time he "busted into Bob's room, yelling that Mays and McCovey had just hit back-to-back home runs." He also remembers that "Bob was a little under the weather that day and still in bed." But Matt just had to share his excitement with his big brother and Bob listened and grinned.

"Bob loved horror movies," Ross recalled, "Frankenstein, Dracula and the Wolf Man, and he would sneak me out of bed so I could watch them with him. Of course, I'd fall asleep every time."

Ross started laughing when he remembered the song his brother, and a buddy of his brother's, used to sing when they were walking down the street.

"We are handsome, were are great, I, Me, I, Me, I, Me eight!"

"Wait, maybe that last word is 'great,'" Ross continued laughing. "They did make it up."

Videographer Rich Jasso, a Terra Nova classmate of Bob's younger sister Maureen Compton and one of the four classmates behind the Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group, who made the memorial monument a reality, filmed Maureen back in 2003 talking about her brother. Even back then, Rich wanted to find a way to tell the stories of these Pacifica kids. Sadly Maureen passed in 2005, but many of her remembrances of Bob that she shared on that treasured film, are captured in this biography.



"Bob and I were less than two years apart and we had the typical big brother, little sister relationship," Maureen said. "He'd pick on me, I adored him. It changed when he was about 15 and I was just turning 13. All of a sudden, overnight, things got better. We just got along like gangbusters! And the thing I miss now is that because he and I were close in age – he and I were a pair. My younger brothers, at five years younger than me and eight years younger than me, they are a pair. It was a twosome and a twosome. Sometimes, when I go to certain places, I want to go, 'Bob, do you remember when Mom did that?' Or, 'Do you remember the time that we went here or there?' That's the hole I can't quite fill. Having that litter mate, that kid that grew up with me that knows all the family history and all the vacation spots we went to. Driving through Sacramento Valley when you are from Pacifica, the fog belt, with no air conditioning every summer and dying in the back seat – with four kids crammed in. There is no one to share that with and that's tough. That's a big hole.

"What was his state of mind when he joined the Army the first time? Oh, he couldn't wait. He wasn't cut out for high school and only got through because of my parents' sheer force of will. He would probably have dropped out in his junior year, had he been allowed to."

Robert Compton, Terra Nova High School, freshman year.

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"How did my parents feel about his joining the Army?" Maureen continued. "My parents struck him a deal, 'We'll let you join the Army but only after you graduate we'll let you go.' Because he didn't turn 18 until August, after graduation. He went into the Army, three days after Graduation Ceremony. So he stuck to his side and they had to stick to theirs. They weren't happy of course. There was a war going on."

"By the time Bob left for the Army, he was spending a lot of time in San Francisco and coming home really late," Maureen went on to say. "It appeared that he needed something more than Pacifica had for him at that point. At the tail end of the 1960s, he wasn't into the drug scene and he wasn't into the hippie scene, not at all. But even if he wasn't, that influence was so pervasive and we were so close to the epicenter that I think he saw something out there that he wasn't going to get staying here. Combine that with teenage angst and that striving to be independent long before we are ready. I think it all pushed him into the service and I think that had he not gone there, he might have found some other outlet and it may not have been any more successful, and the outcome would have been perhaps the same – because he wasn't really happy here. Yet he was more at peace with what he found in Vietnam. Odd! Go to war to find peace. Sometimes kids that age need a focus and they are so idealistic that going over there and helping out those poor people that were being firebombed, and Agent-Oranged, and having whole villages slaughtered – that was something terribly important as opposed to dropping out, or fighting the establishment, or swearing that you will never turn 30. It had a lot more impact."

Tim has also thought many times over the years about why his cousin signed up with the Army.

"He was so intelligent and he was so bored with high school," Tim said. "He just couldn't learn anything at Terra Nova. He was a dichotomy. He was smart and he was wild. There was the time we stole a couple of tombstones from a local cemetery and placed them in the parking spaces of the principal and vice principal at Terra Nova, and wrote RIP on those tombstones. These were people's tombstones! We were clueless! On another day, we broke water meter boxes and car antennas along Linda Mar Blvd. Bob was the most property destructive person I've ever met and yet incredibly gentle. He also had a big heart. And he loved his family, and he and his sister Maureen were so close. I was very close to Maureen as well.

"As to girls, they really liked him. He was tall and good looking. But he didn't know what to do with that because he was also very shy. I think Pacifica just didn't have enough going on for him and I know he was mesmerized by my brother's— David Perry— stories. David was a helicopter pilot. He spent two years in Vietnam and had over 1,500 flight combat hours. I don't think Bobby was waiting his whole life to join the Army. He wasn't a born GI Joe. But the Army offered something he couldn't find here. In a way, he ran away to join the Army."



The Ford Ord graduate poses with Matt, Ross and Maureen, 1967.

Bob did his basic training at Fort Ord. Approximately 80 miles south of San Francisco, the training grounds of Fort Ord consisted of about 28,000 acres near the Monterey Peninsula. (The U.S. Army Post closed in 1994.) From there, the soldier headed out with his unit to South Vietnam.

Bob was a good letter writer and when he was in Vietnam, he got interested in photography. He would mail film directly to the Linda Mar Camera Shop in Pacifica and they would develop the photographs for him. His folks would then send the developed photos back to Bob, making a few separate copies for the family.

"My dad would go pick them up and make sure there wasn't anything that we couldn't see and then he would bring them home," Maureen recalled. "I'm sure the camera shop saw some things they didn't want to see but they were always delighted and gracious about developing them. Everybody wanted to do a little something for the soldiers."

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"What kind of missions was he involved in?" Maureen pondered. "I never really knew. All that went to my dad at the lumber company. In my letters he wrote, 'It's hot here. Send more cookies! Be good to Mom and Dad! Don't fight with Ross or Matt!' Well I didn't fight with Ross and Matt. But it was the big brother thing. 'Oh, and I got some great buddies that are dying to meet you. They saw your photograph on my locker!'" (Nearly 40 years later, Maureen was still rolling her eyes over that last item!)

"I don't remember getting letters, but he sent me hats and jackets from Vietnam," Ross said, "all kinds of pretty cool stuff. I remember being fully dressed and going to school with my Vietnam clothes. I was pretty proud of my brother!"



Maureen noted that when Bob came back from Vietnam the first time, he was "much more mature and much more somber." (The Army rotated soldiers through Vietnam on one-year tours.)

"He wasn't a kid anymore," she said. "He didn't like what he had seen but it centered him, because he was pretty much the typical tormented teenager when he left. So in that regard, he was at peace."

"But after he came home from his first tour of duty, he re-upped and went back," Maureen continued. "We were all pretty upset about that. We thought it was pretty fortunate that he had made it through the first time. It was almost like he was doing it to us. Of course he wasn't but that is kind of how it felt. But I think Vietnam really took him to a place where he felt he was doing some good. He was very attached to the kids there. He would write home for toys and clothes, anything that was edible that wasn't perishable that kids would enjoy. Candy bars would melt, but stale chocolate chip cookies – those kinds of things. He really found kind of a calling."

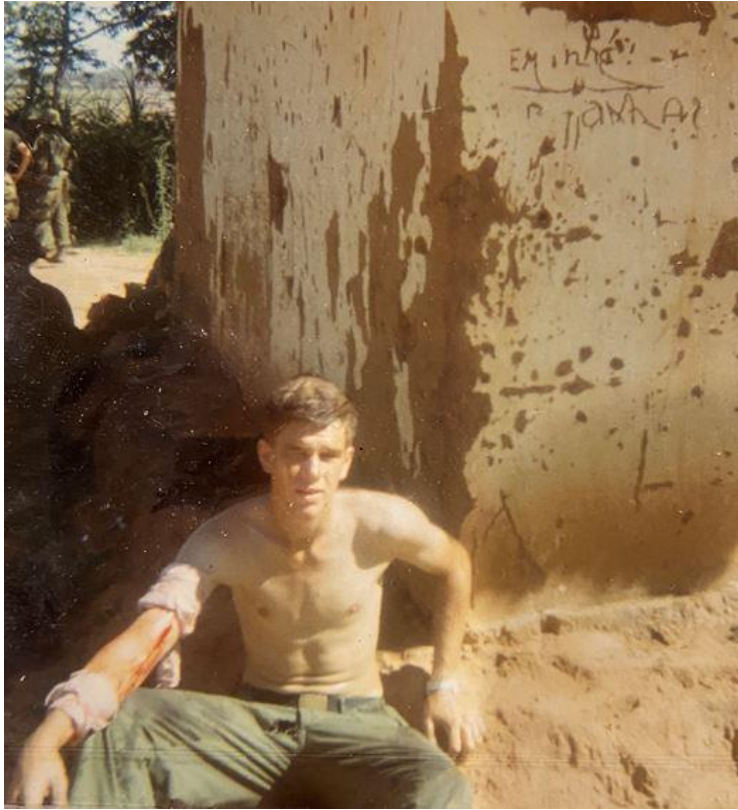
"I remember when he came home after his first tour of duty," Ross said. "He was pretty quiet but kind of the same guy. I was chasing Matt around with a squirt gun, I ran by Bob and he grabbed the gun out of my hand and stomped all over it. It had affected him that much. But he went back anyway."

Tim also talked about Bob signing up for a second tour of duty in Vietnam.

"He had comrades in arms there," Tim said. "He had buddies there in his platoon. My brother re-upped too. I think you just get embroiled in it."

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During his first assignment in Vietnam, Bob was awarded the Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. At the time he was wounded, he was serving as his unit's machine gunner. He wrote his parents in June of 1968 to be sure they knew he was okay. Excerpts from that letter are included here, along with the photo he sent to give his family peace of mind.



June 12, 1968

Dear Mom and Dad,

Well folks, I earned my Purple Heart this morning. It's nothing serious and I should be back in the field in a short while.

In my last letter I mentioned us going north for a few days but it looks like we'll be moving out soon. We hit 3 booby traps and mines in less than 24 hrs. This morning a guy hit either a mine or pressure-type booby trap. His legs were blown off at the knees and 8 other guys got shrapnel. I was darn lucky myself, got some in my shins and in the right arm and hand. It's nothing to worry about, honest.

Haven't much time for a long letter, just wanted to let you know what happened and that I'm OK. (Before you receive some scrambled telegram from the Red Cross.)

...Heard Marichal won his 11th yesterday. That was good news to hear, maybe he'll

win 30. My squad leader was all smiles when he heard the Mets won again. He got a small piece of shrapnel in his private, should have seen him laughing!

Gotta go if I'm gonna make it to the showers.

So long.

Love,

Bob

In July of 1968, Bob sent his folks a 10-page letter on Pacifica Lumber notepad paper. Some is excerpted here.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Man oh Man, have I got some writing to do. We just got in last night from that 5-day mission and it was a dilly. Up and down mountains that were so steep it was ridiculous.

Right now I consider myself a very lucky guy. Our new Colonel called in this morning and gave the order for our platoon to go out for another 5 days setting up ambushes. I couldn't go out because the skin off the top of one of my toes got rubbed off and now it's infected with jungle rot, which I've got all over my arms too. I tell you, we can't take much more of these eggheads.

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Whew! This letter is for gripes. Last night the re-supply chopper had 3 sacks of mail on it. What did they do but drop one out of the chopper while en route. I was expecting to get those pictures but they weren't with the other 2 sacks. So Mom, I hope you saved the negatives if that is the case.

...I've been taking the vitamin pills you sent and they seem to be of some help. Like yesterday, after climbing up a mountain for 7 hours I had enough strength to help put out a brush fire that the artillery guys had let get away. It was quite a sight, guys running around beating the fire with branches and pieces of cardboard. I'd have gotten a picture but I was too busy. (Need film too.)

Got a unique picture this morning. Our platoon sergeant, when hearing that we had to go out again said, "Well, I might as well make the best of it." He then asked me for the remaining case of beer (I had bought the night before because of my promotion) and then strapped it to his rucksack. Right away I knew it was going to be a good picture and it certainly should be.

Every time I think of pictures it reminds me of that sack of mail. All of us agreed we'd go look for it if a chopper would drop us off in the approximate area but no word has come down about recovering it.

...Guess this will be all this time. This toe should be keeping me back for some time so I'll write often.

Goodbye for now.

Love,

Bob

(the guy who used to be a PFC)

"Of course they made him a sergeant," Tim commented. "I imagine people would follow him anywhere. I did."



Bob was home for Christmas 1968 and the New Year.

"We lived at the end of Perez where there is a lot of open territory," Maureen said. "Bob went for a walk and came back all shaken because he kept looking for tripwires. He was so used to being in the jungle and being careful not to get blown up that he couldn't enjoy his walk."

"Christmas was awkward," Maureen went on to say. "I don't know, I just felt kind of detached from him at Christmas. That was weird. Almost watching him more than interacting with him – seeing what was going on, what he was doing, how he had changed, how he had not changed. What was the focus of his life now? He was more adult but still, he was just 19."

"He spent a lot of time with my cousin Tim," she recalled with a smile. "They went out raising hell. They borrowed my car and came back stinking of stale beer and for years afterwards, every time it rained my car smelled like stale beer. And who knows where they went! They would go for two or three days then come back."

It was close to mid-May, 1969, when Maureen woke up in the middle of the night.

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"I was crying my eyes out and couldn't stop," she said. "My mom came in, 'What's wrong? What's wrong?' And I said, 'I don't know.'"

"The next day I was in English class writing Bob a letter," Maureen continued. "The buzzer went off, the intercom. I needed to go to the office. And it all became clear. I closed my books. I knew. It was just inevitable almost. You don't put yourself in that kind of situation twice. He'd already been wounded twice. So this was the big one."

"I remember the day when they came to the door," Matt said. "I was so excited. Mom! Mom! There are Army men at the door! And I remember the look on her face because she knew what it meant, but I didn't. That's a memory that has burned into my recollection."

Maureen was picked up at school by her mom's best friend and brought home. It was then she learned that a messenger had come to the house and told them that Bob was missing in action.

"I still went to school some days after we found out he was missing in action," Maureen said, "and then I would kind of unravel and go home. Then one day, gosh I don't even remember where I was – we just found out. He hadn't had his dog tags on and it took a long time to figure out who he was."

In a *Pacifica Tribune* story, dated May 21, 1969, the article stated that a telegram from the Department of Defense arrived mid-afternoon Tuesday, May 20, "officially confirming the death of Robert Compton, 19, ending a six-day waiting period since Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Compton of Perez Drive had learned their son was missing in action."

On May 12, 1969, Sgt. Robert William Compton, Tactical Communication Chief, C Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry, 11th Infantry Brigade – died of wounds from hostile gun fire in Quảng Ngãi Province, South Vietnam. He was the recipient of two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star Medal and an Oak Leaf Cluster.

"How did my parents react?" Thirty-four years later, Maureen fought back some tears as she considered the question. "My mom fell apart. She just went to bed and stopped eating and cried and cried and cried. My dad sat in his chair with a glass of whiskey and some sleeping pills at night. It was pretty tough on them. I kind of had to step in. I had just turned 18 two weeks prior. So, I was old enough and I had two younger brothers that were quite a bit younger than me, and they needed parenting, and my parents needed parenting, they were just devastated. It kind of got me through it though, having to take care of everybody else. You kick into another level, your spiritual side kicks in and helps you through those times. That's what I did."

For Maureen, the death of her brother left her no interest in going to the various high school senior rites of passage. She skipped the senior prom and the parties. She did go to her graduation but she could barely remember it. Her parents went as well, though she didn't know how they did it. How they faced all that sympathy, or inevitable questions or maybe no questions at all.

"Nobody wanted to talk about it," Tim said. "My parents didn't talk about it. Bobby's parents wouldn't talk about it. I talked to my friends about it but I never got the facts."

"It just devastated my aunt. It changed her whole life. She could barely go to the Linda Mar Shopping Center to go grocery shopping. She was really a smart and strong woman and it knocked the wind out of her."

Funeral services for the Army Sergeant were held in the chapel at Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno on Thursday, May 29th.

In 1973, Bud Perry took over Pacifica Lumber with another relative, Fred Schoenduby, and Marv and Ramona Compton, and their two youngest children, moved to Graeagle, California.

"I wish my brother had been around longer," Ross said. "I would have liked to have known him better and known him as an adult."

"He is our hero," Matt said.

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"It took me quite a few years to come to total grips with it," Maureen said in 2003. "I mean it still hurts and there are days I am still reminded. Like when I drive past Golden Gate National Cemetery and there is a flag on every grave, and you know how many thousands of graves there are, that always gets to me. But he died when he was 19 and I am 52 now, so it is almost like he is frozen. I don't think of him as a 54-year-old man, I think of him as a 19-year-old kid. Now, since I have been a mother for so long, it is almost a maternal feeling of sadness, like losing a kid. It's different. But I take my lunch out and I have lunch with him. There are things that are easier now with the passage of time. I feel his presence and I think of him and I can just be there with him and it's okay."

"I think about Bobby every day," Tim said. "He was remarkable. He was a force. He wasn't a wise guy; he wasn't a punk – that was me. He was a patriot. If he was here today, he would own a large company and I would be working for him. There is nobody on this planet that I loved more than him. He was my James Dean."



Bob Compton and his young friend take a moment to exchange hats, South Vietnam.



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is additionally the author of two historical biography books on some of the more than 370,000 interred at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, CA. Visit her website at www.bartlettbiographies.com.

This story was sponsored by Pacifican Rich Jasso.