

Bartlett's News Briefs

December 26, 2019

To Build a Memorial

CLASSMATES WORK TO HONOR PACIFICA'S VIETNAM FALLEN

BY JEAN BARTLETT



June of 1965, before the War came to their class. Clockwise from the top of the pile: Barbara Scopinich, Robert Stuckey, Rich Jasso, Butch Petersen, Pat Little and Dave McKay.

"Growing up at that time, as I look back now I see it was pretty turbulent," longtime Pacifican Rich Jasso said. "But when you're a kid, you are just trying to get by."

Rich is a 1969 graduate of Terra Nova High School and one of four classmates who have banded together to establish a permanent memorial to honor Pacifica's 13 sons who died in Vietnam. Along with Rich Jasso, these four classmates are: Mike Jelinsky, Barbara (Scopinich) Petersen and Patti (Topolinski) Hawker. Together they are the Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group (PVMG). The four classmates, along with a fifth classmate, Faye (Field) Jasso-Miller, were interviewed for this story in December of 2019.

"We are a group of Pacifica natives, veterans and local high school alumni who are committed to working together to establish a permanent memorial dedicated to Pacifican service personnel who died in Vietnam," PVMG states in their 2019 introductory letter, written shortly after they formed in October of 2019.

Already a location for the memorial has been found and confirmed. It will stand at the home of Pacifica's American Legion Post 238, 555 Buel Avenue, Pacifica. The local Legion is proud to be a part of PVMG's permanent memorial project and will serve as the group's fiscal sponsor. Additionally, PVMG is adding the names, as they get them, of Pacificans who died in wars subsequent to Vietnam. This particular story is to shine a light on this project and to help raise the memorial with the funds needed to do so. There will also be a memorial to each of the fallen Pacificans through biography.

The names of Pacifica's Vietnam fallen are (alphabetically) as follows:

George Cabano, Jr. 1949-1968 (Oceana); Stan Childers, 1946-1967 (Terra Nova); Medford Chrysler, 1947-1967 (Terra Nova); Robert Compton, 1949-1969 (Terra Nova); Robert Curry, 1945-1966 (Terra Nova); Larry Foster, 1947-1966 (Oceana); Dave McKay, 1951-1970 (Terra Nova); George Patterson, 1948-1970 (Terra Nova); John Premenko, 1949-1970 (Terra Nova); Peter Premenko, 1947-1967 (Terra Nova); James Walker, Jr., 1947-1968 (Terra Nova); Johnny White, 1951-1970 (Terra Nova); and Charles Wright, Jr.

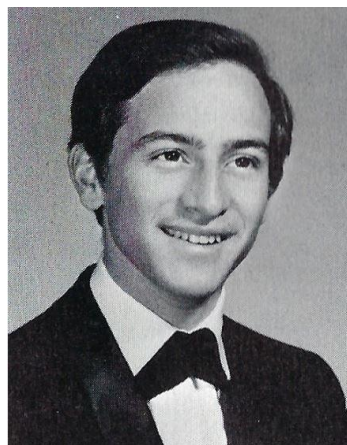
Charles Wright, Jr. died November 18, 1969. His name came to the group through a discovered 2009 letter written by Pacifican Bonnie Campbell. A 1964 Oceana High School graduate, Bonnie passed in October of 2010 and no further information is currently known on Tech 1st Class Charles Wright. Please contact Rich Jasso at jasso3@gmail.com or Mike Jelinsky at mjelinsky@gmail.com if you have information.

"The main intent of the memorial is to ensure that the survivor families and friends be afforded the dignity, honor, respect and recognition they deserve in their own hometown of Pacifica," PVMG goes on to say, "for paying the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country."

This story is just a beginning.

* * *

In 1965, when Rich, Mike, Patti and Barbara began their freshmen year at Terra Nova, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered American combat forces into Vietnam. While the War began before his presidency, it was during his presidency that what had been called the Vietnam conflict became an American war. (*America's involvement in Vietnam began in 1950 under President Harry S. Truman. The U.S. began supplying the French military in Vietnam with advisers as well as funding to help stop the communist-led Viet Minh. It was during the time of the Cold War – a time of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union following the Second World War.*)



Rich Jasso, Terra Nova High School Class of 1969.

"I wasn't thinking about war at all when I was a freshman," Rich said. "As far as I know, nobody was, well maybe I was a little."

One of six kids, Rich's eldest brother was in the Air Force when Rich started high school.

"He joined right after he graduated in 1963," Rich noted. "He served for four years and came back in 1967. We didn't know it at the time, because it was classified, but he served at secret air bases in Laos and Thailand from 1965 to 1967. Still, I was just a kid and the reality of war wasn't really on my radar."

Retired from the floor sales and installation trade, Rich has been married for 35 years, has three daughters and five grandchildren.

"Two of my friends from my class are on The Wall (The Vietnam Veterans Memorial)," Rich said. "I moved with my family from San Francisco to Pacifica when I was in seventh grade and these two kids, Dave McKay and Johnny White, transferred from Pacifica's Sanchez School to Linda Mar School where I was going. Then we all went to Terra Nova."

There are so many stories on both Dave and Johnny that it was decided, for this first printed story, the focus would be more on Johnny. It's a way to frame the times. (Each Pacifica son will be profiled once this project heads past the starting gate.)

"Johnny and I had some dalliances together," Rich laughed, "a little on the subculture side! I got him in trouble and he got me in trouble! Johnny was sort of funny. He was on the cusp of being a hippie but being a tough guy. If you look at his later high school photos – when all of us guys didn't put anything in our hair and just let it grow long – he would still put stuff in his hair, even though it was long. Before that he looked like Elvis. He was a very good looking guy and despite his tough guy veneer, he was a real soft guy inside. You just kind of felt safe around Johnny because he had that swagger."

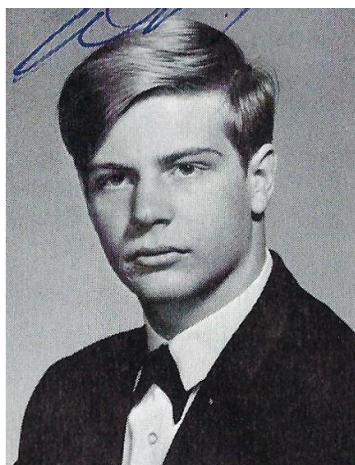
Mentored by local pastor Lee Warford, by the end of his sophomore year Rich became an honor student and remained so through graduation. He also became very involved with creative writing and Glee Club. He and his girlfriend, Elaine Campton, formed a folk duet and sang at Catholic and Protestant church functions. They won several talent contests and appeared on live radio. In addition, Rich got involved in student government and counseling activities at school.

"I also practically crusaded against youth drug use. I led a team of other students giving talks at lower grade levels all over the school district as facilitated by Terra Nova."

While Rich and Johnny remained friends throughout high school, they didn't hang out as much as they once did. "I had sort of straightened out."



Friends Dave McKay and Johnny White on the field at Linda Mar School, June of 1965. "This is the saddest picture," Rich Jasso said. "A mere five years later they were both gone."



Mike Jelinsky, Terra Nova High School Class of 1969.

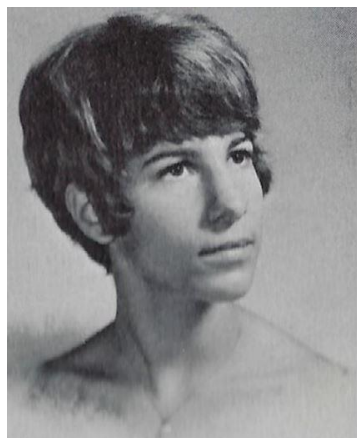
In high school, Mike Jelinsky was also good friends with Dave McKay and Johnny White. Mike was an athlete in high school. He was a good student, outgoing, didn't take himself too seriously and liked to joke around. He also found a connection back then with the Pacifica American Legion which opened the door to his career in the military.

"In 1968, I was sponsored by the Legion to attend Boy's State," Mike said. "This experience led to correspondence with the United States Military Academy at West Point."

After Mike graduated from Terra Nova in 1969, he became the first Pacifican to attend West Point. Thirty-eight years later, he retired as a Major General from the United States Army. He lives in Green Bay, WI, is the father of four and the grandfather of two.

Like his three classmates, he is dedicated to completing this memorial.

"The names of the deceased veterans that will grace the face of this Pacifica Veterans Memorial, are the kids that Patti, Rich, Barbara and I grew up with," Mike said. "They died as kids in a foreign land in the defense of the United States. This memorial is both righteous and overdue."



Barbara Scopinich, Terra Nova High School Class of 1969.

"Our intent is to install a memorial to honor the veterans from Pacifica who gave their lives for their country," longtime Pacifican Barbara (Scopinich) Petersen said.

Barbara, who grew up to teach preschool and kindergarten in the Pacifica School District for 25 years, said her Terra Nova High School experience was a very enjoyable one.

"I was on the Spirit Staff and participated a small amount in student government," she said.

Barbara married her high school sweetheart, Butch Petersen, and they had two children.

"Dave McKay, who lost his life in Vietnam in 1970, was one of my and my husband's best friends," Barbara said, "from our neighborhood, through grammar school and through high school. He enlisted in the Army in 1969 and he and I corresponded while he was stationed in Vietnam."

A widow now, with grandchildren attending school in Pacifica, Barbara said this memorial is long overdue.



Patti Topolinski, Terra Nova High School Class of 1969.

Terra Nova graduate Patti (Topolinski) Hawker has lived in California's Wine Country for 31 years. She said in high school she was a "goofy, gregarious, team-spirited girl."

"I was a cheerleader in sophomore year and a big sports fan – and still am with baseball. Love my Giants!"

Always an animal lover, Patti said she was fortunate to work in the veterinary field for 16 years. Once she moved to the Wine Country, she became enthralled with wine and worked in the industry for 20 years. She was widowed a year ago.

"I knew Dave McKay very well," she said. "We were in the same circle of friends and I wrote letters to him when he was in Vietnam. I also knew Johnny White but

not as closely as I did Dave. I was very good friends with Maureen Compton whose brother Robert also lost his life in Vietnam."

Patti became aware of the idea of the Pacifica Veterans Memorial project at her class's 50-year high school reunion this past October.

"At our reunion I got reacquainted with Rich and he told me about this memorial that he has been thinking about for a while. I thought 'this is a good cause' and told him, 'sure, I'll help you.' While some may not support a war, we certainly need to support those that signed up to protect us. These guys deserve to be recognized with a permanent place of honor."



June of 1965, taken at Linda Mar School, l to r: Rich Jasso, Dave McKay, Debbie Lannoo, John Brun and Barbara Scopinich.

* * *

"The first death that sent shockwaves through our school, at least when the four of us were there, was 'Stan the Man' (LCpl James Stanley B. Childers)," Rich said. "He died in February of 1967 in South Vietnam. He was the nicest guy. He was the good looking star athlete. He was so popular at Terra Nova and so well-known that no one could believe he died."

Rich remembered reading about Larry Foster's death in the Pacifica Tribune. Pvt. Lawrence Eugene Foster died on May 22, 1966 in South Vietnam. He was an Oceana High School graduate.

"By the time I graduated from Terra Nova back in 1969, my thoughts were the same as everyone else's," Rich recalled. "It felt very personal. I had no opposition to the military in itself. It was just the politics. It was the politics of lying and keeping the truth from the American public. 'Why are we there?' But it was on the news every day. The journalists that were embedded with the troops – we saw those clips on television every night. It was a nightmare

watching that stuff. It bothered us all. Fear of going somewhere you don't want to go. It was lurking over you, threatening your decision making. Should I even go to college? What would my Lottery number be?"

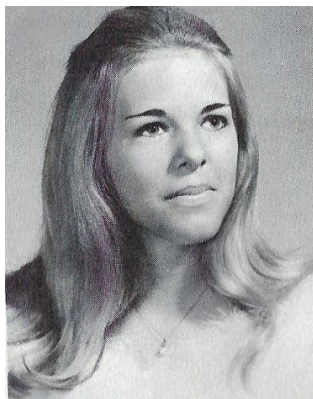
The purpose of the Vietnam Selective Service Lotteries was to assign military induction by chance, so that certain factors such as race or social class did not affect the outcome. Three hundred and sixty-six blue plastic lottery "capsules," representing all the dates of the year including leap year, were tossed into a large glass container and then were assigned a lottery number as they were picked. Those with numbers in the lowest one-third of the picks had the highest chance of being drafted.

"My brother Robert and I started going to demonstrations," Rich said. "We were also very naïve. These were demonstrations where people got arrested. But we didn't know who put the demonstrations together. I was never arrested but I remember running a lot. I was very fast."

Johnny and Rich also reestablished their friendship.

"By then, Johnny had really got into creative stuff," Rich went on to say. "He was good with his hands and he wanted to start a leather shop where he made leather products like belts. He had a lot of potential."

* * *



Faye Field, Terra Nova High School Class of 1969.

Faye (Field) Jasso-Miller is the mom of three, the grandmother of six and has been involved with ministry since right out of high school. She knew Johnny White very well. He was like a brother.

"It makes me emotional to talk about all of this, but I am also happy to do so," she said. "In our freshman year of high school for some of us, which includes Johnny and me, it was for a while a magical mystery tour.

"Johnny was happy go lucky and we had the same kind of folks – my father was strict and his father was strict. We also shared a love of music. Every time a new band or a new album came along, Johnny was knocking on the door, be-bopping his head. His favorite song was 'I'm So Glad.' He sang it all the time. When we were old enough to drive, every Friday we were on our way to the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco. He always drove."

During its reign, 1966 to 1969, the Avalon Ballroom was one of the most important music venues in the Bay Area. It was there, June of 1966, that Janis Joplin made her first public appearance with Big Brother and the Holding Company. The Grateful Dead played the Avalon Ballroom 29 times in that short span.

"Johnny and I didn't attend school functions like football games or dances. Music was where we were. Janis Joplin was singing and we were there. We used to love singing 'Age of Aquarius' (from the musical 'Hair'). Johnny was an Aquarian, I'm an Aquarian and so was our friend Linda Lynch."

In the summer before her senior year, Faye said she had a real awakening with God.

"When I entered my senior year, I was in a whole different place. I didn't spend as much time with Johnny in senior year. I sang in Glee and we had the most amazing music teacher, Mr. Bentley. He saw all this music in me. But Johnny and I remained friends, we were always friends. I knew his mom and his dad and his siblings. I knew his dog Velvet, a black lab. Johnny loved Velvet."

It wasn't that long after high school ended that Johnny went to Vietnam. Faye saw him the night before he left.

"He looked so handsome. He was in his uniform and he was so proud and happy, and he wanted to make his dad proud."

* * *



June of 1965, Rich Jasso, Larry Zane and Johnny White on the volleyball court at Linda Mar School.

On April 16, 1970, PFC Johnny Bryan White died in Gia Dinh Province, South Vietnam. Faye heard about it when she was driving on Linda Mar Blvd. A friend stopped her. "Did you hear about Johnny's death?" Faye drove immediately to Johnny's home. His mom was there alone and she was devastated. Faye held her and cried too.

"I remember sitting at home and writing a poem the day of his memorial," Rich said. "I was so upset when I found out he had died."

Rich joined the Army when he was 25. The Army medic did his basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and was then assigned to Fort Sam Houston, Brooks Army Medical Center and Audie Murphy Memorial Hospital. Eventually, for the duration of his enlistment, he was permanently assigned to Letterman Hospital Medical Center in the Presidio of San Francisco.

"For me, what first got me to start thinking again about all of our Pacifica kids who were casualties of the Vietnam War was when The Moving Wall came to town (April of 2003)," Rich said.

Often called "The Wall That Heals," The Moving Wall is a half-size replica of the Washington, DC Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It has been touring the country for more than thirty years.

"After seeing The Moving Wall, Maureen Compton (Robert Compton's sister) and I both brainstormed the concept of a Pacifica Vietnam Memorial, when she began assisting me with background research for my concept of a documentary. I'm sorry to say that we lost Maureen in 2005."

"I thought the Vietnam War was misguided when I was in high school and I still do," Rich went on to say. "But nothing takes away from the sacrifice that these guys made for their country. We will never forget them."

To support the Memorial Project of the Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group (PVMG), tax-deductible donations may be made to PVMG, through:

Pacifica American Legion Post 238. 555 Buel Avenue, Pacifica, CA 94044. Hall phone: 650-355-4346. Checks may be written to Pacifica American Legion Post 238.

In the memo section of the check, write: "Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group" or just "Memorial Group." With additional questions, contact: Rich Jasso, jasso3@gmail.com or Mike Jelinsky, mjelinsky@gmail.com.



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 also an award-winning children's book author, a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and the author of two historical biography books on some of the more than 370,000 interred at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma.