

To Build a Memorial

The Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group are four classmates from the 1969 graduating class of Terra Nova High School, who have banded together to establish a permanent memorial to honor Pacifica's Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq fallen. Along with a physical memorial, each of these young Pacificans is being memorialized through biography. Read the article about the Memorial Group and the goals of their project, [here](#).

June 23, 2021

The Story of Johnny White

1951-1970

BY JEAN BARTLETT



Johnny White, Terra Nova High School, sophomore year, 1967.

It was winter, 1970, and it was nighttime as five young men walked along the two-lane, unlit, Devil's Slide portion of California's Pacific Coast Highway. Rain poured down on them as they passionately discussed the Vietnam War. Occasionally they would be interrupted by the horn of a startled driver – shocked to come upon the group while traversing the bends of the cliff-hugging road. The youngest in that group was Johnny White. He had, relatively recently, developed a friendship with Robert Jasso, also in that group of five. Robert, a Terra Nova High School graduate, Class of 1967, had known Johnny mostly as his brother's childhood friend. Rich Jasso and Johnny were the same age. Rich had just graduated from Terra Nova so many months back in June. Johnny had not graduated.

"Johnny dropped out of Terra Nova to focus his attention on the work place," his little sister Sherry (White) Bolin said when interviewed for this story. "School wasn't really working for him. He wasn't interested in the educational part. He wanted the work. He wanted to make money."

But that night in 1970 was two days before Johnny was heading off for his U.S. Army assignment and he was looking for information – or maybe for reasons on why he shouldn't go to Vietnam.

"For a long time, Johnny didn't like me," Robert said. "I was one of the original long hairs at Terra Nova. Most people's parents wouldn't let their boys grow their hair long and look like a hippie. At the time, I was a bit of an anarchist and I had a sharp wit. Johnny seemed like more of a clean-cut guy."

But things shifted and sometime after Johnny left Terra Nova, he and Robert got to be friends.

"I am sure he thought of me as an older guy, kind of a role model," Robert said. "He was a big kid, bigger than me. He reminded me of an Errol Flynn-type guy – good looking, square jaw, high cheek bones, good physique. Girls loved him. I remember his room was decked out with posters. But I didn't really know him on a huge everyday basis. Our friendship was short and intense."

The three other men in the late-night walking group were Robert's buddies and like Robert, none of them were against the military but none of them were for the Vietnam War.

"At that moment, Johnny had one foot in the United States and the other in Vietnam; his feelings were very mixed," Robert continued. "I remember he was wearing a green Army poncho, and it was just glistening with rivulets of water and his face was totally wet. We were all drenched. We were being showered on and we were yelling and trying to keep him from going to Vietnam. It was windy and it was crazy, and it was dangerous. Here we are walking along Devil's Slide, probably drunk, possibly stoned, trying to persuade this kid to stay home."

"But he made it past the gauntlet we put him through and went. So his resolve was there."

* * *



Born on January 21, 1951, Johnny Bryan White was the second child and first son of Georgette Marie (Gomes) White and Jackson Bryan White. The couple were parents to four: Sandi, Johnny, Sherry and Robert. Georgette White was born in La Honda, CA, and grew up in Pescadero. Of Portuguese descent, her family dates back in California and she was a Native Daughter of the Golden West. Her husband, Jackson, was from Marion, Illinois.

"My dad was the eldest of 11 children," Sherry said. "He tried to escape from home when he was 14. He made several attempts to join the Merchant Marine and finally did get in, underage. Then he went into the Navy. When Johnny was born at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Oakland, Dad still worked for the U.S. Navy out at Hunters Point Shipyard (San Francisco). He was an electrician, a foreman. Back then, the family lived near the shipyard. They moved to Pacifica in 1955, not long before I was born. Our home was on Galvez Drive in Linda Mar – 1207 Galvez. "

←Clockwise from bottom left: Robert, Sandi, Johnny and Sherry, circa 1961.

"We grew up with a lot of kids in the neighborhood," Sherry continued. "There was always some game going on. And back then, most of the moms were at home and not a one of them was too afraid to yell at you if you were doing something bad!" Sherry laughed at the recollection.

"We had a creek property. As kids, every year we were in the creek building dams. It was our playground. Pacifica was a great place to grow up in so many ways and there was so much camaraderie in Linda Mar."

Johnny played Little League Baseball at White Field. During the season, it seemed like he and his family spent every weekend at White Field and they loved it. He started playing acoustic guitar at a relatively young age. Then later as a teen, he did the "electric guitar thing." He had a newspaper route. Sherry never remembers him folding his own newspapers. He used to give her a quarter to get the job done.



Johnny in elementary school.



Johnny with his acoustic guitar.



Johnny, Little League, 1964.

"He loved building model airplanes and cars," Sherry went on to say. "He always liked building things. He built forts. He and his friends dug this big hole in the backyard and built an underground fort. Those were the days when kids entertained themselves."

Johnny often made the *Pacifica Tribune* Little League Sports section. For instance, playing for Linda Mar Realty – summer of 1963, "Johnny White slugged a grand slam home and drove in four runs. He also hit a single and drove in one run to take top batting honors for the day. Gary Hernandez got the nod as winning pitcher and was aided by Lorin Ottonello behind the plate." And again for Linda Mar Realty, same summer, "Johnny White belted a two run homer and drove in three runs for the victors, with Calder helping with a double. Pat Higgins, catcher, and Ken Roberts, pitcher, each did their share for Sun Valley by hitting doubles."



Christmas with the Whites, clockwise from far left: Sandi, Jackson, Sherry, Georgette, Johnny and Robert, circa 1962.

"Johnny was fun and jovial and full of mischief, and always getting into trouble for his mischief," Sherry grinned. "He was tall and he used to use me like a barbell, literally, to lift weights."

Johnny and his siblings often watched The Three Stooges. Originally a Vaudeville team, The Three Stooges used physical farce and slapstick comedy throughout 190 short subject films that were all the television rage during the 1960s, in particular. Moe Howard, the Stooge in charge, was famous for attacking his fellow Stooges with "gag" eye pokes, slaps and head bonking.

"We used to watch television and I would sit on his back," Sherry laughed. "He would lay down with his head across his arms and I'd take a seat. We would watch The Three Stooges and when the commercial came on, I would hightail it to the bathroom and lock the door – because he would practice the Moe 'thing' on me. I blame him for my phobias! But of course, I adored him."



Sherry and Johnny at the San Francisco Zoo, circa 1963.

As a kid, Johnny was also a go-kart builder.

"Nothing in the garage was sacred," Sherry noted. "Anything that had wheels was going on the go-kart, such as the wheels on the old lawnmower or a buggy. Galvez seemed like a big hill to me when I was a kid – though it really isn't much – and back then, Rosita didn't got all the way back. There was a farm there and there wasn't any traffic. We would go all the way up, to the other end of Galvez, and come down two levels of hills on go-karts. That was so much fun.

"He was always that older brother that I wanted to hang out with. But I was a lot younger and I was a girl, though I didn't see myself that way. I think that's why I got tortured! I've been locked in a fort, was nearly burned at the stake and was hung by the bunkbed!"



**Johnny would have many prized modes of transportation.
This motorbike is from his freshman year of high school.**

In the days the White family was growing up, kids in Pacifica's Linda Mar neighborhood went to Sanchez Elementary School through sixth grade, and then seventh and eighth grades at Linda Mar School. Johnny used to ride his bicycle to school, dropping his sister off at Sanchez when he was attending Linda Mar. She rode on the handlebars. Just like at Sanchez School, Johnny had a lot of friends at Linda Mar.

"Linda Mar School is when I got to be friends with Johnny and another kid from the neighborhood, Dave McKay," said Rich Jasso, Robert Jasso's younger brother.

The Jasso family moved from San Francisco to Pacifica when Rich was in seventh grade. Rich, Johnny and Dave all went to Terra Nova High School together as well. (Both Johnny and Dave would leave Terra Nova following their junior year, and both would eventually head to Vietnam. Neither would make it home.)

"Johnny and I had some dalliances together," Rich said, smiling, "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."

Like Rich, Johnny and Dave, Faye (Field) Jasso-Miller was also in the Terra Nova class that would graduate in 1969. She and Johnny were friends. "He was like a brother," she said.

"Johnny was happy go lucky and we had the same kind of folks," Faye said. "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."

Operating from 1966 to 1969, the Avenue Ballroom was a classic rock venue of that era, featuring bands like the Grateful Dead, and Big Brother and the Holding Company, along with the latter's lead singer, Janis Joplin.

"I remember Johnny going out with an armful of albums to a friend's house and there were always friends coming in with records," Sherry recalled. "I still even have some of his albums. My mother hung onto them. My mom was that mom when you thought you were throwing stuff away it was just going into her closet!

Sherry said that when Johnny was in high school, a lot of his friends would come over and they would climb in through his bedroom window.



"They didn't go through the front door," she laughed. "We lived in a Linda Mar rancher and there were four kids. The boys shared a room and the girls shared a room, and these were not big rooms. Johnny would scoop up my little brother and bring him into my room in the night – so he could entertain. Actually, after Johnny passed away, I moved into his room and someone did try to climb in through that window, who didn't know, and it scared the hell out of me!"

←Johnny always enjoyed being silly. In this photo, he is wearing a Barbie hat and accessorizing it with a Barbie purse on his pinkie.

Sherry said that Johnny's "teen" relationship with her dad was definitely part of those times.

"My dad was the guy who had the leather belt. Going out to the garage was the place you did not want to go and Johnny got the belt out there a few times as a teenager."

In 1968, there was a weeklong youth riot in Pacifica at the Linda Mar Shopping Center. That was one of those times.

"Johnny was there at some point while the news cameras were rolling. My dad saw him on the news. With my dad, you could do 'bad' stuff but you couldn't lie about it." Sherry sighed at the memory.

"But my dad was a proud dad and he did everything for Johnny that he could. We weren't treated with kid gloves as kids are now. I'm not sure if it is better. But we all respected our parents."

Like so many of his buddies, Sherry said that Johnny had a motorcycle.

"He also went through the car thing. My dad got him several different cars. He had a VW Bug that he had for a very short period of time before he rolled it.

"In addition, he was very creative. When he was in school he did woodworking as well as bead work. He learned how to work with leather. My sister and I still have some of the purses and belts he made us."

In Johnny's freshman and sophomore years at Terra Nova he played football. As he aged, his interest in music, which included dallying on electric guitar, became more of his thing. His plan was to eventually own and operate his own leather shop.

* * *

While his fellow classmates were in the early part of their senior year at Terra Nova, Johnny entered the U.S. Army and did his basic training at Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, Washington. Only 17 at the time, it would be another year before Johnny did his AIT (Advanced Individual Training) at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. There he trained to be an Army cook. However it was at Fort Lewis, that he would immediately learn the line that Army barbers are

famous for, "You want to keep your sideburns?" Following the "yes" response, the sideburns were shorn and subsequently placed in their former wearer's hands.



Johnny White, second from left, top row, U.S. Army Training Center, Ft. Lewis, Wash., Graduation, December, 1968.

After his Army Training graduation in Washington State, Johnny returned to Pacifica. He worked and really finessed his skills at leatherwork. He still had friends climbing in through the window. Just due to changed interests, he lost contact for a while with his buddies Rich and Faye, but all that came back before he headed off to Fort Leonard Wood.

Located in the south central Missouri Ozarks, Fort Leonard Wood, or "Lost in the Woods" as its residents called it, was established as a basic training center in 1940. Johnny enjoyed learning his specialty, cooking, and he thoroughly enjoyed cooking for a crowd.

He wrote his mom from Ft. Leonard. (Jackson and Georgette divorced and Sherry doesn't have any of the letters her brother may have sent their dad, who died in 1976. But Sherry found this letter to her mom, not long after her mom passed, at the age of 90, in 2019.)

Mom – I Love You

You shouldn't miss my letters cause every letter you write me, I'll answer as soon as I get it. So if you don't receive any letters from me figure it's your own fault O.K.! My schooling shouldn't interrupt our letters. You mean more to me than getting ahead ever will. And what's this, don't worry about "moon" stuff? You know what I think about going to the moon. I'm proud it was our country who made it there

first. But I think it's a big mistake. I think we're more worried about outer space than our own troubles on our own planet. To me it's a waste of money. I watched the touchdown in St. Louis over not this last weekend but the weekend before.

I've been going there every weekend with my friend Bob Rogger. He lives in St. Louis. I stay over at his house and go out with him every once in a while. He's a musician and has a record out that plays on the local stations. I think it's pretty good. He plays in a soul-music band called the Apostles. He plays drums. The only thing is he got drafted and isn't playing anymore. He has a "69" Grand Prix, which gets us to his house, usually Friday night sometime. He also has the cutest 81-year-old grandma who I talk to and help every now and then.

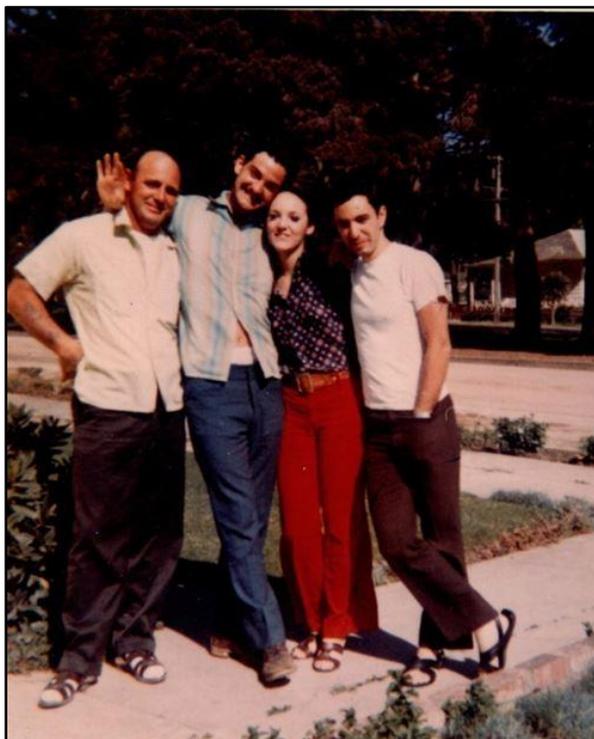
I bring my homework there, if I have it, for the weekend. Last week we went to the drive-in.

Tomorrow we play A Company in softball and if we win, we'll play a tie-off for first place with D Company. We have uniforms and everything. But it's just a lot of fun to get out there and goof off. Today we played a practice game with Head Quarters Co. and beat em 12-8. I play left field, the other cook plays right and the Mess Sergeant pitches. ...

Before his deployment to Vietnam, Johnny spent time with his family, cooking up a storm for them on his 30-day leave. He marveled at what a difference it was cooking for so few. It was two nights before he left that he walked Highway 1, in a downpour, with Robert Jasso. But the next day, the sun was out as he posed for a photo with his dad, his sister Sandi and her husband Ron Weber.



At some point on leave, Johnny poses with his brother Robert and their cousin Theresa Hibbet.



Left to right: Dad (Jackson), Johnny, sister Sandi and her husband Ron Weber, the day before Johnny shipped out.

Johnny's friend 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."

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Private First Class Johnny Bryan White served with the 154th Transportation Company, 4th Transportation Command, United States Army Support Command (Saigon), 1st Logistical Command. His tour start date commenced on March 19, 1970. On Saturday, April 18, 1970, two men in uniform knocked on his family's door.



"It's something you don't forget," Sherry said. "They don't even have to say anything when you open the door, you know. My mom opened the door and I came up to her. They were standing there and it was horrific. I pretty much lost it. My brother was very important to me. It was hard on the entire family."

PFC Johnny Bryan White was killed on April 16, 1970, in Gia Dinh Province, South Vietnam.

On Wednesday, April 22, 1970, the *Pacific Tribune* reported that "the terse Army announcement said merely that Pfc. White died in Saigon of non-battle causes and that official word would come within the week."

Johnny's mom told the Wednesday weekly that, "Johnny never wanted his picture in the *Tribune* nor any fuss made about him after he went into the Army. I'd like to keep it that way for him now. He was a happy go lucky fellow and he had a million friends. Make it as simple a story as possible. He wouldn't have liked a flowery story or big headlines."

←The *Pacific Tribune* ran this photo and a small, accompanying story on Page 3 of their April 22, 1970 issue. They additionally noted, "The funeral will be held at Nauman and Lincoln's Chapel by the Sea at a time to be announced later, pending word from the Army."

Faye heard about Johnny's death 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.

"The details of my brother's death have remained vague," Sherry said, "because he was on leave in Saigon when he died. He was a cook and he would not have been in battle, although I suppose you never know. But he was in a country that didn't want him there."

On May 15, 1970, Peter A. Sakach, Captain, U.S. Army, wrote Johnny's mother a letter of sympathy, most of which is presented here:

Dear Mrs. White,

On behalf of the Officers and men of the 154th Transportation Company, may I express our deepest and most sincere sympathy on the loss of your son, and our comrade, Private First Class Johnny B. White on the sixteenth day of April 1970.

Although he had not been assigned to this company very long, Johnny was well liked by the other members of the unit. He was a very capable, intelligent and enthusiastic individual who showed great promise of being a true credit to his unit and the United States Army. The death of such a fine and promising young man is a shock to all of us who knew him and we share with you a sense of grief at his loss, praying that God grants him peace.

A memorial service, attended by members of Johnny's unit, was conducted in his honor and memory in the Battalion Chapel on the twenty first day of April. I am enclosing a copy of the memorial program prepared especially for this service.

Johnny, his father Jackson, and his brother Robert, are buried together at Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno, Section 2A, Site 396. Private First Class White's name is on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall at Panel 11W, Line 15.

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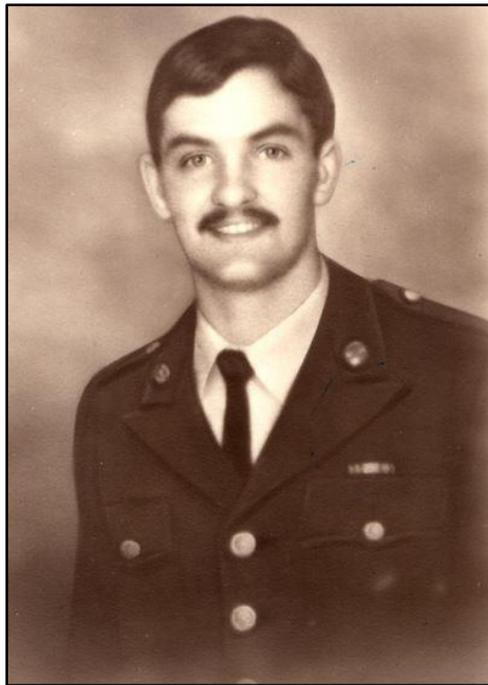
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"My brother' Johnny's death and the recollection of that devastating moment when we were told, is a feeling that just doesn't go away," Sherry said. "It was a long time before I could watch anything on television that played 'Taps' or watch anything that referenced Vietnam. I don't think anyone in our family ever got over losing him and in many ways it shaped us."

"I don't know where I was physically when I learned that Johnny died," Robert said. "But I was immediately mentally and emotionally transported back to that night we walked on Highway 1. On that night, I really felt that he was in mortal danger. And when I learned of his death, I just felt depressed and really sad. I felt so much regret that I didn't do enough to keep him home. I do know that had he lived, he would not be a radical. He would be an upstanding citizen."

Sherry still misses her brother but has found peace with his death.

"He loved cooking and found his place in the Army as a head cook. I think that was part of his gift. He always found a way to make his life situation work for him. I am so proud of who he was and how well he handled his time in the Army, always finding ways to improve himself and enjoy his life. I will never forget him and my children will never forget him, even though they never knew him. But as long as I live, I will always wish that he was still here.



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.