

Author: Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

To Build a Memorial ~ The Story of George A. Cabano, Jr.

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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](#).

November 26, 2020

The Story of George A. Cabano, Jr. 1949-1968

BY JEAN BARTLETT



George Cabano, Oceana High School senior photo.
Class of 1967.

"My brother George had a great laugh," his sister Donna Garibaldi Woodside still recalls clearly. "And he made me laugh, a lot. Of course we had normal kid stuff. I would annoy him, make that also a lot! But he was a protective and caring big brother to all of us – his two little sisters and his little brother. Everyone at Oceana High School loved him, especially the girls.

"He was also a sensitive guy and he hated what he was trained to do. He hated it there in Vietnam. He just wanted to do it and come home. I wrote him a lot. He wrote to me as well."

"I met George in 1963," Dan Peters said. "I was 14. My family had moved from Brighton Road in Sharp Park to Milagra Drive (in Pacifica's Pacific Manor neighborhood). We moved across the street and a few houses down from George and his family. I considered George my best friend and buddy. He was a good guy and he was always ready to laugh."

George Angelo Cabano, Jr., was born in San Mateo, California, on July 25, 1949 to Dolores Jones and George Angelo Cabano, Sr. His parents split when he was a little and his mom remarried. Dolores and Frank Garibaldi and their family lived in Daly City and then moved to Pacifica in 1958. George was the eldest of four. His sister Donna is three years younger, his sister Marcel is five years younger and his brother Frank is eight years younger.

George and his stepdad got along great.

"They had their moments," Donna laughed, "but it was all good."

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Frank worked at Pacific Bell as an inspector repairman, managing the fleet of trucks that the workers used.

"Dad also worked at the Union Oil Station on Hillside Blvd. in Daly City," Donna said, "back when gas stations had mechanics. Mom worked at many different car dealerships, in the DMV part of it."

On Wednesday, October 9, 1968, the *Pacifica Tribune* ran a front-page story on George. In it, publisher/editor Bill Drake wrote about George's childhood.

"He was the kid who used to play baseball in the middle of Milagra Drive, mow the lawn and run errands for his mom. He's the one who went on camping trips with Troop 29, Boy Scouts of America, and came home 'dirty but so happy.' He's the one who used to carry a flag for Frank Bedford's blue-and-white Pacifica Sweethearts marching group.

"He's one of the ones who trooped to Pacific Manor School and rode the big yellow bus to Sharp Park School. He's one of those you didn't hear about being in trouble; he wasn't a statistic in the juvenile crime report.



George and Santa. Circa 1954.

George and Dan were Boy Scouts together in Troop 29. After both achieved the rank of Life Scout, the two friends and Oceana High School classmates transferred to Explorer Scouts at around age 16-17.

"Besides hiking and camping with the Boy Scouts and Explorer Scouts, George and I spent a lot of time hiking in the Milagra canyon/creek areas. We also explored the deserted pillboxes from WWII on the hills."

Prior to the U.S. entrance into the Second World War, these Army "pillbox" stations were furnished with radar equipment, high-powered telescopes, telephone connections and plotting rooms. Gun batteries were at the ready for coastal protection.

George, like his stepdad, had a big interest in cars.

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George, sophomore year, Oceana High School.

"We used to help, watch, Frank tinker with the race cars and with the assortment of older hot rods in his garage," Dan recalled. "I think there was a 1939 Ford Coupe that George worked on that was to be his when he got out of the service. I know his dad kept it for years after, but never finished it."

"One of the big things we used to do as a family was go to the Vallejo Auto Race Track (Vallejo Speedway) on Saturday nights," Donna said. "Dan often joined us. And I remember at one point, George got himself a Mercury Cougar. It was gold."

"I remember that car," Dan said, "I'm not sure where George got it, maybe from his dad or possibly from another neighbor, Jim Soto. I got my first car from Jim, a 1938 Buick Special. George did help me work on the Buick and we double dated in it our senior year. George was always happy he and his girlfriend got the huge backseat. It was a serious relationship and I can tell you that George didn't believe in pre-marital sex. He was saving that for when they got married. At least, not in my backseat...!"

"George and I also used to go to the slot car racing track in Pacific Manor," Dan went on to say. "It was next to Bank of America. Both of us built slot cars and raced them there."

George played football all four years at Oceana and his coach, Jesse Jones, said he never missed a day of practice in any of those four years.

"His number was 66," Dan said. "He played defensive center. I remember he was good at it and he really enjoyed the game. He told me he liked to knock people down!"

Dan said that George liked to draw. He did pencil drawings of cars and excelled at Oceana's mechanical drawing class. He also noted that George was always hungry.

"When we got home from school, George would get the box of corn starch and sugar out of the cupboard, mix them up, and cook his version of pudding. Sometimes he would mix in a piece of a Hershey chocolate bar for flavor. Years later I mentioned that to his mom and she had a good laugh because she said she always wondered where the corn starch went. It was our secret."

George's favorite go-to meal was a hamburger, fries and a shake, repeat.

During high school, George worked at Chubby's in Sharp Park.

"Chubby's was at the corner of Francisco and Santa Maria," Dan said. "The building is still there. It's where El Toro Loco is now." (El Toro Loco serves Mexican, Peruvian and Latin American home-style food.)

"I think George worked as a busboy, cleaned dishes. I remember he didn't like the boss, Chubby, but was happy that he got all the fries and hamburgers for free."

"When George left and joined the Marines, I started working at Chubby's," Donna recalled with a smile. "That's about the time when The Turtles came out with their song 'Happy Together.' That was George's favorite song."

George's mom told the *Tribune* in 1968, that George had registered at Lassen Community College in Susanville, California. He wanted to be a forester, she said. "He just loved the outdoors so much."

But then, a month after graduation from Oceana in 1967, George enlisted in the Marines.

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"George decided he wanted to do his part for his country and wanted to be the best, 'The Few, The Proud,' which is why he joined the Marines," Dan said. "He was very excited about being a Marine, not so much excited about going to Vietnam."

A last camping trip was planned.

"We went to the upper Sierras, east of Long Barn, 'we' being: Mike Ross, Ed Talbot, George and me. George had already joined the Marines and we knew this would be the last time we went camping as a team. It was hot and dry. George forgot to bring a canteen for water and kept bugging the rest of us to share ours. We gave him a bad time about forgetting something so important and that he better not do that in the USMC. A few miles later, we passed a group that was going home and George talked one of them out of their water jug, convincing them they didn't need it for the downhill trip. We all had a good laugh at that."



Camping buddies, l to r: Mike Ross, George, Ed Talbot and Dan, 1967.

George's Marine Corps Base Camp was Camp Pendleton in San Diego County, California.

"Our folks went to his Marine Corps graduation ceremony," Donna said. "I know they were worried about his going to Vietnam."

"I remember when he came home after boot camp, we wrestled on his lawn," Dan said. "He showed me all the moves and tricks he learned for hand-to-hand combat. I was impressed. He tossed me rather hard a few times."

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George served with the 3rd Marine Division, 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, G Company. His specialty was Infantry Assaultman. He began his tour in Vietnam on January 7, 1968.

"George was a good letter writer," Dan said. "He thought the War was messed up. He was looking forward to getting home in one piece. He would always write 'FREE' where the stamp would go on the envelope.

"He didn't like the heat and the dirt. He did get jungle rot. His family sent socks and foot powder to him. They also sent him chocolate bars. He didn't like the food, except when they were sent behind lines for rest. I remember he said he got to eat all the steak he wanted when he was at rest areas."



George sent money home regularly from Vietnam to his stepdad. It was for a down payment on a Firebird, a white one.

"George came home on leave in June of 1968," Donna said. "He was supposed to be in Hawaii but came home instead. Not sure how that came about. He did come home with jungle rot on his arm. He had band aids on it and I remember thinking it was gross. But we had a great week with him, laughing and just talking and being together as a family. That was the last time we saw him."

In the late summer or early fall of 1968, George wrote his mom that his infantry outfit was in maneuvers. They would be practicing amphibious landings from aboard the Princeton. His mom relaxed a little when she read that. Maneuvers were not battles.

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The fifth USS Princeton (CV-37), an aircraft carrier, provided amphibious assault carrier services in Vietnam, in 1968, for operations "Fortress Attack" III and IV, "Proud Hunter," "Swift Pursuit," and "Eager Hunter."

George was killed on Thursday, October 3, 1968 in Quảng Trị Province, South Vietnam. October 3rd was also Frank's birthday. The *Tribune* reported that three Marine officers arrived at George's family home on Milagra to break the news. The *Tribune* also reported that "neither the Marine officers nor the telegram which arrived explained just how he died except the gunshots were from 'hostile rifle fire during an operation.' His body, the officers said, was aboard the Princeton."

"We were all home except for Mom," Donna said. "She had to work late. The Marines took Dad aside and only told him. When the Marines left, Dad told us. When Mom came home shortly after, we were all crying. Mom knew immediately what had happened and let out a scream that I will never forget and fell to her knees sobbing."

"Dad was the strong one for all of us. Mom was a mess. She was prone to migraines so she was in her room for weeks. It took a very long time to sort of become a normal family again. Actually it was never that normal again. This changed our whole family dynamic – from the large family of six to a small family of five."

"I remember exactly when I found out," Dan sighed. "My girlfriend and I had gone to see Stanley Kubrick's *'2001: A Space Odyssey'*. We drove home and parked in my driveway and sat there a few minutes. My grandmother, who lived with us, came out and knocked on the window of the car. She told us and we both started crying. All that ran through my brain was the final scene in the movie where the embryo floats off into space. I still think of that today."

"All I still know about George's death is that he and the group of Marines he was with were ambushed," Donna said. "Out of 10 guys, only two survived."

"I was 16 and going to Oceana when it happened. I was trying to be strong. None of us kids missed much school. But it was awkward to go to school. I recall the kids at school talking about me being at school so soon after George's death. 'None of their business,' I remember thinking."

Before George's funeral, the *Tribune* interviewed one of George's buddies, not named in that October 9 story.

"George talked frankly about a 'man's chance in Vietnam.' He said, 'Well, if you get it, you get it,' and he just kidded around about it. 'The only way you can go on in Vietnam,' George said, 'was to go on believing you won't get killed.'"

Dan Peters also talked to the *Tribune*. He had a letter ready to mail to George about the car he'd been working on. George had asked to see photos. Dan told the *Tribune* that George's last letter to him was mostly devoted to what George called a "groovy protest poem," which he said he'd found in a book called "*Listen to the Warm*." "If you can find it, Dan, buy it, it's out of sight."

Fifty-two years ago, Dan brought that letter down to the *Tribune* because, he said, "I hope it will show you and the people of Pacifica how George felt about the protest movement." The *Tribune* printed it.

The poem George quoted, in his own handwriting, was by Rod McKuen: "*Methinks Thou Doth Protest Too Much*," and it reads:

*"Look at them kids in their back yards
Playin' with matches, burning draft cards.
Look at them cats called Sonny and Cher,
Two of three million of 'em, all of that hair.
Look at them types on motorcycle bikes
Roaring through the neighborhood scarin' little tykes.
Hell's little angels dressed in blue;
tattoos say, 'Mother, I love you.'
Oh the time, the trials and the troubles are such,
Methinks, thou doth protest too much.*

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*Look at them lily whites going to church,
Later, in the afternoon, callin' John Birch.
Sendin' letters to the PTA,
Saying this teacher's red and that one's gray.
Look at them pacifists marchin' in the street,
Ain't nothing much worse than two left feet.
Stirrin' up rebels and racial unrest,
nothin' much left to protest but protest.
Oh, the times, the trials and troubles and such,
Methinks, thou doth protest too much."*

The *Tribune* pondered if perhaps the peace symbol on the back of George's envelope would seem to come in contradiction to the sentiment of the poem George liked; or then again, maybe it wasn't contradictory to be patriotic and also want peace.

* * *



Funeral services for Marine PFC George Angelo Cabano, Jr., Purple Heart recipient, were held on Friday, October 11, 1968, at Chapel by the Sea in Pacifica. His burial followed at Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno. It was crowded. Along with his family, his friend Dan, his camping team, and his buddy Joe Brown, there was a sea of Pacifica faces. (Donna has stayed friends with Dan Peters and Joe Brown all these years.)

"I knew George from elementary school and high school," said Kathleen (Fulwider) Zeno. "Jim Schaffner, who had been class president, and I went to George's funeral together. Later, in our class reunion years, we set a table for George and Larry Foster." (Larry signed on with the Marines in the middle of his junior year at Oceana, 1964. He died in Vietnam in 1966.) "We put up their photos and the rubbings of their names from the Vietnam Memorial Wall. They will never be forgotten."

"It was a sunny day," Donna said of that Friday in 1968. "I remember the gun salute and 'Taps.' To this day when I hear 'Taps,' I am back there at the cemetery on that day."

"The day that we found out that George died was the day that changed all of our lives forever," Donna continued. "Everything changed. Nothing was the same, forever.

"If I could see him once more I would thank him for being my brother and tell him that I loved him very much. As kids and siblings, we didn't say that we loved each other. Only figured that out later."

"I often think of George and wonder what kind of man he would have been," Dan said. "A loyal family man for sure. He wanted kids and I believe he would have been a great father. I'm sure we would still be good friends. He certainly will always be in my heart."

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Dan thinks back on the day his buddy was buried.

"I remember seeing George cramped into the coffin with his dress blues on, wondering how he was killed and if his body was disfigured. Even now it makes me so sad to think about it. I remember going to the funeral at the gravesite and hearing 'Taps' played. I remember getting in my souped-up '55 Chevy and as I started to drive away, I put in the clutch and blasted the engine for one last salute and squealed the tires. I hope he heard it."



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.