

To Honor Our Fallen

George Patterson'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. George 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 George Patterson

1948-1970

BY JEAN BARTLETT



George Patterson, Grade 2, Pedro Valley School, 1956.

"George had a finger on what the trends were," Jackie (Boyd) Thompson recalled. Jackie is a 1967 graduate of Terra Nova High School. "He used to collect things so he could trade them. He had baseball cards, *Mad Magazines* and comic books from the *Archie Comics* series. One time I traded him eight baseball cards for one of Willie Mays. Willie Mays was my favorite player."

"Another time I traded all of my baseball cards with George for *Archie, Jughead, Betty and Veronica* comic books," Jackie laughed, recognizing the possible value today of those cards. "George was astute; aware of what was going to be the next big thing. There's a verse in a song by R.E.M. that reminds me of George (*Exhuming McCarthy*). The lyrics go: 'You're sharpening stones, walking on coals / To improve your business acumen.' But instead of walking on coals, I think of George as walking along the fields and creeks and concrete sidewalks of Pacifica, sharpening his mind and business acumen."

Jackie and her twin brother Alan, also a 1967 Terra Nova graduate, first met George at Pedro Valley School. The Boyd family moved to Pacifica's Linda Mar neighborhood in 1954. They lived at one end of Montezuma Drive and George's family lived at the other. Next door to George's family were the Wilsons, who were also friends with the Boyd twins.

But really, while Jackie and Alan knew George at San Pedro Valley School, and in fact were classmates all the way through high school, their friendships didn't blossom until seventh grade. That was when the three were at Linda Mar School and it was only after Alan and George got in a fist fight. It wasn't the pair's first fisticuffs. Apparently Alan and George also had a moment in second grade. Second grader George had red hair and freckles which second grader Alan took umbrage to. While George and Alan became

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good friends after their fight in seventh grade, Jackie and Alan believe George was given a lot of childhood grief over his hair color and freckles.

George Francis Patterson was born on December 26, 1948 to Orma and Josette Patterson. He was the eldest of their four children: George, Lucy, Robert and Ralph. Originally from Texas, Orma was in his late forties when George was born. The U.S. Army Master Sergeant served in WWI, WWII and the Korean War. He was a 28-year career veteran. George's mom Josette was from Belgium. She and Orma met in Europe.

"I remember George was a curious kid," Jackie said. "We used to go to San Pedro Creek and catch polliwogs and take them to George's house and put them in jars. George wanted to see them turn into frogs."

Jackie said that it was during her "tomboy" days that she and George hung out. When George's family moved to 1396 De Solo Drive, and Jackie began spending more time with her girlfriends, she and George saw less of each other.

Alan and George were friends through both seventh and eighth grade, though they didn't have one class together at Terra Nova.



George, sophomore year, Terra Nova High School, 1965.

"We used to play marbles together," Alan said. "We also played poker with our friend Kerry Cowen, who's gone now. We played for change. George was good at chess. He and Robbie Bulloch, who was also good at chess, used to play at school. George definitely was not an extrovert but he had a good sense of humor and he was smart. He was a car mechanic. He could take a car apart and put it back together again. He was also pretty strong. He could pick up an engine on his own. He had a good height on him. He got to be six feet.

"When he was in seventh and eighth grade, he was a good outfielder and centerfielder. The two grades used to play against each other at school. We did typical kid stuff before high school, though we kept it to the neighborhood. I don't remember him graduating with the class. All of a sudden he was gone. He had enlisted."

George does not have a senior class photo but according to the *Pacifica Tribune* article—April 8, 1970—George enlisted in the U.S. Army right after graduation. His father also noted in that article that his son excelled at electronics at Terra Nova.

George served with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, aka Blackhorse. Activated in 1901 as a horse squadron, the Blackhorse Troopers became an armored cavalry unit in the 1930s. More recently, the 11th ACR reorganized as a deployable heavy brigade combat team while continuing to serve in rotational support for the military at large. During the Vietnam War, 20,000 Americans served with the Blackhorse Regiment.

George was an armor crewman, serving as a tank driver and mechanic. His technical proficiency and sometimes on-the-spot ingenuity in the maintenance of weapons and equipment was quite literally life-saving. Fellow "Vietnam" tankers have noted that one hour of running a tank meant three hours of maintenance. It also really helped if you could get along with your crewmates. Not a big space for four people – commander, gunner, loader and driver.

His father explained the sequence of his son's first stint in Vietnam to the *Tribune*.

"By Thanksgiving of 1968, George was in Vietnam as a tank driver. Thirteen months later he was home on leave, a self-assured, confident young man."

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The insignia of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. The colors red and white are the traditional Cavalry colors. The rearing black horse indicates the Regiment's nickname, "Blackhorse."

He was also dedicated to doing what he could to help kids at an orphanage he had encountered during his first Vietnam tour. When he was home he filled up his folks' garage with gifts for these kids. He planned to send for them at the first opportunity when he returned to Vietnam.

"Let me tell you what my son did," his father told the reporter. "He wanted to go back to Vietnam last year after his tour of duty was over, so he flew to Washington, to the Pentagon, and got his orders changed and was back in Vietnam in 24 hours. I would have gone through channels. But not George, he went direct."

"It was his desire to be with his buddies," his father continued, "and his desire to help the kids at that orphanage – that's what drew him back to Vietnam."

The *Pacifica Tribune* reported that during his second tour of Vietnam, Specialist Four Patterson was "killed along with several fellow soldiers somewhere on the outskirts of Saigon during an enemy artillery barrage, April 1, 1970."

On the Black Horse Memorial website, George's final moments in Tây Ninh, South Vietnam, are recorded as follows:

"Specialist Four Patterson distinguished himself by heroism in connection with ground operations against a hostile force on 1 April 1970 while serving as a gunner with Troop A, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, in the Republic of Vietnam. On this date, Specialist Patterson's unit was conducting a reconnaissance mission in a triple column through the dense jungle. The left flank suddenly began receiving intense rocket-propelled grenade, small arms and automatic weapons fire from an estimated North Vietnamese Army company. Specialist Patterson placed an immense barrage of machinegun fire upon the enemy bunkers. When his tank commander was injured, he exposed himself to the deadly fire to assure his evacuation. He then assumed control of the main gun and commenced with highly accurate bursts of fire as well as directing the movements of his tank toward the bunkers. As the assault continued, heavy enemy fire fatally wounded him. Specialist Patterson's actions led to the capturing of enemy weapons, prisoners of war and inflicted numerous casualties upon the enemy. Specialist Four Patterson's actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army."

George's friend Larry King would later remember George on the since-established military community website, Together We Served, and on the online database, Find A Grave.

"George was my best friend in Vietnam," Larry wrote. "I was with him when he was killed. He was to leave the field the next morning. He was a good person, my brother in arms. I think of him often."

George was the recipient of the Bronze Star Medal with Valor Device and Oak Leaf Cluster, the Purple Heart Medal, the Army Commendation Medal with Valor Device, the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal and the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal. He was also the recipient of the Combat Infantryman Badge. His Unit—A Troop, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment—was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation and the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Palm Device. George was 21 years old when he died. Along with his family, he left behind a garage full of gifts for the kids he grew to care so much about. He also left behind a "bundle of electronic equipment he had accumulated while a student at Terra Nova."

"I moved from Pacifica to North Carolina right out of high school," Jackie said. "I didn't know George had gone into the service. I returned to Pacifica 12 years later and found out George had died in the service of his country. I was so touched."

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"I have since gone by both of his childhood homes, many times, and each time I thank him for his bravery and his courage, and his dedication to our country and to our freedom. I also think back on when he was teased for his red hair and freckles as a kid. Look what you did, George. I'm so proud of you. You were one of the brave that answered the call. I will always be grateful.

"I have also thought about George over the years," Alan added. "He gave so much and he was so young."

George and his father, who died at the age of 74 in 1975, are buried together at Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno. The son and father share a headstone, one name to a side, located in Section O at Site 985. Specialist Four George Francis Patterson is on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall at Panel 12W, Line 72.



George, junior year, Terra Nova High School, 1966.



Specialist Four George Francis Patterson, Blackhorse.

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Author's note: If any of George's siblings discover this tribute, please contact Pacifica American Legion Post 238 so that your comments can be added to this binder.



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.

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