

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Another Unpopular War

Similar to the current war with Iraq, the Vietnam Conflict, which dragged on for 15 years through three presidents—Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon—was not a popular war. The draft system was still in effect, and many men were forced to participate. Twelve men from Livermore died in World War II, and the same number died in Vietnam between 1959 and 1975. The United States lost approximately 58,000 young people in Vietnam; 304,000 were wounded.

Army Corporal Dennis R. Podgorny graduated from Livermore High in 1966. He earned his Block L by participating in swimming, golf, track, football and basketball. He was elected king of the junior prom. A friend remembered what a great sense of humor he had. Unlike many, he really knew how to tell a joke. Soon after graduation he was drafted and by September 1967 he was in Vietnam. He was a rifleman and was killed at age 19 on November 9 by hostile small arms fire in Quang Nam Province when he attempted to silence an enemy automatic weapon unit. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with a V device for valor and a purple heart posthumously. A fellow vet remembered that his Alpha company buddies used to tease Dennis because at that time a man named Podgorny was a prominent member of the USSR Politburo.

Another Livermore High student, Leonard D. Erickson, joined the army in 1967, his senior year. He was on the wrestling team and played the French horn. A friend wrote of the good times they had in band together. PFC Erickson was married and had a baby son. At age 18 he was killed on April 7, 1968 by a either a mine or a booby trap while on a combat mission with the "Brown Water Navy," the Mobile Riverine Force, a combination of navy and army men. They fought through the muddy landscape of the rivers and canals of the Mekong Delta. Leonard was killed in Dinh Tuong Province.

Army specialist John Chester King was a star athlete at Granada High, making All-East Bay in football and wrestling during his senior year. His jersey was number 12, and the 1968 yearbook shows several photos of him as quarterback. The Eagles named him the Most Outstanding Senior Player. A high school friend wrote about wrestling on the school team with Chester, hanging out at his house and flirting with one of his "boss" sisters. After high school graduation in 1968 and a semester at Chabot, Chester joined the army. His brother, Eddie King, remembered well hugging Chester goodbye at the Oakland Airport. Eddie described his younger brother as a "happy-go-lucky guy, not a mean bone in his body." A fellow vet remembered the fun times they had together in the service, including his teaching Chester how to play horseshoes. The twin turbine Mohawk with its bubble canopy in which Chester had been flying while doing aerial surveillance crashed in Quang Nam on November 2, 1970. He is buried at Memory Gardens Cemetery in Livermore. He was 20 years old. Eddie still gets choked up when he talks about his brother. He says that usually people focus on the grief of the veteran's parents, but the siblings have a rough time, too. He regrets deeply not having been able to know his brother as an adult. As a result of his experience, "I go out of my way to let vets know how much we appreciate them."

Marine PFC Leo "Buddy" Buckholdt attended schools in Livermore until his family moved to Santa Cruz. After his 1964 high school graduation, he joined the Marines. Fellow classmate Don Staysa drove Buddy and another friend to Oakland, where the three of them signed up and passed the required test. Don remembered him as "just a regular guy." They were promised that they could serve together in the same unit, but that didn't happen. Buddy became the crew chief and door gunner on a Huey. A fellow Marine wrote: "As you ran to the door of waiting helicopters, a Marine covered your moves and did his best to make sure you made it on board. The rattle of the machine gun and waving of arms were a welcome sight" as men hurried to leave a hot spot. This was Buddy's job until he was killed trying to evacuate men from the top of Hill 488, a rocky knob called Hui Vu, where the men had had an observation post. He died at age 20 on June 16, 1966. Don didn't learn of his friend's death until he returned home from the war.

Petty officer Reid Isler attended high school in New Mexico before his family moved to Livermore. He enlisted in the Navy after graduation and trained as a corpsman at San Diego and at Oak Knoll Hospital in Oakland before being sent to Vietnam. On his first patrol with a Marine unit, he was killed on a search and destroy mission southwest of the Marine Base at Khe Sanh on May 17, 1968. Under heavy fire he gave aid to a wounded Marine and was killed while preparing to move him to a protected position. He died at age 21 and was granted the Bronze Star posthumously.

Next week I will describe the other seven casualties of the Vietnam War from Livermore. I owe special thanks to Pat and John Dutro for their help with this column. Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.