

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](#).

August 30, 2021

The Story of Jim Walker 1947-1968

BY JEAN BARTLETT

Jim Walker's dad, James Edward Walker, Sr. served in the Navy in the Second World War on the USS Hornet (CV-8). The third and the last of the Yorktown-class aircraft carriers, the Hornet was commissioned just weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The ship fought valiantly in the Pacific Theater. In June of 1942, she helped turn the tide at the Battle of Midway, the epic battle between the U.S. Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). The ship went on to provide air cover in the Solomon Islands until October 24, 1942. On the morning of October 26, 1942, she took her place in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. Within a space of minutes, the Hornet was hit by four 550-pound bombs and one IJN pilot flew his bullet-riddled plane into the aircraft carrier which embedded, blazing, into her flight deck. Then two IJN pilots pierced her hull with two torpedoes, starboard side. Already severely damaged, in the afternoon she was struck by two more bombs and another torpedo. She sank early the next morning. Of her 2,200 sailors and air crew, 140 would never see home again. James, Sr., who survived the sinking of the Hornet, thought the hardest days of his life were behind him. But he found out on April 30, 1968, he had not yet seen his hardest day. On that day, James Sr. and his wife Felice learned that Jim, a 1966 graduate of Terra Nova High School, died in battle in Quảng Trị Province, South Vietnam on April 29th. It happened at 2 a.m. Jim was killed outright by gunfire. His parents were told it would be five to twelve days before Jim's body would be brought home.

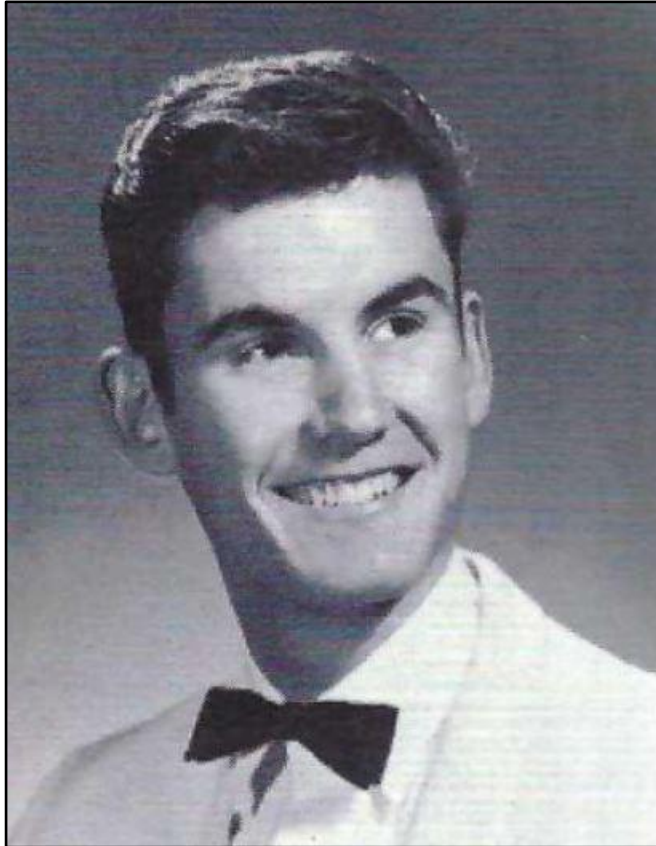
"They're sure it's Jim, huh," James Sr. asked the two Army officers who had walked up to the front door of the Walker home at 1270 Alicante Drive in Pacifica's Linda Mar neighborhood.

"They rarely make mistakes, sir," the lieutenant quietly told him.

James' wife Felice had had a funny feeling all day, the day before. It started when she read that her son's unit had experienced heavy action. When she had walked outside the morning of the 30th to pick up the paper, she saw the men in uniform.

"I remember screaming," she later told the *Pacifica Tribune*. "They didn't have to tell me. I knew my boy was dead."

Later Jim's father would remember being told that Jim was "killed somehow while on combat duty with helicopters."



Jim Walker, Terra Nova High School senior photo. Class of 1966.

James (Jim) Edward Walker, Jr., was born in San Francisco on February 26, 1947 to James Edward, Sr. and Felice Walker. He was their only child. Jim's dad was born on October 2, 1917 and his mom was born on August 1, 1907. From Oregon originally, Jim's mom was a first-generation American. Her father was from France and her mother was from Denmark. Through his mom's first marriage to Elmer Coghlan, Jim had three half siblings: Elmer Jr., Robert and Jacqueline. Jim was raised Catholic and like his parents, was a member of St. Peter's Catholic Church in Linda Mar.

A cable splicer with PG&E (Pacific Gas and Electric), James Sr. moved his family from San Francisco to Pacifica in the 1950s. In 1960, they bought a newly-built home at 1270 Alicante Drive.

"I knew Jim at Terra Nova High School," said Lou Siegel, Terra Nova Class of 1965. "He was a year behind me and he didn't play baseball like I did. But I know he was a swimmer and he did track. I always found the fact that he did swimming impressive. I hated that pool. It was freezing!"

"I remember him as fun and lighthearted, and tall, definitely tall. He was a good guy and he had a lot of friends." (He was six foot four.)

Barbara Johnson of Linda Mar Florist could hardly believe it; didn't want to believe it when she heard the news directly from Jim's dad on the 30th. Just the day before, she and a friend had sent Jim a package. They knew Jim was a fan of sunflower seeds, salami, crackers, cheese and fruit juice – so they filled up a five-pound box with his treasured snacks, wrote him a note and shipped it off.

"Jim was a great favorite at the florist shop," Barbara told the *Tribune*. "He was always buying flowers for dates and for his mom. He was such a pleasant, nice boy, a boy you liked to have around."

Mother's Day 1967, Jim had ordered an orchid from Linda Mar Florist for his mom. As friends and family gathered at Jim's parents' home on the 30th to talk about Jim, to try to make sense of their loss, one friend told the *Tribune* that that orchid was blooming.

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Besides swimming and track, which earned him his Terra Nova Block, Jim played clarinet in the Terra Nova Tigers Marching Band in 1963.

"Jim had many friends," one of his classmates told the *Tribune*. "He dated several girls. He enjoyed life."

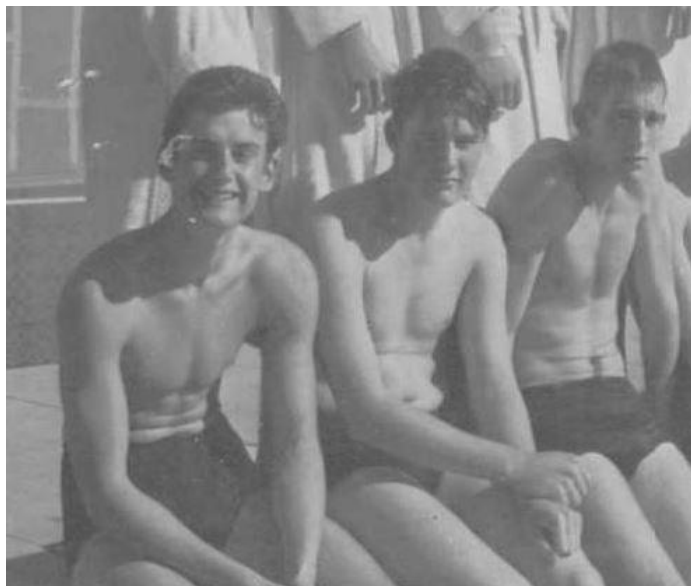
Following Jim's graduation from Terra Nova, he got a part-time job at the *Tribune*. He helped run the printing press. After a few months, he left to work full-time at PG&E doing construction. In December of 1966, he volunteered with the U.S. Army and was sent to Germany.

He was a good correspondent. He wrote his folks regularly. In his last letter he sent a check for \$142.

"Could you put that in my savings account? I'm going to buy a new car when I get out."



Jim on clarinet, 1963, Terra Nova Tigers.



Jim with members of the Terra Nova swim team, 1963.

In December of 1967, Jim phoned his family from New York City to let them know he was coming home on leave. This was an unexpected surprise and his family was thrilled. It was only after Jim had been home a few days that he told them, he would not be returning to Germany. He had been transferred to Vietnam.

But it was a wonderful visit and during his time home, a number of his friends came over and chowed down on pizza and reminisced over their various adventures. He told them of some of the plans he had in mind when his 18 months were done. He told one of his friends he had met someone and fallen hard. He hoped to marry her.

On March 23, 1968, PFC Walker arrived in Vietnam. The infantryman was a light weapons specialist attached to D Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division.

Originally horse-mounted soldiers, the 1st Cavalry Division was activated in Texas in September of 1921. Nicknamed the "First Team" during the Second World War, the Division dismounted and became an infantry division, an air assault division and an armored division. During the Vietnam War, the First Team Airmobile was the first full U.S. Army division deployed to Vietnam.

Jim wrote his mother.

"If you read about the First Cavalry in the papers, Mom, remember, it's the best outfit there is. We're the first to fight the enemy."

Completely unsettled by what she had read that Monday morning in the newspaper regarding Jim's unit, Jim's mom did not box up all the goodies she had bought for her son, which naturally included his "cherished" crackers and salami. "I was just so upset," she said. Her husband, who had retired from PG&E and taken on his son's part-time job at the *Tribune*, had gone to work that day. He worried about his wife and he told his fellow workers that it was "tough having a son in Vietnam." And then of course the very next day they were answering the Army lieutenant's question. "Would they like an honor guard for Jim's service?"

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"We are very proud of what Jim did," his mother told the *Tribune* and the lieutenant. "He should have all military honors. He did his duty. He did not burn his draft card. He was not a hippy. But he didn't want to die. He was just 21."

A Requiem Mass for U.S. Army E-3 Private First Class James Edward Walker, Jr. was held at St. Peter's Catholic Church. He was laid to rest at Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno, Plot S, 692. The Purple Heart recipient's parents would later be buried next to him, his mom in 1980 and his dad in 1992. Jim's name can be found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall) at Panel 53E Line 8.



PFC James Edward Walker, Jr., front page, *Pacifica Tribune*, Wednesday, May 1, 1968.

Author's note: If any of Jim's relatives discover this tribute, please contact the Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group so that your comments can be added.



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.