

SCHUYLKILL COUNTY
VIETNAM VETERANS
Memorial



Dedicated
May 10, 1997



Donald J. Seaman

Explosion made Locust Valley man county's first casualty

Air Force soldiers were going through routine mission preparations at Bien Hoa Air Base on May 17, 1965, when disaster struck.

A 500-pound bomb, just loaded aboard a B-57, exploded, setting off a chain reaction.

Within seconds, neighboring airplanes, surrounded by crewmen, were exploding and burning at the base 12 miles north of Saigon.

Three more 500-pound bombs went off, then some napalm bombs, phosphorous fire bombs and finally some 750-pound bombs.

Thirty American soldiers were killed, 100 more wounded. Among the dead was Tech. Sgt. Donald J. Seaman, 34, a Locust Valley native.

He was the first of 39 Schuylkill County soldiers who would be killed in Vietnam.

Multiple shrapnel wounds was the official cause of death, although it took a day to figure out that Seaman was even in the explosion.

His parents were Fred and Gladys Seaman of Locust Valley.

He left behind a wife, the former Mary Menalis, a Mahanoy City native, and three children, Donald, 7, Joseph, 4, and Mary, 1, at their home in Mount Holly, N.J.

The Seamans' former next-door neighbor in Locust Valley, Laura Blackwell, recalled that young Donald was adventurous and a bit mischievous.

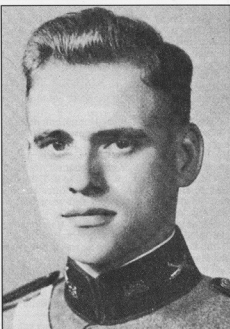
Blackwell, the former one-room schoolhouse teacher who became principal at Mahanoy Area Elementary School, recalled that Seaman once got into a terrible accident in a convertible car and walked away.

"He was afraid of nothing," she said. "No wonder he went to Vietnam."

He was a 1950 graduate of the Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne. While there, he earned a sharpshooter's medal, studied artillery tactics and rode with the Harrier's Club, a junior horseback cavalry.

Seaman volunteered for Korea first, leaving Penn State University early to join the Air Force.

Military investigators quickly ruled that sabotage had played no part in the massive explosion at Bien Hoa.



DONALD J. SEAMAN
Died May 17, 1965

Regardless, the explosion "caused more death, injury and destruction to U.S. forces than any single Communist attack of the war" up to that point, the Associated Press reported.

Forty American airplanes were destroyed or damaged. One military official said it would take only hours to replace the equipment.

"The Viet Cong couldn't have done a better job themselves even if they worked on it all year," remarked one Air Force officer at the time.

Seaman had been in the Air Force for 15 years and survived a tour of duty in Korea. Now he was dead and it was an accident.

Seaman's name is etched in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington on panel 01E, line 119.

— By Daryl Nerl



Reese A. Jones

Quakake man died while trying to rescue fellow Marines

He was bent on becoming a Marine no matter what.

And Reese A. Jones of Quakake, a high school football player/tough guy with a crew-cut, enlisted in 1966 even though the Vietnam War was ongoing.

What was unique about Reese, according to his older brother, David W. Jones, 49, of Harrisburg, was that he fully understood and accepted the risks involved.

He was killed Oct. 11, 1967, in combat in the province of Quang Tri, Vietnam. He was the 13th county man who died in the war.

Because he was 17, Reese could not enlist on his own.

"Our father had to sign for him and he didn't want to. He felt, give him a year and let him grow up," David said.

But his father signed and Reese went to Parris Island, S.C., for training in June 1966.

He was first assigned to the Caribbean aboard an aircraft carrier. In May 1967, he was assigned to Vietnam as part of the 3rd Amphibious Marine Division.

Reese's death occurred during a mission to rescue a Marine unit that was overrun by Vietnamese in Quang Tri.

He was serving in infantry as a grenadier and operated M-79 grenade launchers. His squad planned to attack the enemy from behind to relieve the troops under fire.

However, there was another wave of North Vietnamese waiting just behind Reese's unit and it overran them, David said.

Reese was shot in the chest with a 50-caliber machine gun. There were only two or three survivors from Reese's 14-member squad.

"He was killed instantly. That I know firsthand. I talked to people who were there," David said.

It happened one month short of Reese's 19th birthday, he said.

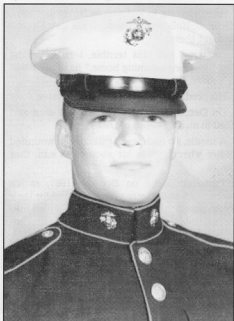
About a week later, Reese was interred at United Church of Christ Cemetery, Barnesville.

Reese, a son of the late Alvin and Dorothy (Zimmerman) Jones, was born at St. Joseph's Hospital, Hazleton, on Nov. 8, 1948. He had an identical twin, Richard Thomas, who died at birth.

His father was a World War II veteran.

Reese grew into a 6-foot-1, 210-pound teenager.

"He was all boy. Into everything. He stood his ground. He wouldn't give in to anybody if he thought he was right," David said.



REESE A. JONES
Died Oct. 11, 1967

Reese was also a rifle expert, an avid hunter and fisherman and played the trumpet. He excelled in sports like football and baseball and earned scholarships.

But all he talked about doing with his life was joining the Marines, David said.

Mahanoy City native John R. Lotwick, now Dauphin County sheriff, said he used to hang out with Reese.

Lotwick, who lives in Hummelstown, said he and Reese were raised to believe in fighting for their country.

"It was our turn to do something for America, and we really believed in the war at the time. We felt we could make a difference and went in," he said.

"We both knew it might happen," said his brother, who is a Vietnam veteran.

"He knew that very well and he was willing to do it, like a heck of a lot of other kids from Schuylkill County."

— By Stephen J. Pytak

Michael J. Kaplafka

Mahanoy City man was reported missing after hostile attack

When Army Sgt. Michael J. Kaplafka suffered a gunshot wound to his arm in Vietnam, his mother, Anna, didn't find out until years later.

Before Michael left for the war in January 1968, his father, John, had told him to send letters to his grandmother's address if he had anything to tell him.

Apparently, Michael did just that about the injury, according to his mother, of Mahanoy City.

"He didn't want me to know," she said.

Anna did learn firsthand about her son's death in Vietnam.

Michael, 20, of Mahanoy City, was riding as a passenger in a military vehicle that encountered hostile fire on June 12, 1968.

According to a telegram his parents received, that was the last time he was seen alive. For an entire week, Michael was declared missing in action, Anna said.

The news hit hard. She said her husband couldn't eat the whole week. All he could think about was his son somewhere in Vietnam.

Anxious to learn more about Michael's whereabouts, the couple went to Fort Indian-town Gap Military Reservation, Annville, where a liaison officer informed them of their son's death.

Michael was the 20th man from Schuylkill County to die in the war.

"He was such a good kid," his mother said. "Even if it is 28 years, I still feel like he was a little boy."

Michael served as an altar boy at St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church, Mahanoy City, and graduated from Mahanoy Area High School in 1965.

During his high school years, he was active in sports, particularly basketball, and enjoyed cars.

"He was always under a car," Anna said.

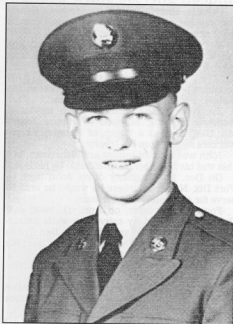
He started driving old jalopies, and eventually, his father bought him a convertible.

"He always wanted a convertible," his mother said.

After graduation, Michael worked at National Rolling Mill in Exton before enlisting in the Army on Sept. 22, 1966.

Following basic training, he went to Fort Belvoir, Va., for engineering school and received a six-month assignment in Germany.

He came home on leave before he headed off to Vietnam.



MICHAEL J. KAPLAFKA

Died June 12, 1968

"I was a little shocked," Anna said of her son's assignment to Vietnam.

However, she said he wanted to go and see what it was like.

"He wanted to go so badly," Anna said. "I think it was his destiny to be there."

Michael served with the SVC Battery Second Battalion, 32nd Artillery. While in Vietnam, he was promoted to sergeant, his mother said.

He wrote home about every other day. One letter told of a close brush with a bullet.

Anna said her son was sitting under a tree when he bent over to reach for his wallet and a bullet passed by his cheek.

Sadly, all of the letters and pictures Michael sent to his family were lost in a fire that struck their home in the 400 block of West Pine Street in March 1966.

Michael is buried in St. Mary's Parish Cemetery. In addition to his parents, he is survived by two brothers, John Jr. and Robert, both of Frackville.

— By Kathryn Campomizzi



Paul J. Mitchell

Marine Band member killed while evacuating wounded

When Marine Cpl. Paul J. Mitchell returned to Vietnam for a second and then a third tour of duty after visits home to Mahanoy City, he would tell foster mother Gladys Kline not to worry.

He played French horn in the 1st Marine Division Band and spent little time on the front fighting, he would tell her.

But a month before that third tour was to end, on Feb. 23, 1969, the war found Paul.

He was helping evacuate wounded people from a camp 1½ miles west of Da Nang when a grenade blast killed him. Mitchell was 21 years old and the 27th soldier from Schuylkill County to die in Vietnam.

Paul's death was a devastating blow to the Kline household at 124 E. Pine St.

He and George Kline, Gladys Kline's son, grew up as best friends from the time they were small boys playing hide and seek around the brush and culm banks in the coal patches outside of Mahanoy City.

The Klines lived in Wiggins and the Mitchells lived down the road in Suffolk.

Paul was only 15 when his mother, Dorothy, died. The Klines invited him to move in.

To George Kline, Paul became like a brother. To Gladys Kline, he became like a son.

The night of Paul's funeral, Mrs. Kline suffered a stroke. She died on March 20.

While she was in the hospital, Mrs. Kline said she could see her Paul.

"She said Paul was calling her," George Kline said. "She said she had to go with him."

To this day, the anniversaries of Paul's and his mother's death and Memorial Day are times of sorrow and tears, Kline said.

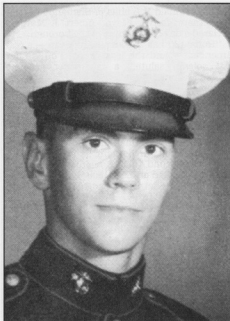
Memorial Day is special not only because of its reference to fallen soldiers, but also because Kline remembered that as the day his best pal would play trumpet in parades for the Mahanoy Area marching band.

"Melody flows easily from that trumpet of Paul's," the 1965 Mahanoy Area yearbook says.

"Hoagies — big ones — serve as a welcome snack. Paul acquires friends easily."

Paul Mitchell was fond of the popular music of the '50s and '60s, including the Beatles. He liked to play the game of Life and football.

He was quiet and shy but popular nonethe-



PAUL J. MITCHELL
Died Feb. 23, 1969

less. He studied and practiced his trumpet diligently, but he wasn't one to show off his musical abilities, Kline added.

Paul enlisted in the Marines a few months after graduation, much to the surprise of his best friend.

Paul was short and slightly built. Kline said he never thought his friend would be able to make it with the service branch renowned for its toughness.

"His brother was also a Marine. He said, 'If he can do it, I can do it.'"

Paul's death touched Mr. and Mrs. Russell Moyer, Orwigsburg, the parents of the previous Schuylkill County soldier to die in Vietnam — Army Cpl. David F. Heiser.

Three weeks after their son died, they sent a sympathy card to the Klines.

"Our prayers are with you and your family to give you strength," the card read, "because at this time we all need it."

— By Daryl Nerl



Paul F. Kostick

Drafted into Army, Gilberton man killed by mortar attack

Paul F. Kostick's world revolved around hanging out his high school buddies and keeping his white '55 Chevy convertible spic and span.

Paul had no intentions of going to Vietnam.

But in March 1968, the Gilberton man was drafted into the Army and was sent to Fort Jackson, N.C., for basic training.

He was shipped to Vietnam in mid-December of that year, assigned to the 1st Air Cavalry Division, Company A.

Eight months later, on Aug. 25, 1969, Paul, 21, was killed when his company came under hostile mortar attack as he was unloading supplies from a helicopter in Tay Ninh.

He was the 32nd Schuylkill County casualty of the war.

His mother, Frances T. Kostick of Gilberton, said she has many fond memories of her dark curly haired, hazel-eyed son, whom she called "Paulie."

His father, the late Paul Kostick, was a World War II veteran.

At 5-foot-10, Paul played basketball in the former Gilberton High School, and was an altar boy at the former St. Louis Lithuanian Church, Maizeville, which has since burned down. He graduated from Mahanoy Area High School in 1967.

In his late teens, Paul became interested in auto mechanics and got a job working part-time at George's Auto Body, Mahanoy City.

His last leave home had been in early December 1968, just before he went to Vietnam.

When he was leaving for the war, his mother said his cousins were going to drive him to the airport and she wanted to go along.

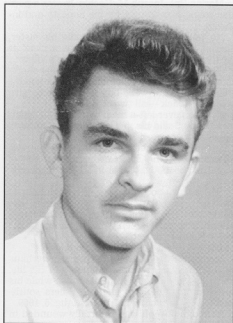
"He didn't want me to go. I cried and said, 'I want to go.' When I saw that jet taking off, I got the weirdest feeling" he wasn't coming back.

Paul's viewing was held at his Back Street, Gilberton, home. He was interred at Our Lady of Siluva Cemetery, Frackville.

In addition to his mother, he is survived by two brothers, John S., Delano; and Raymond P., Gilberton; and a sister, Jean Ann Kostick, Gilberton.

His mother said she does not know much about what her son's life was like in Vietnam.

"When he wrote letters, he wasn't allowed to



PAUL F. KOSTICK
Died Aug. 25, 1969

say what he did or where he was," she said. "At the time, I guess we didn't realize what was going on over there."

Jean Ann said she thinks his job was to either help deliver supplies or troops aboard a helicopter.

"Every month, he sent me a roll of film and he said when he comes back, he'll tell me all about the pictures."

His '55 Chevy no longer exists, but it was not used in Paul's absence.

"It was like a reminder and nobody wanted to use it. It rotted," his sister said.

"It was left here waiting for him and I guess we just didn't bother to fix it," his mother added.

But memories of Paul have not faded. His 1st Cavalry patch and his Purple Heart are framed and hang near his high school photograph in his family's home.

— By Stephen J. Pytak



Thomas P. McKerns

Mahanoy City man killed by gunfire on way to help others

People in Mahanoy City knew Thomas P. McKerns by his trademark — an easy smile.

"Once an old teacher couldn't remember him. Then she said 'Wasn't he the one who was always smiling?' " said his mother, Eva L. McKerns, 81. "I said 'Yes, that's him.' "

But when it came to serving his country in Vietnam, Tom was all business.

When he was killed by a hail of machine-gun fire on Aug. 28, 1969, it was as a hero. He was sprinting through an open field to help some of his wounded platoon mates who had been pinned down by a North Vietnamese army force.

For his actions, he posthumously received a Purple Heart and Bronze Star with V device and Oak Leaf Cluster, among a host of other conduct medals.

Tom, 21, was the 33rd Schuylkill County man to die in the Vietnam War. He was a private first class serving with the Army in Company B, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry.

As a student at the St. Canicus Elementary School, he had been an altar boy and valued the company of his friends more than any school book, his mother said.

"He was very well liked. I don't know if he had an enemy in the world," said childhood friend Paul T. Coombe, now the principal of Holy Family Elementary School, Ashland.

For fun, Tom loved to hunt deer and repair cars.

"He was always tinkering with cars," said his younger brother, David McKerns, Mahanoy City. "He'd buy one, fix it up, it'd break down and he'd get another."

He and Coombe also played stickball together on West Mahanoy Street when they were students at St. Canicus.

"He was just a happy-go-lucky guy," Coombe said. "He would do a favor for you. He was not the type of guy to talk about you or stab you in the back."

When Tom died, it struck home that the war could take even the most generous and good-natured people, Coombe said.

"It was such a short time he was over there 'til he was killed," he said. "That was what really brought the war home to us."

Although his father, Gerald, died when Tom



THOMAS P. MCKERNES
Died Aug. 28, 1969

was just 10, he still inherited his skills in building and construction.

When he enlisted in the Army, he left behind a promising career with Green Construction, building roads near Hazleton, Mrs. McKerns said.

The military tradition also ran strong in his family.

His uncle had been killed when his B-17 flying fortress crashed into another Army Air Corps plane over Germany in World War II.

In addition to his mother and brother, Tom was survived by a brother, Gerald Jr., Reading, and a sister Kathleen Herrero, Grosse Pointe, Mich.

Despite her son's decorations, his mother insisted that every veteran deserves equal credit for their service in Vietnam.

"They were all heroes, or they wouldn't have gone," she said.

— By Benjamin Ames