

# REMEMBERING STUDENTS



BILL WECHTER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

From left, veterans Samuel Hernandez, Mike Burns, Bill Robuck and David Gonzales, all San Dieguito High School graduates, want to build a monument to students who were killed in Vietnam on the school grounds in the vicinity of where they were standing Thursday.

## VETERANS MORE THAN JUST NAMES ON STONE

ADAM KAYE  
STAFF WRITER

ENCINITAS — The six names a local veterans group wants to set in granite belonged to all kinds of young men: a star athlete, a musician, a surfer, a bus driver, an artist, a farm boy.

Some of the men behind the six names have left a lasting impression on their communities and their alma mater, San Dieguito High School in Encinitas.

One thing the students have in common is that they attended the same school. Another is that



PHOTO COURTESY OF ISAAC LOPEZ

Victor 'Chief' Lopez while serving in Vietnam in 1968.

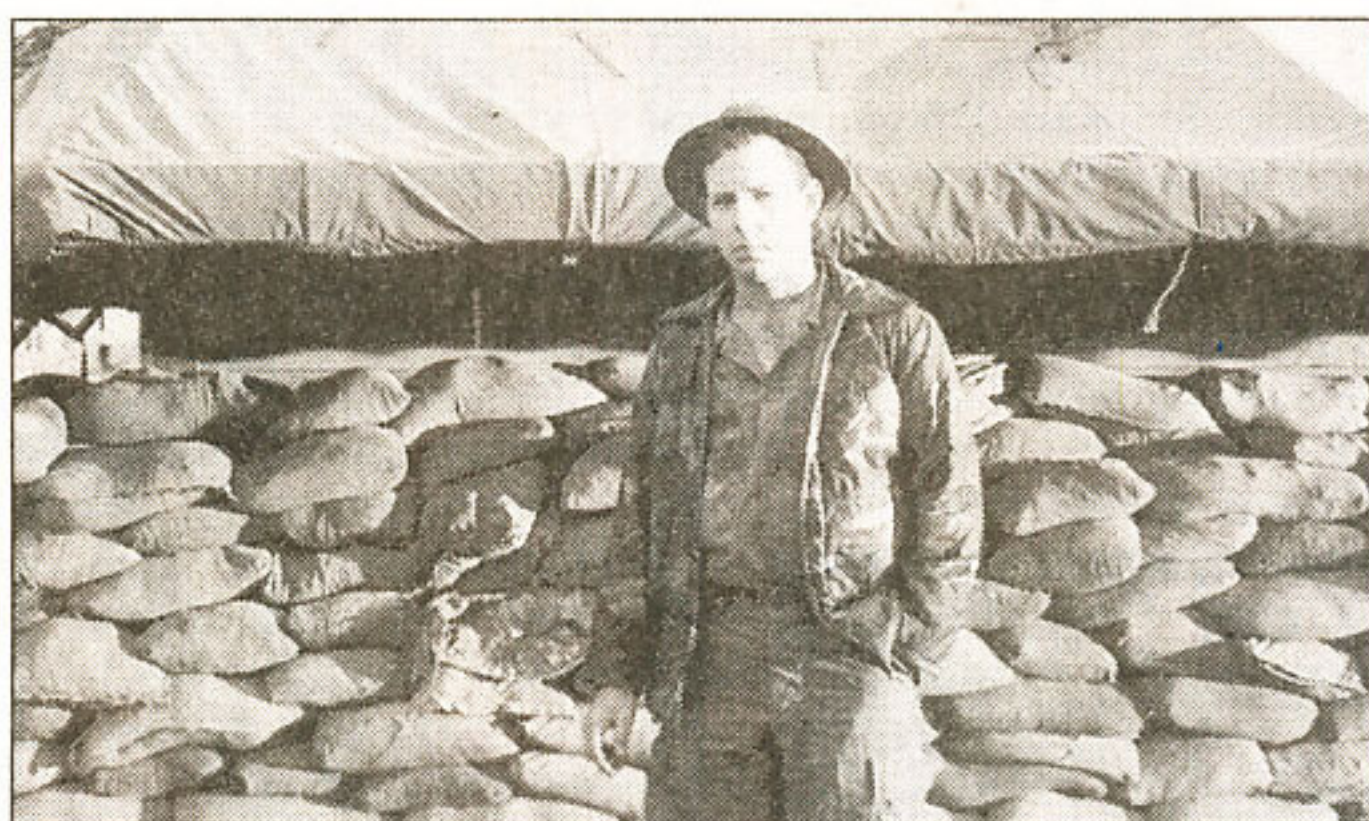


PHOTO COURTESY OF JAN TYLER

Tom Mericantante serving in Vietnam in 1968.

each of the six was killed fighting the war in Vietnam.

Now the San Dieguito High School Veterans

group wants to erect a war memorial on the Santa Fe Drive campus, where the

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## VETERANS

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64-year-old school now is called San Dieguito Academy.

The group has collected information on the six men from friends and family who live across North County for the memorial. San Dieguito Union High School District trustees are crafting a policy governing memorials to guide the project.

Six core members belong to the veterans project, each a graduate of San Dieguito and each a former serviceman.

For group President David Gonzales, who lives in Cardiff, to build the memorial is to keep a personal vow to honor fallen friends such as Jimmy Mitchell and Michael Zerbe.

"I'm very sensitive about this issue," he said. "I promised Jimmy and Mike I would do something."

Although more than three decades have passed since the six soldiers died in Vietnam, their friends and family reminisce about the men who will remain forever young in their memories. These are their stories.

### Marine 1st Lt. James M. Mitchell

He stood 5 foot, 3 inches tall but was a star basketball player.

Once, when an opponent teased him, "Mitchell bounced the ball between the guy's legs, zipped around him, and started dribbling it," said teammate Mike Shores. "No one could catch him — you could never get the ball away from him — so the crowd was roaring with laughter."

Mitchell was class president and voted most popular and most athletic by his fellow high school seniors in 1959.

He liked surfing, and Moonlight Beach in Encinitas was one of his hangouts.

His widow, Jan Mitchell, remembers Jimmy's '54 Chevy convertible, the Valentine's Dance that was their first date and the fact she didn't get a good-bye kiss. She received only handshakes until about the sixth date, at a place in Rancho Santa Fe called Blueberry Hill.

"It was a huge moon," Jan Mitchell said. "That's when he put his arms around me and kissed me."

James Mitchell proposed marriage on Christmas Eve and soon was married at St. James Catholic Church in Del Mar. He became a father July 20, 1965.

But he never was able to hold his daughter.

"I sure dream of the day when we can all be together again, and I can sit down and hold my little girl," he wrote



PHOTO COURTESY OF BUTCH STILLMAN

Jimmy Mitchell at age 18 in August 1959.

to his wife from the war zone.

Erin Mitchell was six weeks old when a land mine killed her father in Chu Lai, Vietnam. She is 36 now and a mother of three.

Jimmy Mitchell's legacy is widespread.

In Encinitas, basketball tournaments were named after him, as was the San Dieguito High School gym. Some locals wanted to rename Earl Warren Junior High School in Solana Beach the James Mitchell Junior High.

On the first day of 1966, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines dedicated Camp James M. Mitchell in Vietnam.

"We stood at rigid attention," wrote squad leader Ed Paulus in a letter to Mitchell's widow, "with tears in our eyes as his heroics were read."

### Army Spec. 4 Victor 'Chief' Lopez

When Victor Lopez was a boy, his mother would read to him from a favorite book about Indians. She told her son he was a chief, and the boy became his nickname.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ISAAC LOPEZ

Victor Lopez

something special. He was just such a strong, gentle guy but really wise."

Lopez organized pick-up games of basketball and football. He had an infectious laugh. He graduated from San Dieguito in 1966.

Lopez worked as a postman in his own neighborhood.

"That was the only time we ever got our mail on time," Gonzales said.

Lopez, a drummer for the Apostolic Church band in Eden Gardens, managed to bring a record player and some records with him to Vietnam, said Isaac Lopez, one of his eight siblings.

He was engaged to be married when he was drafted at age 19. After a six-month deployment, an explosive device killed him in 1969.

Gonzales, a football player, dropped out of MiraCosta College with the intention of joining "Chief" in Vietnam.

"Then I get this letter from him," Gonzales said. "He says,

"Vico, whatever you do, don't come over here. I must have read that letter over and over. They sent him home about a week later. I remember, I cried, he was just like my brother. He was so special."

### Army Pfc. Raymond Nelson Curley

Ray Curley lived with his father in an apartment above Curley's Garage in downtown Del Mar, two blocks from his favorite surf break.



1964 HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK PHOTO

Raymond Curley

Curley and friends converted a tool shed behind the garage into a stash spot for their surfboards.

Curley graduated from San Dieguito in 1964, was drafted and began his tour of duty in 1967. Shrapnel wounds killed him during his fifth month in Vietnam.

Former Del Mar lifeguard captain Grant Larson remembered Curley's mild demeanor and big smile.

In those days, surfers braved frigid winter waters without wetsuits. They would warm up with bonfires and cigarettes on the beach.

Curley, Larson said, "was a real strong guy."

"If you had a scrape with someone, he'd be right there with you," Larson said. "He'd be the first guy to step in."

### Marine 1st Lt. Charles B. Henricks

Charles Henricks came from Texas and brought with him a heavy drawl, said Emily Wolfe, who grew up with Henricks in Solana Beach.

"That's what made him even more appealing," she said.

Henricks, a helicopter pilot, was killed by hostile fire in 1969. He was 27.

Before he joined the military, Henricks drove a school bus from the San Dieguito area to Palomar College.

Wolfe, a class of 1962 alum from San Dieguito, e-mailed these recollections of her bus driver to the North County Times:

"He was not only the nicest

person I ever met, with a good sense of humor, but he was a great bus driver," she wrote. "I remember one instance where the school bus almost got in a wreck and due to Chuck's great driving skills, he was able to avert an accident. I will always remember him and was deeply shaken when I heard he had been killed in Vietnam."

### Army Pfc. Thomas L. Mericantante

Thomas L. Mericantante could draw anything he saw, said his half-brother, Jan Tyler.

And he could draw with either hand. He played saxophone. He played football.

"He was a well-rounded kid," Tyler said. "Just a good kid."

Mericantante was killed by multiple fragmentation wounds in 1968, only a year after he graduated from San Dieguito.

His military service was predestined. Through the 10th grade, he attended the San Diego Military Academy, which today is Santa Fe Christian School in Solana Beach.

His uncle, a retired marine captain, was one of the academy's founders.

Tyler said he and his family have made a point to keep Mericantante's memory alive. That memory, he said, is one of an 18-year-old man.

"All the young men that were lost," Tyler said, "they'll always be remembered at whatever age they were when they died. They never had an opportunity to age."

### Navy Lt.j.g. Michael R. Zerbe

Michael Zerbe and his twin sister Patricia were raised by their mother on 40 acres east of Del Mar, southeast of where Torrey Pines High School is today.

The family's water came

from a well and looked rusty as it was tapped from the cistern. Their mother was a social worker. Life was lean, and Christmas oranges were a special treat.

Patricia Zerbe Tinney, who now lives in Utah, remembers her brother as quiet and introspective.

The twins were active in the 4-H — he raised swine and she raised sheep. They boarded horses and kept goats.



1957 HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK PHOTO

Michael Zerbe

"His high school days were not happy ones," Tinney said. "We were backcountry bumpkins. We didn't feel well in social circumstances."

Although Zerbe only attended San Dieguito through his sophomore year before transferring to a school in National City, his name belongs on any memorial constructed on the campus, Tinney said.

"I would have really hurt feelings if it weren't," she said.

Zerbe was 24 when he died. The helicopter he was flying crashed as it took off from the USS Kitty Hawk in the South China Sea.

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