

A vow, and a memory, never to be forgotten



Jim Brass of San Marcos released a dove yesterday after reading the name of Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Alexander Hunt, killed in World War II. Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune

Memorial at Encinitas academy fulfills vet's promise

By Sherry Parmet
STAFF WRITER

ENCINITAS — At his 30-year high school reunion, David Gonzales was shocked to learn that a former buddy had been killed in the Vietnam War, not long after graduation.

He and Michael Zerbe, classmates at San Dieguito High School Academy in Encinitas, had been close since elementary school. After high school they lost touch.

"When I learned what hap-

pened to him, I made a promise and a vow that I would do something to ensure that he would never be forgotten," said Gonzales, who was an aerial radio operator for the Air Force in Vietnam.

That was 14 years ago. Yesterday, family members and friends from as far as Georgia and Florida gathered at San Dieguito High School Academy to honor 18 academy graduates, including Zerbe, who are fallen war veterans. Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks,

Gonzales began raising \$15,000 needed to build a veterans memorial at the entrance to the school. Inscribed in polished granite on the concrete memorial are the names of veterans of World War II, Korean and Vietnam.

Sterling Zerbe traveled from Atlanta to pay tribute to his father, a lieutenant junior grade who died at age 24 off the coast of Vietnam.

Zerbe's father enlisted in the

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MEMORIAL

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School board initially wasn't too keen on idea

Navy after high school and went through pilot training in Pensacola, Fla. On April 15, 1966, during a search-and-rescue mission, Zerbe's helicopter, based on the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk, crashed into the South China Sea. Zerbe was

killed.

"I was only 15 months old when he died, so I don't know an awful lot about him firsthand," Sterling Zerbe said. "I've learned this past weekend that he was thinking about going to law school after he got out of the military."

Gonzales said his proposal for a memorial for Vietnam veterans was initially met with resistance by some school officials, who felt it wasn't appropriate at a high school. However, the San Dieguito Union High School District board wel-

comed a memorial that honored all war veterans.

"I had a lump in my throat for a while, seeing their names on there," Gonzales said. "I made it and they didn't. We sat in the same classrooms, walked in the same halls, played on the same football teams. It's a very intimate memorial."

As each veteran's name was called during the ceremony, a dove was released.

Dawn Landingham flew in from Tallahassee for the ceremony. Her uncle, Pfc. Thomas L. Mericantante, died in Viet-

nam while serving in the Army.

"I think this is a wonderful way to honor men who lived in this area," she said. "I think young people don't really understand the sacrifice and dedication of these men. I'm 38 years old, and I'm just now beginning to appreciate it."

Kaylene Turner, a senior at the academy, participated in the ceremony by reading the name of Pfc. Eugene Dawson, who died fighting in World War II in 1945.

"I think the memorial is absolutely beautiful," she said.

"This has been so moving, and I think (the memorial) shows what our school stands for — being proud of who you are and standing up for yourself and other people."

The nonprofit group Gonzalez established, the San Dieguito High School Veterans, is also preparing biographies on each of the fallen veterans for the academy's library.

"For students at the school, it will be a history lesson and a shot of reality," Gonzales said. "Tomorrow there may be a war, and they may be called to go."

State Sen. Bill Morrow, R-Oceanside, was the keynote speaker, and other elected officials attended the dedication.

In addition to the memorial, the San Dieguito High School Veterans are raising money for a scholarship program. Gifts in the range of \$500 to \$750 will be given to academy students in the name of each of the honored veterans.

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