

## **Brad's Blog: A family journey to Oregon, a local soldier's story and 'Philomath in bloom'**

A half brother shares details of Paul J. Cochran's life and death; locally-produced video makes its debut.

by Brad Fuqua

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On the 54th anniversary of his half brother's death this past Sunday afternoon, Fritz Baier revisited the Philomath property where his biological mother's house once stood on the corner of College and North 16th.

Baier traveled to Oregon for on-site research as part of his efforts to write a book that chronicles life experiences related to his adoption, search for family and self-discovery. The itinerary included a stop in Philomath to learn more about a veterans park that will memorialize Paul Jeffrey Cochran, the half-brother that he never met and only found out existed just over 20 years ago.

Eric Niemann became involved with the Cochran story during his term as Philomath's mayor. In October 2019, the City Council accepted a property donation from the estate of Beverly Durham, who had died a year earlier and gifted the land with the condition that it be used to establish a park and memorial for the son she lost in Vietnam.

This past weekend, Niemann showed Baier the property and shared insight about a proposed park design. The conversation evolved into an intimate discussion about Jeff Cochran — he was called by his middle name to family — to help provide a more complete picture about the man whose name will be attached to the park.

The timing of Baier's visit to Philomath coincided with the completion of a touching video that pays tribute to Cochran and ties in the soldier's desire to get back home from Vietnam. Local video storyteller Aaron Alston, who with his wife owns King's Glory Productions, created the video, which starts out asking the question, "What do you think of when you think of home?"

The video makes references to passages from letters that Cochran had written to his grandmother not long before he was killed in action on May 1, 1968.

From March 20, 1968: "How is spring coming, or isn't it? Are the blossoms in bloom yet?" And two weeks later on April 3, he wrote, "I imagine the weather is starting to get decent around Philomath. I sure would like to get home again."

Ben Beddingfield, who was the first-ever recipient of the Paul J. Cochran Memorial Scholarship as a graduating member of Philomath High's Class of 1968, and his wife,

Diane, contributed funding for the video. Beddingfield and Cochran had been teammates in Philomath High's baseball program.

The timing of Baier's visit and the completion of the video was just one coincidence. For example, Niemann said Shonnard's Nursery just recently agreed to supply flowers for the future Cochran park. For years, Baier had an account with Shonnard's to be able to send flowers to his biological mother in Philomath.

Sitting down at a folding table that Niemann had set up at the park site, Baier shared details of his journey with us and in the process provided a humanizing perspective on Cochran.

Before getting into those details, a bit of background on Baier. His full name is Frederick Baier and he lives in Aiea, Hawaii. He was the youngest of four children of Beverly Durham — the oldest being Paul and the middle two being a half sister, Shane, and another half brother, Nick.

Baier was given up for adoption and never knew of his biological family. As adoption restrictions eased about 30 years ago, Baier felt the need to know more about his past and began searching. He discovered the Cochran line in his family history in 1999 — much of that, by the way, through the help of the Benton County Historical Society.

In August of that year from a motel room in San Antonio, Baier made the phone call to Beverly Durham's home in Philomath. Her husband, Marv, answered and with "my heart in my throat," asked if Beverly was home. Once she was on the phone, Baier shared the date and location of his birth and asked if that meant anything to her. After a long pause, she replied that it did.

In the following months, he learned more and more about the family from her and that's when he first became aware of the half-brother that was lost in Vietnam.

Baier grew up in a military family with his dad serving in the Marines. Baier himself was in the military and is retired Air Force, with service that included tours in Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

His research on the Cochran family line has included access to letters that Jeff wrote home. In the book that he's writing about his four families — adopted and biological — Baier is writing a chapter on Jeff.

During his research, Baier tracked down several of Cochran's platoon mates that served alongside him in Vietnam and the information painted a fascinating picture.

Cochran, who had been adopted by his grandparents, graduated with the PHS Class of 1966 and not long after decided to join the U.S. Army. After completing airborne school to become a paratrooper, Cochran deployed to Vietnam in December 1967.

In the month or two before his death, it became clear through Cochran's letters that he wanted to come home to Oregon — back to a normal life. Baier said that his platoon mates all had similar comments about him — that he was a good soldier, a good friend, even thinking of him as a brother. The bonds of friendship were strong.

“People come and go but they were devastated when Jeff died,” Baier surmised out of those conversations.

Cochran, who was known as PJ in his military life, was described as a practical joker, someone who was a sort of informal leader and didn’t flinch when asked to do something. His platoon mates listened to him and said he was a hard guy not to like.

On April 30, 1968, the troop company that included Cochran spent the night guarding a bridge. The next day, a sister company was ordered ahead to clear a village. But they soon found out that it was the location of a Viet Cong regiment, using the site as a command post and field hospital, Baier said.

Not long after, the second troop contingent moved forward with Cochran serving in the role of a tank track commander. They made a line and advanced across a rice paddy field while taking heavy fire.

“That’s when Jeff was killed,” Baier said.

The troop went into retreat mode. One of Cochran’s closest friends, “Irish,” was in the next track and rushed over to find that he was dead. He’s the one who got Jeff out.

Baier concluded through his research and the conversations that Cochran had volunteered for the Army as a sort of test in his journey to become a man. He went to Vietnam, did his job and was among those fighting so they could go home.

“I think he passed his test,” Baier said. “There was a transformation.”

Cochran was only 20 years old at the time of his death. Upon a return to the United States, he and his buddy planned to get themselves a couple of ’69 Camaros and drive across the country.

Beverly Durham was 90 when she died on Aug. 5, 2018. It appears that like many of us, she endured a lot of challenges in life. Her son’s death in Vietnam was obviously difficult and she felt strong about wanting to keep his memory alive after she was gone.

Paul J. Cochran Veterans Memorial Park in Philomath is the result. Thanks to Niemann’s efforts and connecting with Cochran’s family, we will now know a little bit more about the man behind the name.