

## **Love of Learning: Honoring service of Staff Sgt. Larry Gassner**

Reflections of the Vietnam War and the sacrifice of a Philomath Gold Star family

by Eric Niemann

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During the period between 1955 and 1975, millions of Americans raised their right hand and swore in to serve and defend our nation during the Vietnam War.

Some volunteered to serve while others were forced into service by being drafted. Back home people protested. It was a tumultuous chapter in our nation's history. Our country was divided.

According to the most recent presidential proclamation:

“In 2012, our nation launched a 13-yearlong commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War to ensure that every veteran, family, caregiver and survivor impacted by the difficult years in Vietnam feels our nation's gratitude for their sacrifice. Every service member of the Vietnam generation should know that their sacrifices mattered and that their service made a difference.

“The names etched in The Wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial remind us of our loved ones who gave their all and never came home. To families, caregivers and survivors of the more than 58,000 service members whose names are memorialized in the black granite, we pledge to never forget the eternal sacrifice of your loved ones and what you have sacrificed for the nation.”

It is in the spirit of this proclamation that Love of Learning takes time to remember the life, service, and sacrifice of Staff Sgt. Larry Gassner.

Larry was the second of four children born and raised by Richard and Dorothy Gassner, who lived in Summit. His brothers were Tommy, Ronny and Terry. All four boys graduated from Philomath High School. Larry graduated with the Class of 1967.

In a Gazette-Times article back in 1999, Richard Gassner reflected that his son was a gentle soul who always thought about his mother on his way home from school or work and would stop to pick a handful of wildflowers for his mom. His mother, Dorothy, described him as a “happy-go lucky kid.”

In 1968, the Vietnam War was escalating in response to the Tet Offensive, which was a surprise attack from the enemy forces from North Vietnam on South Vietnam. Over 16,000 Americans were killed in action in 1968 alone. This was the highest casualty count during any year during the war. Larry was drafted the following year in 1969.

Gassner married his high school sweetheart, Sandra Brockamp, in June 1969 about three months before he was drafted into the Army.

According to Richard Gassner, Larry attended basic training in April 1969 up at Fort Lewis, in Tacoma, Washington.

Larry used to serve as the cook on elk hunting trips and thought he could best serve the Army as a cook. His dad said he was a good cook.

Instead, Larry was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, to be trained as an infantryman. He later received orders to deploy to Vietnam and was assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion of the 27th Infantry Regiment. The 27th Infantry Regiment is a unit assigned to the 25th Infantry Division. The 27th Infantry Regiment members are known as the Wolfhounds.

Before his deployment, his wife, Sandi, gave birth to a son also named Richard after his grandfather. Larry did take a moment to hold his son before being shipped to Vietnam.

Larry loaded an aircraft bound for Vietnam on Feb. 21, 1970.

According to his commanding officer, Capt. Criswell, Larry's unit was based near Cu Chi about 20 miles northwest of Saigon in Hau Nghia Province.

On May 31, 1970, Larry's unit was en route to an ambush site. As they were moving through the jungle, they were attacked by sniper fire. Larry was struck. He fell. He had only been in Vietnam 100 days. He died just three weeks shy of his 21st birthday.

It is difficult to find the words to capture the grief of his family when the uniformed officers showed up in Summit to notify Dorothy Gassner that her son had been killed in action. It is painful to consider the anguish of his wife, Sandi, and his son, Richard, who he would not have the chance to see grow up.

Larry was buried in the Historic Summit Cemetery with military honors over 50 years ago.

As I learned more about Larry's story, I discovered that the 2-27 Infantry Wolfhounds had recently established a brick memorial patio at Schofield Barracks located on Oahu in Hawaii. Schofield Barracks is home to the 25th Infantry Division known as the Tropic Lightning Division.

A man named William "Easy" Smith, who was both a Wolfhound Vietnam Veteran and now serves as the president of the 25th Infantry Division, has a dream. Easy's Dream is to honor fallen Wolfhounds whereby each 27th Infantry Regiment Wolfhound killed in Vietnam while serving in the regiment will have a memorial brick placed in the patio at Schofield Barracks.

Apparently, an anonymous donor stepped forward in recent years to provide the funds to purchase all the remaining bricks so that the dream would become a reality.

In December 2019, I reached out to Easy Smith to inquire if Larry Gassner had a brick? He died fighting as a Wolfhound. Easy returned my call on Christmas Eve and told me that while Larry did not have a brick yet, he would be sure to get one created and installed to honor his sacrifice.

By sometime in March 2020, I received a heavy package from Easy. The package had news that Larry's brick would be installed on the patio in Schofield Barracks in May 2020 and that he was providing a replica brick to present to his Gold Star Mother, Dorothy Gassner. Soon afterward, a second big package arrived with miniature bricks for Larry's widow, son and surviving brothers, nieces and nephews. It also contained coins, hats, shirts and other Wolfhound memorabilia to share with the Gassner family.

I was beyond impressed by Easy's remarkable generosity and his incredible kindness. He epitomizes the value of taking care of soldiers and their families. His actions warmed my heart.

On Memorial Day weekend 2020, on the 50th anniversary of Larry's death in Vietnam, I had the honor of presenting Larry's brick to his Gold Star Mother on behalf of the Philomath community and our nation. I presented the memorabilia that Easy Smith sent. It was a small token of our community's gratitude for Larry's Gold Star family. We recognized Larry's service to both our country and Vietnam. It served as a symbolic gesture to his mother that we have not forgotten him. She still had Larry's military medals hanging on the wall of her home.

Dorothy Gassner lived another few years and just passed away last month on Feb. 17, 2023, nearly 53 years to the day from when her son left for Vietnam. She was laid to rest in the Summit Cemetery right next to her fallen son that she lost years ago in Vietnam.

Sadly, Larry Gassner's name is not the only Philomath High School graduate listed on the Vietnam Wall. Both Paul J. Cochran and David "Doc" Styles graduated a year earlier in the PHS Class of 1966. They were also killed in action in 1968 and 1969, respectively. Their names are also etched on the wall.

I have had the honor over the years of meeting with members of both of their Gold Star families also. Despite the loss of their loved ones 50 years ago, the pain never goes away. Articles about these visits are available in the Philomath News archives.

Wednesday, March 29 is Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day. Take a moment to reflect on the fact that there are over 58,000 names on the Vietnam Wall. These names represent 58,000 other families just like the Gassners. Their loved ones made the ultimate sacrifice defending our nation and their respective families still grieve their loss 50 years later.

We must never forget them.

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