

## Soldier's family 'honored' by park

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Harry J. Simmons Jr. was a heroic soldier, a devout Christian and a "gentle giant," his sister remembered. The township park bearing his name will be rededicated Sunday.

Harry J. Simmons Jr.'s final act in this world crystallized the essence of the man, his older sister said.

Simmons, a Middletown resident and Marine lance corporal, was killed April 8, 1967, while saving another Marine during the Vietnam War. A \$1.2 million renovation at the Middletown park bearing his name was recently completed, and the park will be rededicated during a ceremony at 3 p.m. Sunday.

While the park is a lasting memorial to Simmons, his family has hundreds of other things to remember him by, including the heroic way he died.

"We were told Harry was carrying a wounded soldier to a helicopter," said Simmons' older sister, Sandra Giangrante of Lower Makefield. "He was carrying the man across his shoulders and as he turned to put the man in the helicopter, he was shot in the heart by a sniper."

According to VirtualWall.org., a website with information on soldiers whose names are on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., Simmons Jr. was killed in Quang Nam Province, near Da Nang, South Vietnam. He "died outright" from "gun or small arms fire." He was 20.

Family members and others who have researched the matter said Simmons was the first soldier from Langhorne - including the borough and the parts of Middletown with a Langhorne mailing address - to die in the Vietnam War.

That her brother would risk death to save another did not surprise Giangrante.

"He was 6-1 and incredibly strong and extremely good looking, but I liked to call him the gentle giant because he was probably the nicest person that God ever put on this earth," she said. "He never, ever, acted snobby to anyone or about anything. He was a wonderful Christian man."

The Simmons family lived on East Marshall Avenue, near where the township municipal center now stands. They were devout Christians who attended the First Baptist Church of Newtown, Giangrante said.

Simmons Jr. attended Neshaminy High School before dropping out and going to work at the Reedman auto dealership, where his father, Harry Simmons Sr., was general manager.

"My brother was very intelligent and mechanically inclined, and could rip apart an engine and put it back together again," Giangrante said. "I think he would have gone to tech school had there been one back then. He was like a lot of young men at the time who didn't like regular school and decided to leave and go to work."

With the Vietnam War in full swing, it seemed inevitable that her brother would end up in the military, Giangrante said.

"I think Harry knew he was doing to get drafted into the Army," she said. "Rather than have that happen, he decided that if he was going into the service, he would go into the branch that was the top notch, the elite, and in his mind, that was the Marines."

Simmons Jr. enlisted in July 1966 and arrived in South Vietnam in December of that year, his sister said. He was a rifleman with Echo Company of the Third Platoon, Second Battalion, according to newspaper accounts of the time.

When he died, Simmons Jr. was serving as a first fire team leader in Operation Canyon, his mother, Frances, said at the time.

Her brother earned several medals and decorations during his time in the Marines, including the Purple Heart and Rifleman's Medal, Giangrante said. He was engaged to Barbara Reingold of the Forsythia Gate section of Levittown in Middletown and the two were to be married in December 1967. Reingold is no longer alive.

Remembering her brother stirs strong emotions in Giangrante about the Vietnam War and its polarizing effect on the country.

"Harry didn't talk about the war being wrong or right," she said. "He knew it was his patriotic duty to defend our country and he did what was necessary. Of course, all wars are wrong, but it is what it is, and the (military) men and women over in Vietnam did what was necessary. I think the people of America were absolutely horrible the way they treated the men and women who came back from Vietnam. They should be ashamed.

"I don't think people should ever go see any movie that has Jane Fonda - Hanoi Jane - in it," Giangrante continued. "I just think she is an absolute pig; I really mean it."

Fonda was and still is widely criticized for her trip to Hanoi, North Vietnam, in 1972 and her anti-war messages broadcast over the radio there. The actress has since apologized for several aspects of the trip, including being photographed atop a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun, making it appear like she was helping to shoot down American planes.

Simmons Jr. impacted few people more than Larry Sherbondy, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel now living in Carlisle.

"I lived near the family in Langhorne and was best friends with Harry's younger brother Michael," Sherbondy said. "When Harry joined the Marines, we looked up to him as kind of a hero, but it was his death that changed the course of my life.

"When the family received word of his death, I was hanging around the house and listening to people talk about Harry," Sherbondy continued. "They were saying how they were sure Harry was in heaven because he had accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior when he was 16. I realized I didn't have that assurance, and it led me to also accept Christ as my savior and to join the military. Those two things have defined who I am, and I owe it to Harry."

In addition to Giangrante, Simmons Jr. is survived by his 85-year-old mother, who now resides in the Pickering Personal Care facility in Newtown; brother Michael of West Milford, N.J., and sister Debra Hyde of Louisville, Ky. His father, Harry Sr., died in 1994.

"I'd say anyone who gives up his life fighting a war, like Harry did, is a hero," Michael Simmons said. "His death had a big impact, and I think the township naming a park after him this many years later is another example. We're honored by that."

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