

In memory and gratitude

Honoring the heroes who died serving their country • Memorial Day 2011

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Barbara Newman holds back tears while talking about her late husband, "Mink" Newman. He was killed in Vietnam on Aug. 12, 1966, leaving Mrs. Newman to raise her young children alone.

A hero's legacy

Nearly 45 years after she learned her husband, 'Mink', had been killed in Vietnam, Barbara Newman is still affected by her loss and his sacrifice.

By **KENNETH FINE**
News-Argus Staff Writer

It started with a despondent gaze — her face void of emotion as she began fielding questions about the man she referred to, simply, as "my love."

She lit up when she remembered their first date — laughing as she recalled the costumes they wore to a "shotgun wedding-themed" Sadie Hawkins dance.

But when Barbara Newman started talking about the day her 8-year-old son was met at the front door by a pair of Army officers, the 78-year-old broke down.

"He said, 'Mommy ... it's some Army men,'" she said, hiding her

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Newman



Medals and the folded flag from her husband's funeral still occupy a prominent place of honor in the Newman home.

Legacy

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face in her hands for several moments before wiping tears from her eyes. "It was a chaplain and another officer. ... I just started pacing the floor."

It doesn't matter that it has been some 45 years since Erman "Mink" Newman was cut down by mortar fire in Vietnam.

Time can't heal the wounds his death inflicted on the wife who gave her heart to him.

"It still hurts," she said, as more tears fell. "It's like it was yesterday."

In the months before he left for the war, Mink was beginning, more than ever, to connect with his two sons.

"He would take them out into the woods and sit them under a tree with their GI Joes," Barbara said. "They just loved that."

So when their father began his 12-month tour, it hit his 8-year-old namesake and 6-year-old, Jim, the hardest — the soldier's daughters, Susan and Sandra, were too young to realize what he was facing, their mother said.

"The boys had a real tough time," Barbara said. "Jim had a horrible, horrible time accepting it."

But their mother had no choice but to go on with the routine of life.

She had four children to raise.

And Mink, she thought, could take care of himself until he returned to her side.

Besides, the letters he wrote painted a jaded picture of how life truly unfolded across the world.

"He was in Da Nang and just outside Da Nang is China Beach," Barbara said. "He sent me a picture of himself sitting on the beach drinking a beer."

"I said, 'Here he is sitting on the beach drinking a beer and I'm home here with the kids.'"

So when those Army officers showed up at the Newmans' door, they brought with them a reality that is still, more than four decades later, hard for Barbara to accept.

Mink and his comrades were asleep at the foot of a mountain when mortar shells started raining down on their position.

And when the soldier woke to the sound of his commanding officer telling him to "Hit the ditch," the father of four was mortally wounded.

"He hollered out, 'Hit the ditch,' and waking from his deep sleep, my husband didn't roll out of the bed. He stood straight up. That's when the mortar got him," Barbara said. "I had a nightmare one night that he was killed. Two days later they came to my door."

While Susan and Sandra

— the girls were, at the time, 1 and 3 respectively — were still too young to understand why their mother was breaking down, the boys, she thought, were old enough to know the truth.

They would attend their father's funeral at West Point.

They would know, Barbara vowed, that he died a hero — a man committed to defending the free world he hoped they would grow up in.

"I always told my children that their dad died for a reason," she said.

But what they didn't know was just how close their mother came to falling apart.

"Everybody came — West Point classmates, wives. They took care of me," Barbara said as tears, again, started falling. "Without them, I wouldn't have made it."

Mink's boys would continue the legacy of service established by their father and his father before him.

But when the soldier's namesake joined the Marine Corps, it brought back painful memories for his younger sister.

"When he enlisted ... Susan, she cried," Barbara said, again breaking down. "She said, 'I don't want the same thing (that happened to Dad) to happen to you.'"

And while his mother never discouraged him, one particular memory from the days after he swore to defend the same cause his father died for still brings her to her knees.

"The first time I went to the Vietnam Wall was after he graduated from Parris Island," Barbara said, her voice trembling. "That was very powerful — to have my husband's namesake in his Marine uniform next to his father's name."

Barbara doesn't need a holiday to remember all she lost.

She relives it every day — when she sees, in her children, all those qualities she

fell for during that high school dance; when she looks down at a photograph of the man she refers to, simply, as "my love."

But the Gold Star Wife hopes that all Americans take some time today to reflect on — and give thanks for — the heavy price so many have paid to keep the nation's enemies at bay.

Only then, she said, will Mink and his comrades' legacy be complete — if those they served to protect still remember — decades after their sacrifice.

"I would encourage them to ... take some time in privacy to remember those who have given their lives," she said, losing herself in tears before continuing. "And remember the families. Remember the children who grew up without a father. It's a struggle — forever."