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Local leaders' work to replace Niagara Falls Veterans Memorial spurs tribute trail

BY PATRICK J. BRADLEY

A few weeks ago, a trio of local business owners – Tom Deal, Rico Liberale and Frank Strangio – were publicly applauded for contributing \$2,700 to replace a marble bench that had been destroyed by vandals at the Niagara Falls Veterans Memorial in Hyde Park.

I applaud them, too, and I was moved by the timing of their gift. Although it wasn't Memorial Day or Independence Day or even Flag Day, their generosity called to mind the valor of local service members who, in times of war, sacrificed their lives in service to our country.

Their donation also renewed my curiosity about a wartime veteran from the other side of the United States, a soldier of my generation who gave his life halfway around the world.

You see, when I cleaned out my rolltop desk this summer – a task that was long-overdue – I discovered a long-forgotten piece of jewelry.

It was well worn and covered with scratches, yet the engraving on it was still readable:

SSG Manuel Lauterio
 USA 6-8-73
 SVN

Staff Sergeant Manuel Lauterio, United States Army, South Vietnam.

The inscription took me back to my college days. When I graduated from Oswego State in 1976, I came home carrying a diploma and wearing that wristband.

While I was glad I'd escaped the draft and an all-expenses paid trip to Vietnam, I wasn't a draft dodger. If Uncle Sam had called, I would have gone. In my family, it was a tradition and was expected.

My dad was a soldier who saw combat in Europe during World



War II. My Uncle Carm was a soldier who later enlisted in the Navy. Uncle John Bradley? He fought in Korea. All of them survived.

The wristband I found was a Prisoner of War-Missing in Action (POW-MIA) bracelet. You could buy them back then for \$2 apiece. Each was engraved with the name of a service member who had been captured by the North Vietnamese or who had gone missing during combat operations.

Americans purchased 5 million of them. Mine bore Staff Sgt. Lauterio's name. I always wondered if he ever made it home.

I found Lauterio online among some Vietnam War records. Thank you, Google.

Manuel Alonzo Lauterio was born Aug. 17, 1947 in Pomona, California. He entered military service from Los Angeles. The records I found didn't say if he volunteered or was drafted.

In Vietnam, then-Specialist 5 Manuel Lauterio was assigned as a helicopter crew chief in the 62nd Aviation Company. A crew chief was a soldier tasked with making

sure his chopper was safe to fly. In charge of both aircraft and crew, he was responsible for everything that happened in and to that helicopter.

Some would say crew chiefs were more important than the pilots themselves.

On Jan. 8, 1973, Lauterio was the crew chief aboard a UH-1H Iroquois helicopter, tail number 69-15619, on a support mission over Quang Tri province.

The northern-most province in South Vietnam, Quang Tri bordered the demilitarized zone that separated North and South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese shot down his helicopter. Specialist Lauterio, age 26, was killed along with five other crew members and passengers. The enemy's presence in the area prevented search and rescue efforts. Their bodies were never found.

The surviving family members of military personnel killed in combat are often comforted by visiting their loved ones' graves. I expect Lauterio's family found it painful that his body was never being returned for burial.

In 1996, a joint U.S. and Vietnamese investigative team recovered human remains from Quang Tri province at a site associated with his helicopter's loss. Three years later – 26 years after his helicopter was shot down over Quang Tri – a forensic analysis identified the remains as those of Staff Sgt. Manuel Lauterio, missing in Vietnam.

Through the years, the Army

had continued to promote the former specialist 5, not knowing if he was missing in action or a prisoner of war.

But now I know. The soldier on my wristband gave his life for our country. He never made it home. And he will not be forgotten.

Like local military veterans and the hundreds of wartime casualties from Niagara Falls who are honored on the Niagara Falls Veterans Memorial, his name and sacrifice will always be remembered.

Staff Sgt. Lauterio is memorialized at the National Memorial Cemetery, also known as the Courts of the Missing, in Honolulu. More than 25,000 victims of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War are honored there.

He's also memorialized on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Should you visit there, you'll find him on panel W1, Line 110, listed with the crew members and passengers who were shot down with him.

From Washington to Niagara Falls to Hawaii, from sea to shining sea, on monuments and in cemeteries across the land, the sacrifices made by members of America's armed forces will always be remembered.

If you ever get to sit on that beautiful new marble bench that, thanks to the generosity of others, will soon take its place in front of the Niagara Falls Veterans Memorial, please give thanks for Staff Sgt. Manuel Lauterio and all the rest.

And if you still have your Vietnam POW-MIA wristband, by all means Google the service member whose name you find on it. Out of respect.

You just might be surprised at what you find.

Thanks to Lewiston Town Board for work on Kiwanis Park Trail

My husband and I want to commend the Town of Lewiston, and especially the town supervisor, Steve Broderick, for the leadership needed to get the Kiwanis Park Trail repaved from the south end in the Village of Lewiston to the north end at Pletcher Road.

It is our understanding that this path is actually owned by the state of New York, and consequently an agreement had to be reached between the town and the state in order to grant the town authority to access and improve the path. We suspect it took a considerable amount of

time and perseverance to overcome this hurdle.

When we called the town for updates on the path's progress, we were treated with the utmost courtesy and professionalism.

As frequent users of the path, we can attest to the fact that the repaving has provided much

more enjoyment to many more people. It is also much safer for riding bicycles.

So, a giant, "Thank you" to the Town of Lewiston and Supervisor Steve Broderick for getting this done!

Karen and Jim Bennett

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