

PROFILES

RED WARRIOR DENNIS LEWALLEN CONTACTS WIFE OF FALLEN SGT.

Original Articles from Reporter James Herrera of the **Monterey Herald**

A Healing Conversation: Seaside widow, Vietnam vet connect

Dennis Lewallen, a retired U.S. Army infantryman, was searching the internet from his Kansas home recently for information on a man he had served with who had been killed in Vietnam.

The name Laszlo Holovits pulled in a [Monterey Herald story](#) from 2015.

"I am trying to decide if there would be any benefit to Mrs. Holovits in contacting her," he emailed the reporter.

Lewallen called 72-year-old Linda Holovits of Seaside to give her a first-hand account of her husband's death more than 50 years ago.

The quest for citizenship

Nothing much has changed since the July, 2015 story that told of Linda Holovits' pursuit to obtain U.S. citizenship for her deceased husband.

Laszlo Holovits, a Hungarian native, was told by the military when he enlisted that serving in the U.S. Army would gain him citizenship to the country he loved, Linda said. He was killed on Sept. 23, 1967, six weeks after arriving in Vietnam. He was 26 and hadn't completed the required paperwork for citizenship. Linda Holovits has struggled for years to get an exemption in his case and have his citizenship awarded post-posthumously.



Sgt. Laszlo Holovits and Linda Holovits on their wedding day 1963

"It's been over 50 years and a long, long time has passed, but it still bugs me that he can't get his citizenship, it's just some stinking piece of paper," she said last week.

Her congressman at the time, Sam Farr, took up her cause, but couldn't get it done. Today, Farr's successor, Jimmy Panetta, has taken up the charge. "Congressman Panetta is exploring multiple ways to address the inequity, including changes to the underlying policy that will allow Sgt. Holovits and others who valiantly served and sacrificed for our country to get the recognition, and their families the peace of mind, that they deserve," said Sarah Davey, press secretary for Rep. Panetta.

The phone call

Last week Lewallen, 71, of Beloit, Kansas, and Holovits met over the phone.

"I told her exactly what had happened that day, which was pretty close to what she had been told" by the U.S. Army, said Lewallen. "I don't think she was ever confident that she had been told the exact details."



Dennis Lewallen - Delta Co. 1967

Lewallen also conveyed to Holovits that her husband was in no way at fault for what happened to him.

According to the military report, Sgt. Holovits “died as the result of metal fragment wounds received when friendly forces threw a grenade at a squad mistaken for a hostile force while training the squad on combat operation.”

“We had been in combat nearly every day, and were always nervous and hypervigilant about movement in the jungle,” Lewallen said. “It was easy for something like this to happen, which didn’t make it any easier to deal with, but our survival instincts had to take over and we didn’t get to mourn until sometime years later.” said Lewallen.

The retired Army man said after reading the Herald article on Holovits, “I for some reason just felt compelled to try to reach out to Mrs. Holovits, and see if I could answer any questions she had, and in doing so, possibly give her some sort of comfort.”

Holovits said she felt better after her conversation with Lewallen.

“He’s a nice man ... a gentle speaking man,” said Holovits. “He said he’s thought about me for years. I loved talking to him ... it bugs him too that my husband doesn’t have citizenship.”

Right, Cindy Holovits talks to reporter James Herrera about her quest to get citizenship for her late husband Laszlo.



Holovits said her husband’s many years of training taught him that he could save lives and that is why he did what he did that night in the Pieiku Province of South Vietnam over 50 years ago.

Holovits was a decorated staff sergeant who had been in the U.S. Army for eight years when he was killed.

What happened

Lewallen provided his first-hand account of what happened the night of Sgt. Holovits was killed in the jungles of Vietnam.

“We were digging in for the night after a day of humping in the boonies. Me and another man were digging in ... and we heard and saw something in front of us in the jungle.

“I told him to stay there and keep an eye out and I would go up to the command post and see if anyone was out setting up trip flares. About half way up to the command post, which was only maybe 100 feet or so, I heard a hand grenade go off, and came back down to see what was going on.

“When I had arrived, the other man that had been with me had thrown a grenade and killed our squad sergeant, Laszlo Holovits. There was another man that was with Sgt. Holovits, but he was not injured.”

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Lewallen said he had wondered for years what the sergeant's name was that got killed because "I had blocked it out of my mind."

He wrote a letter to a man he believes was the company commander and received a response identifying Sgt. Holovits as the soldier who was killed that night.

"This happened probably seven or eight years ago, then a few weeks ago I was searching the internet for any more information on Sgt. Holovits" when he ran across the article, said Lewallen.

The former Army infantryman said in contacting Linda Holovits "it may help in my healing as well. Everything I do to help me deal with the terrors of war is painful at the time, but I think necessary."

"I never thought I would be able to locate her, and I knew it would be hard for me to talk to her about it," said Lewallen. "Surprisingly she was easy to talk with, and I was very comfortable visiting with her."

After the war

Lewallen said he continues to try to make sense of the incident and many others that happened during his time in Vietnam. He said he struggles with "survivor's guilt" and several other things that are associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I go to group therapy at a VA clinic with several other veterans with PTSD every week," said Lewallen.

Holovits recounted the day she received the news of her husband's death.

"When the soldiers came to tell me, it was like somebody – how do you explain death – it was just a shock to learn about it. Everything changed from that moment on. We had talked before he left for Vietnam. I asked what would happen if he didn't come back. He said, 'don't worry, I'll be back.' But it just feels like it ended my life even though it was him who died. I still think I need to talk about it," said Holovits.

To read the original Herald story on Linda Holovits visit <https://bit.ly/2AEOk15>.



James Herrera

James Herrera has been with The Herald for nearly three decades, during which he has been an ad designer, staff artist, newsroom graphic artist, videographer and now a reporter. He covers business and the cities of Marina, Seaside, Sand City and Del Rey Oaks.

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