



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
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Always Wanted To Be An Army Man

Kern County's First To Fall In Vietnam

By Gilbert Gia
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Clayton Fannin was on leave from West Point in 1956, and Satan didn't recognize him. Wilma Oaks recalled, "It took some doing by Clayton to convince Satan who he was, and then poor Satan cried for forgiveness. Clayton was delighted that he fooled his dog." ¹

¹ Email to the author

Just a year earlier, Clay Fannin had been one of three Outstanding Seniors at East Bakersfield High. Four years after that day he fooled Satan, Clay was a Distinguished Graduate at West Point.² The Army sent him to Ft. Benning, where he completed the officers' course. He then went to Ft. Rucker, Alabama and qualified as a fixed-wing pilot. Fannin joined the Army Rangers, completed jump school, and in December 1960 was promoted to First Lieutenant. He was stationed at Ft. Lewis, Washington. In April 1961 Fannin was at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, and learned to fly the Army's Mohawk OV-1, a twin-engine reconnaissance aircraft.

Family and friends in Bakersfield had been followed Clay's military progress for six years, and when he visited home on leave, the Order of DeMolay presented him the Chevalier Degree for his accomplishments.

² Jun 1959



Clayton A. Fannin

Clay was attending church at Tacoma when he met Rosalyn Foster, a student at Pacific Lutheran. In September 1961 they were married. About a year passed, Rosalyn and Clay said their good-byes, and First Lt. Clayton Fannin, 25, was sent to Nha Trong, Vietnam as a pilot in the 23rd Special Aviation Warfare Detachment.

Officially he was a combat adviser to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, but in his off-hours he taught English at a missionary school and raised money for the Christian children's orphanage.³ In November, Rosalyn wrote that they had a baby girl, Rosemary Anne.

³ *Assembly Magazine*. 2003



The OV-1

Clay's letters said he was flying, but there was never a mention of danger. On January 10, 1963, about 250 miles north of Saigon, Lt. Clayton Fannin and his ARVIN observer Lt. Suu were killed when their Mohawk crashed into a mountainside near the provinces of Pleiku and Phu Bon.⁴

Clay's East High Class of 1955 had two other Outstanding Senior men. They were Tim Lemucchi and Michael Roemer. Lemucchi attended Stanford and Georgetown Universities, and he became a successful trial lawyer in Bakersfield. Roemer attended Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he became an international economist. But Clayton Fannin wanted to be a soldier.

⁴ Fannin's name is first on the Vietnam Memorial in Bakersfield and 16th on Panel No. 1 of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. His name also appears on the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Sacramento, CA, and on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Olympia, WA. Fourteen-thousand men and women from Kern County served in Vietnam from 1963 to 1972. The Bakersfield Vietnam War Memorial at the corner of Truxtun and Chester Ave, had, at last count, the names of 135 men killed in that conflict.

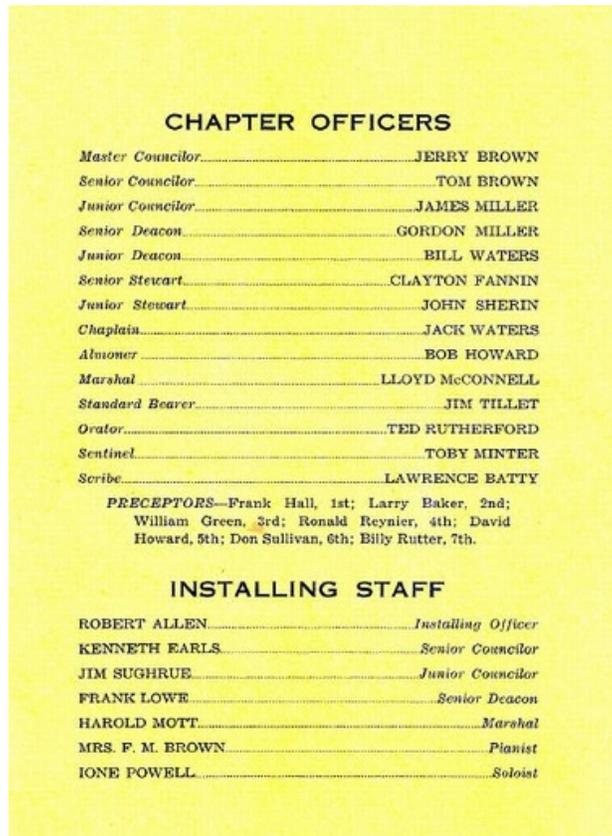
Mary Ellen Fannin recalled, "My husband and I did a lot with our kids and were involved in everything they did. Clay was a practical boy from an early age. In a statewide 4-H competition he demonstrated how to kill, pluck and dress chickens, and he took second place. My boy's interest in the military was spurred by the circumstances of WWII, by our friends, and by his three uncles who were in the service. He wanted to be a soldier before he was in Kindergarten--he wanted to be a general." ⁵ His sister, Mary Jo, had similar memories, "Clay and his friends always played soldier. I've got photos of him before he was five in the little Army uniform that one of his uncles gave him." ⁶

Clay Fannin was 14 when he joined the East Bakersfield Chapter, DeMolay. He focused on the work, moved steadily through the chairs, and in his senior year of high school was installed Master

⁵ Telephone conversation with the author

⁶ Letter to the author. Mary Ellen Fannin (Jul 11, 1919 - Jan 5, 2008) worked for a bank, owned a dress shop, was an East Bakersfield High secretary, and was manager of the Especco Federal Credit Union. She was involved in church youth groups and activities of the 4H, Jobs Daughters, DeMolay. In 1976 she and her husband moved Portland, Or, bought a 31-foot Airstream trailer, and for 14 years traveled throughout the US, Canada, Mexico, and Central America. Ellen's husband, Jess W. Fannin, died in 1995. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 11, 2008)

Counselor. DeMolay honed his leadership skills and fostered his commitment to civic duty.



East Bakersfield Chapter, DeMolay. Installation, Jan 17, 1953
(Image from Dale Schwamborn)

Mel Kachigian was Valley Master Counselor when Clay was a DeMolay counselor. Said Kachigian, “We were close to the same age, and I got to know him through DeMolay meetings. I can tell you that Clayton was very bright, and I remember that he always wanted to be a fly boy.”⁷

⁷ Email to the author

Clayton mother recalled that from an early age he attended churches but was not a member of any one of them. She explained, "It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that even at that time he was religious and faithful to God. He did join the Calvary Baptist, and later when we moved over to Chester Avenue, he was president of the church's youth fellowship. After he graduated from high school and went to the Academy, religious work took on an even more important part in his life."⁸

In 1954, the Fannins lived in a one-story stucco at 2210 Pacific Street, and Clayton and Mary Jo attended nearby East Bakersfield High School. "Jake," as their father was called, was a switchman for the Southern Pacific and the first treasurer of Espeeco Federal Credit Union, which he and his wife organized in 1954. "About the same time that my husband and I started the credit union," said Mrs. Fannin, "I got a job at East High. Clay had been in the high school Cadets Corps for three years, and in his senior year he was named Cadets Captain. The adviser in 1955 was Ben Gmur, and Ben put Clay in charge of teaching first-period Cadets. Whenever I asked Clay about how the teaching was going, he was very confident and told me he was doing a good job."

⁸ Email to the author



East High Auditorium

Mary Ellen continued, "Clay didn't avoid sports, but he had a problem with organized teams. He didn't want to be a follower, and he admitted to me once 'I can't be just a part of team.' This attitude meant that he never ran with the elite high school group. But they respected him." Clay's boyhood friend Jack Flad said Clay really had no negative attributes. Jack named his second child Clayton.

Most memories were remarkably similar: Myrna Dee Bell Castro, Dale Hopwood, John Howlett, Tim Lemucchi, Roberta Matlick, Ted Rutherford, Dale Schwamborn, and Jack Waters uniformly agreed that Clayton was an active, straight-laced, serious worker; quiet and to the point.

In 1955 members of the Cadets were looked on as an odd group. Wasn't that for guys who wanted to duck out of PE? In fact, students in Cadets could avoid PE, but the program allowed them to take both. If Clay knew about those jibes, he didn't listen to them. He would have been in Cadets even if it meant just marching and flag raising, but Cadets offered more than that. East High had a small-caliber target range, and when Clay was at East, Cadets took awards at the state level for marksmanship.

When Clay was a Sophomore he worked at the student store for adviser Les Engelson, and when Clay was a Senior he was in charge of the store. The job gave him high profile. Dale Schwamborn recalled Clayton as an agreeable, smiling manager.⁹

Ron Spitz was in Cadets when Clay was, and Spitz recalled when the two of them attended two-week, summer training camps at Ft. Ord and Camp Roberts.¹⁰ There, the boys got a first-hand look at Army life, and Clayton liked what he saw. In his junior year he was named outstanding Cadet officer, and in his senior year he became captain.

⁹ Interview with the author

¹⁰ Email

According to the *Bakersfield Californian* Clayton Fannin was “a man who created his own destiny.”¹¹ Mary Ellen agreed that her son was always preparing for the next step in life. She described the first time he talked about the military academy: “In his Junior year he told me and his father that he wanted to go to West Point, and my husband said that we'd do all we could to get him in. But as it turned out, we didn't have to do anything. Before we knew it, he'd called around and got the information and set things in motion by himself. When he told us about it, we asked him why he didn't let us help him. He said, 'If I can't do it on my own I don't want to do it.'”¹² Representative Harlan Hagen awarded West Point appointments based on a competitive exam, and Clayton applied to take the test.¹³

Dale Hopwood characterized Fannin as an unlikely soldier: “I couldn't see him killing people. He wasn't the gung-ho type. Clayton was the kind of leader who didn't have to come right out and tell others what to do. I never thought of him as aggressive. He was a

¹¹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 10, 1988, B4

¹² Letter to the author

¹³ Fannin also applied to UC, Berkeley.

moral person just doing his job. He seemed to know that he was doing the right thing.”¹⁴

Word got around that Clayton was studying for the West Point test. Said the German teacher Hildigard Elgis, "The facility was close knit, and we were fond of our students. On lunch hour we teachers always talked about this person and that, and Clay was a big topic.”¹⁵

Clay served on the Senior Class Council, worked in the student store, and took part in Cadets, but those extra activities cut into his study time for West Point. Mrs. Fannin's voice softened as she remembered that part of his life. "So Ben Gmur pulled him out of Cadets and put him in PE. A little later Ben told me, 'Well they gave it to Clayton.' I guess some of the kids laid it on Clay, but the Cadets program also 'gave it' to the Cadets. "

¹⁴ Email to the author

¹⁵ Interview with the author

WELCOME

East Bakersfield High School students and faculty join in acting as hosts, and in expressing appreciation to our citizens for generous support and continued interest in their schools.

K. W. Rich, Principal

SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS

- 7:00-7:30 Annual Inspection of Cadet Corps
Ben Gmur, Commandant
North side of Cafeteria
- 7:30-8:00 Band Concert
Harry Hildebrecht, Director
West side of Cafeteria
- 8:00-8:15 Glee Club
Miss Mary Lynn, Director
Cafeteria
- 8:00-9:00 Fashion Show
Miss Gladys Mortenson, Instructor
H206
- 9:00-9:15 Glee Club
Miss Mary Lynn, Director
Cafeteria
- 7:00-10:00 Departmental Exhibits

Welcome Night Schedule, East High, 1953

(copy: Dale Schwamborn)

His mother continued, "Then the Trig teacher, Peggy Sprague, wanted me to excuse Clay from her class so he could get tutoring for the test. I talked that over with Vice Principal Irving Lane, and he

told me that Clay already 'had it,' and there wasn't much use in getting him a tutor. What he was telling me was that Clay was already studying for the test on his own. He'd already gotten to it. His aunt and uncle were visiting then, and my sister asked Clay, 'Are you going to pass the test?' And Clay told her, 'I wrote it.'" Clayton got his appointment to West Point, and about that same time the University of California offered him a scholarship to Berkeley. But Clayton had already enlisted in the Army."

A family friend, John Papasergia, recalled, " I knew Jess and Mary Ellen Fannin from the railroad, and I thought a lot of Clay. I remember that after he graduated he drove to my house to say goodbye before he left for West Point. I told him, 'Don't get pumped up with this hero b.s.' He told me not to worry and that he wouldn't do that. He was a nice kid."¹⁶

Clayton's personal standards made him different from most high schoolers because, as his mother characterized him, "He didn't want to do anything unless he was the best."¹⁷ Without exception, all who remembered him said he was intelligent, and some added he was

¹⁶ Interview with the author

¹⁷ Telephone interview with the author

quiet and sensitive. Others went so far as to say he was a loner. Clayton's West Point roommate Stanley Delikat commented that the label *loner* "wasn't altogether incorrect." Clay's mother had heard that before, but she said it wasn't true – "unless they meant he didn't go out for team sports."¹⁸

At West Point, Clayton earned the friendship and respect of his company mates. Delikat wrote, "In a way he seemed to function at a level above the others. We called him 'The Bishop' because he was so moral. But he was well-liked and had a very dry sense of humor."¹⁹ Richard Clark, another West Point roommate, wrote, "Clay was dedicated to the service of others, and the military was one way to exercise that philosophy."²⁰ Mrs Fannin added this, "A few years ago one of those fellows wrote me about a classmate of theirs who was an atheist. He and Clay would have coffee and then get into discussions about religion. After that, the man came back to God."²¹ Clay taught Sunday school for military families at West Point and was program's administrator in his fourth year, but he also competed on the West Point rifle team.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Assembly Magazine*, 2003

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Telephone interview with the author

Doris Hopwood Dunham recalled June, 1956 when Clay returned home on leave. "He seemed to have become an even more assured person. He'd never been a jock in the four years at EB, but he sure got plenty of admiration when he showed up at my graduation in his West Point whites. Mary Jo and I and everyone were impressed and felt that we were blessed by his presence." ²²

News came that Clay was missing. His sister recalled, "When we found out, it turned my father's hair gray almost overnight." ²³ For several months the family heard nothing more, then in September, Rosalyn's mother and brother drowned in a fishing accident off Alaska. "When they died," said Mary Jo, "I just knew my brother had died too." ²⁴

Eleven months went by. Mary Jo recalled the day they learned about Clay's death: "We were home on November 25th watching President Kennedy's funeral when somebody from the *Californian* called to ask if we could verify a report that Clayton's remains had been found. That was the first news we'd had that he was dead. The

²² Email to the author

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Army didn't formally notify us until December."²⁵ The loss of the dedicated, talented, and promising life of Clay Fannin devastated the community.



Memorial Amphitheater, Arlington, Virginia

Lt. Clayton Allen Fannin was posthumously advanced to Captain and granted the Purple Heart. Bakersfield DeMolay held a memorial service. On January 2, 1964, Captain Fannin was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery near Memorial

²⁵ Ibid

Amphitheater. The inscription at the reads, "We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."²⁶

Clay's daughter grew up, married, and had a son who was an active little boy. He learned to swim when he was five, and in high school he took advanced classes. They say Russell is the spitting image of his grandfather.



The Wall

(photo credit: Dale Schwamborn)

²⁶ *Assembly Magazine*. 2003. On October 4, 2000 at Fort Benning, Georgia, West Point Class of 1959 honored Clayton Fannin. Fannin's years at the Academy were described in *Front & Center*, Publication of the Association Of Graduates, United States Military Academy, Fall 2000. www.vvmf.org/