

Meet Joseph Vincent Whelan, Green Beret, Vietnam War, One of Cranford's 86.

By Don Sweeney

Since taking on this responsibility to tell the stories of the Cranford 86 I find myself gravitated to war movies On Demand and in theaters as I spend hours researching the stories of our hometown heroes. The movies that have historical themes of real encounters are the ones that I am attracted to the most. The latest was the story of PFC Desmond T. Doss a Medal of Honor recipient despite refusing to bear arms during WW2. The movie is Hacksaw Ridge, directed by Mel Gibson. If you haven't seen it, you must. As I walked from the theater I said to my son, I can't believe this happened over 70 years ago and I have never heard this amazing story.

In the past year I have read stories much like this as we uncover the history of the 86 Cranford men that sacrificed their lives for the freedom of our country. Until now, most of these stories have been locked away. Most of the people that knew these men and their stories have passed on, leaving the stories tucked away and untold to today's Cranford inhabitants.



JOSEPH VINCENT WHELAN

Joe . . . even-tempered . . . a nicer guy you couldn't meet . . . C.H.S. football player . . . will always remember the day he passed geometry . . . seen with Dick Salway . . . future plans undecided.

Football 9, 12; Basketball 9; Baseball 9; Golf 11, 12.

The one that caught my eye in my six inch stack of photocopies of old news articles was the story of Joseph Vincent Whelan, Green Beret from the Vietnam conflict. Born on February 1st 1942 in Bayonne, he lived most of his life at 126 Makatom Dr. in Cranford, moving here when he was two years old. A graduate of St. Michael's Elementary School before moving up to Cranford High School, where he was captain of his golf team as well as a valued member of the varsity football team. A note under his yearbook picture states "an even-tempered guy...a nicer guy you couldn't meet" .

He joined the Army immediately after graduation in 1959 and served for three years. Stationed in Greenland, he saw no action as this was after the conclusion of the Korean conflict. As the Vietnam conflict broke out, he re-enlisted in 1965 and attended Officer Candidate School. After graduation he was commissioned second lieutenant and then attained the rank of Captain. He was wounded twice during his first tour of duty when his special forces unit was overrun by North Vietnamese during the nearly two month long siege of Khe Sanh early in 1968 and was awarded the bronze

star for Gallantry for that tour. <http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/battle-of-khe-sanh>

Joseph was then sent back for another tour in Vietnam. He served as leader with the 5th Special Forces Group (Green Beret) of a joint Vietnamese and American Platoon. He was killed while in action while on a combat mission when his platoon was ambushed in the landing zone Providence of Laos on October 25, 1969 three weeks after starting his 2nd tour of duty.

His Silver Star citation reads: Captain Whelan distinguished himself while commanding a platoon of Vietnamese civilian irregulars during an exploitation mission deep in enemy held territory. Subjected to enemy fire, the platoon was inserted by helicopter into the planned area of operation. After moving some distance from the landing zone, the platoon was attacked from every side by a company of North Vietnamese armed with rocket propelled grenades and automatic weapons. Several Americans and Vietnamese were seriously wounded in the initial exchange of fire. With rocket propelled grenades exploding overhead and machine gun fire raking the area, Captain Whelan moved from cover through open terrain to a group of his Vietnam irregulars that were stunned by the ferocity of the enemies attack. He quickly allayed the soldiers fear and disorder by forming them into a large squad and rallying others to join them. Shouting commands and words of encouragement to his men, Captain Whelan led a bold rush against a fortified enemy position atop a nearby hill. Firing their weapons on the run, Captain Whelan's squad, with him at the fore, broke through the rank after rank of enemy soldiers. Although knocked down several times during his advance by the blasts of exploding grenades, Captain Whelan struggled to his feet and continued to lead his men on. As the allies neared the crest of the hill, a large barrage of rocket propelled grenades unleashed by the enemy mortally wounded Captain Whelan.



Inspired by his unfailing courage and leadership, Captain Whelan's men fought on and routed the North Vietnamese from their defensive position. Captain Whelan's gallantry in action, at the cost of his life, was in keeping with the highest tradition of the military service and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.

Joseph Whelan received many awards for his service in Vietnam including two purple hearts, The Bronze Star, The Silver Star, the Army Commendation Medal and The National Defense Service Medal.

He left behind in Cranford his wife Dorothy (Gillespie) and a daughter Charlotte 18 months old. Charlotte later attended Clemson University and settled in South Carolina where she married the son of a South Carolina State Senator.

A service was held at St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church and he was buried with highest honors at Arlington National Cemetery in

Virginia. He was one of America's finest and one of our Cranford 86.



Under the direction of the Cranford 86 Project a group of generous charitable organizations brought new life to the Masons' float. This gave the V.F.W. a rolling stage to allow the older heroes that formerly marched proudly in our 100-year-old parade, to continue to safely participate. A team of Cranford Jaycees, under the leadership of Geoffrey Semler, worked feverishly to extensively renovate the float to get it parade-ready in just four short weeks. A new plywood floor with carpeting, new railings, and bench seating were installed for comfortable transport of the Cranford veterans.