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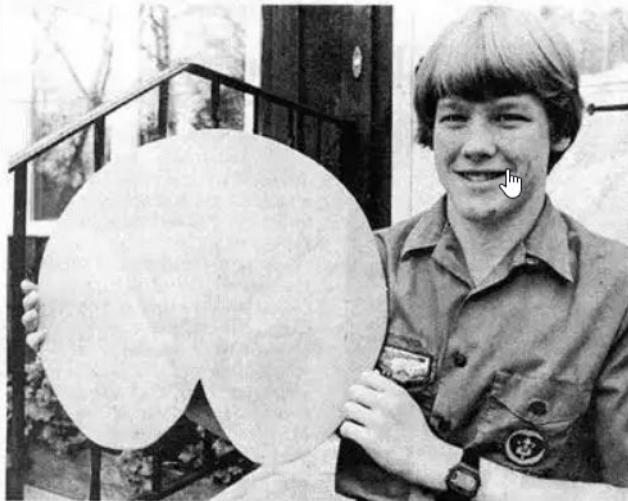
White Bear Lake honors one of its own this Memorial Day

By Shannon Granholm/Managing Editor

May 21, 2025



On Memorial Day, Monday, May 26, the city of White Bear Lake will honor one of its own, Major Curtis Donald Feistner — a 1986 White Bear Lake grad who died at the age of 34 in a helicopter crash in the Philippines in 2002. This collage was made by a member of Task Force 160th to honor Curt.



Eagle scout project

CURT FEISTNER, a sophomore at White Bear High -- North Campus, shows off the plywood "lily pads" he put together for the Department of Natural Resources. Curt contacted the DNR for ideas on what he could do for his Eagle Scout project. The DNR said that they would need some of the wooden lily pads for the their Fishery display at the Minnesota State Fair. Curt made 20 lily pads for them. Curt has been in Scouting for about five years.

Curt Feistner was recognized in the White Bear Press in November 1983 for his Eagle Scout project. He made wooden lily pads for the Department of Natural Resources Fishery display at the Minnesota State Fair.



White Bear Lake 1988 grad John Doherty flew this flag in honor of Curt at ISAF in Kabul, Afghanistan around the 10th anniversary of Curt's death. Legion 168 plans to place this flag and plaque in a prominent location for all to see.

American Legion 168 is pulling out all the stops to honor one of its own this Memorial Day.

Each year, the VFW Post 1782 and American Legion alternate on which organization plans the Memorial Day events. In 2025, it's the American Legion's turn.

About a year ago, Legion members received a phone call from White Bear Lake Area Schools. As district staff were going through items during construction of the unified high school campus, they stumbled upon a plaque, flag and photo that were given to the district in honor of Major Curtis Donald Feistner — a 1986 grad who died at the age of 34 in a helicopter crash in the Philippines in 2002.

"We both looked at each other and said, 'We've got to do something,'" said Gary Carlberg, American Legion 2nd Vice Commander.

Curt was raised in Birchwood Village. He earned the rank of Eagle Scout and was a three-sport athlete in cross-country skiing, tennis and soccer.

John Doherty, a 1988 White Bear High School grad, was on the cross-country ski team with Curt. "I was a terrible skier ... I was the worst skier on the team. There was a group of skiers that would bring (the younger) skiers on the weekends when they went to state parks to go ski. And he was one of those people," he recalled. "Looking back now, that tells you even more about his character for someone who was willing to do that."

Doherty says Curt was an inspiration to the younger skiers on the team. Curt's senior year, he won regions and sectionals. After he graduated, Curt decided to follow his brother, Alan Feistner, to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His freshman year, he wrote a letter to the White Bear ski team back home.

"(The coach) read that letter to us as inspiration," Doherty said. "He was a great skier. He was a great athlete."

Scott Storkamp, a 1985 White Bear Lake grad, got to know Curt really well while they attended West Point and skied on the ski team. (Their paths continued to cross, as they were both stationed in Hawaii at the same time years later.)

“He was a great dude. He was as all-American as you can get,” Storkamp recalled. “He was a great guy and extremely good at what he did.”

Curt graduated from West Point in 1990 and went on to serve as an Army aviator in a variety of leadership positions for numerous worldwide operations. Those who knew him described him as a “talented athlete and outdoorsman.” He was an avid parachutist who competed in sporting events, including Hawaii’s Iron Man triathlon.

Curt was a member of the Special Operations Air Regiment-Task Force 160th, known as the “Night Stalkers” for eight years. Task Force 160th is based out of Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and consists of some of the Army’s most-qualified aviators, crew chiefs and soldiers who provide helicopter support for special operations forces. Their missions are usually conducted at night, at high speeds, at low altitudes and on short notice.

His brother Alan, who served in the Army for 20 years as an engineer, explained, “In the Army, generally, they rotate people around every two or three years. You don’t stay in a job very long, but in Task Force 160th they are so specialized that when they find somebody they like, they generally don’t let them leave.”

Curt, the unit commander, was tasked with building out the unit. In August 2001, Task Force 160th was deployed to the Philippines to support the Philippine Army in rescuing two American missionaries who had been held hostage for a year.

On the afternoon of Feb. 21, 2002, Alan had just completed a data analysis course in Virginia when he saw a headline, “BREAKING NEWS: MH-47E crashes in the Philippines.” He knew there was only one Army unit flying that type of helicopter, but he wasn’t certain that’s where his brother was. All he knew was that Curt’s unit was deploying from Korea to support the war on terror.

“I immediately hoped and convinced myself Curt was not on that specific helicopter ...but I was worried, knowing his company only had four helicopters,” Alan said. “I knew Curt. Curt always led from the front; he wouldn’t be in an office when his men were on a mission. It was Curt’s ‘lead from the front’ mindset that drove him to join Task Force 160th.”

Alan, their brother Bruce and their mother Arlene were all worried. Alan was awakened at 4 a.m. by a phone call from Bruce, who called to say the Army had visited their mom in the middle of the night to notify her that Curt was on the helicopter that crashed at sea off the coast of the Philippines. The

family was told Curt was “missing in action,” but was not given any more information. Four days later while attending a memorial service at Fort Campbell, they learned Curt’s body had been recovered and was on its way to Minnesota.

Alan explained that the Task Force did three days of daylight missions and then switched back to nighttime missions. “They were flying over the ocean and the 160th flies at nap-of-the-earth, so they’re about 150 feet off the ground. When you are over the ocean, you have no depth perception,” Alan explained. “It was spatial disorientation that got them. They were in a storm ... they were in darkness, and they were exhausted, all that contributed to the crash.” (Nap-of-the-earth flying is a helicopter maneuver where the aircraft flies at or below treetop height, utilizing natural features for concealment.)

Doherty, who served in the Navy (active and reserve) for 31 years, was in grad school at the time of the crash. He read an article about a helicopter crash that described one of the victims as a three-sport athlete from White Bear Lake. “I couldn’t believe it It was very shocking, knowing who he was. He was a very invincible character.”

Curt became an inspiration to Doherty. “I would wear a bracelet with his name on it to remember him.”

Around the 10th anniversary of Curt’s death, Doherty was in Kabul, Afghanistan, and flew a flag in Curt’s honor at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Headquarters. “I thought it would be appropriate to get it signed by the Senior Special Operations person in Kabul at the time,” he recalled. “Turns out ... he was a member of the 160th and knew Curt really well.” When Doherty returned to Minnesota to visit his family, he dropped off that flag at the school.

“His compassion for people; the level of effort he put into everything he did was ... he was a very inspirational human being,” he said. “I can only imagine all the things he could have accomplished.”

Now, over two decades after Curt’s death, he will be honored this Memorial Day and that flag will be placed in a prominent place in the Legion for all to see and remember Curt’s sacrifice.

“As time passes, your worry is that nobody will remember Curt and so for us, we are very appreciative that people remember Curt’s service, that he was a part of the White Bear Lake community,” Alan said.

“He was out serving the community while he was overseas, and he was taken from us. He didn’t want to leave in that capacity. All of us wanted him to come back to White Bear Lake ... He is truly missed.”

Union Cemetery event highlights

- Program at Union Cemetery at 10 a.m. Keynote speaker will be White Bear Lake’s own General Paul Nakasone, a retired four-star general in the United States Army. Nakasone will talk about the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.
- The memorialization of Major Curtis Donald Feistner. A helicopter is planned to fly over in his honor at 10:15 a.m.
- Renowned trumpeter Manny Laureano will play “Taps” and “Danny Boy.” “Danny Boy” was written by English lawyer Frederic Weatherly in 1919 and is set to the traditional Irish melody of “Londonderry Air.” Some interpret the song to be a message from a parent to a son, wishing for their return from war.

*Editor’s note: See Memorial Day calendar of events for other events

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https://www.presspubs.com/white_bear/opinion/unforgettable-story/article_00fbff07-84bd-43cb-b111-06f52354644a.html

Unforgettable story

Shannon's Shenanigans

By Shannon Granholm

May 20, 2025

A couple of weeks ago I sat down with Gary Carlberg and Bill Milashius from American Legion Post 168 in White Bear Lake to learn about what is planned for this year's Memorial Day events. During our conversation, they told me about White Bear Lake's own Major Curtis Donald Feistner, who was killed in 2002, and I knew this was going to be a big story.

As the news team was preparing for this week's Memorial Day issue, I couldn't help but feel immense pressure that my story was just as special as Curt was to truly honor him the way he deserves.

I wanted to learn everything I could about him. Where he grew up, why he went into the military, where he went to school, what sports he played, what hobbies he enjoyed, what was important to him, what his military career looked like and what ultimately led to his untimely death on Feb. 21, 2002, in a helicopter crash in the Philippines.

I was lucky enough to talk to one of Curt's brothers, Alan Feistner, who now lives in Walla Walla, Washington. Alan also served in the military as an engineer for the Army for 20 years. Alan told me all about his younger brother and reminisced about the day he will never forget, the day he was given the news that his brother was "missing in action" and wouldn't be coming home.

During my research on Curt, I stumbled upon a piece written by Scott Storkamp on the West Point website and knew I needed to talk to him too. Turns out, Scott attended high school with Curt and their paths continued to cross after graduation, both at West Point and later when they were both stationed in Hawaii.

I also connected with John Doherty who knew Curt from high school sports. Curt became John's inspiration, and around the 10th anniversary of his death, John was in Kabul, Afghanistan, and flew a flag in Curt's honor at the International Security Assistance Board Headquarters. He then returned that flag to Curt's hometown, which will now be displayed at the Legion for all to see and remember Curt's sacrifice.

Curt's story was tough to write on so many levels. I wanted to make sure I got across how inspirational he was to so many. But I also don't have much experience with the military, because the only relative I know of that served was my mother's father, Leo Slavotinek. He died in 1970 when my mom was only 8 years old. I'm told Leo was drafted into the Air Force (1952-1956) and stationed in both Japan and Korea.

I'm so thankful my sources took the time to explain how truly incredible it was that Curt was accepted to and graduated from West Point and went on to serve as the commander of Special Operations Air Regiment-Task Force 160th (the Night Stalkers).

This Memorial Day, I hope everyone can take a moment out of their boat ride or picnic to remember the true meaning of Memorial Day. It is a day to remember all the American servicemen and women who died while serving their country. That's the least we can do for their families who are forever changed because of a tragedy.

To see the full story about Curt, visit [presspubs.com](https://www.presspubs.com).

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