

‘Returning Home’ monument planned in Dana Point honors sacrifice of military families – Orange County Register

 ocregister.com/2026/01/02/returning-home-monument-planned-in-dana-point-honors-sacrifice-of-military-families

Erika I. Ritchie

January 2, 2026



Gold Star parents John and Cindy Elliott, front, with their dog, Zsa Zsa, Terry Rifkin, president of the Dana Point 5th Marine Regiment Group, and Dana Point mayor John Gabbard at Heritage Park on Tuesday, December 30, 2025. They are building a nearby monument to remember military personnel who lost their lives. Cindy Elliott holds a stuffed puffin in honor of her son, Marine Capt. Sean Elliott, whose nickname was Puffin. Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



PUBLISHED:

John Elliott had just launched a kayak with his son, Sean, in Dana Point Harbor when the younger man broke the news that he was joining the Marines.

The decision wasn't surprising, John Elliott recalled, his son was enthralled with flying and loved the brotherhood among Marines. Capt. Sean Elliott went on to earn his wings, and in his nearly eight years of service, he deployed to the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, North Africa and Afghanistan.



1 of 6

Gold Star parents John and Cindy Elliott, their dog, Zsa Zsa, Terry Rifkin, president of the Dana Point 5th Marine Regiment Group, and Dana Point mayor John Gabbard in Dana Point where a military monument is planned. John Elliott holds his son's, Marine Capt. Sean Elliott, photo, while Cindy holds his cowboy boots on Tuesday, December 30, 2025. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

In 2017, [Sean Elliott, 30, was the co-pilot on a C-130](#) that crashed in a Mississippi soybean field, killing all 16 aboard.

John Elliott and his wife, Cindy, knew the dangers facing their son and that he might one day not return home. Now they are part of an effort to recognize the military families who serve and sacrifice right alongside their service member.

The Dana Point Fifth Marine Regiment Support Group — one of the most active military support groups in Southern California — has commissioned the bronze statue “Returning Home” from Colorado sculptor Sutton Betti. It will capture the moment of reunion between a Marine and his wife and child as he runs into their open arms following a deployment.

The sculpture will be surrounded by two memorial benches in Dana Point's Heritage Park, along with dozens of bronze plaques and brick pavers, all of which will tell unique stories of love, service and sacrifice.

“It gives you comfort,” John Elliott said of the plaque in honor of his son that will be among the others on a Wall of Honor. “There’s a sense of bonding with other people and community that maybe have also lost their loved ones.”

[The support group is raising more than \\$130,000 to pay for the monument.](#) The City Council agreed to pay up to \$110,000 for its installation, which includes reworking infrastructure at the park overlooking Dana Point Harbor.

The significance of the monument is not lost on Mayor John Gabbard, a second-generation Marine who, as a combat engineer officer, served 17 years and deployed overseas multiple times.

“It represents a brief moment when the terror, loss and tedium of war are gone and replaced with the embrace of a family who has endured their own agonizing uncertainty, pain and loneliness,” he said. “There are kisses, hugs and celebration in the moment, but also an unsaid resolve and hope to restore their lives together.”

Gabbard, who recalls standing on the flightline waiting for his own father, a helicopter combat crew chief, to return from deployment to Vietnam, emphasized the importance of the families left behind.

“They are the stabilizing force in a chaotic environment, ensuring that the entire family’s life can be somewhat normal in an un-normal world,” he said. “This statue honors the spouse and child as much as the Marine.”

He credits the support group for making the project a reality.

The volunteer group is active year-round and assists Camp Pendleton’s “Fighting Fifth” regiment by raising money for single Marines to attend the Marine Corps Ball, hosting baby showers for expecting families and providing single Marines in the barracks with a Thanksgiving feast.

The support group – presented with the prestigious national Spirit of Hope Award in 2021 – has also built and paid for monuments in the 5th Marine Regiment Memorial Garden and raises money for base projects, most recently to spruce up and renovate the Lt. Vincent R. Capodanno Memorial Chapel near the garden. There are monuments there for those [who died in Iraq and Afghanistan](#), a Purple Heart memorial and a monument to Marines [who died in Vietnam](#).

“We’re the glue,” said Terry Rifkin, the group’s president and CEO. “It’s been our honor. The Fifth Marine Regiment is the most highly decorated in the Marine Corps.”

Rifkin, a founding member from 2004, said a returning Marine at Camp Pendleton had commented that there were no memorials honoring their families.

“I took that simple message to heart,” Rifkin said, adding she began working on the idea of the statue five years ago.

While a Marine is represented in the sculpture, the monument is inclusive to all who served, she said.

“We’ll have a beautiful site,” she added. “It will be a place of reflection and honor for all branches and the families who stand beside them.”

Among those appreciative of what the support group is doing is Col. George Flynn, commanding officer of the 5th Marine Regiment, who is preparing for a deployment to Australia.

“What I love about the statue is that it tells so much of a very beautiful story that any Marine looking at that can say, ‘That’s what it feels like,’” Flynn said.



Col. George Flynn, commanding officer of the 5th Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton, right stands with the regiment’s Sgt. Major Anthony Lappe, left, in the 5th Marine Memorial Garden. The garden is paid for and maintained by the Dana Point 5th Marine Regiment Support Group. (Photo by Erika Ritchie, staff writer, OC Register/SCNG)

As someone who has been in the service for 23 years and has deployed multiple times, he calls what the Dana Point group does “the gold standard.”

“It’s unusual for Marines to have the support we have here,” he said.

For his Marines, he said, the group symbolizes another example of their purpose in defending the nation.

“They have their families back home, fellow Marines, but when you look at what the Dana Point support group provides, it’s local support and love to the Marines of the regiment,” he said. “It gives them a great perspective on what they provide to the nation.”

Just recently, the regiment came off a [two-week predeployment training schedule](#), and the support group was there with a Christmas party for 400 families at a Dave & Buster’s in Carlsbad.

“Every child of a Marine in the regiment walked away with more gifts than I could even count,” Flynn said.

“They played video games to their heart’s content and had great food, had Santa and elves,” he said. “Coming off a hard training, it really brought levity, and it also allows time for the Marines to break bread together.”

That event and others the group puts on are opportunities for the regiment’s leadership to engage with the Marines.

“When the Marines feel they have someone looking out for them both inside and from the community, I think it gives them a renewed sense of drive and purpose to do what they’re supposed to do in support of the nation,” Flynn added.

The new memorial in Dana Point, he added, will make the broader community more aware of military service and sacrifice.

“Even if it causes them to just think for a moment, ‘Oh, there’s a family that is tied to this Marine.’ It’s someone’s little boy or girl who is going forward to do what needs to be done,” Flynn said. “There’s a family involved, full of worry and pride. If that gives someone some pause to better understand that, then that statue at Heritage Park does its job.”

A place to sit and let that sink in is what Carol Santell, who is sponsoring one of the benches, hopes will make the monument special.

Related links

- [Camp Pendleton Marines enjoy a Super Bowl party organizers hope is ‘the perfect day’](#)
- [Orange County support groups serve Marines for Thanksgiving](#)
- [Camp Pendleton ‘docs’ train ahead of deployment to Australia](#)
- [Camp Pendleton monument honors fallen Marines](#)

The 93-year-old Dana Point resident, whose husband served in the Navy, is one of the group’s biggest donors, spending \$25,000 for the bench.

Selfishly, she’s been angling to have a bench in the park near her home, she said. So, when she was approached by Rifkin about the project, she decided it was meant to be.

“It’s nice for Marines, other service members and families to have a place to come when they’re feeling down,” Santell said.

That bench overlooks the place where father and son were kayaking when Sean Elliot first declared his intention to be a Marine.

“The spot is beautiful, and it completes a circle,” John Elliott said. “In a way, he started and ended there.”

The couple stays involved in the lives of the active-duty Marines from the 5th Regiment, in their own way experiencing part of the brotherhood that drew in their son.

“By them providing continued support, they’re still part of the team,” Flynn said of the Gold Star parents. “It allows them to see an aspect of their son through the eyes of other Marines and reconnect to the brotherhood.”

And, he said, it also aligns with a Marine Corps philosophy of adopting a more parental mindset.

“When you lose a Marine, you see the moms and dads deal with that challenge,” Flynn said. “And, then these Marines step up. And those parents who lost their son or daughter will always grieve the loss of their child, but they take on a squad’s worth of sons and daughters.”
