

Fallen soldier John Pelham's legacy is ever-expanding (Column)



John Pelham, 22, of Portland, (left) in an undated photo with his mother, Dawn Pelham, and father, Wendall Pelham. Pelham, a specialist with the U.S. Army supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, was killed in Afghanistan on Feb. 12, 2014. (LC- Courtesy of Pelham Family)



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During his son's funeral two years ago, Wendall Pelham predicted John Alexander Pelham would be "bigger in death than in life."

It's something Wendall thinks about often.

"I made the comment and it just came out," he said, "and it has been so prophetic, it's almost eerie sometimes."

Specialist [John Alexander Pelham](#), 22, was killed by enemy gunfire on Feb. 12, 2014 while serving in Kapisa Province, Afghanistan. He was there on his second tour of duty with the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group - the Green Berets.

John was a big personality and a gifted athlete who made friends easily. Two years ago, his family created the [Live Like John](#) memorial nonprofit, dedicated to sharing John's legacy and supporting causes he loved.

"I just want to make sure whatever it is I'm doing at the time, I'm doing it with as much passion and zeal and zest for life as my son did," Wendall said.

The nonprofit's inaugural event was a charity racquetball tournament, a sport John loved. His father introduced him to the fast-paced game and he quickly

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became a competitive player. Three days before his death, the last thing John wrote on Facebook was, "I can't wait to play racquetball again."

The first two tournaments were held in March, but this year, [Oregon Racquetball Association](#) members asked the Pelham family if they would be interested in moving the event to December. The association was looking for someone to take over an existing tournament that had lost its organizer.

Thus, the third annual John Pelham Memorial racquetball tournament -- happening in only the second year of the organization -- will be held Dec. 3 at the Multnomah Athletic Club in Portland.

Money raised from the event will benefit The Military Racquetball Federation, The Green Beret Foundation and Oregon Youth Challenge Program in Bend, an Oregon National Guard program for at-risk teens.

John spent part of his senior year with the Youth Challenge program because his poor grades put him at risk of failing to graduate high school on time. But John thrived in the structured environment of the Youth Challenge Program, and he returned to Sunset High School to graduate in 2010. The experience cemented his interest in the military, and he enlisted in the Army in 2011.

So far, each memorial racquetball tournament has raised about \$3,000 for charity, after expenses. With nearly all 100 slots for this tournament filled, Wendall hopes to hit that goal again this year.

The memorial nonprofit also sells \$5 rubber bracelets that have been taken across the globe by John's friends and family. The Instagram page, "[Wear in the World is John](#)" shows people raising their wrists while wearing "Live Like John" bracelets as they hike, fish, play sports or visit the beach. There are probably 1,500 of these bracelets out in the world, and Wendall enjoys seeing how far they travel; how friends and family carry a part of John wherever they go.

Sometimes, though, the person who carries John with them is a mystery.

Last week, a woman walking along a beach in Cape Cod, Massachusetts discovered a metal memorial bracelet engraved with John's name, military rank and date of death. The woman found it half-buried in the sand, took it home, and searched the name online.

She discovered a news story quoting Wendell and reached out to him to mail the bracelet to family.

So far, the Pehlams haven't found the bracelet's owner, but they'll keep looking.

It's another sign for them that John's influence in the world, his legacy, is ever-expanding.

IF YOU GO: Entry fees for the John Pelham Memorial racquetball tournament are \$35 for the first event and \$15 for a second event, limited to 100 registrants. The tournament will include singles and doubles divisions for all levels. Register online at: <http://www.r2sports.com/tourney.asp?TID=18756>.

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