

BERNARD HERBERT PLASSMEYER

In the afternoon of September 12, 1970 an officer of the U. S. Marine Corps drove up to the home of Paul and Monica Plassmeyer to personally deliver the following message sent via Western Union Telegram:

I REGRET TO CONFIRM THAT YOUR SON FIRST LIEUTENANT BERNARD H PLASSMEYER USMC HAS BEEN REPORTED AS MISSING IN ACTION SINCE 4:10 A.M. ON 11 SEPTEMBER 1970 YOUR SON WAS THE PILOT OF ONE OF TWO A4E SKYHAWK ATTACK AIRCRAFT THAT WERE SCRAMBLED IN SUPPORT OF THE 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION. DURING YOUR SON'S SECOND ORDINANCE DELIVERY RUN AGAINST A KNOWN ENEMY POSITION SPARKS WERE OBSERVED COMING FROM HIS AIRCRAFT FOLLOWED BY A LONG TRAIL OF FLAME. NO PARACHUTE OR OTHER INDICATION OF EJECTION WAS WITNESSED BY THE OTHER AIRCRAFT ON THE SCENE. SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS ARE IN PROGRESS AND EVERY EFFORT IS BEING EXERTED IN THIS RECRD. NO OTHER INFORMATION CONCERNING YOUR SON'S DISAPPEARANCE IS AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME, HOWEVER I WISH TO ASSURE YOU THAT WHEN ANY SIGNIFICANT INFORMATION BECOMES AVAILABLE YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY INFORMED. I EXTEND TO YOU ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS SINCEREST CONCERN DURING THIS TIME OF GREAT ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY. YOUR SON'S WIFE HAS BEEN NOTIFIED.

L W WALT GENERAL USMC ACTING COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS.

Bernie, born May 5, 1945 was the fourth and youngest son of Paul and Monica, having been preceded by Martin Lloyd on March 17, 1936, Norbert B. on August 13, 1938, and Frederick P. on June 22, 1941. The home was a farm in Osage County, Missouri located a few miles south of Westphalia on the Maries River. Reach as one might to recall highlights of his early life at home, your correspondent comes up short with few details, a deficiency that will be attributed to a seven year age differential. Bernie was merely a normal



annoying sixth grader when I was getting ready to go away to college. He associated more with our brother "Fritz", who was closer to his age. We were all active in helping do farm work appropriate to our age, and also helping Mom with dishwashing and other chores around the house. One winter day when our parents were away from home the two of them were enjoying a sled riding afternoon on the hill north of the house that resulted in a crash that drew blood from Bernie, much to the distress of Fritz, but that was just one of the things that happened in the normal course of growing up. After finishing St. Joseph School at Westphalia Bernie went to Hannibal, Missouri to give the St. Thomas Seminary a try.



He mentioned enjoying solemn pillow fights, and presumably seminary life was not entirely disagreeable to him, but nevertheless he decided to return to Westphalia and continue his education at Fatima High School.



Twenty years after his 1963 graduation from Fatima High School his friends and classmates presented a memorial plaque honoring Bernie, their class president. Comments at the presentation ceremony recalled the “good old days of high school band, basketball, and just times spent horsing around”. Classmate Danny Wilde, who along with Mike Forck, Bob Kerperin, and Tom Borgmeyer organized the memorial said, “It was kind of nice. We missed him but there are a lot of good memories, too. He would have

been pleased the way things went. I think anyone would like to have something like that done in their remembrance.” Bernie was an active and talented high school student. In 1961 he took on the exacting task of making elderberry wine of sufficient quality to be served at his Mother’s dinner table.

The question of a career choice on Bernie’s part was not discussed with me, but I am pleased to remember that he did attend my graduation from Parks College of Aeronautical Technology of St. Louis University, and later attended and graduated, also with a B. S. in Aeronautical Engineering, with a record and grade point average considerably above mine. During his career at Parks College he was selected to participate in part-time employment doing engineering work for McDonnell Aircraft, an honor available only to upper level students of superior achievement; and he applied the proceeds toward gaining a commercial pilot’s license. Prior to graduation he was accepted by United Airlines for their pilot training program. In January of 1966 Bernie and at least one friend were available to do some heavy lifting in the move of our household from Lindsay Lane to Cranberry Court in Florissant. The most significant achievement of his college career was meeting and successfully courting Carol Knaus, a nursing student at St. Louis University and daughter of the highly



regarded pediatrician Dr. William Knaus of Belleville, Illinois. Carol and Bernie were married on June 15, 1968.

At the time of Bernie's college graduation in late 1966 there was an acute need for manpower in the armed forces to carry on the Vietnam War, and he received a draft notice for induction in the U. S. Army. Upon consideration and with a desire to better control his options he joined the Marines and prepared for induction in March of 1967. In late December 1966 he and his older brother Martin Lloyd made a ski trip to Colorado, where they also purchased a two acre lot on the Roaring Fork River. he returned with severe sunburn but that did not preclude his entry into the Marine Corps.

So in March 1967 Bernie began his Marine training as a member of the 44th Officer Candidate Course, from which he emerged as a new 2nd Lieutenant on June 2, 1967. Preflight training would have been his next step, but due to an overload of students in line at Pensacola he was sent to Marine Basic Officer School, the sixth class of 1967 (BC 6-67), where he excelled and graduated second in the class of 498 officers on November 1, 1967. Lt. Col. Jack Wells, USMC(Ret), a member of BC 6-67 and author of *Class of 67, The Story of the 6th Marine Officer Basic Class of 1967*, quotes the class honor graduate, 2nd Lt. Barry Jones recalling "Bernie was a real bright, multitalented individual....He was low key, humble, confident, and a real delight to be around".



Following Basic Officer Class Bernie was assigned to flight school at Pensacola Naval Air Station where he was once again ranked among the top in his class. He and Carol were married at Bellville, Illinois prior to his advancing to the Naval Air Training Command at Meridian, Mississippi. He was awarded his Gold Naval Aviator Wings on March 21, 1969 and they moved to Beeville, Texas for his transition training into the A-4 attack aircraft. He was selected for the Orville Wright Achievement Award, presented to outstanding graduates

of the U. S. Air Force and Naval aviation training commands.

In the fall of 1969 Bernie and Carol were sent to Yuma, Arizona, from where he was assigned to Vietnam in February of 1970. Carol, pregnant with their first child due in September elected to remain in Yuma where she participated in communication with Bernie and others via the base ham radio. Bernie was assigned to Marine Attack Squadron 311 (VMA-311) located at Chu Lai, from where he flew over 100 missions in support of troops operating in the difficult ground terrain.

In a letter dated 16Aug70 Bernie wrote "The 101st Airborne Division has been seeing a lot of action west of Hue and we have been flying a lot in support of them....Except for a few days things have generally been fairly slow. Average about one hop a day. In a few weeks the monsoons will be here and things will really slow down....The biggest news of course is that the day when Carol and I will become parents is rapidly approaching. I really feel out of the picture over here. There will be many more though I suppose."

In July 1970 VMA-311 was relocated to Da Nang Air Base and it was at Da Nang that Bernie and Captain George Focht were on alert duty in the early morning of September 11, 1970 when an emergency request for support was received from the Army 101st Airborne unit operating on Firebase O'Reilly in the A Shau Valley. That call for support and the immediate response on a dark and cloudy night brought about the devastating message of September 12, 1970.

Important details of the situation have been recorded elsewhere so an attempt to restate them here could lead to further confusion. In summary, after arriving over the target area Bernie made several attempts to definitively identify the target and on a second (or later) run into the assigned area his airplane was observed to emit a shower of sparks followed by a sheet of flame. Captain Focht had difficulty with release of his ordnance and was operating in the mode of an observer, although his vision was limited by the clouds and darkness. In any case, he witnessed a crash and saw no evidence of an ejection from Bernie's airplane.

Following the phone call from Dad at home, the three stateside sons of Paul and Monica set out to gather at the farm for mutual support and to receive any additional information that may become available. I (Norb) came home with my family from Florissant; Lloyd, serving in the Army at the Pentagon, came in from Washington, D.C.; and Fred came in from Kansas City. We were painfully conscious of Carol in Yuma, but there was almost nothing we could do to make that better. An eerie feature of that first evening at home was the howling of the beagle, as though he knew that something was amiss with his friend Bernie. We simply waited anxiously for further word while keeping up with the limited activity necessary to keep the farm going. Several days later a telegram dated September 14, 1970 arrived with the following message:

THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON
FIRST LIEUTENANT BERNARD PLASSMEYER USMC CONTINUES TO BE
LISTED AS MISSING IN ACTION IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM.
OFFICIAL SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS HAVE BEEN
TERMINATED DUE TO THE CRASH SITE BEING LOCATED IN AN
EXTREMELY HOSTILE AREA. A GROUND SEARCH CANNOT BE
CONDUCTED AT THIS TIME BECAUSE OF THE HEAVY ENEMY ACTIVITY IN
THAT AREA.....

LEONARD F CHAPMAN JR GENERAL USMC

There was indeed, very little additional information forthcoming from that difficult situation. There were serious attempts to search the area from the air, and there was a report of a parachute harness observed in a tree in the vicinity of the crash site. But no survival radio signals were detected and there was no evidence that he survived the crash, hence his status as MIA was maintained.

Carol stayed in Yuma and gave birth to their son, Bernard W., on September 27, 1970. She later returned to make her home near her parents in Belleville, Illinois and became an active parent, and participant and leader in the effort to support POW-MIA families and to make sure that the men left behind were not forgotten, even traveling to Southeast Asia to pursue that activity. The difficulty of not knowing was felt deeply by everyone involved, and it was especially hard for Mom, who also participated in POW-MIA activity until her untimely death from cancer in November of 1974. On the basis of no information indicating his survival having

been found Bernie was listed as dead on April 7, 1976. A memorial service, complete with flyover of a missing man formation, was held at Westphalia on April 24, 1976.

Through the years we have received numerous messages of support and sympathy from people who have visited the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington or the traveling replica, or came upon Bernie's information from other sources. These kind and thoughtful people have sent etchings of his name on The Wall, and others sent bracelets bearing his name that they have worn for an amazing span of time, all demonstrating that the effort to remember America's POW-MIA's has been successful.

Among those messages, one from Douglas Bonnot, a retired sergeant from the 101st Airborne Division stands out. Having visited The Wall and seeing a bracelet bearing Bernie's name, he reports the "striking coincidence that I was in Viet Nam at the same place and time as Bernard. I know that he was a U.S.M.C. pilot of an A4E Skyhawk and went missing on September 11, 1970, quite likely during a mission in response to our desperate situation. I can recall the period vividly." After identifying his location and circumstances Sgt. Bonnot went on to say "The siege of Firebase O'Reilly was as fierce and relentless as that of Firebase Ripcord, with continuous rocket and mortar attack followed by Sappers and massed infantry attacks by the North Vietnamese Army. Two of my three team members were severely wounded during that



siege, as were many of the South Vietnamese defenders. However the firebase was not abandoned as a result of NVA combat actions, but because of the onset of seasonal monsoon weather. Tactical air support provided by U.S.M.C. pilots flying from their base in Da Nang made the difference." "The tactical skills of these dedicated Marine pilots were critical to our survival as well as the successful fulfillment of our mission. These combat actions are now but a footnote

in the history of this troublesome era. But those of us who were there on the ground will never forget the selfless and heroic actions of these Marine flyers who supported U.S. and allied Army forces. We relied on their help and they gave it skillfully, without question, without hesitation. I didn't know Lt. Bernard Plassmeyer but I wish I had."

On the evening of Thursday, January 21, 1971 I was in Washington, D. C. and had an opportunity to visit with Capt. George Focht, the flight leader on the mission with Bernie, and Col. Bannon, the commanding officer of his unit. They were both on duty in Washington, as was my brother Martin (Lloyd) who had also served for a year in Vietnam, and they agreed to come to Lloyd's house in Arlington, Virginia to talk about Bernie. Col. Bannon's first remark was that there is no doubt that Bernie is gone. He had flown missions with Bernie and they attended Sunday Mass together. He spoke in several ways of his high regard for Bernie but he also felt strongly that holding out a thread of hope that he is alive is wrong, and that he has a moral obligation to get that changed. Capt. Focht, an experienced pilot who flew hundreds of "hops" over Vietnam confirmed Col. Bannon's thoughts and stated that, as his ordnance would not

release he made it his business to be in a position to observe as Bernie was making his run. He said he saw sparks that looked like a 4th of July sparkler, then a sheet of flame that went into the target area and he did not see a rocket flash indicating an ejection. Regarding the possible sighting of a parachute harness by a helicopter pilot, they explained that the helicopter had been hit numerous times by small arms fire, and he was in doubt about what the pilot actually saw. In addition the parachute harness fits tightly over the pilot and he would wait to remove it until he had escaped immediate danger. A survival vest with two survival radios is worn over the harness, and first priority would be given to talking on the radio. They explained that there was no major crater or concentrated impact area, indicating that the airplane exploded and came apart before it hit the ground and pieces, possibly including the harness went in every direction before impact. So we had the statements of two men with major responsibility and concern who were convinced to a degree of moral certainty that Bernie did not survive the crash on September 11, 1970. I believed them at the time and continue to believe that they were stating the truth to the best of their ability. I believe that I let that be known to other members of the family but there was no way to overcome the message of the continued listing of Bernie as MIA, and in fact no valid reason not to operate under the assumption that he may be alive and held captive, as numerous other unfortunate men were.

There have been continued efforts to resolve cases of this kind, and they include visits to the crash site in 1991 and 1994 by search and recovery specialists operating with the cooperation of the government of Vietnam. An August 1994 report stated "It was suspected that the pilot's aircraft had been hit by enemy fire and disintegrated". In summary these on-site investigations in extremely remote terrain located the crash site and identified a limited number of aircraft parts along with evidence that the pilot, Bernie, did not separate from the aircraft before impact.

This is a summary of what I think I know about my brother, Bernard H. Plassmeyer, by all accounts a truly good man who lived his twenty five years fully and productively. His life will continue to serve as an example to all of us who are left to carry on, and we are all obliged to do our best in whatever role is assigned to us.

Norb Plassmeyer

January 2011

