

## **Bernard G Hitro Jr.**

**KIA 1/10/69**

### **“Bernie / Brother / Friend”**

Sunday January 12th 1969 was a gray, cold and snowy day in Buffalo, NY. We had just left All Saints church after 9 AM mass and dad had given me a couple of dollars to buy doughnuts at the corner store. As I walked home I noticed an olive green Plymouth with Government plates a few doors down from our house and saw two men in full uniform on our front porch. I went inside, my mother Rosie was crying at the top stair; almost as if she didn't come down then the message being delivered would go away. We were informed that Bernie was Missing in Action. Bonnie, (our sister) who was away studying to be a nun would join us later in the afternoon. I remember a lot of praying and waiting for more news. Night time came as did a ring from the door bell....Telegram delivered.....WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT .....KILLED IN ACTION 1/10/1969. There was a tradition that a soldier could escort the deceased home. A longtime neighborhood friend from Riverside had less than a month remaining on his tour Pvt. Richard “Dickie” Valint. A cold January evening at the Buffalo airport cargo terminal where two families at the two ends of the emotional spectrum awaited the plane outside in the cold. As if scripted both soldiers exited the plane simultaneously. Dickie down the stairs, Bernie's casket out the cargo door, and slowly down the conveyor. As Bernie was loaded into the Hurst, Dickie in uniform and eyes focused walked passed his family offered condolences to our parents and gave our mother the US flag. It was very respectful. For the next three days Dickie stood on guard at the head of the casket. Bernie was in full uniform, looked very tanned, very peaceful and very young. He was 20 years and 2 months old. The mourners were numerous, the days were long and Rosie was never to be the same. Bernie was laid to rest two weeks to the day he died, January 24th, 1969.

That spring I came home from 7th Grade and saw an assortment of medals and citations spread out in the dining room. Dad told me that my brother was a hero and that the paper wanted to do a story around the medals and him. Rosie wanted nothing to do with it and

the medals were boxed up and put in the attic for the next ten years. Our parents were meticulous in keeping up the gravesite. They now both are laid to rest next to their son.

Forty Years later, the day after Memorial Day 2009 I was contacted by one of Bernie's friends who was trying to contact the family to pass on some letters written by Bernie from Vietnam. In 1968 Billy had recently returned from his tour in Vietnam, so the content was in the context of soldier to soldier. It was in those letters that gave a glimpse of what the brave men of 2nd Platoon were living. Thank You Billy for working to find me and get these letters to us.

**Excerpts of what Bernie wrote 12/11/68:**

"I've been over here a month and a half at the end of this week and I don't think there is much more for me to do. So far I've had an air assault from choppers, patrolled through jungles, been mortared and rocketed and took part in a 2½ hr firefight that really awakened me to the fact that the "Big Boy" (Bernie's reference to God) upstairs controls all. Seeing all the dead NVA doesn't bother you much, but coming face to face with a guy you eat breakfast with and have lived with for six weeks lying on a trail with nothing you can do for him but pray gives you an awful feeling inside. Billy I can't say much for being over here I just hope I will be able to be able to go home and look back at this year as something that gave me a better outlook on life and got me much closer to the "Big Boy" for when you are not thinking of home your praying that you get back."

**FINAL LETTER 1-08-69** letter to Billy, in his words:

The letter started with your brother telling me to take notice of his stationary which had a couple of bullet holes in it. He said that his company was having lots of contact with the enemy but that he would be ok because the "Big Boy" was looking over him. After being notified one evening at Valley Forge hospital that Bernie was MIA, I asked my doctor if I could have leave to go back home. When I arrived, there was a letter from Bernie dated 1-08-69, he was killed two days later, it was the toughest read of my life. Every Memorial Day and Veteran's Day for over twenty years I would read that letter, until upon a move the letter got away from me some 15 yrs ago. It was a powerful letter and expressed a core theme of "the Big Boy" Bernie's way of expressing his faith. He told me of an incident where

he was out on listening post (LP) 30 – 50 yards outside the companies circle when he spotted a NVA soldier coming through the bamboo brush. He shot the enemy and ran back to the company soaked in sweat from nerves from the contact.

These letters with reference to the 2nd Platoon gave me another piece of info to search on the internet. In the following days I found the Charlie2-7.org website, and my eyes couldn't believe it when I found our brother in the Memorial section.

From 1st Lieutenant John Guillory, Bernie's Platoon Leader:

Many years ago I posted the "Remembrance" below on the Vietnam Memorial Virtual Wall web site. Each time my email address changed I would edit the address in hopes that some one looking for a connection to Bernie would find me:

*"Bernie was an outrageous crackup. He thought he was my radio operator, but he was really my co-chef and my devil's advocate. We talked (argued and whined) for hours about the merits of his New York, and my California - which state had the best looking women, best food, best sports teams, best nightlife, and on and on. We know friends in so many different ways. There are grade school friends, neighborhood friends, college friends, army friends, but Bernie was my friend kind of friend. Bernie lost his life as a hero, defending the lives of those he considered friends. We shared a favorite meal we concocted from C-Rations -- Sloppy Joes. Whenever I see or smell a Sloppy Joe sandwich or see a nun, I think of my friend Bernie."*

In a following communication John stated:

"On the day he was killed in action, Bernie was aware that he was mortally wounded, and asked me to say the "Act of Contrition" with him, and I held him in my arms as he died." The details of that day can be found in the Remembrance to "Doc Trip" also in the documentation section of this web site.

From what I can gather it appears that Michael Fontaine arrived at 2nd Platoon at about the same time in early November as Bernie did, and it appears that they had a close bond.

To Mike Fontaine (Doc Trip) 2nd Platoon Medic, KIA 1/10/69 while trying to assist Bernie and two others after they were wounded...the bible states.... John 15:13 "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. " God Bless You

Joe is a friend and high-school football teammate of Bernie. Joe was a pallbearer at Bernie's funeral and we share the loss of a brother. Joe lost his younger brother to cancer in 1978. Joe became an ordained minister in 1985 in Baltimore.

I am so moved by the letters you sent me – I contacted John Guillory and thanked him. "Bernie Hitro is my friend. Bernie's death pierced not only my soul but my consciousness as well. For over 40 years I have worked on social justice issues; poverty, racism. I am not sure this would have been my path had it not been for Bernie's life.

He died the way he lived – other-centered, other-focused and the consummate team player. He is my hero – not for the way he died – but more for the way he lived. I am a better man due to our relationship. I choose to honor Bernie's example of a life worth living – by trying to make a difference in the lives of others."

Peace,  
Joe

**In Closing, To John Guillory:**

Thank you for being there that day in January and holding Bernie in your arms with love and compassion. You took the place of all of us who held him in our hearts. I hope we can meet someday - to hug you and share our sincerest gratitude.

Bonnie (Hitro) Attea

**To his Comrades in 2nd Platoon:**

To all of you he was known as Bernie, to all of us he was Brother. Not just to Bonnie and I, but to aunts, uncles, cousins and close friends. Our father was Bernie Sr, so he was then and is still now referred to as "Brother". The following that John passed onto me says it best:

*"I now know why men who have been to war yearn to reunite. Not to tell stories or look at old pictures. Not to laugh or weep. Comrades gather because they long to be with the men who once acted at their best; men who suffered and sacrificed, who were stripped of their humanity. I did not pick these men. They were delivered by fate and the military. But I know them in a way I know no other men. I have never given anyone such trust. They were willing to guard something more precious than my life. They would have carried my reputation, the memory of me. It was part of the bargain we all made, the reason we were so willing to die for one another. As long as I have memory, I will think of them all, every day. I am sure that when I leave this world, my last thought will be of my family and my comrades. Such good men."*

*-- Author Unknown --*

After the ten weeks you spent together in Vietnam it is our hope for you to remember him as your "Brother" too.

Jim Hitro

