

BERNARD BAX

KILLED IN ACTION – VIETNAM WAR

Bernard “Bernie” Bax was the youngest son of Mr. & Mrs. Henry P. Bax of St. Anthony. After graduation from St. Elizabeth High School in May 1969, he volunteered for service and was inducted into the United States Army in August. He reported to Ft. Knox, Kentucky and was trained as a gunner with the armored infantry. He was assigned to Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry, 1st Infantry Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). He shipped out to the war zone in Vietnam in February 1970. He celebrated his 19th birthday in Vietnam on March 15th.

Bernie was engaged to marry his high school sweetheart, Carolyn Rehagen. On May 4th Carolyn received a letter from Bernie in which he told her he was departing on a four-day mission. That was the last she or anyone else in the family knew until men in uniform appeared at the Bax home on Mother’s Day, May 10th, to tell his parents, Henry and Christine, the tragic news: their son had been killed in action in Vietnam on May 8th.

Thirty years later a Vietnam veteran telephoned Christine Bax and asked if he and two other Vietnam veterans from Bernie’s unit could come and visit the family. She said they could.

At the meeting with Bernie’s mother, Christine (his father, Henry P. Bax, was deceased), Bernie’s brothers Danny and Larry, sisters Debbie and Diane, and Carolyn and her husband, Jerome Kliethermes, the three Vietnam War veterans told them they had been in an armored personnel carrier (APC) right behind Bernie’s APC in an attacking column, that they were not in Vietnam but in Laos, where a secret war was being waged against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) outside the official combat zone, that their armored column was ambushed by NVA soldiers, that Bernie’s APC was hit by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) as it was cresting the top of a ravine, that the U.S. soldiers in the trailing APC killed the attackers, for whatever that was worth, and that the last they saw of Bernie was when he was flown out of the battle on a medical evacuation helicopter headed for a military hospital. They did not know whether he was dead or alive, and they were now trying to find out what happened to him and to others who were wounded or killed in the battle to bring some closure to their lives. They were saddened to learn Bernie did not make it.

The three veterans shared stories about Bernie in the service and listened to stories about Bernie growing up. They paid a visit to his grave at the St. Anthony cemetery, toured St. Anthony and St. Elizabeth, looked at the churches, saw the school, and crossed the swinging bridges.

Bernie’s older brother, Danny Bax, himself a Vietnam veteran, observed that it gave his mother comfort to hear the stories about her son – how he lived his last two months far, far away, and how he died on a secret mission in a place that could not be named.

Americans in the Vietnam War. Active involvement by U.S. combat forces in Vietnam ran from 1964 to 1973. During that time, approximately 58,000 American military service personnel died in the war zone. Pvt. Bernie Bax was one of them. His name is on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

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