

To Build a Memorial



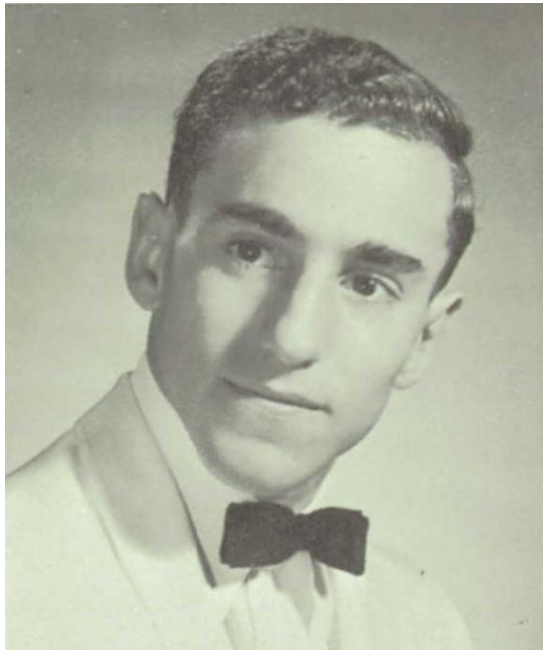
John Premenko's name is engraved on the Pacifica Memorial Monument, located at the western end of the parking lot of Pacifica's American Legion Hall—555 Buel Avenue, Pacifica, California. John is one among fourteen remembered. The monument, dedicated on November 11, 2021, at 11 a.m., was built to honor Pacifica's Vietnam and Iraq fallen. Finis Vitae Sed Non Amoris.

November 11, 2021

The Story of John Premenko

1949–1970

BY JEAN BARTLETT



John Premenko, Terra Nova High School senior photo. Class of 1967.

"My cousin John could have been a standup comic," Marilyn (Harvey) Scott said. "He was just hilarious. I remember sitting around his family's kitchen table and he had us in stitches. The family had a mynah bird who could mimic John really well. John was a lot of fun!"

John was the third son of Nick and Mary (Casalegno) Premenko. His eldest brother Peter was born in 1947. Peter was followed by Dave, born in 1948, and John was born on August 11, 1949. The family's youngest, Pauline, was born in 1952. All the kids were born in San Francisco.

"My family moved to Pacifica from San Francisco when John was in sixth and I was in seventh grade," Dave Premenko said. "Our dad, who served in the Army Air Corps during the Second World War, was a craftsman. He was a very talented person. He started out as an automobile mechanic. He worked at the Cadillac dealership in Stonestown in San Francisco (Fazackerly Cadillac). But he got headaches and had to quit that. In those days, they didn't have those hoses that vent out."

Nick Premenko then went into carpentry. He was in Carpenters Local 848. He was also a master tile setter. The last 10 years of his life, after retirement, he worked for the Presidio of San Francisco as a craftsman making trophies and plaques. But earlier, he built his family's home in Pacifica. It took him 14 years.

"Before we moved to Pacifica, we lived in the Excelsior District of San Francisco," Dave said, "the Mission/Geneva area. We went to School of the Epiphany on Vienna Street. That was our neighborhood. The Church of the Epiphany was our parish church. John served as an altar boy there, just like our brother Peter. I was not an altar boy."

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The boys spent their elementary school years doing all the "typical boy stuff."



John with his camera in San Francisco, 1960.

"We climbed rocks and trees and hills," Dave recalled. "We played Army, and Cowboys and Indians. We went to Amazon Park every day and hung out. We played baseball and went on the monkey bars. In those days, kids had a lot of freedom. Mom said, 'Just be home before dark,' and we were." (The Crocker Amazon Playground is on Moscow Street at Geneva Avenue.)

"Dad was always working, and then trying to build the house in Pacifica on weekends and nights," Dave continued, "so we did not have any vacations to speak of—we hardly went to the zoo. Mom didn't drive so we took the bus wherever we went. She'd have us go with her on the bus and we were all holding hands. Mom was a homemaker and she was quite a good cook. Her background was Italian-American. My dad's family was originally from the Ukraine.

"As kids we did the stuff needed at home. We worked in the backyard, we pulled weeds, and we didn't get paid. You did it because you were asked to do it."

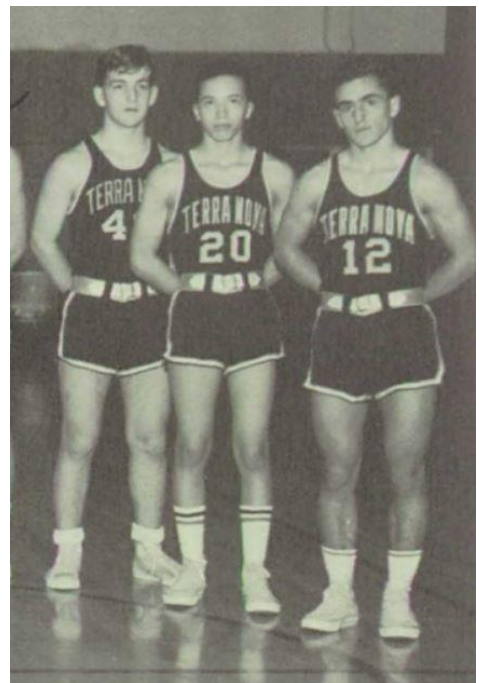
Epiphany School is a K–8 school, and even after the family moved into their Pacifica home, Peter, Dave, John and Pauline all finished their elementary education there. One of the aunts in San Francisco would provide a place to stay or a ride after school.

Dave and John went to Terra Nova High School in Pacifica all four of their high school years, as did Pauline. Peter went to Archbishop Riordan High School his freshman through junior years, and then to Terra Nova.

"I don't think once he got into high school that John liked school all that well, but he did like sports, mostly basketball and track, and he was good at both of them. He was a great little brother—he was colorful and very witty."



Terra Nova HS, 1965. John is bottom row, center.



Terra Nova HS, 1966. John is far right.

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"John and I met in high school," Liz said. "We are the same age. I grew up in Pacifica, in Linda Mar. We didn't start dating till our senior year.

"How would I describe John? All the clichés! He was fun-loving and funny. I thought he was adorable. We just had an attraction. Before he moved to Pacifica, he had considered the priesthood. But he changed his mind before we met."

Liz reiterated John's love of basketball and track.

"He was five feet, two inches tall, just like me," Liz said. "But he was excellent at basketball and track. He was also a good student. You had to keep your grades up to do sports."

John and Liz graduated in June of 1967 and married in April of 1968 at Good Shepherd Catholic Church in Pacifica.

"It was a small, intimate wedding with family and a few friends. I loved John's family and I still love John's family. We have never not been family. They are terrific people. When I remarried, I said to my mother-in-law, 'I don't want to give you up.' And she said, 'Why would you have to?'"



Liz and John Premenko on their wedding day, April 7, 1968.

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Newlyweds Liz and John, center, with Liz's folks Rose and Paul Goff on the left, and John's parents Nick and Mary Premenko on the right.

John went to work for the Post Office as a letter carrier after high school and was working there when Liz became pregnant with their first son, Peter, who was named after John's big brother.

"I didn't know John's brother Peter," Liz said. "He was out of the house and in the Coast Guard when John and I started dating."

It was not long after they graduated from high school that Peter went missing in Okinawa, late August of 1967.

"That had a big impact on our lives," Liz said, "and that was why John signed up for the military. He wanted to find out what happened to Peter and he was very driven. He had his goals and he was going to do them."

Liz and John's son Peter was born in November of 1968. On December 19, Sergeant John Premenko completed his Special Forces training at the John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

"John did his initial eight weeks of basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington. I stayed in Pacifica at my parents' home on Alicante. When he came home, our son Peter and I moved to North Carolina with him."

Four weeks later, the local Fort Bragg newspaper ran a story on John.

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"The sergeant, who is now prepared for an assignment with one of the six operational Special Forces groups around the world, received his first four weeks of training in map reading, patrolling and methods of instructing native personnel.

The student then received instruction in his category of the five basic skills found in Special Forces detachment—medical, communications, intelligence and operations, engineering, and demolitions and weapons.

Sgt. Premenko concluded his training with a four-week course in Special Forces tactics and techniques. He was taught the advantages of psychological warfare and the necessity for gathering and assessing intelligence data before infiltrating and actually operating in an area."



Sgt. John Al Premenko.

"John had almost a year of training and he got to like being in Special Forces," his brother Dave said.

Trained as a SF Radio Operator, the Green Beret arrived in Vietnam in February of 1970 and was immediately assigned to CCS Recon Company. Back at home, Liz was pregnant with the couple's second child.

John wrote to Liz often and she to him. His missions were secret and they kept their correspondence about "normal" things. His spirits were good.

"I remember one time, my mom, his mom and I filled a box to send to him of all his favorite stuff," Liz laughed, "including salami. As packing material for the box we filled it with popped popcorn. He said that everybody loved the popcorn more than anything else."

John came home on a 30-day leave.

"He and Liz came to Pacifica to say, 'Hello,'" Dave said. "That was the only time we saw him and that was the last time we saw him."

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Home on a 30-day leave, John visits with his wife and son.



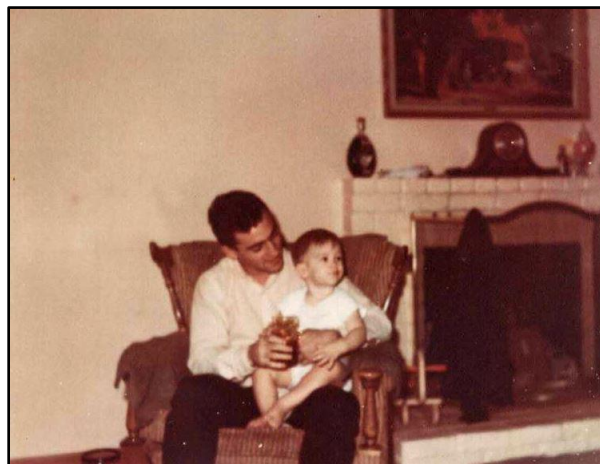
John and Peter, 1970.



John, Peter and Liz, 1970.



Liz and John Premenko, 1970.



Father and son, 1970.

"John volunteered for a second tour in Vietnam," Dave said. "That was the tour he planned to do R&R in Okinawa and find out what happened to Peter."

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As missions and criteria changed, John's military record shows he served in several Special Forces units. Those units, as reported on The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall of Faces, are as follows: CCS (Command and Control South); MACV-SOG (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group); 5th Special Forces Group (colloquially known as the Green Berets); and USARV (United States Army Republic of Vietnam). Some of the Green Beret missions included entering Laos—before such operations were officially acknowledged.

"John would write, 'I can't tell you exactly what we are doing or where we are,'" Liz said, "but he intimated he was in Laos."

John turned 21 on August 11, 1970. On August 14, Sgt. Premenko was serving as a radio operator for a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol on a special mission in Laos. His unit was located deep within enemy-held territory and had been there a day without being detected. On August 14, the unit moved from their position and immediately came under heavy fire from a well-armed, large contingent of enemy soldiers. Mortally wounded at the outset, John nevertheless returned a blaze of cover fire which allowed the other members of his unit time to secure a more defensible position and regain the situation. An excerpt from Sgt. John AI Premenko's BSV posthumous citation, notes: "Sgt. Premenko distinguished himself by heroism on 08/14/70." (The Bronze Star with "V" is awarded for valor or bravery during combat actions against an enemy force.)

On August 10, 1970, a day before John's birthday, Liz gave birth to the couple's second son, Kyle, at Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco. She was just back home in Pacifica, when she saw people getting out of a car.

"It struck me odd at first," Liz said. "There was an officer and a military pastor, getting out of a car on my street."

"They came and told me," Liz continued. "The whole thing was horrible. I went with them over to my in-laws and told them. His family was devastated and at that time, David was in the Army and stationed in Germany, and Pauline's husband was in the service and stationed in Alaska."

"The Red Cross told me that John had been killed," Dave said. "And I was flown home. John is buried at Golden Gate National Cemetery, just over the hill in San Bruno."

"I was a widow at almost 21," Liz said. "It was all just one day at a time for quite a while. John's family and I were even tighter after that. Family is important and they have always been hugely involved in my sons' lives."

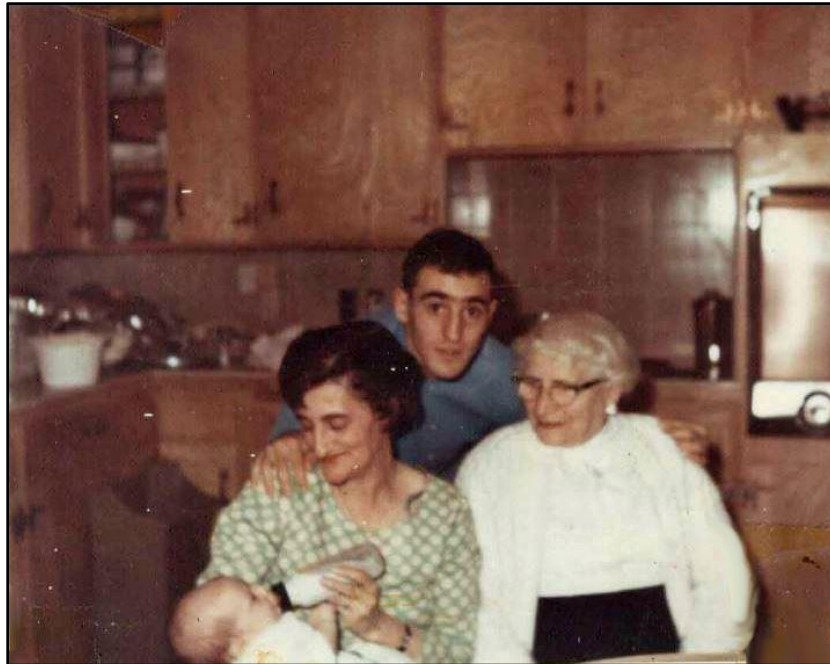
The family keeps the medals, badges, patches and tags of Army Special Forces Sgt. John Premenko in a display case, pictured below. They are as follows, left to right. Medals: Bronze Star with V Device (Valor) and an Oak Leaf Cluster (second award), Army Commendation Medal, Purple Heart, Vietnamese Military Merit Medal (Awarded by the Republic of Vietnam), Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm (Awarded by the Republic of Vietnam), National Defense Service Ribbon, Vietnam Service Medal and Vietnam Campaign Ribbon. The items in the top row, left to right, are: Dog Tags, Parachutist Badge, Airborne Tab (part of the Green Beret unit patch), Sharpshooter–Automatic Rifle, Expert–Machine Gun, and Marksman–Rifle.



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"John was a great person, a good family man and a good husband," Liz said. "Our time together was pretty short but we have two beautiful sons and they are both awesome people. John would absolutely be proud of them. Truly I can say, as I look back on their lives, that they both are really terrific, good men."



John Premenko, with his mom, Mary, his maternal grandmother, Caroline, and his son, Peter, November, 1968.



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is additionally the author of two historical biography books on some of the more than 370,000 interred at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, CA. Visit her website at www.bartlettbiographies.com.

This story was sponsored by the Pacifica Veterans Memorial Group.