

To Honor Our Fallen



Peter 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. Peter 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 Peter Premenko

1947–1967

BY JEAN BARTLETT

"There was no body, no funeral, no nothing." ~Peter's brother, Dave Premenko, February, 2020.



Peter Premenko, Terra Nova High School senior photo. Class of 1965.

Born in San Francisco on June 26, 1947 to Nick and Mary (Casalegno) Premenko, Peter was the first of the three Premenko sons. Dave was born in 1948 and John was born in 1949. The youngest Premenko, Pauline, was born in 1952. The family lived on Concord Street in San Francisco's Excelsior District.

"We went to School of the Epiphany on Vienna Street," Peter's brother Dave said. "That was our neighborhood, specifically the Mission/Geneva area. The Church of the Epiphany was our parish church. Peter served as an altar boy there and so did John. I was not an altar boy."

Dad "Nick" served in the Second World War in the Army Air Corps. The Staff Sergeant was a ball turret gunner and part of the 91st Bombardment Group (Heavy). On May 29, 1944, on a mission to Poznań, Poland, Nick and his fellow "Shoo Shoo Baby" crew members—Shoo Shoo Baby was a B-17 Flying Fortress—lost their third engine just after crossing the German border. This forced a landing in neutral Sweden where the airplane and crew were interned. Preserved and, at the time of this writing, located in storage at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, Shoo Shoo Baby is awaiting transfer to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

"Our parents were married in 1945," Dave said. "Mom was a homemaker and Dad 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. Then he 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."

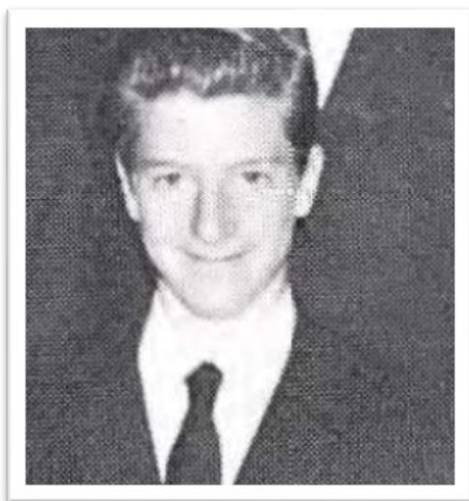
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By Jean Bartlett ©2021

While the kids were growing up, their dad built the family home in Pacifica, California—a 12-mile ride south of San Francisco along the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The home is in the Vallemar neighborhood.

"He worked on it after work and on a lot of weekends," Dave said. "It took him 14 years to complete it. We moved in when Peter was in eighth grade. All of us stayed at Epiphany for elementary school (Epiphany is a K-8). Mom didn't drive so one of our aunts, who worked at Schlage Locks on Geneva, she'd pick us up or drop us off at one of our other aunt's homes. Once high school started, I went to Terra Nova in Pacifica and so did my brother John and my sister Pauline. Peter did his first three years of high school at Archbishop Riordan in the City, and then he went to Terra Nova in Pacifica for his senior year.

"When we were little kids in San Francisco, in elementary school, my brothers and I did all the 'typical boy stuff.' We climbed rocks and trees and hills. 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.)



Peter, freshman year, Riordan High School, 1962.

"But once Peter headed to Riordan High School, there was a big separation between us because Peter had to travel by bus to Riordan, and then take the bus home to Pacifica. So he got home late. That makes you miss out on that time that siblings usually have before they head out of the house—to grow and mature together. We did work together, however."

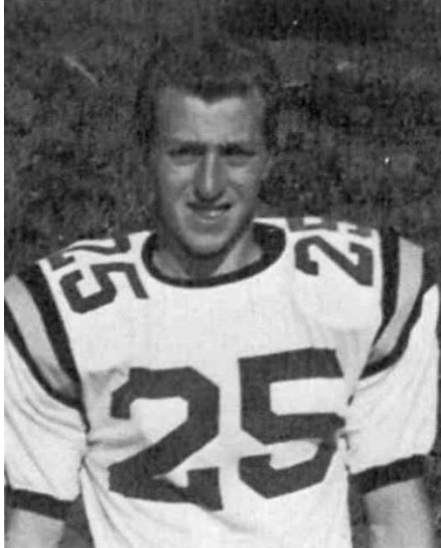
Peter, Dave and John began working as a team in their middle school years. They did gardening jobs for Oddstad Homes Corporation, which was builder Andy Oddstad's company. Andy built nearly 14,000 Bay Area homes, which included launching the Linda Mar development in Pacifica, along with developments in San Bruno, Redwood City, Belmont and Oakland. After Andy's death in January of 1964, the Premenko sons continued to do gardening for the company under its new name, Challenge Development Corporation.

"As they built homes in those days you got a garden," Dave said. "You got a fence, you got a lawn – you didn't get a backyard – but you got the lawn in front. We took care of lawns in Portola Highlands in San Bruno, and in Sterling Highlands in Redwood City. In those days they didn't have sprinkler systems, so the back of our truck would be full of hundreds and hundreds of hoses. My dad drove us until Peter could drive, and then Peter drove us. We'd drag hoses and put our sprinklers up and then after a half hour, we'd move them around. We also planted ice plants on all kinds of hillsides. We did gardening every weekend, Saturday and Sunday. It was good work and we loved it and we managed our money. We had bank accounts."

"Peter was a very nice guy," Dave continued. "He was a quiet guy and he loved to read."

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Peter, Terra Nova High School, 1965.



Peter poses with members of the track team, Terra Nova, 1965.

The family, who has given much in the service of their country, is not a military family by tradition.

"My brother Peter chose to enlist in the Coast Guard because I think like most young men, including myself, he was afraid of the draft," Dave said. "And you knew if you went into the Army, you were going to Vietnam. It was like two stops. That was it.

"He signed up when he was 18. He didn't know whether he would get in or not, so he went to Skyline (a public community college in San Bruno). He loved electronics and he was studying that at Skyline for at least six months, if not longer. Then he was accepted into the Coast Guard and he signed up to do electronics. I'm not sure, but I think it was all that secret coding stuff—and he was excited about that because that's what he wanted to do."

Dave said the last time he saw Peter, Peter was getting on the bus to head off to his training. Did Peter leave a girlfriend behind? Yes. There was someone Peter was seeing in the East Bay, but Dave hadn't met his big brother's girlfriend and didn't know her name.

"After Peter left, he wrote home and he called home. He was very tight with my parents. But for all of us, the last time we saw him was when he took off on that bus. After that, it's all unknowns."

Peter went missing in Okinawa.

During the Vietnam War, Okinawa served as a launching point for U.S. military forces, and deployments to Vietnam continued until the end of the United States involvement in the conflict. According to a March, 2015 article by Jon Mitchell for the *Japan Times*, U.S. authorities kept tight control on media. According to a 2005 article by Okinawa Peace Network of Los Angeles, "In 1965, the U.S. Air Force began using B-52 bombers based in Okinawa to conduct massive bombing raids on North Vietnam." According to a March, 2017 article written by Matthew M. Burke and Chiyomi Sumida for *Stars and Stripes*, "There have long been rumors that Agent Orange was stored or used on Okinawa, but no one has been able to find proof." According to a January, 2012 article by Doug Bandow for *Forbes*, "The U.S. occupied Japan after the war (WWII) and turned Okinawa into a veritable colony." In May of 1972, Okinawa was returned to Japan.

"Peter died in Okinawa waters in 1967," his brother Dave said. "We don't know how. Somebody came to my parents' door and handed them a letter. His death certificate said 'missing.'"

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On September 5, 1967, Mr. and Mrs. Premenko ran an obituary on their son in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

PREMENKO, Peter N.—accidentally in Okinawa, August 28, 1967. Peter N. Premenko, dearly beloved son of Nick and Mary Premenko, loving brother of David, John and Pauline Premenko, loving grandson of Caroline Casalegno, survived by aunts and uncles: a native of San Francisco, aged 20 years.

Memorial Requiem High Mass will be offered on Wednesday, September 6, at 9 a.m. at the Church of the Epiphany.

"Ten years after Peter's death, my parents finally got a death certificate," Dave said. "I also believe they finally received the \$10,000 insurance."

The death gratuity is a lump-sum payment made by the Department of Defense to individuals identified by the service member, prior to his or her death while on active duty, active duty for training, inactive duty for training or within 120 days of release from active duty if the death is due to a service-related disability. The death gratuity payment amount has grown substantially since the Vietnam War.

"My parents were devastated," Dave went on to say. "And my dad was furious because there was no body, no funeral, no nothing. My mom was very religious and that helped her, but my dad was not as religious and he was so angry. All these years later, we would still like to know what happened to Peter."



Peter Premenko, Block Award student, 1965.



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.

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