

Uncle Bernie: A Family's War Story (rev July 31, 2016)

January, 1926 to July, 1945

This is a story of love and of loss; the story of the joy in family and the devastation in tragedy. This story was repeated in millions of unique ways across the world during World War II, when over 3% of the world's population died. This story takes a magnifying glass to that overwhelming tragedy and looks into the impact of loss in one family, and how that loss stretched over time.

The first thing I noticed when I started to write about Uncle Bernie was that here again was another relative who switched to their middle name. Time and again genealogy searches had been thwarted by that fact. So Uncle Bernie was Uncle Earl. He died before many of us were born. Like so many others he died during WWII. We could hear stories, remembrances, but never really knew him.

One thing different about Uncle Bernie was that although he died in the war, he was murdered by a fellow soldier. His loss seemed greater because of its tragic nature. It made it harder to accept, to get over, and to move on.

Bernie was born in Vermont January, 1926 to parents Agnes (her first name was actually Mary) and Earnest. Bernie's enlistment papers listed his father as a baker. His birth father died in 1927 when Bernie was a little over a year old, so young he could have no memory of him. He had a sister Lorraine 7 years older than him and a brother Paul, 5 years older. He was the baby at that time, and from later conversations it sounded like Bernie's death cemented his status as the baby forever in the mind of his mother and sister.

The loss of the breadwinner in 1927 was catastrophic. No day cares, food stamps, WIC. People depended on families. Extended families were the norm. Stories abound about how relatives watched over or looked after one another. My paternal grandmother moved her parents into the house behind her so she could watch my great grandmother who was becoming senile. But Agnes's mom had 14 children, so her mother could offer no help. Other options were limited.

So after her husband died, Agnes put her children into a Catholic orphanage and took a job as a servant in the home of a doctor. (That doctor later removed a birth mark from Lorraine's second child). Years later Lorraine reminisced that she could only visit her brothers on some weekends, and sometimes visited her mother at work. Lorraine remained in the orphanage until she aged out after 8th grade and was moved to a boarding school in Canada for high school. The orphanage was described as strict, bordering on abusive. Physical abuse like rapping on knuckles may have seemed harsh to children alone and scared. Some of the memories may have been enhanced over time: little children, lonely, lost their father, separated from their mother and each other could have been afraid of many things. In any event, their memories of those years were not normal happy childhood ones we'd wish for today. Bernie developed a cough in the orphanage and he was moved to a sanatorium for a time. It's not possible to know what it was like for a baby and toddler in these circumstances.

But Lorraine told stories of a happy baby brother. She described Bernie as a doll, beautiful eyes, like her father, and loving. From her description it appeared that he had not suffered as greatly from the impact of the loss of his father as his siblings had.

Uncle Bernie dropped out of high school in 9th grade; for reasons not known, but it was the start of the war. By now his mother had remarried Herman. Bernie now had a half-brother, John, born in 1935.

These war years were years of sacrifice, but so were the 1920's and 1930's spent in the orphanage and in the great depression. For that generation, much of their life had been constant sacrifice, just working as hard as possible for your family. The little we know about Bernie, there's every reason to assume that family was important to him, and he had spent some of his post-orphanage years with his mother, Herman his step-father, and John his half-brother.

Before 1940 Agnes and family lived in Vermont. In 1941 Agnes's husband Herman started commuting to work in a munitions factory in Connecticut. Shortly after that he switched to work in the Boston Navy Yard and the family moved down to Concord Street, then Tremont Street in Boston. Bernie may not have made the move immediately but John remembers him moving in later; it was a small cramped apartment. Bernie got a job in a grocery store four blocks from the apartment. His boss Julius Cohen greatly respected Bernie.

The war had been waging for several years by 1944. Many of his cohorts and relatives were already fighting overseas. Brother Paul had enlisted in the marines before the start of the war – it was his goal and he could not wait. Bernie received a draft notice when he was 18. John described Bernie as sensitive and generous – he did not want to kill anyone, so he cried when he was drafted. But he followed through on his enlistment March 24, 1944.

Agnes and Lorraine were “luckier” than many during the war years; they had a husband at home. For so many families the breadwinner was gone, the woman left alone, and again, like Agnes in the past, left with having to find a job and maybe child care with no prior work history and no extensive child care network set up. By this point in the war there was rationing of several products, and shortages were common. We understand today the sacrifices of military families and spouses, the stress and pressure that wear on the children and marriages. Back then there was a whole country of military families. Parents feared losing children, children feared losing parents, and many did. Over 400,000 soldiers died. Families lived with the fear and stress of that daily. There was no way you would compare your hardship at home with the hardships of those fighting the war, but that didn't ease the sufferings of those left behind or eliminate scars that would appear later in life for both veterans and families on the home front.

Bernie became part of the 284th Engineer Combat Battalion. Basic Training was in Breckinridge, Kentucky. It was typical army basic training, though by now there were some older recruits than earlier in the war. Training was hard and besides the physical and rifle training, the engineer battalion had to learn how to repair and build bridges, build roads, and clear minefields; hence the battalion label of engineer. In September and October 1944 the companies left for England. There they obtained further training from actual combat veterans. After Christmas in January 1945, they crossed the English Channel into La Havre France.

From then on food was sparse, sleeping accommodations minimal, the cold relentless. Train cars meant to move 8 horses held 40 men. While in defense of Remich on the Roselle River, they came in contact with General Patton, and wished that they hadn't! Next they were assigned to hold the bridge across the Our River, spitting distance from the Germans. This position was precarious and the right move by the Germans would have led to a horrific battle. General Patton had gambled that the

Germans would not recognize the weakness of this defense and left this green company to defend the position so he could pull the 17th Airborne Division out.

Next they moved into Aachen, Germany where they built and maintained roads needed for supplies and removed mines. This started a period of constant moving. Bridges and roads had been bombed, dams destroyed and land mines placed to cause as much hardship for the Allies as possible. A bridge was needed across the Roer River. Here they built the longest fixed Bailey Bridge (254 feet) in the European war. They continued across Germany, including to the bridge at Remagen with the 9th Armored Division.

The Allies finally crossed the Rhine. By now the companies were combat veterans and expert bridge and road builders, recognized for their speed and skill. Sometimes they didn't sleep, they slept outside in fox holes in the rain, in tents on hay, in trucks, in lean-tos and once in a while in a bed. Sometimes they ate and some days not much. They helped erect a bridge over the Altmuhl River for the 14th Armored Division. They fought their way to Nuremburg and were transferred back to Patton's 3rd Army and liberated some camps of POWs. They built (temporary) Bailey Bridges in Landshut to help liberate more POW camps and a concentration camp. General Patton used one bridge to free a POW camp at "high noon." They even built a prison to house 100,000 prisoners of war.

Hitler died on April 30th 1945 and Germany surrendered on May 7th and VE day was celebrated May 8th. On that day they witnessed the surrender of part of the Luftwaffe. After VE day they returned to Nuremburg to repair it before the Nuremburg Trials, build sawmills, and build more POW enclosures. They worked on a cinder path in a cemetery where General Patton was to attend a service, and they even blew up safes. Their largest task was to repair Nuremburg Stadium. On June 27th they moved to the south of France, Marseille, to prepare for the invasion of the Japanese island of Honshu.

"While in Marseille, France, the Battalion also suffered a few losses ... [including Uncle Bernie, who] ...were mortally wounded when an altercation between some other GI's got out of hand...All were very well thought of and sadly missed. May the soil rest lightly on their graves." (Shilling page 141)

The stories told by relatives of Bernie's death were often appended by "the war was over." Technically the war did not end until two months after Bernie's death. Hiroshima had not happened yet so it was assumed that some troops would be deployed to the war in the Pacific. Some were already home. But in southern France where Bernie had leave, there was no fighting or war anymore. Germany had surrendered two months earlier on VE, Victory in Europe day. Thus the war was "over" in France. For the time being these troops were not actually engaged in battle. The pressure was off. Some were hoping to be sent home. There was probably a degree of boredom and soldiers were antsy. Some of the "respect and protect" and camaraderie of the unit may have been lost. Discipline may have been looser away from the battlefield. They were moved south to prepare to move to the war in the Pacific if needed.

In any case, the details of the court martial tell the story of some apparently racially motivated bad behavior escalating to a fight escalating to murder. There had already been a brawl a few days before and troops were warned that this would not be tolerated. The day of Bernie's murder, one black soldier requested a ride from a white soldier who refused and mouthed off. A scuffle ensued. Trucks were being loaded to take troops from leave back to their camp. Because of the scuffle and the earlier brawl, the transportation timing was escalated, but the accused murderer obtained a

loaded rifle (carbine), returned to the area of the trucks, shot into the back of one of them, and killed two soldiers including Bernie, and wounded others, none of whom were part of the original incident, just innocent bystanders. The soldier accused someone else of the murders. The soldier was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Bernie had been in the army only 1 year, 3 months, and 12 days. He survived a year in the European theater only to be murdered by a fellow soldier.

A soldier's account: "This day I won't forget so easily ...The other fellow which got it too, was from B. Company (Bernie)...These boys didn't have anything to do with the argument either, - others got hurt." ("My Travels in the E.T.O.")

Notifications for death in WWII were often by telegram; there were too many deaths for personal notification. Of course any death notice in any way was devastating. There were symbols on windows to notify people that a family member had died. By 1945 they were prolific. But eventually Agnes found out that Bernie had not died in battle but by friendly fire, if pre-mediated murder could be called friendly fire. She was visiting with her mother when she got the news. The devastation must have been greater. Her son need not have died. It was not by enemy action, but rather as an innocent bystander caught in the middle of a racial incident. When neighbors inquired, her story was devastating and sad. Grief piled on grief. A priest came to tell Agnes that Bernie had never regained consciousness after he was shot. The other soldier died the next day in the hospital.

For the rest of her life Agnes struggled with her own anger surrounding the death of her son. It was another scar from the war that never healed. Even in white Vermont there had been manifestations of prejudice and discrimination. Stories were told of KKK crosses burning on the lawn of French Canadian Catholic immigrants. When Bernie was growing up in Vermont, a large population in Burlington was first, second, or third generation children of "illegal immigrants" who came from Canada to New England by simply crossing the border. Many spoke French in the home. Most were Catholic. Prejudice of many types was nothing new.

But the irony was that Bernie was not prejudiced. His job at the grocery store was across the street from a bar that served as a black nightclub at night. After work Bernie and his boss Julius would go to the bar and mingle at ease with the blacks. The family remembered Bernie as friendly and accepting of his black neighbors.

It is easy to blame soldiers for all actions, errors, and crimes, just as easy as it is to forget that they were really just children. Most 19 year olds today would have a hard time entering into the shoes of their ancestors. There were many soldiers 17-21, not even fully grown. When I toured a WWII submarine I noticed how small and cramped it seemed, with only a few inches space for a sailor on a lower bunk. I remembered how young so many of these sailors were, how small and frail they might have seemed to someone today.

Before the war Bernie is said to have been dating Claire, though his 9 year old step-brother was not aware of a girlfriend. After the war a French girl, Nicole, made attempts to contact Agnes, stating that she had been close to Bernie and he had asked her to contact his mother and step-father should he be killed. Like his siblings Bernie probably spoke fluent French so the possibility of meeting and befriending a local girl near the end of the war is plausible. After the war Claire married Bernie's older

brother Paul. Claire remained saddened by Bernie's death the rest of her life and tried to visit his grave on her later trip to Paris.

Little else is known about Bernie. Most letters home or to a soldier were lost or destroyed over time. Few people had the means or forethought to save them. As a generation passed on, descendants threw out most keepsakes. The only physical items I have from my mother Lorraine would fit in a toddler's shoe box. No email, no electronic backup. For information we have mostly the words of the survivors passed on as oral history. We can guess and speculate, but unfortunately never know.

The scars of the loss and the details of it never left his mother Agnes. She spoke often of Bernie. His sister Lorraine's description of Bernie as "a doll" and "loving" speak of the depth of her loss. Lorraine's only piece of jewelry at the time of her death was a golden heart locket with a cross on the front and a tiny picture of Bernie inside. I have no words from Paul, but how did he feel? He was a child in the orphanage, stripped of his family, unable to look after his baby brother or help his mother during that time. Then he survives the war but his baby brother died. Bernie's half-brother John's older siblings had their own lives by the start of the war (Lorraine married in 1939 and Paul joined the marines before the war). Bernie, his closest sibling in age, only lived with him a while then left him to fight when John was 9, and he was killed the next year. He saw his mother grieve that loss. How would the war and loss affect a child? What about the loss for Claire and the unknown Nicole in France? We are certain that Bernie's loss was deeply felt by many in his life.

Of course we still call Bernie a hero. We honor his service. We also missed having him in our lives. He was a dropout who left home to fight in a war far away from everything he knew. He had to have known personally of many war deaths by the time he was drafted. He would have known friends and neighbors who experienced loss. The last "home" picture (not at their apartment, but perhaps at a neighbors) of him remaining, shows him in uniform, young and smiling beside his mother. This was probably the last time Agnes saw her baby. May he rest in peace beside his fellow soldiers.

REFERENCES

Oral History

Website : <http://284thcombatengineers.com/>

Silent Heroes: The Story of the 284th Engineer Combat Battalion During World War II, 2015, Written by the 284th Engr. C. Bn, Compiled by Mikel Shilling

My Post Script

The above is the story of Bernie, his loss, and how it impacted his friends and family, but there are still many other stories. His sister Lorraine's brother-in-law was shot down in the Pacific during the war and his wife became a widow with two children. Lorraine's husband, my father, was given a 4F deferment which was due to an injury from high school. What was it like to be a draft age male still at home, not in a defense job?

Here's what I have learned by studying all this history. The affects from the war and from the loss of a child did not stop at the end of the war and all the scars did not disappear. No discussion existed of PTSD or survivor stress at that time. There were few resources to help on the home front, and it was a "front." The war was fought in the homes while it was fought on the battlefield with guns. The impact on families would be downplayed when the business of recovery and soldiers returning came to the forefront. The Great Depression followed by WWII left our ancestors with high "stress scores" and vulnerable to a barrage of problems. Back then, many who suffered probably kept it all inside and internalized or medicated their pain, maybe without really understanding it. The generation that followed could not help but be impacted. This "Greatest Generation" had lived through so much deprivation and hardship in their lives that it was natural to want to protect and maybe spoil their children. But children aren't raised in a bubble, and protecting them totally from the ghosts of the past could be only marginally successful. We fight wars today, but our understanding has broadened – for every youth like Bernie who gives his life, we know there are families that need help to deal with that loss and help to move on. Thankfully, there is much more support for the individuals and families in the military today. For this we should all be grateful, and in honor of their memories continue to do even more.

Linda Simpson



Agnes and Bernie, Furlough



Uncle Paul, Marines




Lorraine, Paul, Bernie



Me (Linda) and Uncle John

Bernard Pichette Is Dead in France
Mrs. Herman Darcy, Mother, Is Notified

Mrs. Herman Darcy, who is visiting her parents, Mr. and Mrs. O. E. LaVallee of 10 Walnut st., was notified Friday by the war department of the death of her son, Pfc. E. Bernard Pichette, 19 (shown here) in France, July 6.



Pfc. Pichette entered the service Mar. 24, 1944, and was attached to the engineering corps. He died after participating in several battles in Germany.

Mrs. Darcy, now of Boston, was formerly of 163 Park st., Burlington.

He attended Nazareth school and Burlington high school. He would have graduated from BHS this June if he had been able to stay in school.

Surviving besides his mother are his stepfather, Herman Darcy of Boston, a brother, Sgt. Paul Pichette, USMC, now serving in the South Pacific; a sister, Mrs. Ray Dorey, and a half brother, John Darcy, both of Boston.