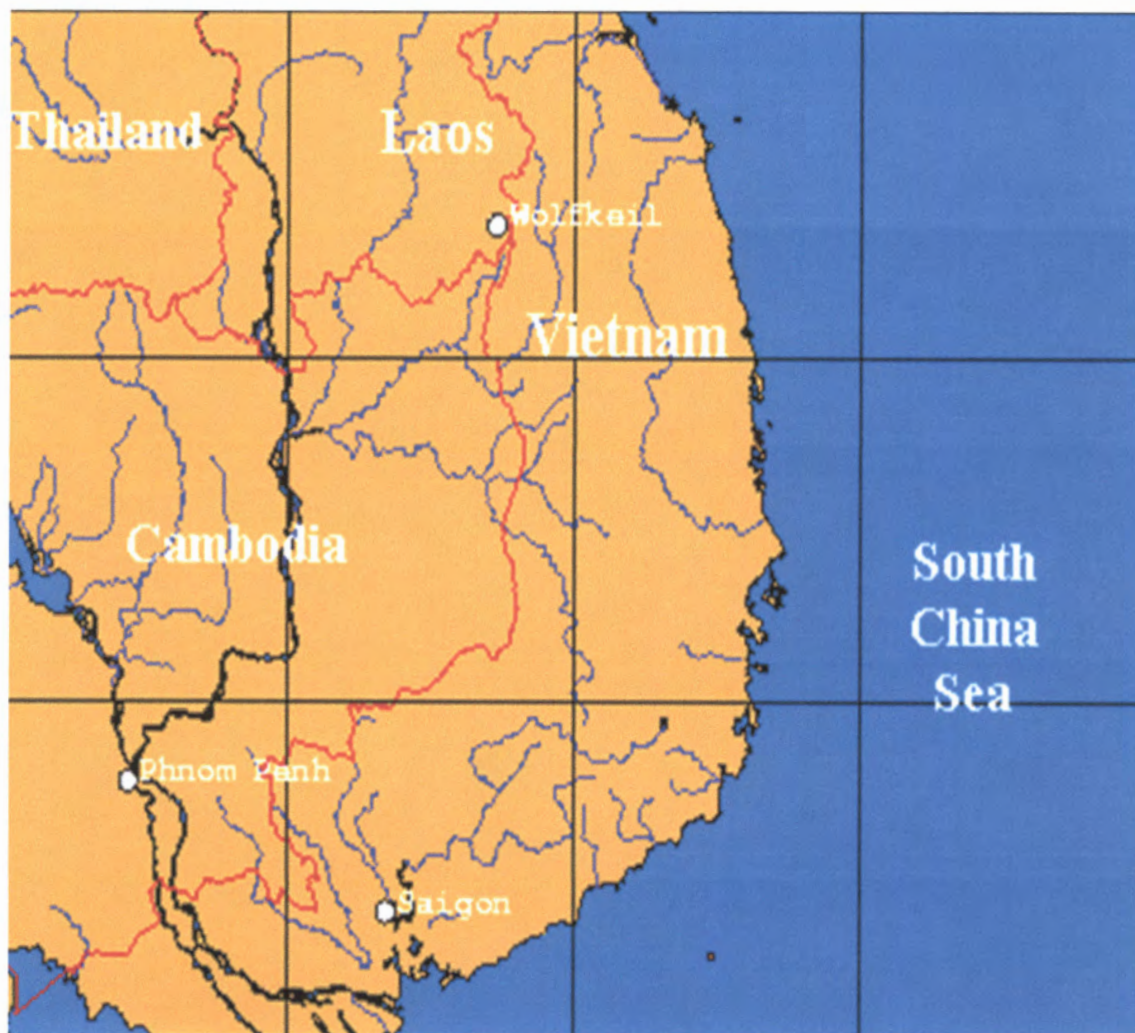


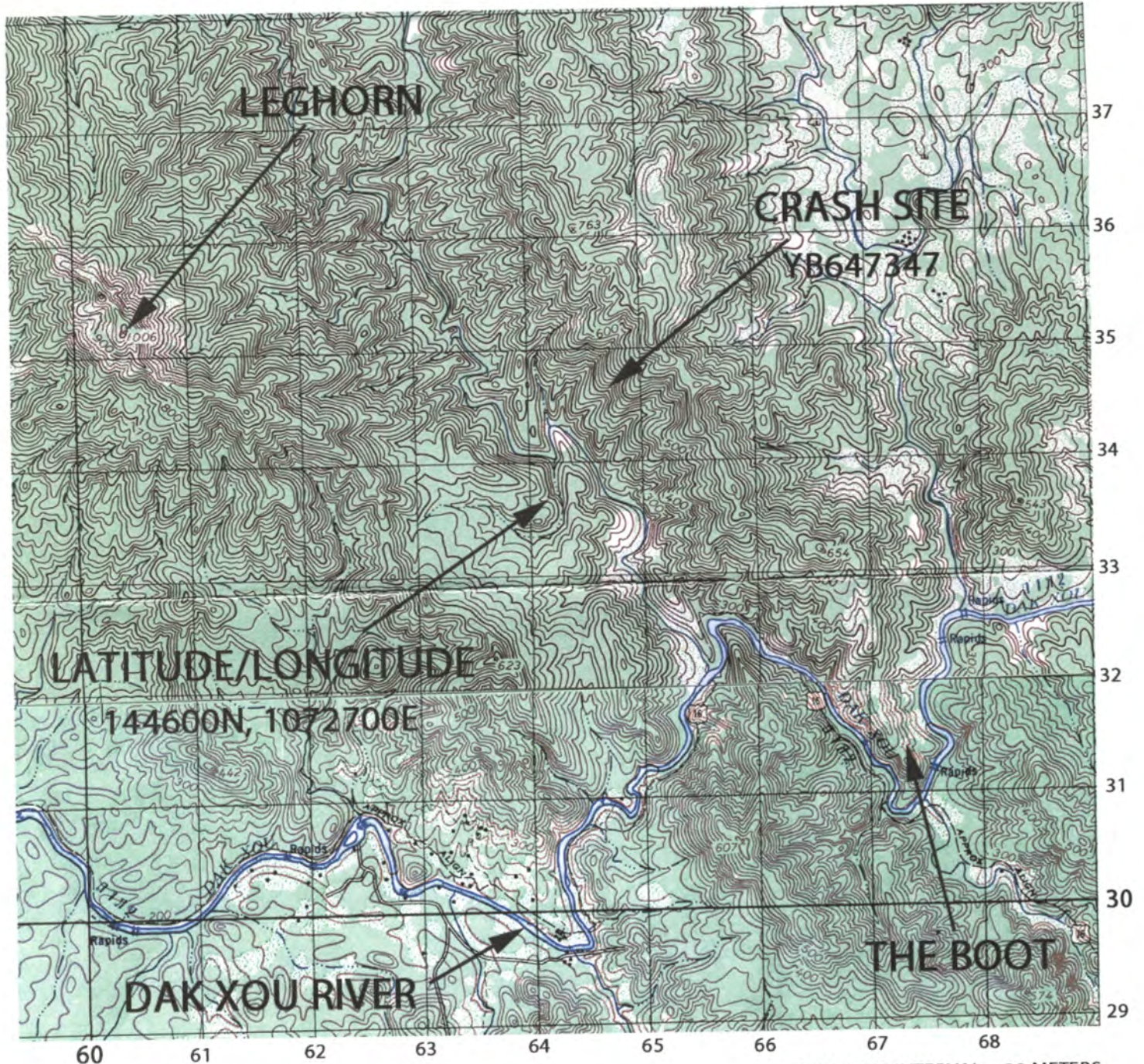
**COL. WAYNE WOLFKEIL – A1 PILOT KIA COVERING SOG MISSION – LAOS – 8/9/1968**

**Major Wayne B. Wolfkeil - Spad 36**  
**6th Special Ops Sqdn, 633rd Special Ops Wing, 7th AF**  
**MIA/KIA 8/9/1968 over Laos**

*Narrative Description and Documentation of the Incident*  
Written and Compiled by Joe Parnar and Robert Dumont  
SOAR XXXIX – LAS VEGAS, NV - OCTOBER 2015



COL WAYNE B. WOLFKEIL MIA MAP  
A1-H SKYRAIDER PILOT  
CRASHED - MIA 8/9/1968



LAOS SERIES L7015  
SHEETS 6438 I & 6438 II SPLICED  
1968 & 1970 MAP INFORMATION

CRASH COORDINATES = YB647347

CONTOUR INTERVAL = 20 METERS  
ALL YB COORDINATES

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## Loss of Spad 36 Covering SOG Mission and Spike Team Maine Bright Light



***Major Wayne B. Wolfkeil - Spad 36***

On 9 August 1968, Spike Team Florida had inserted during the early afternoon into a target area located in the Dak Xou (Xe Xou) River Valley approximately four kilometers east and two kilometers south of the MACV-SOG radio relay site "Leghorn" in Attapeu Province in southern Laos. The LZ was on the east bank of an unnamed tributary river of the Dak Xou and lay at the foot of a mountain that rose to an elevation of approximately 800 meters. The mountain, covered primarily with triple canopy jungle, was part of a range that terminated at its southernmost end at a navigation landmark known as *The Boot*. Formed by the bends the Dak Xou made as it cut through the mountain passes, it was called *The Boot* due to its distinctive appearance when viewed from the air.

The Covey Pilot that day was Major Daniel A. Wright flying Covey 541, a Cessna O-2 Super Skymaster, with Covey Rider S.Sgt. Gerald E. Denison, code-named *Grommet*, on board. Sgt. Denison was an ex-SOG recon team leader who would be communicating directly by radio with the team being inserted and coordinating the mission's available air support.



*Cessna 0-2 Super Skymaster*

Team Florida, operating out of FOB2 Kontum, consisted of One-Zero (team leader) S.Sgt. Richard Vanderzwalm, One-One (assistant team leader) Sgt. Ralph Rodd, and a number of Florida's Vietnamese team members. The assault helicopter company covering FOB2 missions in August 1968 was the 119<sup>th</sup> AHC Gator Slicks supported by the Croc Gunships. The first insertion helicopter onto the LZ unloaded Vanderzwalm and one-half of the team without incident. As the second insertion helicopter approached the LZ, it came under intense small arms and automatic weapons fire from enemy forces positioned on the west side of the tributary river. The aircraft's commander broke off his attempted insertion run and the Croc gunships moved in and returned fire.

Grommet then ordered the gunships to back off and move to the east so that the tactical air assets that were currently on station could be deployed. Flying Tac Air for the mission that day was a pair of U.S. Air Force A1H Skyraiders from the 6<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron operating out of Pleiku. Spad 35, was flown by Major William M. Constantine; and Spad 36, was flown by Major Wayne B. Wolfkeil.

According to Sgt. Denison's eyewitness statement: *"Covey 541 marked the target for the Spads. Spad 35 rolled in and released its ordnance without incident. Spad 36 followed him in and as he reached the release point, he appeared to be trying to pull out or break right. Spad 36 did not release any ordnance. He rolled up on his right wing like he was trying a low level barrel roll and impacted nose first almost upside down. There was no attempted ejection visible. Upon impact, the aircraft exploded in a huge ball of flames. There were periodic secondary*

*explosions for approximately one hour after impact and small fires still burning six hours after the impact."*

Attempts to raise Major Wolfkeil on his emergency RT-10 radio were unsuccessful and he had sent out no emergency beeper signal. The time of the crash was determined to have been 1525 L based on statements by other witnesses to the incident, including the mission's Flight Leader. The military coordinates given for the location of the crash were YB647347 which would place it north and east of where the SOG team was pinned down and slightly more than halfway up the mountain's western slope—a distance of approximately 2,100 feet.

The mission was now a bust with the crash of Spad 36 and efforts turned once again to suppressing the enemy fire so that the members of Team Florida could be rescued. After approximately an hour and a half of the Crocs attacking the enemy position, a helicopter was able to land and extract Sgt. Vanderzwaln and his men.

A SOG Bright Light (SAR) team was inserted into the area in an attempt to reach the crash site but they were unsuccessful in doing so due to the difficult terrain, deteriorating weather conditions, approaching darkness, and the presence of enemy forces in the area. Covey 527, piloted by Captain William R. Johnson and Major Don A. Grimm supported the Bright Light operation. Tactical Air support came from Lt. Col. Al Corey flying Spad 37, and Captain Tommy Stroud, flying Spad 38.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident Major Wolfkeil was tentatively declared to be "Missing in Action." According to a report prepared by Colonel George P. Birdsong, the commanding officer charged with evaluating the evidence, this was because of: "1. Lack of conclusive eye-witness accounts due to a broken ceiling. and 2. Lack of positive evidence that Maj Wolfkeil did not... escape the derelict aircraft." This second assessment was based on the fact that the dense jungle where Spad 36 went down would have provided "not only concealment and shelter from the enemy," but could have also prevented contact with friendly forces. For these reasons, Colonel Birdsong did not wish to arrive at a "precipitous decision" that Major Wolfkeil was killed in the crash until definitive evidence was found.

Because the downed plane and missing pilot had been flying in support of a SOG mission, over the course of the next several days S-3 officers at FOB2 Kontum continued planning for another Bright Light operation to recon the crash site despite the ongoing bad weather and enemy activity. A second Spike team was

inserted into the area, but like the first one on the day of the crash, it had to be extracted almost immediately due to the above stated factors.

Spike Team Maine, led by One-Zero Sfc. George Wilson Hunt and newly-designated One-One Sgt. Daniel W. Janc, was the next team chosen for the search and rescue/recovery operation. It would be Janc's first time in the field on a SOG assignment. During pre-mission briefings Hunt and Janc were told they would rappel directly into the crash site rather than walk in from a more distant LZ. This was to reduce the possibility of detection or attack by the enemy as had been the case with the first two attempts to reach the area. They were further told that most likely Spad 36 had been hit by fire from a 37mm antiaircraft gun. The fact that the plane had rolled to its right before crashing and exploding was an indication that the pilot had been killed or was incapacitated and had "dropped the stick" and thus was no longer in control of the aircraft. As the A1 was carrying up to 12,000 pounds of explosives along with 300 pounds of gasoline, there was little chance of anyone surviving the resulting fireball.



***Sfc. George Wilson Hunt***  
***One-Zero - Spike Team Maine***



***Sgt. Daniel Janc***  
***One-One - Spike Team Maine***

Although the identity of the pilot of Spad 36 was not disclosed, the mission was still the mission. Slim odds and the hazards posed to the team members were not considered to be overriding factors in S-3's planning. Nor were they for Sgt. Hunt as he prepared to execute the mission.

In the early morning hours of August 26, Hunt and Janc along with four indigenous Maine team members boarded Huey slicks at FOB2 and were flown to the SOG launch site at Dak To near the Laotian border. After receiving word from the Covey Rider—again it was Sgt. Denison—that it was a go, the operation got underway. The original plan to rappel directly onto the crash site on the western side of the mountain where the crash had occurred was almost immediately abandoned. This was due to problems with the rappelling ropes becoming entangled in the trees when they were dropped from the hovering helicopter.

After Sgt. Hunt conferred with Sgt. Denison, a secondary insertion point was selected near a seasonal stream bed just beyond the base of the mountain's eastern slope. Although the terrain was not dense triple canopy jungle, the conditions were still inhospitable enough so that the helicopter could not land. In preparation for this new situation Hunt and his men reorganized the ropes by cutting off the tangled portions. The team then successfully rappelled onto the new LZ with three men on each shortened length of rope. Almost immediately after getting on the ground, ST Maine team heard signal shots indicating the enemy was aware of their presence and would soon be looking for them.

Insertion at this new location—an area of scrub brush, small trees and saplings, sand bars, and ankle-deep streamlets—required the team to land navigate a considerable distance up and over the eastern side of the mountain and part-way down its western slope to reach the crash site which was approximately 1.5 miles away. Though it was still morning, time would be of the essence.

Not long after they set out the team encountered a seasonal mainstream that would have to be forded. The bank on the other side of the stream was some fifteen paces away and somewhat higher than the side where the team now found itself. Because of the persistent signal shots Hunt decided there was no time to look around for a better place to cross and waded directly into the nearly chest deep water holding his CAR 15 rifle above his head. Upon reaching the other side he signaled his men to follow him and scrambled to the top of the steep bank where he observed a line of unoccupied foxholes running along its edge. While his team was crossing the stream, Sgt. Hunt planted toe poppers—small anti-personnel mines the recon teams carried with them to deter anyone on their trail—into some of the nearby foxholes.

After proceeding a short distance further the team came to a clearing where they observed a cluster of small buildings surrounded by bamboo fencing. The buildings definitely did not appear to be of the type that would have been constructed by the few indigenous people living in the vicinity.

Janc asked, "What to hell is this?"

Hunt wasn't sure but thought it might be some type of semi-permanent bivouac camp situated between the stream and the mountain for defensive purposes. While Hunt made note of the structures there was not time to conduct a thorough search of them. He motioned for the team to move quickly past the open area and get back into the trees before they encountered any enemy who might be nearby. As they began their ascent of the mountain and for the rest of the way, the team continued hearing the NVA trackers' gunshots. To Hunt it felt like they were literally being chased up the mountain.

After some hours of traversing the difficult terrain, Maine finally reached the mountain's summit. They had just begun to make their way downhill toward the crash site when they spotted an enemy platoon sweeping the western side of the mountain and heading directly towards them. Hunt realized that their present location was exactly where the tracking shots had been guiding them. He ordered his men to move slightly to one side where they were able to successfully conceal themselves in the thick jungle undergrowth and allow the platoon to move past them. As soon as it was safe the team continued moving down the mountain. Hunt told Janc, who was carrying the radio, to inform Covey of the enemy's movements so that an air strike could be put on them.

Though the persistent signal shots were a reminder that the enemy was still on the lookout for them, Maine finally reached the crash site which was approximately 1,000 feet from the top of the mountain. The area was a burned out debris field in the middle of the jungle with only small bits and pieces of the aircraft to salvage.

While their principal orders were to search for any signs of the missing pilot, their secondary orders were to bring back as many as they could carry of any items with a serial number or some other type of identifying markings on them, and that's what they stuffed in their rucksacks. Also lying amid the wreckage was some unspent CBU that Hunt had to warn the indigenous team members to avoid touching. One of them found what appeared to have been part of a flight helmet and showed it to the Sgt. Hunt who took it and put it in his own rucksack. In searching the area it was obvious that the aircraft had shattered completely and totally burned. No human remains were found, and other than

the shard of the flight helmet, nothing else that was associated with the pilot. The time spent searching the crash site was approximately thirty minutes although that's just a best guess on the part of Hunt.

Sgt. Denison then radioed ST Maine and advised them of a large enemy presence above them higher up on the mountain. He said the team needed to be on the move and as soon as they were out of harm's way to notify him so another air strike could begin. The Covey Rider directed them to continue down the slope to a potential LZ closer to the river bank where Team Florida had inserted two weeks previously. When Hunt's men neared the LZ they discovered it to be heavily wooded. Hunt left Janc with the team members and rigged up some C-4 explosive to blow down a number of trees so an exfil helicopter could land or at least hover closer to the ground. At the same time, Janc was informing Covey the team was safe and okayed the air strikes.

The enemy was hit with a dozen Spads unloading their ordnance while the Croc gunships covered ST-Maine. One of the A1's was piloted by Linden Gill, a close friend of Wayne Wolfkeil who had gone through training with him, and both were assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron at Pleiku to provide tactical air support for SOG missions. They were only fifteen days into their tour when Major Wolfkeil was killed. In the words of Gill, "Every flyable aircraft the 6<sup>th</sup> had available that day" was utilized as he and the other pilots "cleaned off that mountain" using bombs and rockets and napalm. Small compensation perhaps for the pilots of the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron, but a degree of reckoning was now being dealt to those enemy troops who were unfortunate enough to be operating in the area where Spad 36 had gone down on August 9.

As the A1's were moving in for the kill further uphill, Sgt. Hunt was unaware that his One-One had okayed the air strike. When Hunt blew the trees with the C-4 it immediately felt like the entire side of the mountain had exploded such was the ferocity of the Spad attack. Once he realized he had not single-handedly blown up the mountain, as well as himself, Hunt watched in awe as the most spectacular and devastating air strike he would witness during his entire tour of Vietnam took place.

A helicopter eventually arrived and successfully extracted the team. There were no casualties to report but Sgt. Janc, suffering from exhaustion and dehydration, felt nauseous. As the chopper rose and moved away from the scene of fire and destruction further up the mountain, he vomited and then felt better for having survived his first mission as One-One of Spike Team Maine.

Upon their return to the base camp at Kontum, Hunt and Janc turned over the items they had retrieved from the crash site, including the shard of the flight helmet, and were debriefed on the details of the operation itself. They were never told the name of the Spad pilot they were searching for. And then, after a day or two of stand down, it was on to the next mission. August 1968 was a busy time for the men of SOG at FOB2.

Meanwhile at 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron headquarters at Pleiku, it had been Linden Gill's duty to gather up the effects of his friend and hoochmate so they could be returned to the Wolfkeil family back in the States. As he was going through some letters and then some tapes from home he happened to listen to one of the tapes. He heard the voice of Wayne's 13-year old son David.

"Dad, you remember that cigar you left on the ash tray on the coffee table?"

"We'll leave it there until you come back ...."



Wayne B. Wolfkeil

It would be another 47 years before Sgt. Hunt learned the identity of the pilot of Spad 36 and the full story of what had happened to him on August, 9, 1968 in the jungles of southeast Laos. And 47 years for Linden Gill to learn the name of the SOG team leader for whom he'd provided air cover two weeks later while the Maine One Zero led the trek back to the crash site of the downed aircraft.

The two of them would eventually meet at a reunion of A1 pilots at the Tennessee Museum of Aviation in Sevierville, TN. One of the other A1 pilots asked Hunt why he had undertaken such a dangerous and difficult mission as there was virtually no chance Wayne Wolfkeil could have survived the fiery crash and explosion of his plane in a remote location on the side of a mountain.

Initially, Sgt. Hunt couldn't grasp the intent of the question or thought he'd misheard it. But then he explained, "We went back to the mountain because we were SOG and that's what we did. That was our mission."


Eyewitness Report of Covey Rider - Gerald Denison

STATEMENT

On 9 August 1968 at 1635 hours, I Staff Sergeant Gerald E. DENISON, RA19524325 was riding as an air observer with Covey 541. We were inserting Spike Team Florida in enemy held territory. The first half of the team got on the ground without incident. The second insert ship received heavy automatic weapons fire. While the gunships were working the area around the team they started receiving heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire from the West side of the landing zone from along the river. I advised the gunships to break off and to move to the East and that we would work our air cap. Covey 541 marked the target for the Spads. Spad 35 rolled in and released without incident. Spad 36 followed him in and as he reached his release point he appeared to be trying to pull out or break right. Spad 36 did not release any ordnance. He rolled up on his right wing like he was trying a low level barrel roll and impacted nose first almost upside down. There was no attempted ejection visible. Upon impact the aircraft exploded in a huge ball of flame. There were periodic secondary explosions for approximately one hour after impact and small fires still burning six hours after the impact. The aircraft crashed in enemy held territory.

/s/Gerald E. Denison  
GERALD E. DENISON  
RA19524325  
SSG E6, FOB 2  
APO SF 96499

A CERTIFIED TRUE COPY

  
JURIS PLAKANS  
05304254  
CPT, INF

**Wolfkeil MIA Incident Report – Col. Birdsong**

ATTACH PARTS: STATEMENTS FROM [REDACTED]			
NAME	GRADE	UNIT	REPORT NO.
[REDACTED]	(SPAD 35)	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	(SPAD 37)	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	(SPAD 38)	Captain	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	(Covey FAC 541)	Major	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	(Covey FAC 527)	Major	[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]	(Covey FAC 502)	Captain	[REDACTED]

17. DETAILED CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING DISAPPEARANCE (duration, extent and results of search; life-saving equipment available and/or used; if applicable, position, time of take, terrain, etc., and any other details pertinent to a determination of status not included elsewhere in this report.)

Maj Wolfkeil took off from Pleiku AB on a combat sortie at 1350 hours local, 9 Aug 68. His call sign was SPAD 36 and he was flying as wingman for SPAD 35. SPAD 36 and 35 rendezvoused with Covey FAC 541 approximately 20 miles northwest of Dak To. The mission was to provide air cover for an Army Special Forces unit operating in the area. SPAD 36 was directed by Covey FAC 541 to silence an enemy troop emplacement. SPAD 36 passed over the target, made a right turn and was observed to explode on impact with the ground. No chute was seen by Covey FAC 541 or SPAD 35. No beeper was heard and no further communication was established with Maj Wolfkeil. An Army search team was put into the area and was unsuccessful in a search and rescue effort. SPAD 37 and 38 provided air cover for the US Army Special Forces team which attempted to reach the crash site. They were unable to do so due to enemy forces, rough terrain, deteriorating weather and approaching darkness. Further efforts have been prevented by bad weather. The time of impact was initially reported as 1538 L. This time was first reported by the Flight Leader and in the OPRSP-3 report submitted by the Command Post. The time was corrected to 1525 L by the statements of witnesses, including the Flight Leader. Maj Wolfkeil's SSA survival kit included the following items: Revolver, .38 caliber, Smith & Wesson, SN K740742; Parachute, seat type, MS-5 #173200; Helmet, M1 2A/F; Harness, cords, PCU 3/P; Vest, survival mesh SKM-21P & components; Radio, RT-10, 4 mesh; Light marker; Knife, survival; Life preserver PU 2/P; Raft, one man LRF 3P; Para raft SK.

18. OPINION OF THE COMMANDING OFFICER

A. CIRCUMSTANCES WARRANT CONTINUATION IN A MISSING STATUS  B. CHANGE FROM MISSING TO DEAD

REASONS

A thorough analysis has been made of all available information. Search and rescue efforts have been unsuccessful due to weather, hostile action and rough terrain. All possible efforts are being made to effect search and rescue. Information available does not warrant a change in the status because: 1. Lack of conclusive eye-witness reports due to a broken ceiling and 2. Lack of positive evidence that Maj Wolfkeil did not in fact escape the derelict aircraft. The crash site is in a "humble" area providing not only concealment and shelter from the enemy, but also obscuring and distracting contacts with friendly forces. Maj Wolfkeil will be continued in a missing in action status in order to preclude the effects of a hasty decision.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

UNCLASSIFIED

NAME AND GRADE OF COMMANDING OFFICER	GRADE	SIGNATURE
[REDACTED]	FR 2/15	Henry P. Birdsong, 2

C 101-ADM-68-0012

Wolfkeil MIA - Search Status Report

ACTION \_\_\_\_\_  
 INFO CS \_\_\_\_\_ CR-PR \_\_\_\_\_  
 IS \_\_\_\_\_ DAS \_\_\_\_\_  
 AUG 30 02 30 '68  
 XDC \_\_\_\_\_ GDC \_\_\_\_\_ TDC \_\_\_\_\_  
 PDC \_\_\_\_\_ SAC \_\_\_\_\_ AGC \_\_\_\_\_  
 EDC \_\_\_\_\_ OI \_\_\_\_\_ SEN \_\_\_\_\_  
 JA \_\_\_\_\_ CH \_\_\_\_\_ RFB 577

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PRIORITY

PT 0173  
 PGTZYUJ RUMNCNU6282 2430000-S555--RUWTFJA.  
 ZNY S5555  
 DE RUMNTS 9 2430545  
 ZNY ~~S5555~~  
 P 300523Z AUG 68  
 FM 033D CMETSPTGP PLEIKU AB RVN  
 TO RUWTFJA/USAFMPC AFPMSCB RANDOLPH AFB TX  
 INFO RUMNABA/CINCPACAF DPSP HICKAM AFB HI  
 RUMUFKA/7AF DPSP TSN RVN  
 BT

~~SECRET~~/CSFO-PA  
 SUBJ: MAJ WAYNE B. WOLFKEIL, FR49652, MIA, 9 AUG 68. REFERENCE:  
 YOUR 281450Z AUG 68. 1. SEARCH HAS NOT BEEN RESUMED BECAUSE OF  
 ENEMY ACTION. IF AND WHEN SEARCH IS RESUMED PROGRESS REPORTS WILL  
 BE FORWARDED. AF FM 484 WAS SUBMITTED TO HQ 7 AF (DPSP) ON 15  
 AUG 68. 2. CRASH SITE IS LOCATED IN LAOS AT GEOGRAPHIC COORDINATES  
 14 DEGREES 46 MIN NORTH 107 DEGREES 27 MIN EAST. FUTURE CASUALTY  
 MESSAGES WILL SUPPLEMENTED BY CLASSIFIED REPORTS TO INCLUDE  
 THIS INFORMATION.  
 BT

NNNN#

Classification canceled (changed to **UNCLASSIFIED**)  
 by authority of 5200.1-R 1-401  
 by Jamie Kuckner 2 Dec 74 Jme.

*1 copy forwarded  
 AFPDCA*

UNCLASSIFIED

PRIORITY

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \* ~~SECRET~~ \*



**Wolfkeil MIA - Search Report**

**IMMEDIATE**

*Not Coded*

**UNCLASSIFIED**

15 OCT 1968

*1342  
1405  
1400*

VV AMAG607  
DE RUMNTB 51 2851145  
ZNR UUUUU  
O 141000Z OCT 68  
FM 633CMETSPTGP PLEIKU APT RVN  
TO RUWTFJA/USAFMPC AFPMSCB RANDOLPH AFB TX  
INFO RUHHABA/CINCPACAF OPSP  
RHMSMVA/COMUSMACV ADJ SIAGON RVN  
RUMUFKA/7AF DPSP TA SON NHUT AB RVN  
BT

UNCLAS CBPO-PA  
SUBJECT: MAJ WAYNE B. WOLFKEIL, FR 49652, MIA. THIS MESSAGE  
IN TWO PARTS. PART I. REF USAFMPC MSG AFPMSCB 102100Z OCT  
68. UPON RECEIPT OF YOUR MSG ON 12 OCT, MAJ MILLIKAN, 7AF  
TIGER HOUND FRAG, WAS CONTACTED FOR ANY ADDITIONAL INFO AVAILA-  
BLE. FOLLOWING RECEIVED BY TELEPHONE THIS DATE: AN ARMY  
GROUND PARTY REACHED THE CRASH SITE ON 26 AUG 68. THEY WERE  
UNABLE TO DETERMINE IF THE PILOT OF THE ACFT WAS IN THE ACFT AT TIME  
OF THE CRASH. THE ACFT WAS COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY FIRE. THE  
TEAM DID FIND BITS AND PEICES OF A HELMET AT THE CRASH SITE BUT NO  
HUMAN REMAINS. THIS INFORMATION WAS RELATED TO THIS CHPO ON  
14 OCT 68 BY TELEPHONE BY THE COMMANDER OF THE 6TH SOS. A TOP  
SECRET MSG FR CO CCN DANANG CITE 814 CONCERNS MAJ WOLFKEIL.

PAGE 2 RUMNTB 51 UNCLAS  
THE TOP SECRET MSG WAS SENT TO CHIEF, SOG, SAIGON AND INFO CG  
IFFV, NHA TRANG (G-2) AND THIS ORGANIZATION WAS NOT ADDRESSEE  
ON MESSAGE. PART II. REFERENCE 7AF MSG 130115Z OCT 68.  
FOLLOWING ARE SPECIFIC ANSWERS: 1. YES 2. UNKNOWN 3. YES.  
FORM 484 WILL BE UPDATED EPD. INFO RECEIVED TO DATE DO NOT  
WARRANT CHANGE IN MIA STATUS.  
BT

**UNCLASSIFIED**

*DR / 1320  
1254 / WS*

MINN

**UNCLASSIFIED**

\*\*

## **P.O.W. Network Biography of Wayne Wolfkeil**

(<http://www.pownetwork.org/bios/w/w042.htm>)

WOLFKEIL, WAYNE BENJAMIN

Name: Wayne Benjamin Wolfkeil

Rank/Branch: O4/US Air Force

Unit: 6th Special Operations Squadron, Pleiku AB SV

Date of Birth: 07 March 1932

Home City of Record: Wilkes Barre PA

Date of Loss: 09 August 1968

Country of Loss: Laos

Loss Coordinates: 144600N 1072700E (YB647347)

Status in 1973): Missing In Action

Category: 2

Acft/Vehicle/Ground: A1H

Refno: 1245

Other Personnel in Incident: (none missing)

SOURCE: Compiled by Homecoming II Project 31 April 1990 from one or more of the following: raw data from U.S. Government agency sources, correspondence with POW/MIA families, published sources, interviews. Updated by the P.O.W. NETWORK 2012.

### REMARKS:

SYNOPSIS: The A1 Skyraider ("Spad") had a varied role in Vietnam, such as flying rescue, close air support and forward air control (FAC) missions. The Congressional Medal of Honor was won by one of its pilots. They were versatile men, trained for many sorts of missions. The rugged and dependable A1, a veteran of the Korean War, flew over 2000 missions in Vietnam.



A-1 Skyraider (Spad)

Major Wayne B. Wolfkeil was a pilot assigned to the 6th Special Operations Squadron at Pleiku Airbase in South Vietnam. On August 9, 1968, Wolfkeil was assigned an operational mission over Laos as the number two aircraft in a flight of two. About 25 miles west of the city of Dak To, (South Vietnam), in Attapeu Province, Laos, Wolfkeil's aircraft was seen to make a sharp right turn and crash, exploding on impact. No parachute was seen, and no emergency radio beeper signals were heard. Although there is ample reason to believe the Vietnamese and/or Communist Lao know what happened to Wolfkeil, they have never admitted having information on him.

Following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, 591 American prisoners were released from North Vietnam. Wayne Wolfkeil was not one of them. In fact, not one of the nearly 600 who were lost in Laos was released. Many of them survived their loss incident and some sent emergency signals. Some were in voice contact and some were even photographed in captivity. Government officials later expressed their shock that "hundreds" more Americans that were expected to be released were not.

The U.S. has been unable to secure the release of any more prisoners held in Vietnam, even though nearly 10,000 reports have been received concerning Americans still alive in Southeast Asia.

Wayne B. Wolfkeil was promoted to the rank of Colonel during the period he was maintained missing. Eleven years after he became missing, the U.S. declared him dead, based on no specific information that he was alive.



\*\*

**WAYNE BENJAMIN WOLFKEIL is honored on Panel 49W, Row 37 of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.**



- Wall Name: WAYNE B WOLFKEIL
- Date of Birth: 3/7/1932
- Date of Casualty: 8/9/1968
- Home of Record: WILKES-BARRE
- County of Record: LUZERNE COUNTY
- State: PA
- Branch of Service: AIR FORCE
- Rank: COL
- Panel/Row: 49W, 37
- Status: MIA
- Casualty Province: LZ

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**The following is the text of an e-mail written by David Wolfkeil, son of Wayne Wolfkeil, on March 10, 2010 regarding an article on MIA families and their stories that appeared in the *Northwest Florida Daily News*. The letter was subsequently published in its entirety by the newspaper.**

My father was shot down over Laos on August 9, 1968. He was flying an A-1H Skyraider. He was assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Special Ops Squadron out of Pleiku AB, SV. He was 36 years old. He was MIA until 1979. His crash site and remains have yet to be found. His present status is KIA/Body Not Recovered.

In my world—my father was bigger than life itself. He played football at Penn State, married his high school sweetheart, flew fighter jets, smoked cigars, drank martini's, had a great sense of humor, loved Sinatra and Peggy Lee, played bad golf on Saturday, made a great pancake breakfast on Sunday, liked to fish and camp, and thought he could fix anything (open to debate). He was a friend to many, a good son and brother, a loving husband, and a great father. Simply put—in the words of my mother—my father was a “good man.”

I was thirteen the day my father went missing. I was home watching over my two younger sisters and brother while my mother was at the commissary when the blue staff car with three Air Force officers showed at our front door. For some odd reason it didn't click in my thirteen year old brain why those three gentlemen were there. When I met my mother at the door and saw the look on her face—it was very obvious she knew why they were there. Within minutes of her walking in the door—the wives showed up—the Army wife from across the street, an Air Force wife from down the street, another Air Force wife from across town. They took turns keeping us all calm in the basement den until my mother summoned us upstairs. I remember that day as if was yesterday.

The transition from MIA to KIA was in a word—anti-climactic. For a variety of reasons I had already resigned myself to the fact that my father did not survive August 9, 1968. We had a memorial service, nice things were said, and a ceremonial marker was placed. It didn't answer any questions, fill any voids, or

provide any closure. Life went on as it had since August 9, 1968. As kids, over time, we learned to “adapt” to his absence. My mother didn’t. She fought long and hard for him. She did everything she could to keep hope alive—a battle that took its toll. She never remarried. She passed away in 2001 and is buried in my father’s plot in Arlington.

I am now 55 years old. I miss my father now just as much as I did that fateful day in 1968. I think of him every day—every day! There’s a void and emptiness, a missing piece that will forever be with me. It doesn’t rule my life—it’s just there. It’s a part of my being. I do my best to keep my father’s memory alive. When the opportunity presents itself I place a flag or lift a glass to my father (and to all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty). I reminisce with my Aunt and Uncle, I try and fill in the blanks of faint and fading memories for my brothers and sisters, I remind my daughter where she got her athletic prowess from and to do her grandfather proud.

I read your article this past Sunday in reference to MIA families and their stories. I wasn’t too sure I wanted to respond. It’s very easy to talk about my father. It’s hard to talk about the experience of him not coming home and life without him. It’s complicated to say the least. Emotions get jumbled, words don’t come, and guilt rolls in. Guilt in the sense that this is not about me—it’s about my father and the sacrifice he made.

Thank you for showing an interest,

David Wayne Wolfkeil—son of Col. Wayne Benjamin Wolfkeil

Shortly after this e-mail was sent in 2010, a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) Survey Team successfully reached the crash site of Spad 36, located in what is now in the Dong Ampham National Biodiversity Conservation Area, and did a cursory perusal of the environs. They found a piece of a propeller blade in a tree and other small parts of the aircraft but nothing associated with its pilot. A follow up recovery mission is to be undertaken by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, the successor agency to JPAC, but no date has been set for that.

Perhaps after a more intensive excavation of the crash site using the latest forensic archaeological recovery methods which involve the digging and sifting and testing of soil samples, the Laotian jungle will at last yield final confirmation of the fate that Wayne Wolfkeil met on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1968 and provide some measure of closure for his family.

*At 1400 hours on June 16, 1979 the Wolfkeil family held a memorial service in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania for Wayne. A plaque with his name on it was placed at a cemetery. But nothing was buried. For now, only Anne Wolfkeil, his widow, is buried in her husband's plot at Arlington National Cemetery.*



*Section 67 – Plot 2467*

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## **Memories Linger: After 45 Years, Efforts Continue to Find Former Penn State Player Wayne Wolfkeil's Remains**

GORDIE JONES Correspondent Lancaster [Pennsylvania] Online - Aug 4, 2013



The stories survive, even if the subject does not.

One of the ones they like to tell about Wayne Wolfkeil, a man who lived so large that his Penn State football career was all but an afterthought, is about how he would fly his Air Force jet out of a base in Newburgh, N.Y., and buzz his hometown of Wilkes-Barre - coming in low and shattering the sound barrier.

There would be a sonic boom. And then he was gone.

"We'd know who it was," his older brother Jack recalled last Saturday, as he sat with his wife Shirley and sister Betty in the family room of his home in Dallas, Pa. The house is adjacent to a golf course, and not all that far from the one on Church Street in Wilkes-Barre where the Wolfkeils grew up (and where Betty still lives).

That was Wayne - a big, noisy presence. And it makes his absence that much more keenly felt.

He died in the jungles of southeastern Laos in August 1968, early in the Vietnam War, having been shot down while piloting not a jet but a propeller-driven A1H Skyraider. (And never mind that officially, the United States was not conducting combat operations in Laos. Unofficially, it most definitely was.)

Wayne was just 36 at the time. Reports say that after his plane was hit by ground fire it banked sharply to the right, clipped a tree or two and, having failed to discharge its payload, exploded as it slammed into a mountainside. No parachute was ever seen, nor were any distress signals ever heard.

But neither have his remains ever been found.

The search has continued for 45 years, workers relying on state-of-the-art equipment, decades-old serial numbers and the accounts of eyewitnesses grown old to comb a handful of sites, none of which has turned out to be Wolfkeil's.

But his son David has received word of another site, one that likely was his dad's final resting place. Only problem is, searchers from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) - an organization whose stated purpose is to track down the remains of every American serviceman lost in conflict - lack the funding at present to visit the site.

So the Wolfkeils wait.

"You sort of learn to be patient," David said over the phone recently from his home in Niceville, Fla. "My dad's not the only one they're looking for."

Shirley and Betty agree that bringing Wayne home would give the family closure.

"It would be an ending to something you thought about all these years," Betty said, "like, 'What if, what if?' To know that it's final, that you don't have to wonder."

David, who at 58 is the oldest of four children born to Wayne and his wife Anne (who died in 2001), does not have high expectations for the search - "Realistically," he said, "you're going to get a chip of a bone or a very small piece of anything" - but would like to see some sort of resolution, if only for his aunts and uncle. Jack, born two years before Wayne, is 83. So too is Shirley. Betty is 77.

"They believe in burying your dead," David said. "I think it would be nice if we got some sort of remains back in time for them to filter that emotion."

Jack, for his part, would like Wayne back not so much for himself as his brother's kids. Besides David, there is Maura, 55, who lives in Billings, Mont.; Nikki, 53, who lives in Asheville, N.C.; and Mark, 51, who lives in Bend, Ore.

"The thing I think that I would value is that his kids would make a connection with something they didn't have," Jack said. "It's more for them that I think we value a return, if you will."

Wayne initially was declared Missing in Action; not until 1979, some four years after hostilities ceased in Southeast Asia, was his status changed to Killed in Action. The family held a memorial service in June of that year, and David would in time describe his dad to the Northwest Florida Times as a man who "played football at Penn State, married his high school sweetheart, flew fighter jets, smoked cigars, drank martinis, had a great sense of humor, loved Sinatra and Peggy Lee, played bad golf on Saturdays, made a great pancake breakfast on Sundays, liked to fish and camp and thought he could fix anything (open to debate)."

Jack, Shirley and Betty offered their own memories over coffee last weekend. Wayne, they said, was strong-willed as a kid, at one point venturing into the back room of an unusual local establishment, one that was a combination barber shop/candy store in front, and a pool hall in back.

Their father, Adam, had laid down the law to the three kids he had by his wife Ruth: Under no circumstances were any of them to go back there.

Wayne did anyway. And his dad found out.

"All hell broke loose," Jack said.

Long story short, Wayne never went into the place again, not even for a candy bar.

Wayne was a three-sport guy at Hanover Township High School. Quarterback in the fall. Basketball in the winter. Baseball in the spring. The usual combination, and the usual adulation. All the girls adored him, including Betty's friends.

"They still talk about him," she said.

He played halfback and defensive back on some of Rip Engle's earliest teams at Penn State, lettering only in the fall of 1953 and graduating the following spring. Wayne was married by then - Anne gave birth to David in February 1955, in Wilkes-Barre - and he began his Air Force career right out of college.

He was stationed in Greenland at first, while Anne and David remained behind in the Wyoming Valley. But in the years that followed the Wolfkeils moved often, as is typical of military families: Minot, N.D.; Suffolk County, N.Y.; Newburgh; Syracuse. (Besides buzzing his hometown, Wayne had something of a close call while stationed in Newburgh. He and his copilot were forced to eject from their jet during a training mission in 1962, because of engine trouble. Both men escaped injury.)

Finally, the family settled in at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs. And in May 1968, shortly before Wayne was deployed to Vietnam, he took the family on a two-week camping trip to the Grand Canyon, Salt Lake City and California.

"It was," David said, "a great trip. It was the last one we took before he left, so it sticks in my mind."

Scarcely three months later, a blue staff car pulled up in front of the Wolfkeils' home. Some officers emerged. So too did a chaplain.

David, then 13, was watching his three younger siblings, while his mom shopped for groceries at the commissary. At first it didn't register as to why these men were there. And after they entered

the home, he remembers standing alongside the chaplain as they looked out a back window, toward a nine-hole golf course.

The chaplain asked David if he golfed.

No, he said, but surely his dad would teach him when he returned.

"For some reason it just wasn't clicking in my mind, what was going on," David said. "I should have known better, but I didn't quite figure it out."

It finally dawned on him when his mom returned home, carrying her bags of groceries. "Her eyes were as big as half-dollars," he said.

Officials tracked Adam and Betty down as they vacationed in Ocean City, N.J. Ruth had died a year or two earlier, and now they were forced to deal with this dire news about Wayne. "It's like somebody hit you in the stomach," Betty said.

She in turn sent word to Jack and Shirley, who had stopped off with their three kids at the Grand Canyon while en route to Colorado Springs. Once he arrived at his brother's home, Jack huddled with some of Wayne's military friends. They had worked the backchannels, and were almost certain from the start that Wayne perished in the crash.

A recovery team tried to go in and find him soon after he was shot down, they told Jack, only to discover too much enemy activity in the area. A second team went in some two weeks later and found bits and pieces of a crash helmet, but nothing more.

"They were looking for more signs that he might have escaped in some fashion," Jack said, "and they just didn't see enough of that."

It has informed his view ever since, put his mind at ease. Finding Wayne's remains now will change nothing for him, since Jack had a pretty good idea from the beginning as to what happened to his brother.

Not so Anne, according to David. Over the years she made frequent trips to Washington, D.C., in an attempt to learn more. Often she was presented grainy black-and-white photos of prisoners of war, but Wayne was never among them.

More information became available after the war ended. Reports indicate that Wayne, part of the Sixth Special Operations Squadron, piloted one of the two aircraft that flew out of Pleiku Airbase in South Vietnam, to a target in Attapeu Province in Laos.

The other pilot made his bombing run unscathed. Wayne was not as fortunate.

"The bottom line is, they waited for the first guy to come in," David said, "and when the second guy came in, took care of him."

Frank Bodani of the York Daily Record, who wrote extensively about Wolfkeil in January 2012, reported that Wayne is one of just two Penn State football players to die in service to his country since World War I. The other is Maj. Fred William "Ted" Shattuck, who was killed on July 19, 1969, after his plane exploded as he took off on a mission from Thailand.

Before that, you have to go back to Red Bebout and Levi Lamb of the unbeaten 1912 team, who died in France in 1918.

Today's technology allows crews to pinpoint possible crash sites, but much still depends on interviewing locals who might have been living in a given area four decades ago. And much more depends on hard work - on setting up what amounts to an archeological dig once a site is reached (a task that can take several days) and sifting through the dirt in hopes of finding something.

And if airplane parts, however minute, are discovered, their serial numbers can be matched to those listed on some yellowed manifest.

That's how Wayne Wolfkeil might finally come home.

His son David began college in 1973 at Missouri, where he was a quarter-miler on the track team. He finished up at Colorado in '80 - "I was on the seven-year plan," he said - along the way

receiving a letter of encouragement from a man who had been an assistant coach at Penn State when his dad played there.

Guy by the name of Joe Paterno.

The younger Wolfkeil spent 14 years in the Air Force himself (1982-96), and at one point in the mid-'80s was stationed in the Philippines, where his dad had undergone jungle training years before.

"I almost expected him to walk around the corner," he said. "That's how close I felt to him there."

Ditto for when he flew training missions in Thailand, right along the Mekong River. Laos was just over the river; by his figuring, his dad's crash site was no more than 80 miles away. "You just have these visions that he's there, he's there, he's just right there," David said.

There are other memories, other echoes of Wayne's big, noisy presence, as when David, now an air operations specialist for the Department of Defense, walks the flight line at Eglin Air Force Base or hears the roar of a jet engine. That's all it takes. He and his wife Jennifer also have a daughter, Veronika, who appears to have inherited her grandfather's athletic prowess; she played soccer at the University of Alabama, graduating in May 2012.

The other Wolfkeils have moved on to other things. Jack spent 38 years in education, retiring in 1990. Betty retired from her job with Social Security a year earlier to look after her ailing father, who died in November of '89.

And always they remember. Always they hope.