

The Final Flight Home of the Phoenix

At 4:00 PM on October 2, 1990, I found out that there would be a funeral service at 10:00 AM on October 5th for a C/158 AHB "Phoenix" flight crew, shot down during LAMSON 719 east of LZ Sophia on March 5, 1971. "Auction Lead" and crew (CPT David Nelson AC, WO1 Ralph Moreira P, SP4 Joel Hatley CE, and SP4 Michael King G) were finally coming home. I immediately called Phoenix members, Jack Glennon in Virginia Beach and Don Davis in Chicago. Their phone chain was so thorough that by 9:00 PM that night, I had been called by at least two Phoenix to tell me about the services. Never having been a Phoenix, I appreciated being included.

My first exposure to this tight knit group was at the 1989 Chicago VHPA reunion where, after registering in, I entered a darkened room that had a bunch of rowdy beer drinkers looking a Vietnam slides. I stayed a while and listened to the outbursts; "Who let him sit in the left side, the slide must be in backwards, we never let him be an AC!" Then they got quiet and spoke reverently about pictures showing those who didn't return; I felt like I was imposing on something very personal and left. However, a strong impression had been made on me by a noisy lot who wore puke green T-shirts that had a squawking chicken, superimposed over a map of Vietnam, on it.

I got another Phoenix lesson at 9:00 PM October 4th at the Sheraton Hotel in Arlington VA. Within a 48 hour period after notification, Dean Grau and family from Minnesota, Ken Mayberry, from Nebraska with his high speed wheel chair, Bruce Updyke from Indiana, Chuck Doty from Maryland, Tom Marshall, from Florida, who was notified at 2 PM that day, Rick Scrugham, from Tennessee who was notified at 10 AM that day, Davis and Glennon were present, drinking light beer, eating chips and telling airlines war stories. The next morning Tom Cullen from Connecticut arrived at the chapel. Their bond was so strong that 9 pilots came at their own expense, from across the United States, to pay tribute to their returning comrades in arms.

The tone of the chapel service was set immediately by Joel Hatley's mother who went to the altar, told us the exact hour and minute that Joel had been born, and paid tribute to the blessing of his short life by reading the attached poem, that she wrote. Although she stayed steady throughout her reading of poem, the emotion of the words gripped the filled chapel. After the services, while others rode to the burial site, the Phoenix walked behind the horse drawn caisson, band, firing party and funeral detail soldiers from the 3d Infantry "Old Guard", a Army ceremonial unit that is so visible at the Tombs of the Unknown Soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

At the end of the flag presentations to the families, Don Davis, who had once rescued Dave Nelson off of Ranger South in Feb 71, placed a pair of old shined jump boots next to the casket. Dave Nelson was fondly remembered as the only person who could walk around Camp Evans during the monsoons and not get mud on his highly shined boots. At the conclusion of the ceremony, Dave Nelson's younger sister came up to the group and tearfully asked, "Did you guys fly with my brother?" Don Davis responded that all these men flew with your brother, and there were no dry eyes in the group. She, then, showed us her cherished pictures of her big brother and pictures of his boots. With that, the Phoenix left the cemetery to meet all the families at a local hotel after the funeral.

We learned and relearned that numerous agencies had been in touch with these families concerning the status of the remains of this crew. Some were official, some were not. Some sought the truth, some still do not. Some were sincere, some were out to serve their own interests. No one, officially or unofficially, had ever made an attempt to talk to the eyewitnesses. In August 1971, when I was in the 174th AHC, the "Dolphins and the Sharks", I obtained a copy of a tape made by Don Peterson, Dolphin 16, in Laos on March 5, 1971, which had one of Dave Nelson's last radio transmission on it. Dave was being asked by Red Dragon 09 the status of his approach into LZ Sophia. Dave calmly responds, on my tape, that he broke off his approach, his aircraft was hit and had been leaking fuel but wasn't now, there were wounded on board, the gunner was hit in the head and he was going to try to make it back to Kilo Sierra (Khe Sahn). Other Phoenix remember a similar call on the internal Phoenix frequency, but that Dave was going to try to get to, much closer, Aloui. UH-1H #67-17341 tried valiantly to get her crew home, but she couldn't and exploded at altitude east of LZ Liz. Now, for me, many unknowns I heard after listening to the tape for 19 years had been answered.

There is no answer to a family member's question, "How come the government did not tell me about you guys?" Words will not describe the expression of sadness and relief one sees in a family member's face when a eyewitness tearfully recounts the aircraft exploding like the "Challenger" and the family knows the possibility of their loved one being an unreturned POW is very remote.

Don Davis, in a letter to me, was very accurate when he wrote: " The warmth and gratitude extended by the families to the Phoenix pilots was phenomenal. What became very obvious was that all the relatives, without exception, wanted to know more about their loved one's last days and particularly last minutes. I guess the Army notification system was never really able to satisfy the families questions about how and why-- after all these years. The families drew great comfort in being able to talk with the people that were there. The families treated all of us with the love they would have bestowed upon their lost sons and brothers, and as a result, I departed with a sense of shame for not having reached out to these people sooner. We must mention this to all the VHPA membership for that specific reason. If there are members of their units who were killed or missing and no one has ever contacted the families, to the best of their knowledge, they ought to attempt to do so. If they are turned away, so be it. But if what happened at Arlington is indicative of other families, they will be warmly received. We owe it to the families, and ourselves to at least make the effort. The families need to share the experience, know what we know, and be made aware of the fact that they are not the only ones who remember."

Last year, I got access to some files in the National Archives and in the Pentagon, that allowed me to identify the units and aircraft tail numbers of some of the almost 2200 KIA/MIA listed in the VHPA directory. I sent my information, as recommended in the VHPA directory, to Gary Roush, who updated the data base. Gary thinks we updated 1000 names. We must update this information and remove the "Need to Verify" as the first step in this process, so that we can be accurate if we are going to reach out to a family. We owe it to them. It does them no good for the families to get their only information from the media and special interest groups who have clearly demonstrated to me absolutely no sensitivity to the families tremendous loss. We must take care of our own.

Mike Sloniker, Phoenix 1H