



THE VHPA NEWSLETTER

Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association

Winter 1991 Vol. 8 No. 3



M2932 11/91
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Washington, DC 20050-6944

Lift Platoon 68th Top Tigers Rubber Plantations Near Xuan Loc 1970

Photo by J. Maxwell

THE FINAL FLIGHT HOME OF THE PHOENIX

October 5, 1990
Mike Szniker

At 4:00 p.m. on October 2, 1990 I found out that there would be a funeral service at 10:00 a.m. on October 5th for a C-130 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.

He immediately called Phoenix members, Jack Glennon in Virginia Beach and Don Davis in Chicago. Their phone chain was so thorough that by 9:00 p.m. 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 at 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 ACP!"

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.

I got another Phoenix lesson at 9:00 p.m. 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 p.m. that day), Rick Scrughorn, from Tennessee (who was notified at 10:00 a.m. that day), Davis and Glennon were present, drinking light beer, eating chips and telling airline war stories. The next morning Tom Cullen from Connecticut arrived at the Chapel.

Their bond was so strong that nine pilots came at their own expense, from across the United States, to pay tribute to their returning comrades in arms, in some cases with less than twenty-four years

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 the 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 3rd Infantry "Old Guard", an 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 February 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 picture 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 transmissions 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 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, Akou. UH-1H #67-17341 tried valiantly to get her crew home, but she couldn't and exploded at altitude east of LZ LZ. 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 an 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 1,000 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 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 family's tremendous loss.

We must take care of our own.

Mike Sloniker, Phoenix 1H

A PICTURE, A FLAG AND A GOLD STAR PIN

*In Memory of
SP4 Joel C. Hatley
Co. C, 158th AVN BN
101st Airborne Div.
APO San Francisco, CA 96383*

That night I kissed my son Goodbye, and watched his plane soar to the sky. Little did I know as he held my hand, that soon he'd lie in some strange land. I still can see his smiling face, and feel his arms in last embrace. His quiet voice and tender touch, his loving ways all meant so much. He said, "Mother please don't cry tonight". I said, "I won't", I promised with throat so tight. I held him close; I loved him so, and it hurt so much to see him go. I'll be alright and I luv ya'll, were his last words going down the hall. He waved goodbye going to the plane, and suddenly I felt so strange. I thought—he's going where he's never been, the "Nam" was his destination again. I didn't know why—couldn't understand—but "heaven" flashed through my mind then. I felt we had really said goodbye, and he truly was gone to the sky. I felt strange peace and calm within, and I felt I'd never see him again. I watched his plane go out of sight, as he was lost in the still, dark night. I love my son. Why must he go? My heart cried out, now it ached

so. He went to "Nam, but I soon learned, he really was lost, never to return.

MISSING IN ACTION...the telegram read, but inside I knew our Joel was dead. He'd been shot down, the helicopter lost...Dear Lord! My son! Oh, what a cost! And then we wait and wait and pray, and hope we'll hear that he's OK. The time was short, tho it seemed long. The grief was great but love was strong. Each day seemed like a million years, as time was washed away with tears. At last word came, and what I knew within my heart, was finally true. **KILLED IN ACTION**...this telegram read, crashed in flames...no survivors it said. **KILLED...NOT MISSING NOW**, it read, My Joel! My Joel! Our Joel was dead! Oh Lord! Oh Lord! Oh no, no please! And then I fell on bended knee. Dear God! I cried in disbelief, my heart exploded then in grief. The tears then like a river did flow; our Joel! Oh Lord! What a way to go!

In crushed remembrance of his love, I bowed my head to God above; to thank Him for that life so sweet, and prayed someday again we'd meet. I felt his hand and tender touch, his last goodbye all meant so much. Just then I saw his face, his smile, and my heart raced across the miles. To join his heart in that last breath, to share his fate, so share his death. To die with him in burning flames, to leave with me only his name. There's no remains, no grave to be, nothing except sweet memories. A picture of him is left instead, and a folded flag to show he's dead. Always I'll look at the smiling face, of the picture

I hold here in his place. Always I'll hold grief and strife, this flag as if it were my life. Always a Gold Star Pin I'll wear, in memory of a life so sweet and fair. A Picture, A Flag, and a Gold Star Pin, I'll always hold in the place of him.

Written by
Ms. Evelyn Laton Hatley

The crew of Huey 67-17341, "Auction Lead" are at rest in Arlington National Cemetery, area 34, plot 4439. Amen.

ANOTHER CREW COMES HOME

Greetings!

Thought this might be of interest. Keith Brandt was an AH-1 SIP with 101st AVN BN. He was shot down during Lan Son 719 over Laos. The unit was stationed at Hue Phu Bi. I know Keith in his first tour with "Soc Trang Tiger" (121st AHC) who he flew for the arrived platoon "Vikings")

I saw Keith on the ramp at Hue Phu Bai the day he was lost. He was a great pilot and a good guy to fight a war with!

Jerry Daly Associated Press July 19, 1990

Remains of Two U.S. Soldiers Killed in Laos Are Identified

The remains of two U.S. Army soldiers killed in an aircraft crash in southern Laos during the Vietnam War have been identified, the Defense Department has announced. The remains, found during a joint U.S. Laotian excavation effort last January, were to be sent for final interment from Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii this week with full military honors, the Pentagon said.

The Pentagon identified the remains as those of Keith A. Brandt, an Army captain from



CAISSON BEARING: THE REMAINS OF Captain Keith Brandt and 1st Lt. Alan Boffman in Single Casket. Arlington National Cemetery. Area 34, Plot 4441. Photo by Jerry Daly

Continued on the next page

**Help the VHPA.
Get a Friend
to Join
Today!**

Bellingham, Wash., and Alan B. Boffman, an Army first lieutenant, of Norfolk. Brandt was 30 at the time of the fatal crash on March 18, 1971; Boffman was 24.

Thanks for the information about the return of this crew, I'm sure their friends are relieved to know they have finally come home.

BLOCK OF TIME

As I sat and enjoyed my morning coffee and newspaper on Sunday, October 21, 1990, I came across a photo of the burial of two KIA's from Laos. The title at the top of the photo read "Long-Awaited Farewell". Boy, was that an understatement! It really hit home as I read the caption below the photo. "The remains of the two soldiers—Capt. Keith Brandt, of Bellingham, WA and LT. Alan Boffman, of Norfolk, VA—were buried in a single coffin, Friday, at Arlington National Cemetery, in Virginia. The remains were returned recently from Laos".

Keith was a good friend of mine and fellow Gun Team Leader. We were Cobra pilots with "D" Co. 101st AVN. BN 101st ABN Div., out of Phu Bai, Call Sign "Hawk", SOI Call Sign for Operation Lom Son 719 was "Music".

On 18 March 71, we were involved in extracting ARVN's from LAOS. I want to remember being about 35-40 miles inside Laos from Khe Sahn, but 20 years is a long time, it may have been less. As always seemed to be the case, the ARVN's were in "deep—" and wanted out yesterday! It was a real mess out there and the slicks we were escorting couldn't find the marker panel for the LZ and smoke was out of the questions. After several minutes of searching, Keith finally spotted the panel and decided to overfly it to give the slicks a solid mark. He went in, and I covered him. Seems this time the ARVN's were telling the truth, because, as we approached the area, all hell broke loose.

Before I knew what happened, I was faced with a "Master Caution", coupled with 90 degree gear box chip light and Keith was on fire, hydraulics out. That's the last I ever saw or heard from him. My front seat saw him go in a flame and I knew it was the end for Keith and Alan.

We managed to get to an ARVN OP. I think it was LZ Brown, but I'm not sure. We were lifted out sometime later. Keith and Alan were listed KIA 03/18/71.

As a matter of interest, the AC that pulled me out contacted me 14 October 1989, Kingsmen 11, Gerry Morgan, a fellow member of VHPA.

I've been watching TV and reading newspapers for the last 20 years with the hope of someday seeing that Keith's remains would be put to rest in the "real world". Well, it seems that day has finally arrived. He and his front seat, Alan, were interred at Arlington National Cemetery, Friday October 19, 1990, nineteen years, seven months, and one day, after that Mission so suddenly took them, forever, from those who knew and loved them.

I respectfully request that the "Body Never Returned" designation be removed from their listing prior to the next publication of the Directory, as they are now home.

I've changed a lot since those days, long ago in Vietnam, as we all have, but I feel a closeness to the memories that will never be forgotten.

I'm still an active member of the U.S. Army Reserves, assigned to Co. "A" 2/123 AVN RGT. St. Paul, MN. We're an attack BN. Part of the 4th ID., Alaska.

I'm a Unit Trainer in the AH-1F Cobra, the latest evolution of the AH-1G we flew in Nam. The big difference being all the "G" whiz electronics we used to dream about all those years ago. Helmut Sub Sight System, Rocket Management System, Heads Up Display, Telescopic Sight Unit, Tow Missiles, etc. Anyone familiar with the aircraft knows the list seems endless!

This Wednesday, when I climb in my Cobra, the memories I have of Keith will be more completely knowing that he was now returned to the "real world" with the rest of us. And, that unlike him, we are so fortunate to have experienced, and ultimately survived, that incredible "block of time" in our lives.

P.S. My compliments to Lane Heath for his accomplishment in CW2. Truly, the finest book on the Vietnam War I've read to date. It's the same war I remember.

Jack Hauck
Hawk 38
Apr. '70-Apr. '71

It is evident that these men are gone but not forgotten. Thanks for detailing the loss of Keith and Alan.

FRIENDS

This is to inform you and members of VHPA of the death of our loving Son and Brother Larry D. Dirks who was killed August 15, 1990 while crop dusting cotton near Lubbock, Texas. The spray plane he was piloting crashed and burned in a cotton field North of Lubbock Airport. No

ruling as to cause of the crash has been issued at this time by FAA. Larry had been crop dusting in the Amarillo, Pampa, Lubbock, Texas area since 1985. He also was engaged in farming and ranching in the Texas Panhandle for several years.

He served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam from February 1970 to February 1971 with Co. B, 227th Helicopter Assault BN, 1st Air Cavalry Div., Phouc Vihn, Vietnam. He was also a member of the US Army Active Reserve, 300th Aviation Co., Oak Grove Airport, Ft. Worth, Texas, in 1972-73 while attending college. In 1978-79 he served as a volunteer helicopter pilot for the Amarillo, Texas Rescue Helicopter in this area.

Our special thanks to some of his Vietnam Veteran Pilots who flew with him and who contacted us during this time of sorrow. And to each of you who knew and loved him but were not informed of his death. To Laylor Jordan for being here with us, to Randy Clark, Herman Leubker, Don Griffith and Richard Garnas for the words of comfort and your prayers and thoughts. May God Bless each one of you who knew and loved him.

Larry never forgot or stopped loving and caring for those of you he served with and kept in contact with over the years. He was a real true friend, a very loving and sharing person to people of all ages and walks of life, he often talked to us about his friends in flight training at Ft. Wolters, Texas and Ft. Rucker, Alabama about his experience in Nam and loved to keep in contact with all you dear friends over the years. To each of you may we again say thank you for everything you did for him and for us. May God bless you.

Mr. & Mrs. Jerry Dicks
Jamie Dicks (Sister)
P.O. Box 26
Canyon, Texas 79015

P.S. Larry was laid to rest August 28, 1990 at Rose Hill Cemetery, Julia, Texas

Thank you for informing us of the loss of your son and our friend.

PIGFEST

Please find enclosed a copy of an Army Times cartoon (based on a TRUE incident, only the ranks have been changed to protect the guilty.) We, the former members of the third platoon, 120th AHC, 1st AVN BDE better known to the civilized world as the