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Strobridge's Voyage Through Life

By JERRY SCHWARTZ
The Associated Press

It was long ago - 40 years ago -- but Don Latham still remembers watching Rodney Strobridge pitch.

It wasn't that he was a great player; Torrance High School had better pitchers than this junk-balling righthander.

What Latham remembers is Rod Strobridge's hands.

"He used to have a fungal infection on his hands," says Latham. "It would eat through his skin, make them tender, and they would bleed at the slightest touch. But he still pitched, and his hands would bleed."

Rod could easily be dismissed as just another fun-loving kid -- easygoing, always joking. But then there was this determined boy on the mound, blood oozing from his hand as he gripped the ball.

It was this boy who would be sent to Vietnam. It was this boy who would win the Silver and Bronze stars, the Distinguished Flying Cross. It was this boy whose helicopter would plummet from the sky at An Loc.

And it is this boy, Pentagon officials say, who may be buried in the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery.

They're going to open the tomb; they're going to test DNA from the bones against blood from nine different families. Ultimately, they hope to identify this man. If he finds a name, he will no longer be a symbol of a nation's grief; instead, he will be returned to his family, and to their own, private sorrow.

Twenty years after her son was declared dead, Althea Strobridge wears his MIA bracelet. "I say hello to him every day," she says.

He was her eldest, born in 1941, in Denver, five years before Connie and 10 years before Brian.

George Strobridge, a plumber, went into the Navy. When he came home from the war, the family moved often, to Colorado Springs, to Nebraska, and finally in 1952 to Torrance, near Los Angeles.

Rodney was so easygoing, Mrs. Strobridge says, that she tended to give him more responsibility than she should have. At an early age, he was baby-sitting his sister and brother.

He liked to play ball. He got good grades, though he was no scholar. He was, his high school yearbook reports, "well known for his good nature and sense of humor."

Mostly, he hung out with his friends, Don Latham, Ricky Boucher and Jimmy Johnson. "The four musketeers," recalls Charlotte McComas Kyes, who used to join them at the Methodist Youth Fellowship. "You never saw one of them without the other three."

It was a standard adolescence of the 1950s. Latham remembers the dances, and the trips to El Prado Park to play football on Saturday afternoons. He remembers how the friends would gather at Tom Nordstrom's house and play cards when they should have been in school.

"He skipped school for 30 days," his mother says, chuckling. "They weren't doing anything bad, but they weren't going to school, either."

After graduation, he earned some money pouring concrete at missile bases in Nebraska with an uncle, Clarence Lacy. He went to community colleges in El Camino and Santa Monica, but never graduated. He worked for an aerospace electronics company, and traveled to install its equipment.

Paul Guiso roomed with Strobridge from 1961-65. "Gosh, we partied. We were young guys and it was Southern California. It was a great time."

There was an eight-month marriage -- neither of his parents (who had by this time divorced, themselves) recall his wife's name.

"There were a lot of girls," Guiso says. Mrs. Strobridge says Rodney looked like the actor Robert Wagner, and the pictures bear her out: "He had deep blue eyes. They were so blue that they almost looked black."

He received a draft deferment, Guiso says, because of the skin condition that so impressed his high school pal. It was a ticket out of the military -- a very desirable ticket for many men of the time.

Instead, he used a lotion, and he was drafted into the Army.

"We were never a part of the anti-American crap," Guiso said. Strobridge's uncle, Lacy, says it was simple: "He knew his father served, and I served, and he wanted to serve."

Lacy recommended that he apply for officer's school, but Rodney said he didn't want it. "I told him, when you get out there and you're crawling under barbed wire down there with the snakes, you'll change your mind."

Strobridge graduated from Officer Candidate School at Fort Sill in Lawton, Okla., on Dec. 17, 1966.

In his first tour of Vietnam, Mrs. Strobridge says, he worked in reconnaissance. He survived it, came back home, remarried. There was no talk of leaving the Army; his parents say he was going to make a career of it. He

had drifted for a long while, and the Army gave his life purpose.

He was home on leave for Christmas 1971. He and his wife, Patricia, spent a week with his mother in Iowa.

``I remember seeing him off,'' says Lacy. ``I told him, `Don't go back there and be a hero, because I don't want to read about you.'''

On his second tour of Vietnam, Strobbridge was trained to pilot the AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter. And he was assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division, Battery F, 79th Artillery - otherwise known as the Blue Max.

Their mission was to lend aerial support to the troops on the ground. They would swoop down at speeds of up to 140 mph, guns blazing.

The pilots of the Blue Max were already legendary for their heroism. There were 32 of them, and they passed whatever free time they had together, at their own officers' club at their base at Long Thong North.

There was ``no silk-scarf stuff,'' says David Funk, then a major who would soon command the Blue Max. Everyone seemed to have a nickname - Rick Rickenbacker became ``Fast Eddie'' when he became an aircraft commander within weeks of his arrival.

Strobbridge didn't have a nickname, Rickenbacker says. He was too new. He was a ``bullet catcher,'' sitting in the Cobra's front seat while the aircraft commander sat in the rear. He did not live long enough to be checked out on the Cobra, and to move to the rear seat.

On April 13, the North Vietnamese attacked An Loc, a provincial capital 80 miles north of Saigon. The town's South Vietnamese troops and American advisors were besieged.

The Blue Max went in. Day after day, the pilots returned to combat. Over seven weeks, nine of the 32 would die.

Strobbridge won the Distinguished Flying Cross on April 27; the citation says bad weather forced him to operate ``within range of enemy small arms,'' and that he persisted though he came under fire.

Two weeks later, on May 11, Strobbridge was flying with Capt. Robert John Williams, a seasoned pilot who had been a helicopter trainer.

Larry McKay, the commanding officer, says Strobbridge and Williams destroyed two of the big T-54 tanks on An Loc's southwest perimeter.

But then, the radio crackled: ``MISSILE, MISSILE, MISSILE!''

A heat-seeking missile -- probably fired by a handheld launcher -- shot toward the Cobra's exhaust pipe. There was an explosion. The helicopter went one way, its tail boom another.

None of the Americans saw them hit the ground.

Strobbridge was declared dead in 1978. Posthumously, he was promoted from captain to major, and there was a memorial service in Torrance. A marker was placed at Arlington, but his remains were missing.

At least until now.

The Pentagon says the remains of any one of nine soldiers who died at An Loc may be in the Tomb of the Unknown. The pelvis, right upper arm and four ribs will be tested with methods that are more sophisticated than those available when the remains were entombed, in 1984.

Rodney Strobridge was 5-foot-9 and 30 years old, and had type-O blood, all characteristics of the man in the tomb, according to the old tests. But other evidence found with the bones points to 1st Lt. Michael Blassie, who died the same day as Strobridge, and whose family has led the effort to open the crypt.

George and Althea Strobridge will go along, but they are unenthusiastic. "I don't need that," says Althea. "It's a long time getting over it, and I'm not over it yet," says George.

It has been a long time. Althea is 79. George is 78; his second wife died three years ago. Rodney Strobridge's wife, Patricia, remarried years ago and lives in Virginia.

Paul Guiso, his old roommate, turns 60 in July. He has two grandchildren. Rick Rickenbacker, his fellow Cobra pilot, works for Boeing in Mesa, Ariz., and has recovered from a heart attack to fly at age 54. His commanding officer, Larry McKay, teaches at The Citadel and is general partner of a private golf club.

And Don Latham, with whom he cut school and played ball, is a chiropractor in Palos Verdes Peninsula, minutes from the old neighborhood.

But Rodney Lynn Strobridge, their son and friend, brother in arms and partner in love, is still 11 days short of 31, a handsome smile in fading photographs.

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