

Lt. Jack C. Rittichier: Vietnam KIA Pilot Comes Home

By PA2 Lauren Smith

Coast Guard search and rescue pilot Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier drank chocolate milk shakes every day and called being a part of the Coast Guard “food for the soul.” As a student at Ohio’s Kent State University, he was captain of the football and track teams, as well as an artist, singer and dancer. His widow, Carol Wypick, said he looked like a cross between Burt Reynolds and Marlin Brando and that he had a biting sense of humor.

“He was interested in making better men out of the men around him by being an example himself,” said his younger brother, Carl. “He was always my idol.”

Jack volunteered to go to Danang Air Base in 1968 during the Vietnam War to work as an exchange pilot with the Air Force 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, because he felt a sense of duty. “This is what I’ve trained for, this is what I know, this is what I want to do,” he said.

His widow said his reasons for going were to save lives, contribute to the war’s ending sooner and to experience the adventure of it all. Already a published author, he wanted to someday write a book about his experiences in Vietnam. She didn’t rest easy with his decision, but his family members reluctantly honored his wishes, and on 17 March he saw his wife and family for the last time.

Today, the ground in the remote Ta-Oy district of the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic is abundant with greenery. Isolated, hand-woven huts, villages and dirt roads dot the lush peaks and valleys. On the morning of 9 June 1968, the backdrop was much different. Jack and his three-man crew—Air Force Captain Richard C. Yeend, Jr., Staff Sergeant Elmer Holden and Sgt. James D. Locker—set out in their HH-3E helicopter, “Jolly Green” 23, to rescue First Lieutenant Walter R. Schmidt. The Marine Corps pilot’s A-4E Skyhawk had been gunned down by enemy fire on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Visibility was good that day, but antiaircraft fire filled the



sky. Other assisting rescue aircraft in contact with Schmidt reported that he survived the crash but had a broken leg and possible broken arm. He would likely require a parajumper to assist him.

Another HH-3E, JG 22, made the first two attempts at reaching Schmidt, but was forced away by ground fire. Eventually, the crew had to abort because the helicopter was low on fuel. JG 23 then approached, entered a hover and began to lower a parajumper to assist Schmidt. As the aircraft made a clockwise turn over the site, the pilot reported receiving heavy ground fire.

Retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Dubois, an eyewitness who flew 1,500 feet overhead on that day, said, “I saw fire coming out of the left side near the engine and told JG 23 that he had a fire. He started pulling out, and I advised him that there was a clearing 1,000 meters north if he had to set down. He said he was going for the clearing. The fire appeared to extinguish and I advised JG 23 of that. He said he was going to set it down as he reached the clearing. When he started down, the blades stopped and the helicopter just dropped. When it burst into flames, it was a ball of fire. It looked like someone had dropped a can of napalm there.”

The investigator in charge of the recovery site said the fire “was hot enough to melt the aluminum in the cockpit and deform the fiberglass. The only thing it didn’t burn was iron and steel.” Because of these circumstances and witness accounts stating there was no chance anyone could have survived the crash, all four crew members were listed as “killed in action, body not recovered.”

Rittichier became the first Coast Guardsman killed in action in Southeast Asia and the only Coast Guard serviceman who was unaccounted for in Vietnam. All told, seven other Coast Guard personnel lost their lives in the war. At the time, no ground search for remains was possible because of intense enemy presence in the area.

Beginning in November 2002, investigative teams from Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) at

Camp H. M. Smith, Hawaii, set out in 12-foot-high elephant grass to look for remains at the spot believed to be the crash site, and joint recovery operations began in January 2003. JTF-FA's joint missions with the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI) are part of an ongoing effort to account for American service members still missing or unaccounted for as a result of the Vietnam War. Since its inception in 1992, JTF-FA has conducted more than 3,500 case investigations and 600 recovery operations which have led to the repatriation of remains that may relate to as many as 500 unaccounted-for Americans.

"Our biggest goal is to bring these guys home," said a member of the 12-person site excavation team. "They didn't quit on us, so we shouldn't quit on them."

Remains believed to be associated with the crew of JG 23 and another incident in the vicinity were returned to American soil on 14 February 2003 for a repatriation ceremony at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. Several months later, the remains were positively identified by

CILHI as those of Rittichier, Yeend, Holden and Locker. (Schmidt was never recovered, and his remains are unaccounted for.)

The night after the remains of Lt. Jack Rittichier were buried at Arlington National Cemetery, his widow



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Facing page, Lt. Rittichier stands in front of a Coast Guard helicopter. Clockwise from top, this HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" is similar to the helicopter that Rittichier flew with the Air Force. A Vietnam veteran places beads on Rittichier's casket before interment. The pilot's remains were laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery near the grave of pioneer Coast Guard aviator Lt. Elmer Stone. Coast Guard Honor Guard members transport Rittichier's casket from a Coast Guard C-130 Hercules at Andrews AFB, Md.

rested easy for the first time in the 35 years since Rittichier's family learned he had been killed in action.

The funeral took place on 6 October 2003 in the memorial chapel at Fort Myer, Va. Men and women in Coast Guard uniforms, many of them aviators, filled the pews, along with veterans clad in leather jackets with patches and rank insignias from former times. A unit of United States Naval Sea Cadets named for Rittichier sat quietly, taking it all in. Many attendees wore prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA)

bracelets inscribed with Rittichier's name. Customarily, a POW/MIA bracelet is worn until the person named on the bracelet is accounted for. That day, the bracelets could finally be returned to the family or placed on the casket during the interment. David Yelton, a retired Coast

Guard chief petty officer, had worn his bracelet for 17 years and tracked the progress of the Rittichier case. "It is closure for me, closure for the family and closure for a lot of Coasties," he said. "Although I never knew him personally, I feel like I know him."

Hymns were sung and scriptures were read. Then, the casket was marched out of the chapel behind a parade of white horses and a carriage that would take Rittichier to his final resting place on Coast Guard Hill, in close proximity to the grave of pioneer Coast Guard aviator Lt. Elmer Stone. After the interment, four Coast Guard helicopters circled overhead, while seven Honor Guard members fired three shots in unison, creating a thunderous gun salute.

"Taps" resonated in the distance as three American flags were carefully folded and handed to Jack Rittichier's two brothers and his widow. Coast Guard flags across the nation flew at half-mast. After 35 years, all hands were finally accounted for. ✈

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