

A rifle salute fired Thursday linked the country's present to its past. Seven riflemen stood in the grass between graves at Arlington National Cemetery. They leaned slightly, took aim at gray skies, then seemed to stop the world from spinning when they fired.

Boom.

Fifty yards ahead, mourners froze in silence before a simple wooden casket.

It was that of Maj. Perry H. Jefferson, the final Colorado Air National Guardsman listed as missing in action from the Vietnam War. At last, he had reached his final resting place, 39 years since his final reconnaissance flight over Ninh Thuan province.

Boom.

Fifty yards behind, five total strangers stopped suddenly in their tracks, bowing their heads with emotion that was all too familiar.

It was a family with Colorado ties that had come to visit the gravesite of another fallen serviceman, Army Staff Sgt. Jeremy Mulhair, a husband and father of three who died during his second deployment to Iraq on Nov. 30, 2006.

Boom.

After the final simultaneous blasts, bugles played *Taps*, and the flag that had draped the coffin was ceremoniously folded.

And soon, the long, lost member of the 140th Air Wing would take his place in America's most hallowed soil, alongside Army soldiers who died near the end of World War II and a Navy Seal killed in combat last year in Baghdad.

'My last trip'

Thursday began with a private ceremony honoring Jefferson in a chapel at Fort Myer, Va., where a letter of appreciation from President Bush was to be read.

Then a long procession made its way through a maze of streets inside the cemetery, led by a 15-piece brass band. But the music stopped when the parade got near Bradley and MacArthur drives.

On foot now, two bus loads of men in dark suits and women in their Sunday best walked down the street behind the horse-drawn carriage carrying Jefferson's remains.

Clomp, clomp, clomp was the only sound until the four horses stopped and four Air Force pallbearers took their places to carry Jefferson the final few yards "home."

He was 37 years old when he went missing April 3, 1969 - exactly 39 years earlier.

Married and living in Northglenn, he had joined the Colorado Air National Guard as a technician and intelligence officer, and was deployed to Phan Rang Air Base in Vietnam in May 1968. As the one-year mark approached, he was just about set to come home.

But there was one more mission to finish. On a warm, spring day, before boarding an O-1G Bird Dog aircraft on a final aerial observer flight, he told comrade Ted Van Deest, now 75, "This is going to be my last trip."

The flight never made it back. Witnesses reported seeing an aircraft crash in a mountainous area. Nothing was found on a search, which was complicated by hostile action in the area.

Jefferson's widow, Sylvia Ross Berry, never gave up hope, staying active in POW/MIA causes prior to her death in December 1992. A black-and-white POW/MIA flag flew near the graveside Thursday.

Poignant moment

Following Wednesday's somber send-off from Colorado by Gov. Bill Ritter and others at Buckley Air Force Base, Thursday's final salute included a poignant moment when Lt. Gen. John Bradley, chief of the entire Air Force Reserve, bent a knee to present the folded coffin flag to Jefferson's surviving brother, Michael Jefferson.

Like most of the day's final salute, the conversation was private, out of earshot of reporters and photographers, who stood quietly at a distance.

Still, through a cold breeze that stirred through the trees, distant onlookers could hear a few words from Col. Victor Hoops, the 140th Air Wing chaplain who came out of retirement for the ceremony.

He paraphrased a saying that has been used to describe fallen service members from many of the country's wars - and one that now applies to the Colorado airman, too.

In life Jefferson honored the flag, Hoops said. And now the country honors him.