

Never too late: Colorado Guard brings home its last MIA

Story by Tech Sgt. Cheresa Theiral



Patriot Guard members render a solemn salute, as the remains of Maj. Perry Jefferson are lowered into the grave. The Patriot Guard is comprised of veterans, many from Vietnam, who continue to honor their country and comrades at funeral services and military events around Colorado. They arrive on their motorcycles, outfitted with American flags, and stand in honor of the sacrifices that are paid for freedom on a daily basis.



Mike Jefferson, brother of Maj. Perry Jefferson, is reflected in the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial as he finds his brother's name, after a wreath laying ceremony, April 2.



U.S. Army Soldiers with Caisson Platoon, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) lead the caisson of Air Force Maj. Perry Henry Jefferson to his final resting spot in Arlington National Cemetery, Va., April 3, 2008.



Less than a week before Colorado Air National Guard Capt. Perry H. Jefferson was scheduled to return home from Vietnam, he was reported missing in action.

On April 3, 1969, Jefferson, an intelligence officer with the 120th Tactical Fighter Squadron, disappeared while working as an aerial observer on board an O-1G Bird Dog aircraft over a mountainous region in Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam.

According to the Department of Defense, search and rescue efforts to recover Jefferson and the pilot of the aircraft, Army 1st Lt. Arthur G. Ecklund, stretched over three days, but hostile threats and lack of evidence pointing to the location of the downed aircraft precluded further efforts.

Another loss

Jefferson was one of two COANG members lost in the Vietnam War. The first, Maj. Clyde Seiler, was killed in action when his aircraft was shot down March 27, 1969, just seven days before Jefferson disappeared. Seiler's remains were recovered a year and a half later, near the site where his F-100 Super Sabre jet crashed.

Two members of the COANG family lost in two weeks; just days before they were scheduled to return home. Seiler was accounted for, but for 39 long years, the whereabouts of Jefferson remained a mystery.

"We lost Perry Jefferson, not knowing at that time where he was or if he was going to be recovered," said retired Col. Donald O. Neary, a former fighter pilot with the 120th TFS. "Clyde [Seiler], we knew because I saw what happened there, but Perry's was different because it was an unknown thing," said Neary, who was Seiler's wingman on the fatal flight.

According to another retired 120th fighter pilot, Lt. Col. Robert G. Beabout, an emergency beacon was detected after the O-1 went missing.

"Myself, I detected it, and Colonel Wilhite detected one ... and ... some other people, and we did a vast search, but to no avail."

Beabout was also the unit historian for the 120th TFS. His journal entry for April 5, 1969, reads:

"I made a sweep of the area as I was returning from my mission. It was very rugged, overgrown terrain. There are lots of boulders sticking up. It will be very difficult to detect an olive drab, light airplane in the area. If it did make any type of a hole, that will soon be grown over."

Retired Lt. Col. Michael P. Rowan was an aerospace medical technician with the 120th TFS. When Jefferson and Ecklund's aircraft disappeared, then, Sgt. Rowan was dispatched with Detachment 1 of the 38th Air Rescue Squadron to help search for them.

Rowan flew out every day on HH-43B Husky helicopters, looking for the downed aircraft and its personnel.

"We never found any remains," he said. "No crash site. Nothing."

Rowan also expressed frustration at leaving Vietnam without Perry, not knowing what really happened to him.

A bitter loss

For Neary, Beabout, Rowan and many other COANG members who served during the Vietnam era, Jefferson's status as missing in action festered like jungle rot.

"I don't say I gave up hope; there are a lot of remote possibilities," said Neary. "But at the same time"

"Being an intelligence officer, if the Viet Cong had gotten him, he would have been tortured inhumanely," said Rowan.

Former Airman 1st Class Thomas W. Moermond, of the 140th Communications Flight, dedicated three decades to finding the truth about Jefferson's fate. He kept a personal dossier on Jefferson, and followed up on numerous leads.

"I've been working on this for 30 years, trying to find him ... trying to find out anything," said Moermond. "It kind of seemed like a black hole."

A family man first

When Perry Jefferson married Sylvia Berry, she already had two children, Cindy and Rick. Overnight, Jefferson became the head of their household, taking on a ready-made family.

Rick Berry remembered his stepfather as an outgoing man with an easy manner; a loving man who was generous with his time.

"He was wise enough to know not to force a relationship, but man enough to take it on," said Berry.

Jefferson joins the Colorado Air National Guard

Berry also described Jefferson as a man, "with an adventurous spirit, a passion for the military, and a love for flying and photography." Those qualities, he said, were what drew Jefferson to the COANG.

"Carrying the pride of his contribution, the friendships he found, and the encouragement and camaraderie he found there, he had found a niche," said Berry.

Retired Col. Claud E. Dutro was a young Airman, fresh from basic training, when he first met Jefferson.

"The thing I remember that was most striking was that he was tall and he always had a smile," said Dutro. "He didn't say a lot ... he quietly went about doing his job. And in intelligence, you always wondered what it was he knew that you didn't. Dedication, quiet service would be the way that I would describe what I knew about Perry Jefferson."

Moermond didn't go to Vietnam with Jefferson, but still remembers him fondly.

When it came time to socializing at the CAMANA Club (combined officer and enlisted club on Buckley), Jefferson normally gravitated toward enlisted members. He always had good things to say about them, and they of him, Moermond said.

"Anytime you ran into one of those guys (enlisted), one of the things that always came up was how well he was liked," said Moermond.

And, to Rowan, Jefferson was "just the kind of guy you'd want to be associated with."

The '68 Call-up

In January 1968, North Korea seized the USS Pueblo in international waters. The U.S. responded by calling up its reserve forces to provide a show of force. As a result, 2,000 members of the 140th Tactical Fighter Wing and its subordinate squadrons were deployed to South Korea, Greenland, Japan, Taiwan and a number of other locations throughout the world.

One of those squadrons, the 120th TFS, was called to South Vietnam, and was the first Air National Guard unit in-country.

There was a competition between unit members to go to Vietnam, Dutro said, "Because they had deployed before, and that they knew what a deployment did to bring a group together."

And, as an intelligence officer, Jefferson was among those who went.

"He was very easy to serve with, he was a laid back fellow," said Beabout. "I always remember him with a cup in his hand, of coffee, or a soft drink, or a beer. We had some Coors beer over there in Phan Rang."

Phan Rang

As an intelligence officer, it was Jefferson's job to give the pilots of the 120th TFS the most up-to-date, critical information on enemy activities before every flight. A near constant point during every briefing involved the fuel supply to the base, carried by an above-ground pipeline.

"Every night the VC—the Viet Cong—would blow up the pipeline, and so his first comments were, 'they blew up the pipeline again last night.' And that was going on ... 230 times that I flew there," said Neary.

"One of the things that Perry had to put up with was sitting around with the fighter pilots and listening to all these flying stories. He always wanted to be flying," said Beabout.

Then his opportunity came.

He became an observer in the O-1 observation plane because "at the time we were having a lot of attacks on the base, many, many attacks in the previous couple of months," said Beabout. "And, so him, being in intelligence, he wanted to go out and get in the observing plane and check around and see if they could eliminate some of the causes of some of the attacks," said Beabout.

"He didn't have to fly in the O-1," said Neary.

But that is exactly what Jefferson was doing that fateful day along with Ecklund, who was at the rudder.

"We were advised he volunteered for the reconnaissance mission on that April 3, 1969, mission, from which he never returned. This act, his whole character ... this is the essence of who we're here to celebrate today," said Berry at his stepfather's funeral, exactly 39 years later.

The end, at last

On April 2, 2008, representatives of the Colorado Air National Guard arrived at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., where they laid wreaths and rubbed Jefferson, Ecklund and

Seiler's names in quiet reflection. On April 3, Perry H. Jefferson's remains were laid to rest with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

Although the mystery of his death remains unsolved, one thing is certain: The burial of Jefferson's remains helped bring a final measure of closure to the COANG family, a family that counts Jefferson's brother and sister-in-law, Mike and Joy Jefferson, and his stepchildren Cindy Kuehl and Rick Berry, among its ranks.

Jefferson's wife Sylvia, a staunch advocate for POW/MIA accounting, died in 1992.

"It's been a unique experience," said Mike Jefferson, of the culmination of events. "I'm relieved, but it's also sad."

Kuehl wrote the poem "Arlington Arlington," which appeared in the funeral program for her stepfather. The sixth verse reads:

"Arlington Arlington
The flame of freedom burns bright
Lord, help us walk in the light
Soldier heroes within your hallowed hill
Your fight is finished
Love is not diminished"

The piece, Cindy said, was "born out of a staggering personal loss, but also the heights of hope." It was her way of saying goodbye to the man she called "Dad."

More than 80 representatives of the COANG attended the events April 2 and 3, and even after 39 years, they are still his brothers and sisters-in-arms. They are still his family.

"I came into the Guard with no experience in the military," said Dutro. "These people have a particular kind of camaraderie and I don't know how else to describe it except family."

"We talk about the Guard being family, and it truly is a family, and when we see a lot of these gentlemen who served with Maj. Jefferson who are here to honor him, we feel like (they're) kind of our ancestors," said Brig. Gen. Trulan A. Eyre, commander of the 140th Wing, Colorado Air National Guard.

"The National Guard is a community, it's a brotherhood," said retired Col. Victor J. Hoops, former chaplain to the 120th TFS and officiating chaplain for Jefferson's funeral services. "It's something that consecrates itself upon chemistry that can only be exceeded by a family. Because it is a body of one, when one hurts, we all hurt," he said.

"Dad, it's been a long time," said Berry, in a tribute to his stepfather. "We've never forgotten your service, sacrifice, or love. Before you were America's hero, you were ours."

Closing a chapter

"This is a great day for the Jefferson family ... to know they have final closure on a chapter that was open for 39 years," said Brig. Gen. William E. Hudson, Assistant Adjutant General for Air, Colorado Air National Guard. "It's also a great day for our Colorado guardsmen who served in Vietnam,

so that you can have closure. Finally, we're going to have closure in the state of Colorado," said Hudson.

Jefferson was the last reported Colorado National Guard member missing in action in Vietnam.

"Everybody's come home; everybody's been accounted for," said Eyre.

"Tonight is really a very emotional time only because it's ... finishing a job that was left undone," said Dutro. "And I think that's very important for the Colorado Air National Guard to feel that way. I'm just glad that the Guard made the efforts to put this together and give us all our chance to say goodbye, to make this closure."

"At least it's over with now," said Moermond. "We found him."

"Everybody can just be happy with the fact that he's here in American soil, and in Arlington, of all places," said Rowan.

"It truly is an honor to be here and be a participant in this ... whether we served with him or not," said Eyre. "He's part of our family."

In addition to commanding the 140th Wing, Eyre, an F-16 pilot, led the missing man formation that flew over Jefferson's gravesite ceremony April 3. Current 120th Fighter Squadron pilots, Capt. Robert "Voo Doo" Bielanski, Capt. Teneyck "Thor" LaTourrette and Capt. James "Swat" Collins completed the formation, while Capt. Jeremiah "Weed" Tucker steered the spare F-16.

There are certain moments of our lives, especially as fighter pilots, that define our careers, Eyre said. "For me ... being able to fly over the Potomac and over the Pentagon and over Arlington ... in honor of a fellow Colorado Guardsman ... I'll never forget it."

Changes

Thirty-nine years is a long time; long enough that Buckley has transformed from an Air National Guard base with limited amenities to a bona fide Air Force base, complete with a commissary, an exchange, a gym and base housing. The 120th Tactical Fighter Squadron is no longer called "tactical," and the F-100 Super Sabre jets have evolved twice. Now, F-16 Fighting Falcons rule the skies over Colorado.

Over the years since Perry Jefferson was lost in Vietnam, the faces of the men and women of the Colorado Air National Guard have changed, but their mission has not. Those who fought in Vietnam share the same kindred spirit of those fighting nameless enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq today. The COANG is still dedicated to protecting the people of Colorado and their American heritage, and Jefferson is part of that legacy.

Thirty-nine winters have passed since Capt. Perry H. Jefferson disappeared. In his absence, he was promoted to the rank of Major. His name is no longer listed with the scores of others still missing in Vietnam; and in the weeks leading to Memorial Day, the cross next to his name on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial will be etched into a diamond, signifying his belated repatriation.

Perry Jefferson is finally home.