

Ted Van Deest stopped at the steps leading up to the hulking, gray aircraft and briefly leaned on his cane.

The legs didn't work as well as they used to, but the stairs wouldn't be a challenge this time. The 75-year-old looked up, lifted his cane and took them without ever touching it to a stair.

Van Deest, and about 80 others, had something important to do Wednesday, and old age wasn't going to stop him.

He'd waited 39 years to see Maj. Perry Jefferson buried on American soil.

The last time

Van Deest remembered the last time he saw Jefferson alive.

It was a warm day in April 1969, and he heard the major was planning to fly on an intelligence-gathering mission. There was one problem. Van Deest believed he'd had a slight premonition about the flight and urged his friend not to go.

Besides, they were only a week away from rotating out of Vietnam.

"The closer you got to getting out, the more paranoid you'd get about missions," Van Deest said. "I asked him if he was sure about this last flight. He told me, 'This is going to be my last trip.' "

Van Deest said Jefferson seemed confident he would come back, so he didn't try to argue with the smiling officer.

"So instead, I just saluted him," he said.

Van Deest was standing inside the cavernous hangar at Buckley Air Force Base remembering that moment.

Around him, others who knew Jefferson and served with him in the Colorado Air National Guard's 140th Wing shared memories and spoke about the familial aspects of the unit.

They had waited a long time for this. It had been years of not knowing what happened to Jefferson, including numerous reunions at which they asked one another if anyone had heard anything new about his whereabouts.

Then, in 2000, what was believed to be the remains of the pilot of the single-engine Cessna 0-1 were turned over by the Vietnamese. In 2001, more remains were brought to the United States.

Some of those remains were identified as the pilot, Arthur Ecklund. Then last year, more remains were identified as Jefferson's.

That set in motion today's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery and the plans to carry Jefferson's friends and unit members to Washington, D.C., for the memorial.

Planes from the National Guards of Wyoming and Kansas were used to ferry them to Washington. Some of the servicemen hadn't been on a military aircraft for years. But Don Neary believed Jefferson would've liked what was happening.

"He's watching all of this, and I know he's thinking it's all so cool," Neary said. "For us, it's a chance to say goodbye."

Neary said he'll be emotional at the service. "I'm emotional now," he said with a small chuckle. "I'm sure it will be powerful."

Col. Victor Hoops was the chaplain for the 140th air wing and said he found out only last week that he would preside over the ceremony at Arlington.

When the arrangements were made for the funeral, Hoops wasn't listed as the chaplain who would perform the service. But Jefferson's family, who knew he was burning inside to do it, requested Hoops.

'I wanted to do it'

Then the pressure was on.

"I wanted to do it - there was never a doubt in my mind," Hoops said. "But now I want to do a good job so that the family and the unit are pleased with the service."

He stood inside the hangar and led everyone in prayer before they boarded the second flight departing for Washington - the first flight had left earlier in the morning with other Vietnam veterans and a few friends of Jefferson.

Prior to that first flight out of Buckley, Gov. Bill Ritter addressed the veterans.

"My purpose here today is to thank you all for your service," Ritter said. "And to have us all remember the nobility that is wrapped into the service that Maj. Jefferson had as a Colorado National Guardsman and, as well, the sacrifice that he and his family made for the country."

Ritter finished his comments and shook hands with the veterans, asking who knew Jefferson or what they did in Vietnam.

Then Ritter came to Steve Jaouen - a friend of Jefferson's. They shared a private moment and Jaouen smiled. Ritter patted him on the shoulder and they walked to the plane, their breath visible in the cold air.

Jaouen said before he got on the flight that the feelings were still raw and that he was expecting it to be an emotional day - just as Van Deest had predicted.

But Van Deest had something planned for the funeral.

He said he would finally salute Jefferson on American soil - a friend who was no longer the last Colorado National Guardsman listed as missing in action but instead was simply missed.

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COMMENTS

Posted by GWM on April 2, 2008 at 2:57 p.m. (Suggest removal)

Well done Major Jefferson. RIP! Most of us thank you for your service.

Posted by 2ndamendmentrights on April 2, 2008 at 3:08 p.m. (Suggest removal)

This is an awesome story. Dont anyone forget the thousands of men still listed as MIA:Presumed Dead or KIA in Vietnam.