

CAP 72 Identification News Release

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News Release:

On February 5, 1969, an American EC-47Q aircraft on a classified combat mission (call sign CAP 72) departed Pleiku Air Base, Republic of Vietnam (RVN), with five 6994th Security Squadron personnel and five 362nd Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron crew members on board. Moving to within twenty miles of Ubon Airfield, Thailand, the aircraft circled back into Laos on a southeastern heading, passing the city of Saravane, Laos. Communication with the aircraft reported all conditions normal. After that exchange, all attempts to make contact with the aircraft failed. Search efforts found no trace of the aircraft or its crew — CAP 72 had vanished.

The members of this ill-fated mission along with their crew positions were: MSgt Wilton Hatton (Flight Engineer), Sgt James Dorsey (Operator), Capt Walter Burke (Copilot), Maj Homer Lynn (Pilot), Lt Col Harry Niggle (Second Navigator), Sgt Rodney Gott (Operator), A1C Clarence McNeill (Operator), SSgt Louis J. Clever (Operator), Maj Robert Olson (Navigator), and SSgt Hugh Sherburn (Operator).

Four months after the loss, a CAS Team (Lao or Thai mercenaries sponsored by American CIA) located the crash site near a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that they had been tasked with observing. The ground at the crash site is relatively level, and the site is located in dense jungle about 100 meters from a road. Apparently, the aircraft had crashed at a near vertical angle and impacted the embankment of a small creek. The right wing was located approximately 500 meters to the NW of the crash site. This CAS team located and recovered evidence linking the site to the CAP 72 loss. They also collected approximately 30 lbs of comingled skeletal remains.

The recovered remains were taken to Ubon Airfield, Thailand, where an initial assessment accounted for five crew members based on the presence of five clavicle bones. The remains were then transported to the Mortuary at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, RVN, where Mr. Wesley Neep took charge of the accounting. After extensive analysis, Mr. Neep could confirm the presence of only seven members of the crew.

The Commander of the 633rd Combat Support Group from Pleiku Air Base went to the Mortuary, viewed the remains, and spoke with Mr. Neep. After this meeting, the commander petitioned for a return to the crash site to recover additional remains that were believed to have been driven under the ground. The Air Force denied this petition, citing the dangerous location of the site. No contingent plan to return to the site after hostilities had ended was made.

Mr. Neep protested that “out of country” recoveries lacked the quality needed for a reasonable accounting. Without an American presence or the presence of a person qualified in recoveries, this recovery did not meet the minimum requirement of “presumptive finding of death,” let alone accounting for the entire crew when the science did not support the finding. After failing to respond to two direct orders mandating shipment of the crew remains to the Mortuary at Dover Air Force Base for

a final accounting, Mr. Neep finally complied. After arriving at the Dover AFB Mortuary, the remains were again analyzed and five crew members were accounted for.

Contrary to the best scientific opinion made available from Mortuary Saigon and Mortuary Dover, and basing their opinion solely on the feedback from non-American mercenaries, Colonel A. M. Dodd (Director of Personnel Services) and Major General Rene DuPont (Assistant DCS/Personnel for Military Personnel) ordered the interment of the Cap 72 remains, citing that evidence of death had been received.

On November 14, 1969, two caskets containing the recovered remains were presented to Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis, MO, for internment. Members of the ten families involved with the CAP 72 loss were transported from a hotel near the recently completed Gateway Arch to the cemetery. A musty canvas pavilion had been erected to protect the families from the bitter cold. Ten seats had been designated for the Primary Next of Kin (aka PNOK) and on each seat lay a manila envelope. The families hoped this envelope would contain evidence that insured their loved ones were indeed represented in the caskets. When opened, the only content of the envelope was a plastic cover that was to be used to protect the American flag each family was about to receive.

After the funeral service, the families were sent home to continue their lives. Many felt cheated of the evidence needed to support emotional closure in the loss of their loved one. Because of this lack of evidence, many family members petitioned the Air Force for more details regarding the loss. During one particular effort, Mrs. Cindy Burke (wife of Captain Walter Burke) spoke with an Air Force colonel. When Mrs. Burke pressed for information, the colonel responded, "You have to realize, Mrs. Burke, animals probably dragged your husband off because it is a jungle area." Broken by the callousness of the response, Mrs. Burke vowed she would not go through this kind of abuse again and abandoned her search for emotional closure regarding the loss of her husband — she never remarried. Several other family members shared this same treatment and disappointment and resolved to move ahead without emotional closure.

The son of TSgt Louis Clever, Paul Clever, was six years old when his father's aircraft was lost. Even at this young age, the uncertainty of his father's accounting was a constant weight on youthful shoulders. As decades passed and documents were declassified, he began a search of various archives throughout the country in an attempt to make sense of why his father never came home.

As details of the conflict between "in-country" assets and bureaucratic assets back in the United States came to light, it became apparent that Americans had been unjustifiably left behind. When Mr. Clever approached the Air Force about taking another look at the accounting, the request was promptly denied. When a request was made to the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), JPAC informed him that there was no active case regarding the loss, so they could not assist.

The JPAC response was not accurate. During 1995 when a field team from JPAC was searching for a C-130 aircraft lost during the war, possibly in the vicinity of the CAP 72 crash site, the team made a brief search of the site. They learned that in the mid-1980s metal scavengers had removed the aircraft fuselage from the site, and it was not readily apparent that a large aircraft had ever been at the site.

During this search, the identification tag of Captain Walter Burke was recovered along with numerous human remains from two test pits that the team had dug. Mrs. Burke was the only family member notified of this update to the crash site. Documents indicate that JPAC had made plans to excavate the site based on the known presence of American remains. Mrs. Burke was informed in writing that an excavation of the site was to take place, but seventeen years would pass before the Air Force provided Captain Burke's identification tag to her in November 2012. No excavation of the site had taken place, and at best, JPAC had simply forgotten about Mrs. Burke and the promise they had made to her.

Disheartened by the lack of governmental support, Mr. Clever had resolved himself to a simple truth — if he did not take ownership of this accounting, nothing would ever be resolved and family members would continue to slip into darkness without knowing what had happened to their loved one. At the time, he was living in Bangkok, Thailand, and working as his company's service manager in Southeast Asia. In September 2011, he made the decision to resign his position. Returning to the United States, he set out to "bring his father home".

As fate would have it, Paul Clever had married Nita Nusairam in 2004. Nita Nusairam Clever is a Thai-born national who speaks the Laotian language. Exhibiting great courage and a driven need to support her husband, Mrs. Clever agreed to participate in a pending jungle search for the CAP 72 crash site. After studying skill-sets, which ranged from archeology to unexploded ordinance, Paul and Nita Clever set out for the jungle of Laos during December 2012.

The search mission would test the couple's resolve to the very edge, but in the end, they located the crash site and recovered artifacts that directly linked the site to the CAP 72 loss. In addition, the Clevers recovered numerous bone fragments that they hand-carried back to the United States. Four days after the Clevers returned to the United States from Southeast Asia, the Air Force announced that a new accounting of the crew was going to be undertaken. This renewed accounting effort can be directly attributed to a correspondence sent from the Director of Air Force Services, Brigadier General Eden Murrie, to Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC),.

On January 29, 2013, after forty-three years of internment the two caskets containing remains of CAP 72 crewmen were disinterred from their burial site. Of the roughly 525 group burial sites located at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, this is only the third to be disinterred. On the following day, the remains were transported with a military escort to Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, NE, for forensic analysis and DNA testing. A "Fast Track" disinterment was made possible by the identification of one of the crew in 1969 which had gone unnoticed. This identification afforded the crew member's family the opportunity for an individual internment which had not been offered. The CAP 72 remains found by JPAC in 1995 were also moved to Offutt AFB from storage at the JPAC Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii.

During Memorial Day Weekend 2013, sitting Mayor Sam Rikard, newly elected Mayor Scott Phillips, and the City of Olive Branch, Mississippi, hosted a Repatriation Ceremony for the remains recovered by Paul and Nita Clever. A procession, which included a horse-drawn caisson and over 150 motorcycles from various Patriot Guard Rider Groups from as far away as Texas, worked its way to the Olive Branch

High School Football Stadium. Many of the Fallen Hero's families along with veterans and concerned citizens traveled from their homes across the country to Olive Branch to witness or participate in this somber event. The solid mahogany casket that contained the remains stood uncovered and encircled by grateful citizens. Lowering the American flag onto the casket — signifying return of the Cap 72 crew remains to America — gave all who attended a lasting memory. After the Repatriation Ceremony, Mr. Danny Russell personally delivered the remains to the Central Identification Lab (CIL) at Offutt AFB, Lincoln, Nebraska. Dr. Derek Benedict took possession of the remains, and in turn they were included with the remains that had been previously recovered for the forensic testing that was to come.

September 4, 2014 marked the day that Air Force Mortuary Affairs started to contact the families of the ten CAP 72 crew members. The Air Force announced that seven of the crew had been positively identified, the same number that Mr. Wesley Need had come to in 1969. Of the remaining three members of the crew, two (Major Lynn and Master Sergeant Hatton) had neither an identification nor an accounting — Captain Burke was accounted for by his ID tag. The three families now carry the additional burden of knowing that the pleas for a return to the crash site to achieve a “Maximum Recovery” had gone out, but the Air Force response was to leave their loved ones behind.

Since the Laotian metal scavengers removed the fuselage from the crash site and since the three unidentified members of the crew were stationed in the front of the aircraft and compressed within the metal, the possibility of future identifications is marginal. Clearly, these three American heroes should have made it home, but due to the weak decision making of Colonel Dodd and Major General DuPont, this may never happen.

Paul and Nita Clever hosted a briefing regarding the identification of TSgt Louis J. Clever in their home on September 19, 2014 in Olive Branch, MS. Along with the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Representative (Mr. Alan Cronin), the Director of the CIL at Offutt Air Force Base (Dr. Derek Benedict) and a Representative from the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) at Dover AFB, Dover, Delaware, (Ms. Colleen Dunn) attended the meeting.

An evidence package was presented and each section of the package was discussed to complete understanding and satisfaction. During the briefing, it was made known that the remains recovered by Paul and Nita Clever in 2012 contained viable DNA that together with the other recovered remains facilitated in the identification of Major Olson, Sgt. McNeill and ironically, TSgt Louis Clever.

Paul and Nita Clever had brought “Dad” home in the most literal sense. It took them exactly three years from start to emotional closure. The remains of the seven crew members who have been identified will be interred over the coming months with full military honors.

*The funeral for Paul Clever's father, TSgt Louis Clever, will be taking place at Jefferson Barrack National Cemetery south of St. Louis MO. It is scheduled to start at 2:30 PM on May 22, 2015.