

Looking for

Story and photos by PA2 Lauren Smith, 14th Dist.



a lost hero



CRASH SITE

The search and recovery team, along with local Vietnamese people search the grounds of the crash site where the HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter was shot down by ground fire in Laos June 9, 1968.

Coast Guard search and rescue pilot Lt. Jack Rittichier drank chocolate milk shakes every day of his life and called being a part of the Coast Guard “food for the soul.” As a student at Kent State University, he was captain of the football and track teams, and also was a great artist, singer and dancer. His widow, the now remarried 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 that were around him by being an example himself,” said Carl Rittichier, his younger brother by one year. “He was always my idol.”

Like many family members at the time, Carl did not understand why his older brother was volunteering 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 and conduct search and rescue missions.

“Why would you volunteer, you’re breaking mom’s heart,” pleaded Carl, before his brother shipped out.

Jack had heard stories from other rescuers who were in Vietnam at the time and felt a sense of duty. “What am I still doing here waiting for the next boat to wash up on the rocks?” Jack rhetorically asked his brother. “This is what I’ve trained for for years, this is what I know, this is what I want to do,” he said.

“Maybe in time, you’ll understand,” he explained to his brother.

Wypick said his reasons for going were to save lives, contribute to the war 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. His wife didn’t rest easy with his decision.

“I hated that he was going,” she said. Their lives were so complete together, and she feared the imminent danger he would face.

“Our marriage was an 11-year honeymoon. Neither of us wanted children, which was good. We were together all the time and had an absolutely wonderful life,” she said.

His family members reluctantly honored his wishes, and on March 17, 1968, 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. The once anarchic Ho Chi Minh Trail is now peaceful and isolated. Thousands of craters left by bombs are now used by the villagers as ponds. They also serve as reminders of the vicious combat that once took place there, killing almost 60,000 Americans.

On the morning of June 9, 1968 the backdrop was much different than it is today. Rittichier and his three-man crew, Air Force Capt. Richard Yeend, Staff Sgt. Elmer Holden, and Sgt. James Locker, set out on their HH-3E “Jolly Green Giant” helicopter, JG 23, to rescue 1st Lt. Walter Schmidt, a Marine Corps pilot whose A4-E Skyhawk jet had been gunned down by enemy fire on the ferociously fought-over Ho Chi Minh Trail, nine miles west of the Ashau Valley in Vietnam. According to declassified reports, visibility was good that day, but automatic and anti-aircraft weapons fire filled the sky. Several foxholes



IN COUNTRY

The crash site in Laos, Vietnam.

and bunkers were observed in the immediate vicinity. Other assisting rescue aircraft which had contact with Schmidt reported that he survived the crash, but had a broken leg, possible broken arm, and would likely require a parajumper to assist him.

Another HH-3E helicopter, JG 22, made the first two attempts at reaching Schmidt, but was forced away by severe ground fire. Eventually, the crew was forced to abort because the helicopter was about to run out of 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 Lt. Col. Robert Dubois, an eyewitness who flew 1500-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 on the left side. He started pulling out and I advised him that there was a clearing 1000 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

into the clearing, the blades just stopped and the jolly green just dropped. There wasn't anything but a black hole in tall grass."

"When it burst into flames, it was just a ball of fire, it looked like someone had just dropped a can of napalm there," he said.

Alexander Christensen, the investigator in charge of the recovery site, and an anthropologist with the Army's Central Identification Lab located

at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, said, "It was a very hot fire. It was hot enough to melt the aluminum in the cockpit and it deformed 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 crewmembers were immediately listed as "killed in action, body not recovered."

Schmidt was never recovered either, and his remains are unaccounted for.

Rittichier became the first Coast Guardsman killed in action in Southeast Asia and the only Coast Guard serviceman unaccounted for in Vietnam. All told, six other Coast Guardsmen lost their lives in the war.

Back at home, family members grieved. "I was absolutely devastated," said Wypick. "It was horrible, I can't describe how terrible it was ...After all these years, it is still so fresh in my mind."

At the time, no ground search for remains was possible because of intense enemy presence in the area.

Thirty-four years later, beginning in November, 2002, investigative teams from

Joint Task Force-Full Accounting at Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, set out in 12-foot-high elephant grass to look



LOST MARLINSPIKE

Personal effects such as a watchband, pocket knife, and captains bars were found Jan. 28 at the crash site of Coast Guard Lt. Jack Rittichier and his three crewmembers, who were killed June 9, 1968 when their HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter was shot down by ground fire in Laos during an attempt to rescue a downed Marine Corps pilot. Rittichier is the only Coast Guard casualty from the Vietnam War whose remains have not been recovered, but an effort is under way to identify what remains were found at the site. The search and recovery team is comprised of mostly Hawaii-based U.S. military and Defense Department civilian specialists including personnel from Joint Task Force-Full Accounting and the U.S. Army's Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii.

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LOCAL HELP

A Laotian villager assists the joint-service recovery team in sorting through a crash site to look for remains of Lt. Jack Rittichier and his crew.

for remains at the spot believed to be the crash site, and joint recovery operations began in January 2003. JTF-FA's and CILHI's joint missions are part of an ongoing effort to provide the fullest possible accounting for American service members still missing or unaccounted-for as a result of the Vietnam War. Since its inception in 1992, Joint Task Force-Full Accounting has conducted more than 3,500 case investigations and 600 recovery operations that 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 Sgt. 1st Class James Elzie, the CILHI team sergeant of the 12-person site excavation team. "They didn't quit on us, so we shouldn't quit on them," he said.

Remains believed to be associated with the crew of Jolly Green 23 and another incident in the Lao area returned to American soil Feb. 14, at a repatriation ceremony on Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. They were transported to the U.S. Army's Central Identification

Laboratory, Hawaii where the forensic identification process is underway.

"Any time we pull something out of the ground, we get excited," said Air Force Capt. Jesse Lee Shaw, Jr., the CILHI recovery team leader for the crash site.

"We find something here everyday — boots, flight suit pieces, a pocket knife, captain or lieutenant rank insignia. It means a lot to the families of all the servicemen we're looking for," he said.

Wypick was excited and shocked to learn of the attempt to bring home remains from the site. "During the memorial service, we had a big wreath, and to have no body was difficult," she said. "It has always been nagging at the back of my mind."

"My mother-in-law always believed that he was running around in the forest over there. But now there is no illusion," she said.

Though Rittichier and his crew died for their country, they did not die in vain, and will not soon be forgotten.



COURTESY OF CAROL WYPICK

ON THE FLIGHTLINE

Lt. Jack Rittichier (middle) shakes a fellow serviceman's hand. As of 1975, there were 2,585 Americans still missing and unaccounted-for in Southeast Asia: Although the U.S. Government has thus far been unable to obtain definitive evidence that this number includes live Americans still being detained against their

will, the information available precludes ruling out that possibility. Therefore, actions to investigate live-sighting reports have and will continue to receive the highest priority. In 1973, 591 American prisoners of war were released during "Operation Homecoming." Not since that time has an American — whose fate was unknown to the United States — returned alive from Southeast Asia.