

STATE
THE BATTALION

Family gets closure 30 years after father's disappearance

By Mark Collette
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

David Poole recently traveled to Hawaii to pick up his father's remains, and the pieces of a Psalm found near the airman's crash site in Vietnam.

For Poole and his family, the trip marks a bittersweet homecoming, one that seals an end to nearly three decades of hope that a husband, brother and father of five could still be alive.

But with these remains among the first identified through a new method of DNA testing and with the personal artifacts found at the bottom of a small pond near Hanoi, comes a kind of closure most survivors of missing-in-action soldiers never enjoy.

Just before a surface-to-air missile blasted a hole through Charlie Poole's B-52 bomber, the gunner recorded a final transmission over the plane's intercom: "That's close enough."

Then another missile exploded, setting the aircraft ablaze and sealing Poole's fate, which the U.S. government would officially switch between "killed" and "missing" three times before a final ruling in 1998.

One family member calls it "31 years of heartache."

The remains, and the accompanying artifacts — a cigarette lighter, some coins, a partial skeleton, and scraps of Charlie Poole's Bible — would eventually amount to more than the sum of their parts.

"I was able to look at that page," David says, "and finally realize what happened in that final moment."

With more than 1,800 Americans listed as MIA from the Vietnam War, burials like Air

Force Tech. Sgt. Charlie Poole's are rare.

The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii has a daunting task the identification of more than 88,000 Americans still missing from five wars.

Over the years, the system for identifying missing military personnel has gradually improved, and a method of DNA testing that started in the 1990s may offer the best hope yet for families seeking closure.

David Poole doesn't remember the faces of the two men who came to his door six days before Christmas in 1972. He only remembers their message that his father, a gunner on a B-52, was shot down on a bombing run in Vietnam.

His trip to Hawaii marks the fourth time he will face the death of his father.

In 1979, Poole was declared killed in action, and a memorial service followed.

Then, in 1994, evidence surfaced that Poole's remains might lay at the bottom of a pond about 10 miles southwest of Hanoi, in Thahn Oai.

It turned out the villagers there developed their tiny economy on the fish in the pond, created when Poole's B-52 sank 50 feet into a rice paddy.

Charlie's wife died in 1994, two years before the discovery of any remains.

"She always said he'd come

back," says Dorothy McLemore, Charlie's sister. "But it got to where she was down on herself then, because she wasn't sure."

Before her death, Mrs. Poole visited the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, along with David.

"She looked up at the wall and turned around and looked at David, and said, 'I'll know what happened to your daddy before you do,'" Mrs. McLemore recalls. "She passed away two weeks later."

Adding to the puzzle, another B-52 crashed the same day in 1972. Two escaped from that bomber, and four had escaped from Poole's.

The Vietnamese had a list of the crew from Poole's B-52, and assumed their six prisoners constituted that plane's entire crew.

"I would dream about seeing him," McLemore says, "bamboo leaves and limbs wrapped around trees where they'd made a place to hold him captive. That's the hardest part of it."

McLemore recalls a brother "full of mischief," but one who loved his country, who would serve in the Air Force from age 18 until his death at 40, who was active as a Boy Scout leader, who was a lay pastor, who always carried a Bible.

In 1994, with relations between the United States and Vietnam starting to solidify, the military had reports of an elderly person in Thahn Oai who recalled a plane crashing where

"He stepped off in the hand of God and that's where the mission ended."

— David Poole
son of Charlie Poole

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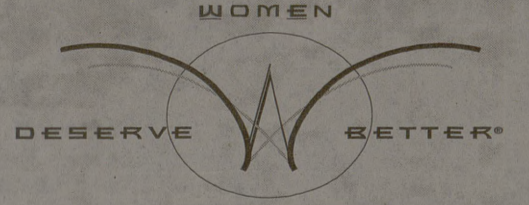
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