

Couple who found remains of missing Vietnam War crew receive Goodfellow public service award

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Michelle Gaitan/Standard-Times Nita Clever explains why she joined her husband Paul Clever's search to find his father who, along with nine other crew members aboard a CAP-72 aircraft, were shot down by enemy fire during a mission in Vietnam in 1969.



Michelle Gaitan/Standard-Times Col. Kimberly Joos, commander of the 17th Training Wing at Goodfellow Air Force Base, awards the Commander's Public Service Award to Paul Clever on Thursday.

Nita Clever fought back tears as she shared part of her story for a group of people gathered to witness her and her husband, Paul Clever, receive the Commander's Public Service Award at Goodfellow Air Force Base.

The Clevers did what had seemed impossible, bringing home the remains of Vietnam War veterans missing for 46 years. The two discovered seven of the 10 crew members aboard Civil Air Patrol-72, an EC-47 electronic combat aircraft, which was shot down by enemy forces in southern Laos.

"I like to say that I found the cure to insanity, because without that emotional closure it's always with you," Paul Clever said about his reaction once bone fragments he discovered were identified as his father, Tech. Sgt. Louis J. Clever, the senior radio operator aboard CAP-72.

Col. Kimberlee P. Joos, 17th Training Wing commander, presented the award to the Clevers in front of the Norma Brown Building at Goodfellow on Thursday morning.

The award recognizes personnel, not employed by the Department of Air Force, for services or achievements which significantly contribute to the accomplishment of the mission of an Air Force activity, command or staff agency.

On Feb. 5, 1969, the aircraft departed Pleiku Airbase, Republic of Vietnam, on a tactical reconnaissance mission, but never returned.

Besides Paul's father, aircraft crew included:

Maj. Harry T. Niggle, navigator

Capt. Walter F. Burke, co-pilot

Maj. Robert E. Olson, instructor navigator

Maj. Homer M. Lynn Jr., pilot

Tech. Sgt. Wilton N. Hatton, flight mechanic

Sgt. Rodney H. Gott, radio operator

Sgt. James V. Dorsey Jr., radio operator

Staff Sgt. Hugh L. Sherburn, airborne mission supervisor

Airman 1st Class Clarence L. McNeill, linguist.

The crew was listed as missing in action after a two-day search came up empty. They were officially declared killed in action Oct. 10, 1969.

From Aug. 1, 2011, to Aug. 1, 2014, the Clevers coordinated a search, determined to find the remains of Paul's father and bring him back to be buried alongside his mother at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in Missouri.

Nita said it was on their last camp day while searching for artifacts in the Laotian jungle that Paul spotted a piece of glass reflecting light and began searching the area around it.

Together they uncovered more than 40 bone fragments and an estimated 50 items that included .38 caliber bullets and fuselage and equipment debris from the crash site.

Paul's father was one of the seven crew members positively identified through DNA.

Lynn, Burke and Hatton remain missing. A group burial was set up at the Jefferson cemetery for intermingled remains previously found at the crash site.

Paul said they had been in touch with the other crew members' families before embarking on their mission, in case approval was needed to exhume the group grave for DNA testing if remains were found.

“Very mixed,” he said the reactions families' had once positive identifications were made. “I think people deal with that kind of loss different ... it was a broad spectrum of relief, anger, (but) for us it was like the funeral is finally ending and it's time to celebrate .”

Paul said he believes if he and his wife had not been determined to bring his father home, the remains would not have been found.

“In 1995 (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command) had actually stumbled across the crash site, that's when they found the dog tag of the co-pilot, and that's why we're hopeful we can get the co-pilot back. He wasn't identified.”

Paul said at that time JPAC had put the crash site on a list for excavation, but it was removed in 2006.

“The best thing to do was to take ownership of it and do it ourselves,” he said.

CAP-72 were members of the 6994th Security Squadron using airborne radio direction-finding techniques in support of ground combat commanders.

In 1967, Goodfellow started the ARDF operators course and an equipment maintenance course to train members for Vietnam War missions.

Joe Martin, ARDF operator and exhibit research and graphics coordinator at GAFB, said they can't be certain whether any of the crew members aboard CAP-72 trained at Goodfellow, but “many of the back end Intel crews from the EC-47 missions did train here — some as linguists, some as analysts, and others in the specialized ARDF operator and maintenance courses.”

A multimedia wall is on exhibit honoring the squadron's Airborne Radio Direction Finding in the foyer of the Norma Brown Building on base.

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