

DNA proves pilot died in Vietnam

Bones close the final chapter in the quest of a Titusville woman and her family.

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For nearly 37 years, Mary Lou Wade of Titusville and her family held out a glimmer of hope that her big brother, Capt. Herbert C. "Herbie" Crosby, would someday, somehow, come home from the Vietnam War.

The search for answers about what happened to Crosby after the helicopter he was piloting crashed in 1970 took his parents to Geneva and Paris. The family followed tips and information of all kinds, even letters from people in Vietnam claiming that they had Crosby's remains and would release them if the family sent money.

Now they know for sure.

On Tuesday, the Department of Defense announced that it had identified Crosby's remains as well as those of two of the servicemen in the helicopter. Remains from the fourth member of the crew have not yet been positively identified.

"You kind of come to that acceptance, but you never give up hope," said Wade, 51. "This means he is home. It means he hasn't been forgotten."

DNA testing has helped the military in recent years bring closure to more and more families of missing soldiers, including as far back as World War I.

"We're identifying about two men a week from all wars," Thomas Holland, a forensic anthropologist and the scientific director of the Central Identification Laboratory of the Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command, told The Arizona Republic recently. His lab ultimately issues the identifications and this year expects to identify about 20 from the Korean War, 50 from World War II and 30 to 35 from the Vietnam War, the newspaper reported.

Crosby's remains were positively identified along with those of Sgt. 1st Class Wayne C. Allen of Tewksbury, Mass., and Sgt. 1st Class Francis G. Graziosi, of Rochester, N.Y. All three were in the U.S. Army.

Although the military announced the identifications Tuesday, the families of the three soldiers already knew.

On Nov. 28, military officials came to Wade's Titusville home to meet with her and her mother, Jane Crosby Wesley, 87. The officials laid out all the evidence they had that the remains were those of her brother. Wade and Wesley knew this day was coming, but it was still bittersweet. When Wesley was given her son's dog tag, which had been recovered in 1989, "She was just looking down and touching it and rubbing her hands over it," Wade said.

Crosby was born in Fort Wayne, Ind., and moved with his family to Donalsonville, Ga., in 1958. He was an outgoing guy who played football and loved cars, his sister said. The back of his military flying helmet said "Firebird 91," after the classic car. He enlisted at 19 and got married in Hawaii during a break from his military service in November 1969.

On Jan. 10, 1970, Crosby and the other servicemen were returning to their base at Chu Lai in South Vietnam. It was Graziosi's 19th birthday. Bad weather forced the UH-1C Huey helicopter to go down over Quang Nam province, about 75 miles south of the demilitarized zone.

Wade, who was about 14 at the time, said her 22-year-old brother's disappearance devastated her parents. But they immediately resolved to find out everything they could. Her father got a passport and said he wanted to go to Vietnam to look for his son. Getting answers was difficult at first because the military was not very forthcoming with families of missing soldiers, and U.S. investigators' access to Vietnam was limited.

Wade said her parents went to France and Switzerland to try to gather information from world leaders about their son and raise awareness about missing soldiers.

As the years passed, the U.S. government committed to doing everything it could to finding missing servicemen -- and sharing what it found with families. Wade and her family's search for clues intensified.

In 1989, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam gave U.S. investigators 25 boxes of remains related to the helicopter-crash incident, said Larry Greer, a spokesman for the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office. Later that year, Crosby's identification tags and other remains were also turned over by a Vietnamese refugee. An informant in Ho Chi Minh City led investigators to a burial site that he said contained the remains of as many as nine American servicemen.

In 1994, investigators excavated the site and recovered a metal box and several bags containing Crosby's remains and the remains of the other two soldiers.

But it was not until July that technicians at a forensic-identification laboratory in Hawaii identified Crosby's remains. Greer said the process took so long because there were hundreds of bone fragments, and the last thing the department wants to do is turn over remains to the wrong family.

In all, 855 Americans once missing in action in the Vietnam War have been identified, and 1,791 others are unaccounted for.

Wade said her brother will be buried next year at Arlington National Cemetery. The family is hoping to have the ceremony in May because her brother was born May 30, which used to always be Memorial Day.

"As a boy he always used to think that they put the flags out for his birthday," Wade said.

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