Sergeant Missing Since 1964 Is Given Funeral

By ELENA SCHNEIDER MARCH 21, 2014

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Photo

Steven R. Woods mourned his father, Staff Sgt. Lawrence Woods, at a funeral Friday at Arlington National Cemetery. Credit Gabriella Demczuk/The New York Times

ARLINGTON, Va. — Nearly 50 years after Staff Sgt. Lawrence Woods of the United States Army disappeared while fighting in the Vietnam War, a funeral service was held for him at Arlington National Cemetery.

Sergeant Woods and an Air Force and Army crew were on a plane that was shot down over Vietnam on Oct. 24, 1964, during a resupply mission. Capt. Valmore W. Bourque, First Lt. Edward J. Krukowiski, First Lt. Robert G. Armstrong, Staff Sgt. Ernest J. Halvorson, Staff Sgt. Theodore B. Phillips, Airman First Class Eugene Richardson and Pfc. Charles P. Sparks were killed, and their remains recovered by United States forces in 1964, according to the Department of Defense. But Sergeant Woods remained missing.

“We know that he was part of the crew that crashed,” said Lt. Col. Melinda Morgan, spokeswoman for the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, “but his individual remains were never identified.”

On Friday, dozens of relatives of the eight soldiers attended the burial at Arlington, where the servicemen were given an “active-duty funeral,” said Melissa Bohan, a spokeswoman for Arlington National Cemetery. Three rifle volleys were fired to honor the men.

In December 2009 and January 2010, a joint team from the United States and Vietnam excavated the site where the plane most likely crashed. They uncovered human remains, but were unable to identify them.

“Therefore today, they were all buried in this one ceremony to include Wood,” Colonel Morgan said. The remains were buried in a single coffin.

Sergeant Woods’s children, Steven R. Woods and Lisa Szymanski, and other soldiers’ relatives accepted a folded American flag while the United States Air Force band played. Mr. Woods clutched a framed picture of his father during the service.

“What drives all people crazy is the uncertainty,” said Ann Mills-Griffiths, chairwoman of the National League of POW/MIA Families, an advocacy group. Her brother, Navy Cmdr. James B. Mills, also went missing during the Vietnam War, in 1966. “The devastation becomes an internal debate of when and where you give up.”

The POW/Missing Personnel Office usually identifies 60 to 80 missing veterans in a year.

But Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel last month called for a complete review of the department’s operations, “to maximize the number of identifications, improve transparency for families, reduce duplicative functions, and establish a system for centralized, complete, fully accessible personnel case files for missing personnel,” Mr. Hagel said in a statement.

Ms. Mills-Griffiths met with Mr. Hagel last December to detail her concerns about the department.

“It’s dysfunctional,” she said. “The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office has had successive directors that focus more on micromanaging operations than providing policy guidance to the governmental community.”

Mr. Hagel’s review is expected to be completed in April.

For now, there are still 1,642 Vietnam War veterans who remain unaccounted for.