Vietnam MIA gets funeral / Rites for remains of airman from Willits -- 39 years late

By Demian Bulwa

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ADAMS153_fl.jpg John Adams the brother of Lt. Lee Aaron Adams received the America Flag by U.S Airforce Col. Larry Wells at the conclusion of the memorial service in Aaron Adams honor. Bone fragments provided by a North Vietnamese farmer 12 years ago have now been found, through DNA tests, to be the remains of Air Force 1st Lt. Lee Aaron "Larry" Adams, 27, of Willits. In April 1966, Adams attacked a target in Quang Binh province in his Republic F-105 Thunderchief. During a dive, the plane was hit by enemy fire. He was memorialized at Beale Air Force Base. Sitting next to John Adams was his wife Patricia Adams and then nephew Steve Adams. City:? 6/2/05 Beale Air Force Base, CA CA Frederic Larson The San Francisco Chronicle less
ADAMS153_fl.jpg John Adams the brother of Lt. Lee Aaron Adams received the America Flag by U.S Airforce Col. Larry Wells at the conclusion of the memorial service in Aaron Adams honor. Bone fragments provided ... more
Photo: Frederic Larson
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Photo of Air Force First Lieutenant Lee Aaron "Larry" Adams, 27, of Willits. Ran on: 06-02-2005 John Adams, Lee Aaron Adams' brother, receives a flag from Air Force Col. Larry Wells. Ran on: 06-02-2005 John Adams, Lee Aaron Adams' brother, receives a flag from Air Force Col. Larry Wells. less
Photo of Air Force First Lieutenant Lee Aaron "Larry" Adams, 27, of Willits. Ran on: 06-02-2005 John Adams, Lee Aaron Adams' brother, receives a flag from Air Force Col. Larry Wells. Ran on: 06-02-2005 ... more
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2005-06-02 04:00:00 PDT Beale Air Force Base, Yuba County -- Thirty-nine years after his death, Lee Adams is home.

His F-105D Thunderchief fighter plane crashed in North Vietnam on April 19, 1966, and Air Force 1st Lt. Lee Aaron "Larry" Adams of Willits became one of the more than 1,800 Americans missing in action from the Vietnam War -- until six weeks ago.

In that time, Adams' parents and one of two brothers died, leaving his remaining brother, John Adams, to fulfill the promise he and the late Clive Adams Jr. made to their parents: to confirm their brother's death and to bring home his remains.

On Wednesday afternoon, Lee Adams was given a military funeral at Beale Air Force Base east of Marysville (Yuba County) that included a 21-gun salute and a fighter-plane flyover. Nieces and nephews heard stories about the airman they never met.

"Welcome home," said Lt. Col. Jim Browning, the chaplain who presided over the service, which prompted an occasional tear.

News of Lee Adams' crash was a blow to his family, which had marveled at the 27-year-old's love for flying, and to Air Force mates who had seen him take on extra missions -- despite deep misgivings about the war -- to shield men with wives and kids. Adam's MIA status never allowed his family full peace of mind.

"Not knowing is far worse torture than a funeral," said Leonard "Lucky" Ekman, a 63-year-old retired Air Force colonel who attended the Air Force Academy and flight training with Adams and came to the funeral from his home in Panama City, Fla.

According to a report by the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii, pilots who were with Adams on his final mission witnessed him roll in on enemy trucks in Quang Binh province but never pull out. Moments later, his plane exploded.

It wasn't until September 1993 that a team of investigators from the United States and Vietnam cooperated in interviewing three villagers near the crash site. Two men said they saw local militia shoot down a plane, adding that they recovered and buried one of the pilot's legs, said Maj. Rumi Nielson- Green, an Army spokeswoman with the MIA agency.

A third informant said he unearthed two leg bones while plowing his field in 1982, and kept one of them. John Adams said he has learned that the farmer was a member of a North Vietnamese militia who ignored government orders to turn over remains for later display as a war memento. Instead, he kept them at his home in accordance with his Buddhist faith.

Later, Nielson-Green said, a mitochondrial DNA analysis from that bone showed it was consistent with Adams' two brothers.

Then, late last year, the site was excavated. No human remains were found, but a villager came forward with a wristwatch and a signal mirror he recovered from the area while searching for scrap metal. The items were consistent with those used by Air Force pilots in 1966.

Convinced, the MIA agency concluded on March 17 it had found Adams, and sent an Air Force official to the Adams' home in Willits -- notifying them as if Adams had just died: with a knock on the door.

At the funeral, more than 150 people, including a couple of Air Force buddies, gathered to memorialize Adams. His remains were held in a small engraved wooden urn, carried by an honor guard, and will be buried in a family plot in Willits.

"His sacrifice and his dedication still speak to us and challenge us today," Adams' nephew, Steve Adams, an Oregon minister, said during his eulogy. "Larry's classmates described him as happiest with a stick in his hand and the throttle full-forward. He lived what he loved."

Adams was described as a gentle giant -- he was 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds. He was handsome, he traveled around the world, and he drove a white Austin- Healey convertible when he was in Willits, but he was humble and enjoyed nothing more than hanging out with family.

Adams was born to fly airplanes, his family said. He earned his pilot's license before his graduation from Willits High School. He once buzzed low over his family's ranch and, in a shout, asked his mother for permission to go to the movies.

He was a gifted football lineman but turned down scholarship offers from Stanford and other schools to study aeronautics at Santa Rosa Junior College. He entered the Air Force Academy in 1959.

In Vietnam, Adams flew the Thunderchief in the 333rd Fighter Squadron, stationed after 1965 in Thailand. He and his fellow pilots targeted roads, bridges and trucks to cut off enemy supplies heading south.

But the enemy fired back with everything from rifles to surface-to-air missiles, and 126 Thunderchiefs were lost in combat in 1966 alone, according to the Air Force.

"There were guns shooting at you all the time -- you just couldn't see them," said Ekman.

Despite the danger, Adams flew extra missions, said his barracks mate at the time, Fred Wood, now a retired urologist living in Larkspur.

"He said somebody had to do it, and if he were killed it wouldn't affect as many family members as someone who had a wife and kids," Wood said.

In his eulogy, Steve Adams quoted his uncle as saying in a letter, sent before his death to his mother, "I do wish our government would clarify the reasons for our being here. This is very hard."

"Larry loved the Air Force, and he planned to make it his career, but he was a man of peace," Steve Adams said.