COLONEL CAMPBELL’S FINAL FLIGHT
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BY SUE OWEN ’94

Missing For More Than 48 Years, An Aggie Shot Down During The Vietnam War Is Finally Laid To Rest By His Family
It’s not known exactly how many Aggies served in the Vietnam War. More than 4,000 were commissioned from 1962 to 1973, but there were also many already in the U.S. armed forces. Col. William E. Campbell ’52, for example, had been in the Air Force more than 15 years when he volunteered to go to Vietnam.

He had a wife and four children, whom he got to see at Christmas 1968 on leave.

A month later, his plane was shot down over Laos. It was not until 1978 that he was classified “killed in action - body not recovered.”

His Aggie Ring surfaced in Thailand in 1991, and his widow wore it until her death. The family brought it to The Association of Former Students, which keeps it on display.

Just before Christmas 2016, the family learned Campbell had been positively identified through mitochondrial DNA testing of remains found in 2014.

And the long journey to bring Campbell back to his family, laying him in Arlington National Cemetery with his beloved wife, began.

**FROM A&M TO THE AIR FORCE**

When Bill Campbell graduated from Texas A&M in May 1952, it was alongside his best friend since their junior high school days in San Antonio—Col. Ralph Dresser ’52, who still calls him “Billy Ed.”

“They told us to go home and wait; we were going to go to pilot training,” Dresser said.

Both Campbell and Dresser would do so well in training that they would be asked to serve as instructor pilots for several years.

In August 1952, Campbell served as Dresser’s best man. “It was an occasion where all of the Aggies could wear their second-lieutenant uniforms for our wedding,” Dresser said. “It was a poor boys’ type military wedding. We didn’t have any swords; we were Air Force!”

Campbell himself was already married and had started a family by that time, having wedded his high school sweetheart during his junior year at A&M: Claretta White, whom he nicknamed “Boo,” because Claretta just had too many syllables.

They moved into married student housing at A&M, and he took on several jobs while continuing his classes. Dresser said his friend particularly liked being night manager at the Campus theater on Northgate, because he could work on homework while the movies played.

In the couple’s senior Ring Dance photo, Boo turns his Aggie Ring out to face the world.

**GROWING FAMILY, ON THE MOVE**

Bill and Boo Campbell moved from College Station through Hondo, Lubbock, Waco and Abilene, as well as stops in California, New York, Ohio and Arizona, as the family grew to include two daughters and two sons.

“He was a huge family man, and my mom, they were the happy couple,” said Dale Campbell, the elder of the two boys.

Dale has become the family’s keeper of a set of 8mm home movies his parents took.

“We used to set up on Sunday nights and watch them...They’re always at the highlights—it’s Christmas time, Thanksgiving, a lot of camping trips,” he said. “It’s interesting to watch them because now that I have a family, I can see where I get a lot of the good things in my family, was the foundation that was established by them. Their love for each other, their family respect.”

Cathy Campbell, the eldest, said, “He was funny. He did have a really good sense of humor. Both my parents did. And they loved parties; they loved Halloween. Especially with my mom’s nickname being Boo, you can imagine—Halloween is my favorite holiday of the year.”

One year, she recalled, at their...
Bill married Claretta “Boo” White during his junior year, and she turned his Aggie Ring to face the world at Ring Dance. In 1991, with Bill’s fate still unclear, the Aggie Ring was returned to her, and she wore it until her death.

The young Campbell family grew to include children Cathy, Cindy, Dale and Bill.
house on Rome, N.Y.’s Griffin Air Force Base, “There were steps going up to the front door, and for that Halloween, my mom dressed as a witch, and she had a big bowl of candy, and she sat on a stool outside. And my dad dressed as Igor... They really played it up, and all the little kids that came, Igor would bring them up to the witch to get the candy. They had fun. That was one thing that I really appreciated about him.”

She also appreciated his strength as a listener: “He was a really good person to talk with. My dad was a calm person. I could go and talk with him if I was worried about my schoolwork, or if I was confused about my boyfriends or having issues or confusion related to my girlfriends. He would listen really well.”

Dale said, “I played Little League; he was always there. We did soapbox derbies. He was always focused on us, not on him.”

Over the years, Bill flew mainly heavy bombers, including B-47s and B-52s for Strategic Air Command, and earned a master’s degree in logistics from the Air Force Institute of Technology before volunteering to go to Vietnam flying the F4 fighter-bomber. There was a need, Dresser said: “They couldn’t keep enough fighter-bomber pilots going. They had to take them where they could get them. So they welcomed his volunteer status.”

In May 1968, Bill began a tour stationed in Ubon, Thailand. The family remained in Independence, Kan.—not far from the town of Caney, where Bill and Boo had met during high school. (Bill was born in McAllen, moved to San Antonio and spent part of high school living with grandparents in northeast Oklahoma, just across the state border from Caney.)

Bill flew with the 497th Tactical Fighter Squadron, called the “Nite Owls” because their combat missions over Laos into North Vietnam were primarily at night. He named his plane “Boo Hoo” in honor of his wife, and traded both letters and audio recordings with his family. Cathy said, “He loved the cassette tapes from us. And there was always a sense that he loved us deeply and he really missed us while he was over there.

“He said in one of the tapes that at times, he would have the duty at night to drive along the airstrip and make sure that it was okay... kind of a middle-of-the-night, long shift.” She can picture him, she said, listening and re-listening to the tapes on those long drives.

For Christmas that year, he got a two-week leave to visit his family. It was sweet but brief, and then he returned to Thailand.

“When his plane went down in January of 1969, I had just turned 17, Cindy had just turned 16 a few days before the plane went down, my
This fall, 1st Lt. Marvin S. Arthington ’68 will finally receive an individual burial at Arlington on Oct. 5 with full military honors after remains recently turned in were positively identified as his. After his plane crashed into a mountain in 1970, he was briefly classified as missing in action but considered accounted for.

In 2010, the remains of another Aggie missing for decades after the Vietnam War, Capt. Clyde Campbell ’66, were identified; he was interred at Arlington in 2012 in a private burial. Six more Aggies killed/missing in Vietnam and Laos have been identified and returned since 1999.


Earlier this year, the name of Sgt. John T. Whitson ’66 was added to the Vietnam Memorial Wall after his eligibility for inscription on the Wall was re-evaluated. Whitson passed away in April 1969 in a Fort Hood hospital, where he had been transferred after being hospitalized with an illness in Vietnam. Read more at tx.ag/Whitson66VMW.

Four Aggies are known to have been held as POWs in the Vietnam War. Released on Feb. 12, 1973, were Capt. James Edwin Ray ’63 (shot down in 1966) and Maj. Robert Norlan Daughtrey ’52 (shot down in 1965); Daughtrey passed away in 2005. Released on March 4, 1973, were Capt. Alton Benno Meyer ’60 (shot down in 1967) and Capt. John Charles Blevins ’61 (shot down in 1966). The names are courtesy of Capt. Meyer.

THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

During the war, Dresser and Campbell both flew different types of missions along the route where Campbell was shot down: the Ho Chi Minh trail, from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam.

“It’s a jungle trail, and you’ve got trucks, you’ve got guns, you’ve got all kinds of supplies coming down that trail 24-7. And what you want to do is you want to interdict. You want to stop them,” Dresser said.

“And they’re trying to hide this Ho Chi Minh trail, and that’s where my job came in, as a defoliation commander. I would go in and spray the tops of the trees” that had been bent over the trail to shield movement below. “And then the fighter guys would come in and follow our marks on the ground and drop bombs on them.

“That’s why I know what area he was in and what it was like.

“It was probably the third worst area in all the Vietnam War,” he said. “The Ho Chi Minh trail at the Mu Gia pass where he was, we lost over 70 airplanes and crews in that general area.”

Campbell’s mission on Jan. 29, 1969, was unusual for a Nite Owl pilot, Dresser said, because it was during daylight hours.

Though planes had emergency locator beacons and crews had radios to carry and use on the ground if they had to bail out, Dresser said, “Nobody heard any of that. All they saw was his airplane—his bombs hit the ground, and his airplane hit the ground. Nobody heard a thing from him or his back-seat guy (bombardier/navigator Capt. Robert E. Holton).

“And that went on for 48 and a half years.”

HOPING FOR ANSWERS

Boo Campbell held out hope as Americans who had been...
prisoners of war returned in the 1970s.

“We were always told that he was coming home,” said the Campbells’ younger daughter, Cindy. “Living every day like that is very hard when you have someone missing.”

Dale said, “It was grieving, but yet she couldn’t grieve, because he was technically still alive and there was that possibility. So the poor lady never knew what to do, what her next step was... didn’t want to go to the next step.”

It was nearly a decade later that Campbell was officially declared killed in action. The Air Force had promoted him from the rank of major to colonel and, in August 1978, conducted a memorial service at Nellis Air Force Base in Arizona—“the first time that we officially buried my dad,” Dale said.

In 1991, anonymous Thai citizens turned Campbell’s Aggie Ring over to a Department of Defense POW/MIA team in Bangkok.

Two years later, the family was told that the pistol issued to Campbell—identified by its serial number—was on display in a Hanoi museum.

Cindy said, “The Ring was in perfect shape. If he had died in a crash, they weren’t burned.”

However, the Ring had been cut to fit a smaller hand. Boo Campbell added a gold-colored strip of metal to make it smaller still, and wore it until her death in 1995. Because

**TIMELINE**

**Jan. 29, 1969**
Maj. William Campbell’s aircraft is hit by enemy fire during the Vietnam War and crashes in Laos; Campbell and co-pilot Capt. Robert E. Holton listed as Missing In Action.

**May 5, 1978**
U.S. Air Force promotes Campbell to the rank of colonel.

**June 8, 1978**
Campbell’s status is changed to “Killed In Action, Body Not Recovered.”

**Jan. 1, 1979**
Memorial Marker erected in Arlington National Cemetery.

**Aug. 8, 1989**
Boo Campbell is notified that her husband’s Aggie Ring has been identified in the possession of a man in Thailand.

**July 15, 1991**
Anonymous Thai nationals turn Campbell’s Aggie Ring over to U.S. government representatives.
of her husband’s service, she was eligible to be inurned at Arlington National Cemetery.

Dale said, “I still say that she died really young because of a broken heart... She had lost her most important person in the world.

“But I was always proud of her... One of the things that I still admire in her was she bought a Winnebago and drove it across the country” after the 1978 memorial at Nellis. A stray German shepherd showed up on the day of that service, “and my mom and this dog became the best of friends, and she took that dog all the way to Nova Scotia.” She named the dog Major.

Cathy said her mother had been very clear that she wanted the Aggie Ring to come back to A&M. “And so when she died suddenly, there was never any question ... that that’s where it belonged.

“It was not meant to go to one of us, and I felt it was certainly not meant to be put in a safety-deposit box somewhere.”

The Campbells’ four children and eight grandchildren brought the Ring to A&M in 2002, and The Association hosted a Ring Return ceremony.

Dale recalled, “The room at the ceremony was actually pretty full... I was very moved by A&M. We took the tour that they give to all the incoming freshmen, and you could just tell that it was alive, and then we went to a football game—it was just fun. It was a great day. I was really amazed.”

Cindy said, “We didn’t find out how wonderful Texas A&M was until we brought the Ring back. You leave Texas A&M and you’re still a part of it.”

Campbell’s Ring remains on display at the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center.

As Cathy later said, “We left my dad at Texas A&M.”

But that was not to be the story’s end.

ROUTE TO WASHINGTON

“I had always hoped that eventually we would get some remains,” Cathy said. “I knew that there was a really good chance that would never happen for our family in my lifetime.”

Soon after the family was notified in December 2016, the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, based at Hawaii’s Hickam Air Force Base, officially announced that Campbell had been identified.

“There are questions that remain, and I don’t think we are going to have firm answers,” Cathy

Campbell’s decorations include the Silver Star and Purple Heart, at top; a full list is at tx.ag/WC52medals. These are kept in a box that belonged to him along with his dogtags that were returned to the family in 1969 with his personal effects, and with a medallion bearing a 1952 Aggie Ring crest that The Association presented to each sibling when they dedicated his original Aggie Ring for display at the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center, where it remains.
said. “What we have been given, though, is more than a lot of families get.”

His identification, she said, shows there is hope for the many families who are still waiting – and in fact, early in 2017, remains were recovered at the crash site in Laos that proved to be those of Campbell’s co-pilot, Holton.

Plans were made to bring Campbell’s casket to Arlington for services to be held May 18, 2017.

Because of factors including his rank and his status as killed in action, he qualified for burial with full military honors, including a horse-drawn caisson and music by a military band.

He was escorted from Honolulu to Dallas and on to Washington, D.C., by Cathy’s son-in-law Lt. Col. Brian Gilpatrick, an Air Force pilot who had long worn an MIA bracelet with Campbell’s name on it. Dale and his family drove from Irving to DFW Airport to join Gilpatrick and accompany the casket in its honorable transfer and flight to D.C.

The funeral honors would be important for the family’s new generations as well, Dale said.

“If there are any regrets, one of the biggest ones was that my kids never got to meet my dad,” Dale said. “They’re going to see him as a hero, and I think that that’s terrific. I think that’s something that my kids and the nephews and nieces get to see, what a great guy he was.

“He’s a bonafide hero. He loved his country, and died for this country. And it’s really important that we remember that.”

Already converging in D.C. with their families were Cathy, traveling from Prattville, Ala., Cindy from Partridge, Kan., and Bill, from Escondido, Calif.

They gathered with first cousin Tom Campbell ’55 and many more relatives and friends in a hotel on May 16—Campbell’s 86th birthday.

Dresser reminisced about growing up with him, attending A&M, training and flying together, of driving all night to join the family in Kansas when they learned he had been shot down.

“He was an above-average pilot, he was an above-average officer, he was an above-average father, husband, all of those things. And he was just a genuinely great guy,” Dresser said.

“Over 70 years he has been my best friend.”

AGGIES PAY TRIBUTE

The next day, assembled on the tarmac at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, they watched with hands over hearts as a nine-member Air Force honor guard carried the flag-draped casket to a hearse, then saluted in silence.

Campbell’s remains inside the casket were covered with a full dress uniform bearing all his medals, including the Silver Star and Purple Heart.

More Aggies lined the route, metaphorically and literally.

An infrastructure engineering manager at DFW Airport, Kelly Rattan ’85—whose own father was killed in action and not recovered in the Vietnam War—found family members a place to rest on their early-morning transit through the airport en route from Hawaii. At Reagan airport, American Airlines customer care manager Chase Pierson ’12 worked in advance to smooth the family’s path through security and ensure they were on the tarmac with no difficulties when the casket arrived.

The Arlington cemetery’s director...
of public affairs, Barbara Lewandrowski, is “a proud Aggie wife” who helped oversee arrangements; she and her husband, David Lewandrowski ’88, also both attended the funeral.

Many other Aggies, some who never knew Campbell or his family, also came to pay respects.

Among them were U.S. Rep. Bill Flores ’76, whose Congressional district includes Bryan, College Station and Waco; and George N. Harris, Jr. ’85, a member of The Association of Former Students’ Board of Directors.

Four newly graduated Aggies and one A&M senior who were at the Pentagon for a Department of Defense showcase saw news of the funeral posted online by The Association, and were granted permission to miss their scheduled presentation time to attend: Glen Colby ’17 and newly commissioned Air Force second lieutenants Alec Thrower ’16, Nicholas P. Warner ’16, Sean Whitney ’16 and Jessica Carranza-Knowles ’17.

“The Aggie Network is a real thing, and it is important that we show up for each other,” Colby said. “I saw a lot of Aggie Rings there.”

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Bobby Sproat ’98, who works at the Pentagon, attended because he saw a notification about the funeral on the National Capital A&M Club’s Facebook page, and he had an Aggie great-uncle who was Class of 1952.

Also present was Ernest Woodzelle of Odenton, Md.—not an Aggie nor a relative, but who had worn a POW/MIA bracelet with Campbell’s name on it for almost 50 years. Cathy Campbell had contacted him to let him know the identification had been made.

At the service in Arlington’s Old Post Chapel, Cathy read from some of the letters her father sent them while stationed in Thailand, showing his humor, caring and love.

Then she read a letter she had written to him just that month, telling him the family was fine, and his children had not been alone; that he was now a grandfather and a great-grandfather; and that he was about to be laid to rest with his wife: “Your beloved Boo waits for you.”

His casket was carried out and placed in the caisson; the matched gray horses with black-glossed hooves drew him through a gate and down a winding road, with family, friends and mourners walking behind, a mile and a half, to Section 60—currently the most active area of the cemetery, with burials of service members mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan operations.

A band played and F-16s roared overhead in a missing-man formation as he was carried to the gravesite. A firing party issued three rifle volleys; then a bugler played Taps.

Flags were presented to each of the siblings, and a bagpiper played “Amazing Grace” as the Air Force casket bearers paced away.

Later in the day, privately, the family returned to the gravesite, after Boo Campbell’s urn had been placed in the grave to join her husband.

There, they laid sunflowers, representing Kansas, for Boo Campbell, and yellow roses, representing Texas, for Bill Campbell.