

13. S-01 crew status change from MIA to KIA

MSgt. Charles Timms served in our unit's administrative office in December 1967. As many of us, he was concerned about the families of our missing colleagues and began a search about their status. He sent a letter to the Secretary of the Air Force on 16 Sep 1993 inquiring about the MIA status of all eleven crew members. His letter was forwarded to the Air Force Military Personnel Command Office for Missing Persons and Inquiries Division for his answer. That came on 12 October 1993. He received eleven almost identical letters which gave four different dates for changes of their status from MIA to KIA. Three crewmembers had their status changed on following dates: Wenaas changed on 8 June 1977, Williams on 24 June 1977 and Van Buren on August 29 1977. The other eight had their dates changed almost one year later on 27 April 1978. How could that be? They all died on the same day!

Here is the copy of one of eleven attachments to the AFMPC/DPMCB. Each addressed one crew member with his rank, date of birth, home of record and the date of status change from MIA to KIA. Other than that, the one paragraph of each one was identical except that eight crew members were declared KIA on 27 April 1978 and the other three earlier in 1977.

NAME: [REDACTED]
RANK: [REDACTED]
DATE OF LOSS: 29 Dec 67
COUNTRY OF LOSS: North Vietnam
DATE OF BIRTH: [REDACTED]
HOME OF RECORD: [REDACTED]
CURRENT STATUS: Killed in Action/Body/Not Recovered
UNIT OF ASSIGNMENT: 314 Tactical Airlift Wg, Nha Trang AB VS
CIRCUMSTANCES OF LOSS: [REDACTED] was a crew member on a C-130E aircraft which was on an operational mission when he was reported missing in action. The aircraft did not return to friendly control and the crew members were declared missing at the time of estimated fuel exhaustion. [REDACTED] was continued in a missing status until 27 April 1978 when his status was administratively changed by the Department _of the Air Force to killed in action. Since his remains have not been recovered and returned, he is listed by the Department of Defense as unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.

Note that this attachment was to a letter written on 12 Oct 1993 and that the crash site discovery was confirmed one year before on November 23 1992. The last sentence states that "Since his remains have not been recovered and returned, he is listed by the Department of Defense as unaccounted for in

Southeast Asia.” No wonder that MSgt. Timms concluded that someone was still searching for the S-01 crash site.

I was just as puzzled by this exchange in communications as the now late Charles Timms and I established contact with the AFMPC/DPMCB office to find out why eleven men died on the same day but were declared as KIA on four different dates. I was not successful in getting a definitive answer, but I learned a lot in the process. Most people I spoke with on the phone were civilian employees. They were very courteous but avoided straight forward answers because of the existing privacy guidelines. I was not a family member. I was just an interested and prying person who claimed to know all eleven men. They explained the periodic MIA review process and identified the final authority responsible for MIA to KIA changes. It is worth while to review here what that process was. Here are selected paragraphs of what I received from them:

2. Circumstances: The above listed personnel comprised the crew of a C-130 aircraft which departed Nha Trang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, at 0030 hours, 29 December 1967, on a classified mission over North Vietnam. The mission progressed as planned and a radio report was received at 0430 hours. This was the last known contact established. At that time the aircraft’s position was approximately 13 miles northeast of Lai Chau, North Vietnam, over a mountainous and densely forested area. When the aircraft failed to return to base as scheduled, an organized search was immediately initiated. Weather conditions severely hampered the search; however, an electronic search was conducted over the intended flight path, to no avail. Over the next two weeks an electronic search and three photographic reconnaissance missions were performed with negative results. Organized search was terminated on 29 January 1968 when a visual search scheduled for that day was cancelled. To date no additional information has been received pertaining to the missing aircraft or any of the personnel on board.

3. Discussion: Careful evaluation of the information of record compels the conclusion that a reasonable possibility exists for the continued survival of the personnel listed in paragraph one. This conclusion is supported by the fact that there were no witnesses to this incident and that definite proof is lacking as to just what befell the crew when their aircraft was lost. In the absence of information to the contrary, it is possible that favorable circumstances prevailed whereby they were able to successfully bail out of the aircraft or survive a crash landing and were subsequently captured by the enemy. The absence of a report establishing their status as prisoners is no indication that such is not the case since the North Vietnamese and their agencies reject any obligations under the Geneva Convention to report the names of personnel in their custody. Until new evidence is produced or other events occur which overcome this possibility, it is reasonable to assume that they may still be alive and any change in their status on this date may be premature and beyond the safe calculated risk of error.

Annual review of the crew's missing in action continued until 30, March 1978 when the personnel office at Randolph AFB recommended to the personnel office of the Secretary of the Air Force that the status should be changed to killed in action. This time the first paragraph lists only eight crew members with the ranks to which they had been promoted while missing in action. Consequently, Osborne went from Captain to Lieutenant Colonel, Claxton from Major to Colonel, Fisher from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel, Parker from Captain to Major, Clapper from Staff Sergeant to Chief Master Sergeant, Darcy from Staff Sergeant to Chief Master Sergeant, Eckley from Staff Sergeant to Chief Master Sergeant, and McCrary from Technical Sergeant to Chief Master Sergeant. The second paragraph is very specific:

2. Discussion: The review and reconsideration of all the facts and circumstances (summarized and attached hereto) resulted in determination that it is not possible to conclusively establish the members' ultimate fate. However, the likelihood that they are still alive may no longer reasonably be considered since they have not been repatriated, sufficient time has elapsed during which it is believed some word could have been received if they had survived, and they cannot otherwise be accounted for. Accordingly, with respect to the above and in the absence of any information to support a presumption of their continued survival, it is concluded that they may now no longer reasonably be presumed to be alive.

A staff summary sheet from Randolph AFB personnel office with acronym DPMC whose subject is "Proposed Change of Status of Lt. Col. Edwin N. Osborne, Jr. and Seven Crew Members" sheds some light on the three crew members that were not included in that office's 30 March letter.

3. The attached letter which constitutes a proposed change of status from missing in action to killed in action on Lt Col Edwin N. Osborne, Col Charles P. Claxton, Col Donald E. Fisher, Maj Frank C. Parker, III, CMSgt Gean P. Clapper, CMSgt Edward J. Darcy, CMSgt Wayne A. Eckley, and CMSgt Jack McCrary is forwarded for review by the Secretary prior to any announcement. The status of the remaining crew members is: CMSgt Williams, KIA (555), 24 Jun 77 and Lt Col VanBuren, KIA (555), 29 Aug 77. Lt Col Wenaas remains MIA and his status will be reviewed by separate action.

Note that Captains VanBuren and Wenaas were promoted to Lieutenant Colonels and Sergeant Williams to Chief Master Sergeant during their time in MIA status.

The Secretary of the Air Force accepted the recommendation of the status review and on 27 April, 1978 the Deputy Assistant for Military Personnel changed the status of eight crew members to killed in action by these words: “the date deaths are presumed to have occurred is the date I have signed this action. This status review letter also added that: “Deaths are held to have occurred while the members, except Colonel Fisher, were in a pay, flying pay, and duty status. Colonel Fisher was in a pay and duty status.”

Based on all I quoted above, we can conclude that the personnel staffs followed their prescribed guidelines in processing missing in action soldiers. However, I was not completely satisfied for not learning why there were four different dates for the changes to KIA status. Then I lucked out by getting an old MSgt. on the phone who had served in Vietnam. Unlike the others I spoke with, he addressed me as Colonel and like a good NCO gave this colonel some good answers. After learning from me that I was one of the eleven Summary Court Officers, we got on the same page. He got me to understand their security and privacy policies. He reminded me that as an SCO I was obligated to examine all personal items I was tasked to assemble and send home to the family. We all had to examine letters and photographs for any compromising evidence that each missing individual might have accumulated. Items that could cause embarrassment or discomfort to folks back home. We were to do this very diligently without sharing our finds with anyone. He said that they basically continued to do the same. Speaking in generalities, he said that there were many families with all kinds of problems. Some had multiple marriages and children from each. Beneficiaries were not clearly defined. Some wives wanted a status change because they planned to move on with their lives and start new families. And there were also others that liked the protracted MIA status because of the pay and benefits. I understood all that and admitted to him that I was not interested in details about any family. He said that they normally handled each individual as a separate case. Our large crew was different because of this large number, but each MIA person had to be looked at separately. Most people were satisfied with annual status reviews. Some hired attorneys to represent them and others had their congressional representatives intercede on their behalf. He suspected that this could be one of the reasons why the S-01 crew’s status reviews got pulled out of the regular review order and got scattered. That finally satisfied me. I had no need to know what this or that family did and I did not want to pry into their lives.

I believe that three of our KIA crewmember widows had new husbands at the time of the funeral at Arlington National Cemetery in November 2000.