

6. Communication between the Families and Nha Trang Friends

Families of the lost S-01 crew members were satisfied with the way the Air Force communicated with them about the status of their loved ones. Staffs in various Air Force personnel offices that maintained contact with them were well trained in handling grieving relatives who were anxiously awaiting any new information on the tragedy and the efforts to locate the missing aircraft. However, they were disappointed with the amount of information they were able to obtain from the friends who served with them at Nha Trang. They were not allowed to share what the families suspected they knew about that fateful mission. As time went by, they gave up asking about the type of flying missions we were conducting and appreciated timely contacts that they had with the personnel staffers.

Initial contact with the families was quick and very appropriate. All wives received surprise visits from a pair of Air Force officers from nearby Air Force facilities who notified them about the air craft loss and offered any immediate assistance that the families needed. This was followed by letters from the Detachment Commander Lt. Col. Dow Rogers and the 14th Special Operations Wing Commander Col. John M. Patton. Each expressed condolences and promises to continue the search for their missing aircraft. Next came communications from the summary court officers (SR0s) who processed and shipped personal possessions of the missing crew members to their families. All wives were disappointed with the information they received from these men who were obviously the closest ones to their loved ones at the time of their loss. Even though they understood that those who wrote these letters were not free to divulge the secret nature of their wartime work, they wanted to know more about what they were doing that night. They wanted to appreciate the sacrifice their men made in the service of their country. Their friends and neighbors at home also wanted to know what happened to their husbands. But all they were told by the SR0s was that our C-130 aircraft was lost somewhere in Vietnam on the early morning of December 29, 1967.

The SR0s and any other friends that exchanged letters with the families after the aircraft loss were soon reassigned to various other bases. Aircrew tours in Vietnam lasted only one year, whereas other assignments were normally for three years. That caused a frequent turnover of personnel in every unit and soon there was no one there from the date when the aircraft went missing. Thus the contact with the unit of assignment was lost. Then the war ended and the unit not only changed its name, but relocated to Kadena Air Base in Okinawa and then to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. As time went on, the SR0s changed their addresses by moving from one assignment to another and eventually retired. They were not kept in the information loop and did not have anything new to relate to the families. So by the time the site of the aircraft crash site was confirmed in 1992, none of the families had contact with airmen who had served with their loved ones at Nha Trang. None of them made efforts to renew contacts with the SR0s with the news of aircraft discovery. They all believed that everyone had also learned about it from some Air Force sources.

Master Sergeant Charles Timms, who served in the administration office at the time of the aircraft accident, questioned the Air Force about the missing in action (MIA) status of the S-01 crew. He received a very specific and proper bureaucratic reply to his inquiry from the Air Force Military Personnel Center on 12 October 1993. It addressed each crew member with the dates when his MIA status was changed to killed in action (KIA). It did not say anything about the crash site discovery that occurred one year before. His Freedom of Information Act question did not ask about the search for the missing aircraft.

The news about the crash site discovery was somewhat embarrassing to the Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field in Florida. The command and the retired special operations community was making plans to dedicate a memorial to the S-01 crew at the Hurlburt Memorial Air Park in 1998. I volunteered to write a story about the S-01 mission for the families of the crew so that they could finally learn about the type of flying we were doing in Vietnam. Then, just before going to print with this story, I was contacted by Mr. Gene Kremin, friend of the S-01 radio operator, who informed me that the aircraft crash site was discovered in 1992 and that the crew remains were being identified at a laboratory in Hawaii.

The memorial was dedicated on 12 July 1988. All went well. Families of all crew members were present and many interrupted contacts with them were reestablished. All who knew about the tragedy from their assignment to Nha Trang maintained secrecy throughout the years. The families learned for the first time what their loved one were tasked to do on the night of their accident.



Colonel Lee Hess and Colonel John Gargus at the memorial pedestal. Lee Hess was the principal organizer for the memorial to the S-01 crew.