



## Last Colorado Air Guard MIA Laid to Rest in Arlington Cemetery

By Tech. Sgt. Mike R. Smith, USAF  
Special to American Forces Press Service

ARLINGTON, Va., April 4, 2008 – The remains of Colorado Air National Guard Maj. Perry H. Jefferson, who vanished during an observation flight 39 years ago over the jungles of South Vietnam, were at last laid to rest yesterday at Arlington National Cemetery.



**Members of the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard carry the remains of Colorado Air National Guard Maj. Perry Jefferson into the Old Chapel on Fort Myer, Va., April 3, 2008, 39 years after Jefferson went missing in action in Vietnam. Photo by Tech. Sgt. Mike R. Smith, USAF**

Three days of events here were a high-profile attempt to put closure to a missing-in-action mystery, but what exactly happened to the intelligence officer and his Army Reserve pilot, then-1st Lt. Arthur Ecklund, during their fateful observation flight may never be known.

A closed-casket viewing was held at a funeral home here April 1. Families, fellow servicemembers, veterans and friends to both men attended full-honors funerals April 2 and 3, which started at the Old Post Chapel on Fort Myer, Va., followed by platoon, band and caisson escorts to their gravesites on the nation's most sacred property.

Ecklund was interred at Arlington on April 2; he was previously interred in Knoxville, Ill., by his

family in 2004. The Reservist attended Arizona State University and was drafted in 1966. He attended helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft training prior to his combat deployment.

More than 150 people attended Jefferson's services here, including nearly 100 from Colorado who watched the state's reported last Guard Vietnam MIA put to rest.

Jefferson was an intelligence officer at Colorado's 120th Tactical Fighter Squadron, which flew the F-100C Super Saber. He received his bachelor's degree from Southern Methodist College and worked for Aramco in the Middle East before joining the Air Guard. His wife, Sylvia, died in 1992.

Jefferson and 375 other Colorado Air Guard members deployed to Phan Rang, Vietnam, in April 1968. They were the first Air Guard fighter squadron assigned to active duty in Vietnam.

For retired Col. Don Neary, an F-100 pilot who served with Jefferson, thinking of his friend still brought up a mix of tears and happy memories of home at Buckley Air Force Base, Colo., and deployed to Vietnam.

Neary said Jefferson didn't need to fly on visual reconnaissance missions from Phan Rang.

"I think what his motivation was he probably wanted to be a pilot, ... but also the aircraft was our forward air control airplane," Neary said. "I think it gave him an appreciation for us, and he went out to get that experience for when he would come in and brief us in the morning."

On April 3, 1969, 37-year-old Jefferson was flying aboard an O-1 Bird Dog observation aircraft piloted by 24-year-old Ecklund. They never returned to their base.

Defense officials said a three-day search found no evidence of a crash, and hostile forces in the area prevented other searches. Both men were listed as MIA.

"We were within a month of coming home," said Maj. Gen. John L. France in "Colorado Pride," a Colorado Air Guard history book.

France was the unit's operations officer in Vietnam and later served as Colorado's adjutant general. In the book, he shares the moments leading up to Jefferson's disappearance.

"Clyde Seiler and Don Neary were on (an F-100) mission together; Clyde got shot down and went into the jungle, ... (and with) no parachute, he didn't get out. ... Then, we lost Perry Jefferson a few days after Clyde. It was a rough time," France said.

The unit returned home in April 1969, and the Air Guard members who served at Phan Rang were immortalized later in the National Guard Heritage Series painting "Scramble at Phan Rang."

Across the nation, 22,745 Army and Air Guardsmen mobilized during the Vietnam War. More than 9,000 deployed to Vietnam.

Jefferson's and Ecklund's case remained unsolved, and there were even rumors of them being seen after the fateful flight.

After defense officials received human remains in 1984 from a suspected military crash, eyewitnesses were interviewed. One witness said the aircraft crashed on a mountainside, and that the pilots died and were buried there. An excavation led by the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command uncovered the aircraft's wreckage, but no human remains were found at the crash site.

In 2000, the remains turned over in 1984 were identified as Ecklund's.

Defense officials said Jefferson's remains were not identified until 2007, after a Vietnamese national living in California turned them in.

The day before Jefferson's interment ceremony, visiting Colorado Guard members walked among blossoming cherry trees to the Vietnam War Memorial to lay a wreath. They also located Jefferson's name on the dark granite and took a rubbing for their military museum.

"Perry was everybody's friend. ... He took off on a normal observation run and never returned. He just vanished," France said.

The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office's Web site states "efforts continue to recover nearly 1,800 Americans who remain unaccounted for from Vietnam."

(Air Force Tech. Sgt. Mike R. Smith serves at the National Guard Bureau.)