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MIA Vietnam pilot's remains may be found

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Elaine Zimmer Davis' husband was shot down over Vietnam in 1969. She has been there once, searching for the crash site, but was unable to get to the actual spot. She's returning next month. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune

On a summer day in 1969, during the Vietnam War, a green sedan pulled up to Elaine Zimmer's home in Smithfield, R.I. A Marine in dress uniform got out.

"This can't be good," she told herself.

It wasn't. Her husband, Capt. Jerry Zimmer, a 25-year-old pilot, was dead. His F-4 Phantom had gone down during a bombing run about 20 miles south of Da Nang, gone down in a crash so fiery — and in a location so remote — that there was little hope of recovering his remains.

Zimmer coped by taking their 2-year-old son, Craig, and driving as far away as possible, all the way

to California. She figured time could work its healing magic there.

In a way, it did. Ron Davis, a neighbor across the street, turned out to be another Marine pilot. They married, added a son of their own and eventually settled in Carmel Valley.

But moving forward isn't the same as moving on. "For years, I felt like I was married to two people," Elaine said. Even though she took the last name Davis, she sometimes used Zimmer as her middle name.

Every week, she talked with Zimmer's mother in New York. She sent her sons there for summer vacations. She kept a trunk with Zimmer's personal effects: clothes, letters, photos.

Opening the trunk, though, was another matter. She couldn't do it. And sometimes she suffered nightmares and panic attacks.

"Anyone who has lost someone and there's no body, there's this sense of it being unfinished," she said.

After the war ended, about 2,500 Americans were unaccounted for in Vietnam. The military set up a command in Hawaii to pursue those cases.

In 1993, investigators went to Que Loc village in central Vietnam, looking for the spot where Zimmer and his radio-intercept officer, 1st Lt. Al Graf, had crashed. Residents took them up the mountain to a riverbed.

The searchers concluded that the terrain and seasonal flooding made the recovery of any remains unlikely. The case was closed, stamped "No Further Pursuit."

And that's where it sat until recently, when family members and friends pored over the crash reports and maps and made an interesting discovery: The investigators in 1993 had looked in the wrong place.

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Gene Mares and Jerry Zimmer met in the eighth grade in Maine, N.Y., and became best friends. Both joined the Marines as aviators. Mares was the best man at Zimmer's wedding and the godfather of his son.

In Vietnam, Mares helped bring Zimmer into Fighter Squadron 542. They flew 24 joint combat missions.

But the buddies weren't together on Aug. 29, 1969. Mares was stateside, his combat tour over. Zimmer and Graf were teamed up, assigned to sit in an F-4 on the hot pad at Da Nang Air Field, waiting to fly out at a moment's notice.

The call came about noon. A reconnaissance patrol in the Que Son mountains needed an airstrike. Zimmer rolled in low and dropped a pair of 500-pound bombs.

Then he crashed into a mountain. Absent any wreckage to inspect, nobody knows for sure what

happened. But apparently the plane was hit by enemy machine-gun fire.

Mares felt guilty.

“Jerry had always guided me in the right direction when we were growing up,” he said. “In Vietnam, it was my turn to guide him, and I’d let him down. I’d let his family down.”

Mares, 65, now lives in Richland, Wash. He said he has never forgotten his best friend, never stopped wondering about the vagaries of fate.

In late 2008, he talked with the Davises about the crash. It had been nagging them, too.

Ron Davis said he knew early on in his relationship with Elaine that Zimmer’s death “was a huge part of her psyche.” He thought more information would help, and he set out to find it, using skills he developed during his 12 years as an FBI agent after leaving the Marine Corps.

The paperwork he reviewed included a declassified report from a U.S. team that looked for survivors at the site right after the crash. Map coordinates in the document didn’t match the spot where witnesses had taken the search team in 1993. They were off by about 550 yards, down in a riverbed instead of on top of a mountain.

“It became clear to all of us that the only way we were going to get any resolution was to go” to Vietnam, Mares said.

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Last March, Mares and Elaine Davis traveled to the village of Son Vien and met with a farmer and former Viet Cong officer named Do Xuan Du. He remembered the crash and had gone to the site days after it happened.

Du and two other residents led the visitors through tall grass, then up a rocky path toward the mountain. The climb was steep. Davis, who was recovering from a broken leg, had to return to the village.

The others pushed past jungle vines, waded across creeks and squeezed through rock crevices. After about two hours of climbing, they reached a crater near the top of the mountain.

Vegetation had grown up around it, but Mares said it was clear that something big and fast had slammed into the ground there.

Peering into the brush and under rocks, they found pieces of metal and plastic that looked to Mares as if they might have come from an F-4. He gathered them to take back to the village.

Du prepared a Buddhist ritual to reclaim the spirits of the departed, to summon them with promises of sustenance. The villagers brought out candles and incense, cookies and rice wine, money and cigarettes. They placed a paper shirt, belt and sandals on the ground.

Mares added a photo collage that Davis had made — pictures of Zimmer standing by his F-4, of

Zimmer with his son, of various relatives.

The villagers prayed and ate the food. They burned the clothes and mixed the ashes into the soil.

They gestured to Mares, urging him to participate. They showed him how to stand and raise his hands. He wasn't sure what they wanted, felt he was doing it all wrong.

Backing away, he went to the other side of the crater with his camera. He took some photos. Then the full impact of where he was and what probably happened there 40 years ago washed over him.

He dropped to his knees and wept.

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Ron Davis sent pictures of the half-dozen pieces of plastic and metal recovered from the site to a network of current and former Marines, including some who used to work on the F-4.

A couple of weeks later, he received an e-mail with this opening line: "Jackpot." Five of the six parts had been identified as coming from an F-4.

The family felt they had enough evidence to persuade the military to reopen Zimmer's case. They sent a notebook of reports, maps, photos and eyewitness accounts to the command in Hawaii, which combs old crash sites for human remains.

Late last year, after reviewing the materials and sending a team to the site, the command put the case back on the active list, Ron Davis said. Excavation would be the next step, but officials with the command said they don't discuss pending cases.

Elaine Davis plans to return to Vietnam next month to gather more details from villagers who remember the crash. She feels something approaching closure now. She used to believe that time heals all wounds, until she had one that wouldn't. Now she thinks what time does is form scar tissue.

Digging into the records, going to Vietnam, pushing for the case to be reopened — that's been like tearing away some of the scar tissue.

Painful, she said, but worth it.

The family held a memorial service for Zimmer at Arlington National Cemetery in August. There weren't any remains to bury, but Elaine Davis said the time was right to say goodbye.

She finally opened the trunk of Zimmer's belongings, too. Inside were old tapes he had recorded in Vietnam, filled with well-wishes for his family.

"Honey," Zimmer said on the first one she played, "I'm back."

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