

History of the Search for Capt Robert L. Simpson, USAF Pilot SSAN 160-26-4213 KIA Approximately 17 Nautical Miles south of Soc Trang South, Vietnam MR-IV, Bac Lieu Province, XR 058278, 28 August 1962

The following is a history of information I have obtained in my search, at the request of the family, of the first American fighter pilot killed in Vietnam in 1962. The crash of Capt Simpson FT-28 fighter aircraft on 28 August, 1962 at 1000 in the morning was observed by Col Gene Mechling USAF Ret(then a Major) his wingman, and a Vietnamese pilot in Mechling's aircraft plus Capt Charley Brown flying in another FT-28 nearby. Maj Mechling went to the site the next day with a Vietnamese riverain boat searching for the FT-28 aircraft, Capt Simpson and the Vietnamese pilot flying with him. They found several small piece of the aircraft and nothing else. Shortly after that (early Sept 62) Lt Charles "Gayle" Stowers, who was an advisor to the Vietnamese 26th Riverain Assault Boat Group located at Long Xuyen headed by Lt Toan of the Vietnamese Navy, went to the crash site searching for the pilot and aircraft. He was there 5 or 6 days and there were several USAF personnel who were on the boat with him who left their C rations which he greatly prized. They were able to find part of the landing gear and some metal parts of the aircraft through grappling in the water but the swiftness of the water and the VC in the vicinity made it difficult to find anything else. Col Mechling thought there might have been a follow-on third boat looking for the aircraft since there were reports of meat eating crabs in the area. The Joint Task Force-Full Accounting(JTF-FA) has indicated that they would search for the aircraft again late this year or early next year. The information for this report was obtained from the CSAF, CNO, Commandant of the USMC, Col Mechling, Lt Gayle Stowers, numerous members of the Air Commando Association who knew and served with Capt Simpson, the family of Capt Simpson and myself while I was with him at Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam in 1962 as a member of Det 2, 1st Air Commando Group. No information was obtained from numerous former Vietnamese AF personnel questioned in 1994 & 1995. It would be greatly appreciated if any former Vietnamese AF pilots/personnel or Vietnamese Navy etc could provide additional information in this search to either recovery the remains of both pilots or recover the aircraft to put this accident to rest for both families who lost their loved ones. If anyone else has anything to add please let me know.

Capt Robert L. Simpson was the first American fighter pilot killed in Vietnam on 28 Aug 1962 at 1000 in the morning. This was verified by the USAF Personnel Center(AFMPC). Capt Simpson was a member of the 6th Fighter Squadron, 1st Air Commando Group and temporarily assigned to Det 2, Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam in 1962. On the 28 August, 1962 he was leading a flight of two aircraft(Col Gene Mechling, just recently arrived, was flying the other FT-28 as his wingman) and both had Vietnamese AF pilots(indications they were Lts) in their rear seat(Capt Simpson had a pilot, possible named Lt Hoa, who was a nephew of the Vice President of South Vietnam). Their mission that day was to escort the US Marine Corps(USMC) helicopters who were transporting Vietnamese Army troops (ARVN) to attack a VC stronghold. The VNAF officer was necessary to fly

with the Americans as a cover story that the American pilots were teaching the Vietnamese how to use the aircraft in guerrilla warfare (in this case there was some of this checkout being accomplished). During the attack and American Forward Air Controller (FAC) called Capt Simpson flight to suppress a Viet Cong force along a Mangrove swamp. Capt Simpson was the flight commander and lead the attack and was on his second pass attacking the VC position when he appeared to be hit. After being hit he crashed in a mangrove swamp where his aircraft tumbled into the Mangrove swamp muddy water. Both pilots were presumed killed from the impact of the crash.

The official 1962 USAF report put the crash at approximately 15 nautical miles south of Soc Trang, MR-IV, Bac Lieu Province, XR 058278. The Viet Cong recorded the event in a propaganda pamphlet (1962 era) crediting the VC Army of Lac-Hoa village at My Thanh (Soc Trang Province) in Soc Trang province of shooting the aircraft down. The downing of his aircraft on that day was an important event for the VC because the propaganda leaflet showed the F-28 being downed by ground fire which they incorporated into the pamphlet into children school books in areas controlled by the VC. The Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTFFA) in 1994 put the downing of the aircraft at grid coordinate XR058278, approximately 35 kilometers south of Soc Trang and 4 miles South-Southwest of Vinh Chau, Soc Trang Province. Col Mechling in 1995, after reviewing the USN/USMC report on the helicopter activity that day which they were supporting put the aircraft crash in the vicinity of 48P XR 2597 3906. A FC Brown of Hampton Twp, NJ, in a Dec 93 letter to me, put the crash site at a swamp at Long 091750N Lat 1055748E. I am still trying to find out how he knew this.

The Vietnamese Riverain boat that took Col Mechling on the 29 Aug., 1962 to the crash site had several divers, without diving equipment, searched the muddy river for one (1) day and found the aircraft in 20-30 ft of muddy water. Neither the bodies of the two pilots or the guns on the aircraft could be found. It was suspected that the VC may have come during the night and removed both the bodies and the armament but was never proven. Shortly after this Lt Gayle Stowers went with the Vietnamese Navy 26th River Assault Boat Group searching for the aircraft and the Vietnamese AF pilot who was a relative of an important Vietnamese government official. Since Lt Stowers was an advisor to the Vietnamese Navy he was more an observer of the search operations rather than leading it. His 1995 comments to me was that they had several USAF personnel on the boat for the 5 to 6 days there who completed his day by leaving their C rations with him for a gourmet dinner later. He sent us pictures of the landing gear and other parts of the aircraft they found. He indicated that he sent weekly reports to a Capt Drazknik of the MAAG but didn't keep any of them. He indicated that they had trouble trolling with their grappling hooks looking for the aircraft due to the swift current at the time. He stated that he felt that the VC didn't get the guns or the bodies because of the strong current of the water.

Capt Simpson was born in Paris France on 27 June, 1927. His father was an executive Vice President with Metro-Goldwyn Mayer and later handled MGM's International Operations out of Panama. He had one brother William who now lives in Del Ray Beach, FL. Although Bob was raised in Panama; he graduated from the Landon School in Bethesda, Maryland. Bob was All Metropolitan in Soccer and baseball and received the Headmasters Medal at the Landon school. He graduated from Landon in 1945 and joined the US Marine Corps and served as a private stateside and the war ended before he could be sent overseas. Bob attended the University of Pennsylvania after leaving the USMC in 1948. At the University he played Soccer and was a member of the Mask and Wig Club (amateur theater group). In 1950 Bob returned to Panama and discovered aviation soloing in a J-4 and flying into every abandoned fighter strip in the Panama Canal Zone in Super Cubs. He was accepted into the USAF Air Cadet program in 1951 and finished his pilot training in T-33s at Williams AFB, AZ. He was sent to Korea where he flew P-80s Shooting Stars with the 5th Air Force. He completed 67

missions strafing tanks. At one time he experienced a flameout near the Yalu River but made it back to base. After Korea he returned to Panama where he met his wife Peggy and later was married. He went on to fly F-89 Scorpions in Prescott, Maine and Thule Greenland. His career continued in fighter aircraft with assignments in Omaha, NE where he flew the F-102 Delta Dagger. He experienced a crash landing in the F-102 in bad weather conditions. Bob arrived in Bien Hoa, south Vietnam on 25th July, 1962 and on the 26th of July was flying combat against the Viet Cong. He flew everyday until the 28th August when he was killed in action.

Capt Simpson has a marker close to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery and his name appears at the apex of the Vietnam memorial. He left a widow and four children. At the time of death his children ranged from 3 to 9 years old.

Arlington National Cemetery has a marker for Capt Simpson's Grave near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Capt Simpson's Family Desires a full Accounting of his Death, The Recovery of his Remains and a Proper Burial in Arlington National Cemetery where a Gravesite is Reserved for him.

The JTF-FA will return to the site if more documented information comes available. If there are any former Vietnamese AF personnel that may have additional information on the names of the pilots, data on the crash etc) please contact me. The JTF-FA search could benefit both pilots families. If anyone has any further information on Capt Simpson's crash on 28 Aug., 1962 please contact me on the Internet or write or call me at the following:

Eugene D. Rossel
6083 Rosa Court
Chino, CA 91710
Tel 909-930-5700 Work
909-591-7342 Home
e-mail aircommando1@earthlink.net