

Pilot's Helmet Lost 48 Years Ago In 'Nam Returned

Daedalian Colonel Jim Randall, USAF (Ret), a member of 11th Flight was shot down 48 years ago during a bombing run over North Vietnam and parachuted into enemy territory. He took off his helmet and parachute and then ran into the jungle where he hid until a daring helicopter rescue lifted him out under enemy fire. He never gave it a thought that he would get his helmet back. To his surprise a phone call to him from a stranger in June 2013 who said "Colonel I have something that belongs to you. We found your helmet." "I couldn't believe it," said Randall now 86 and living in Colorado Springs.



Photo courtesy of Gary Gregg
Gary "Paco" Gregg holds the helmet that belonged to Jim Randall.

way from Southeast Asia.

The day Randall was shot down Oct 13, 1965, he was leading a flight of four F-105s to destroy a bridge in North Vietnam. Randall, a major at the time, had flown 118 combat missions. All were dangerous but he did not dwell on the risk. "You had a job to do."

Randall grew up during the Great Depression in Roanoke, Virginia. When World War II started he yearned to become a pilot. When he was old enough he signed up in 1945 and became a Tuskegee Airman for training at Tuskegee Army Airfield, Alabama, to be a pilot. The war ended, all pilot training ended, and he was discharged. In 1948 he was asked by the War Department to become a member the newly formed Air Force. He graduated from fighter pilot school in 1950. He deployed to Korea in 1952 flying the P-51 Mustang. He flew 75 missions knocking out bridges and rail lines. He continued his flying career in the Air Force and eventually was assigned to fly the F-105 in Operation Rolling Thunder. Of the 53 F-105 pilots who went down over Vietnam in 1965 24 were rescued, 15 were captured, and 14 were killed. After his Vietnam tour he continued serving in the Air Force retiring in 1980.



Jim Randall holds a model of the F-105 he flew in Vietnam. Beside him, on the desk, is the helmet he thought he had lost forever 48 years ago in Vietnam. Before being returned the helmet made a journey of thousands of miles to reach its destination.

Randall's helmet somehow made it 1000 miles south to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), where in 1990 a Frenchman named Dominique Eluere found it in an Army surplus stall in the city's hardware market. He searched for years trying to find out who the helmet belonged to without any luck. In 2007 he became friends with Gregg, a retired stoneworker from Nebraska who had fought in Khe Sahn, Vietnam in 1966 and had been returning to Cambodia working for a non-profit organization providing education for minority Montagnard people. Eluere told him about the helmet with the name of Randall on it and his search for the owner. Gregg said he would help him try to find the owner. The Air Force told him it had no record of a Major Randall shot down in Vietnam. Gregg ran a notice in the Vietnam Veterans of America magazine asking if anyone had information. A few weeks later he got an email from a former officer in Randall's Wing saying he was alive and lived in Colorado Springs. Gregg was visiting his grandson's graduation in Colorado Springs. He called Randall and they emailed Eluere who sent back a photo of the helmet. "That's it," said Randall clapping his hands and laughing. The helmet even had his oxygen mask attached. A few days later Eluere shipped the helmet to Gregg. Gregg presented the helmet to Colonel Randall at a gathering of the Tuskegee Airmen in St Louis in August 2013.

Randall smiles and shakes his head when he tells the story of the men who did so much to return his helmet. "It's incredible. They could have sold it. Instead they gave it back."

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