

25Nov71 JG70 Loss

<http://www.virtualwall.org/ds/SwenckRB01a.htm>

On 25 November 1971, two CH-53 helicopters of the 37th ARRS, call signs JOLLY GREEN 70 and 73, departed Bien Hoa Airbase to pick up survivors of a crash near Can Tho (variously described as a CH-46 *CHINOOK* or C-7 *CARIBOU*). During the pickup JOLLY GREEN 70 took hits from enemy fire. After dropping off the crash survivors at Can Tho, the crew of JOLLY GREEN 70 checked their aircraft and decided it was capable of the return flight to Bien Hoa Airbase. JOLLY GREEN 70 was crewed by

- **Major Robert B. Swenck, pilot;**
- **Capt John W. George; copilot;**
- **TSgt [James R. Thomas](#), pararescueman;**
- **Sgt R. L. Sneed, pararescueman;**
- **Sgt H. L. Theriot, flight engineer; and**
- **A1c Thomas D. Prose, pararescueman.**

The two JOLLY GREENs departed Can Tho in tactical formation for the 95-mile flight to Bien Hoa to the northeast. During the return flight, they encountered a 100 foot to 300 foot overcast with moderate to heavy rain showers. At 1550 hours, while flying below the cloud cover, JOLLY GREEN 73 lost contact with JOLLY GREEN 70. When radio contact could not be reestablished search and rescue efforts were begun. JOLLY GREEN 70 was located approximately 13 nautical miles southeast of Tan Son Nhut Airbase, Saigon, in the Song Nha Be River, near the town of Nha Be, Gia Dinh Province, South Vietnam. The aircraft wreckage was close to the east bank of the river. While the west bank of the river was secure, the east side was considered enemy territory.

Two crewmen (Theriot and Sneed) survived the crash and reported that the aircraft had been hit by enemy ground fire. There were reports from a local fisherman that a third person was sighted alive in the water after the crash; this person was tentatively identified as TSgt Thomas.

Salvage efforts began at once, with Vietnamese divers locating and searching the submerged wreckage. The aircraft was raised with cables and the bodies of Major Swenck, Captain George, and A1c Prose recovered. While the wreckage was being towed to a more

secure location, the cabling broke and the wreckage sank once more. On 27 November, divers once again searched the wreckage for Thomas' body, and the wreck was raised a second time for a further search. Thomas was not found, nor was he found during ground searches of the river banks downstream. His body was never recovered.

(Sources: the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association, the POW Network, Task Force Omega, and James Henton's compilation of Air Force helicopter losses

24 Oct 2002

Memories of My Father, A Vietnam War Hero

"The deceased, Major Robert B. Swenck, was survived by his wife, Donna, and his three daughters, Stacy, Lori and Heidi."

How strange I felt reading that obituary! At age twelve, what had I survived? I still lived in our little brick house in Fern Creek, Kentucky, I still went to Fern Creek High School, and I still slept in my own bed at night. My father had died in Vietnam, his chopper shot down by a sniper on Thanksgiving Day in 1971. I didn't understand then, as I do now, thirty-one years later, what I had survived.

The morning after Thanksgiving that year, as we were eating donuts and listening to music, an unmarked car pulled up in the driveway. Two men in dress blues stepped out. All military wives know what that means, and the men had only spoken a few words before my mother collapsed on the front porch. They carried her crying to the couch, and we were told our father's chopper had crashed in the river and he was missing in action. Mom sobbed; I felt shocked and numb. I took my two little sisters, ages six and nine, downstairs to the basement and kept them there. We stayed quiet and listened, forgotten in the confusion. For two days we made sandwiches and stood apart, watching. Dad's body was recovered two days later. Mom cried some more. People brought us food for a few days and then we were left alone. Mom stopped crying and walked around the house with a distant stare. A dark cloud was in our house for a long time.

For months I imagined my father showing up at my classroom door to take my hand and walk me home. Even now, I still wonder if

his spirit will ever visit me in a dream, giving me guidance I still long for.

Soon after his death I remember running into Mom in a dark hall of the house and her sharp intake of breath as she said, "You look just like your Dad." She searched my face and saw every resemblance; my cheeks, eyes, nose, and frown stung her heart. I couldn't help being a reminder of sorrow for my mom. Did we remind everyone we knew of Death, our faces omens of the grief Death brings?

We had been mainly sheltered from television images of the war. Besides, those men wearing camouflage running around on the ground were not my dad. My dad was a pilot, he wore a plain flight suit when he went to work. He was doing something Top Secret and the return address on his letters was fake. As far as I knew, Dad was at work on a very long mission. I didn't understand what war was. Then he was killed. As I grew older, I came to hate the Vietnam War and blamed the government, even though I had no idea about the war's causes and avoided any mention of it. I became a rebellious teenager, transforming hurt into toughness. I grew bitter in my ignorance. Hating the war helped when I had to tell someone my father died fighting there. I couldn't say he had been drafted unwillingly; he was a career soldier who served two tours in Vietnam. Joining in the belief that it was a bad war made it easier to get along with others who hated it, which was most everyone I met. I did not know then that my father had been a hero.

I found out about that from The Trunk. On Thanksgiving Day 1996, the 25th anniversary of his death, Mom appeared and deposited a heavy blue trunk in my living room. She firmly announced that these were my father's things and were now mine to keep. She was finished with them. I wasn't so sure I wanted the trunk, and I put it away in the closet. Many months later I opened it and found my father's blue uniform, several medals and a large stack of letters.

I had seen the medals as a child, set out on the bookcase in the basement. He had earned them during his first tour in 1969. Now I saw what they were: A Silver Star (one of the top medals a soldier can earn), three Distinguished Flying Crosses, an Airman's Medal for Valor (he was most proud of this one), eight Air Medals and a Purple Heart. I read over 100 letters he had written to Mom and to us. I found out that Dad was a highly skilled Air Force chopper pilot for

the 20th Special Operations Squadron (the Green Hornets) who was flying "sensitive and classified missions" on the real, secret front lines of the war. The 20th SOS's mission was to rescue long-range reconnaissance patrols on the ground in Cambodia during a time when both the United States and North Vietnam were denying any involvement there. He repeatedly flew extremely hazardous missions head-on into gunfire with frequent disregard for his own life. One time he and his men ran to a crashed and burning chopper and lifted it up enough to free a man who had been pinned underneath. Reading the letter he wrote to my mother that same evening took my breath away.

Since opening the trunk, I have researched the war and asked my mother questions. She bravely told me how they met and what kind of husband and father he was. They grew up in Okolona, Kentucky and met when Mom was about ten years old. She wanted to play baseball with the boys and Dad said, "Aw, let her play a while. Then she'll go away." They were high school sweethearts at Southern High School; she was a cheerleader and he was on the basketball team. He courted her from Western Kentucky State, and she followed him there two years later.

My search for information has intensified since Sept. 11, 2001. Seeing the faces of those who had lost loved ones made me know I could not wait any longer to tell my family's story. I wanted those children to know someone understood their loss. I recently made several Internet contacts with men who flew with my father. They are telling me stories about his bravery and skill, and about his ever-present wit. Everyone respected him. The day he died, he had flown in the rain to rescue fourteen Navy men from battle. After sharing a turkey sandwich with them at their home base, he was flying back low under the rain clouds when a sniper's bullet shot him dead in midair.

My own memories have surfaced. I remember him being tall and having feet so big I could sit on one and get a ride around the house. He and Mom had lots of friends and gave big parties. He would kiss Mom in the kitchen or squeeze her knee during road trips in the car. He affectionately rubbed my head until my hair shook, and he challenged me to always do my best in school. He taught us proper manners in a restaurant. His shadowy presence looming in the doorway was enough to make my sister and me stop our loud nighttime giggling and lay quiet as mice in our beds. He was always

telling jokes and could make anything sound funny. He told us he had earned the Silver Star by flying a general to use a real latrine.

When Dad returned from his first tour in Vietnam, he arrived at Standiford Field Airport still wearing his flight suit. The airport personnel made him enter the terminal through the back door so he wouldn't upset the passengers or be called a baby-killer. I remember Mom and us three girls waiting just inside the big plate glass windows, watching each person walk across the tarmac, looking for Dad. Suddenly Mom flew around toward us and spoke quickly in a tone that made me know her instructions were very important. "Sit here, girls. Wait and don't move. I have to go meet your father at another gate." Mom's look was stern and fierce, but she wasn't mad at us. We sat wide-eyed for a long time, and finally there was Dad walking down the hall, Mom clinging to his neck. We ran and grabbed his waist, his knees, whatever we could reach according to our heights. He tried to hug us all at the same time with different hugs. Mom needed a certain wife-hug, Heidi a baby hug up in his arms, and Lori and I some little girl hugs. Mine came with a little respect attached since I was the oldest. Lori got the rough house since she was a tomboy and his favorite. We were so happy to see him.

However, when Dad got home, he was different. When we three jumped on him to tickle him in his chair, he growled and pushed us away. He turned mean. He got mad at the dog over an accident and threw it up against the wall. He broke a guy's nose at a party for making a comment about Vietnam. Mom tells how he woke up from nightmares in a cold sweat. All he could think about was going back over there, and that's what he did a few months later. When we drove him to the airport, I cried uncontrollably in the car. I did not know that would be the last time I would ever see him.

I am proud to be Dad's daughter. My Mother deserves a medal of her own. She is an original Super Mom who worked full-time and raised three young girls up into happy, successful adults. The strength of both parents lives on in us. My sisters still don't like to talk about Dad, but one day our children will be glad to hear about him. Bob Swenck never saw his daughters graduate college (all three of us!) or get married; he can't kiss his grandchildren or hold his wife's hand as they grow old. Heroes historically have fought for a good cause. My father was a hero because he believed he was defending the freedom of his family and country. He could not know he was jousting against the windmills of Communism. The Viet Cong

was a real enough enemy, vicious in battle. He fought hard and bravely and gave his life for his fellow man. He deserves the same honor as any soldier. He did not die for nothing. He died for his belief in freedom, because he was a soldier doing his job. I write this to give him that honor.

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