

# MIA Funeral — His Mother Still Wonders

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By Jack Lynch

Funeral services will be held in Belmont today for a merchant seaman who disappeared in South Vietnam nearly 11 years ago, but the missing man's anguished mother still harbors doubts that the remains shipped home last week by the government are her son's.

It would not be the first time the government had been wrong about the fate of Stephen Michael O'Laughlin of Belmont, who was second officer on the freighter Express Baltimore when it steamed into Qui Nhon, about 300 miles northeast of Saigon, in December, 1965.

His mother, Soule O'Laughlin, said yesterday that she decided to accept the remains as her son reluctantly. "I don't believe this situation is resolved," she said.

O'Laughlin, a 1964 graduate of the California Maritime Academy, had made several trips to Vietnam before he sailed aboard the Express Baltimore, according to his mother.

During the Nhon stay in Quin the ship's captain became ill and was taken to Saigon for treatment. O'Laughlin left the ship on December 15 to join his captain in Saigon and assist him back to Quin Nhon.

There was no report of his reaching Saigon, and a military

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investigation found no clues to what might have happened to him. Later that month, Mrs. O'Laughlin was notified her son was missing.

Two years later, in 1967, the United States Embassy in Saigon sent Mrs. O'Laughlin a "presumption of death" report on her son. This was rescinded by the State Department a year later when a Vietnamese soldier who had escaped from the Viet Cong reported that O'Laughlin was being held prisoner.

But O'Laughlin's name did not appear on the list of prisoners of war held by North Vietnam that was provided to the U.S. in early 1973.

Later in 1973, a team from the U.S. Joint Casualty Resolution Center was in the Quin Nhon area searching for the body of an American pilot believed to have been buried in the area.

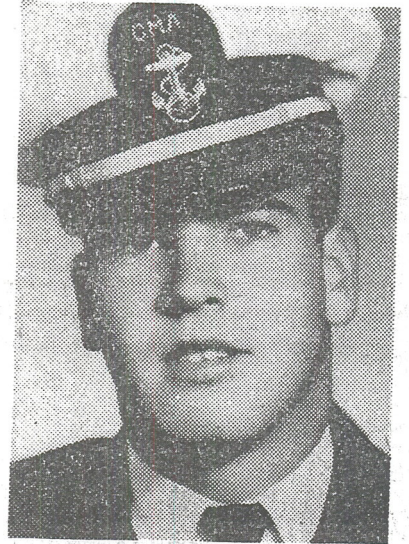
In the course of this search they unearthed the remains of several bodies and one of these — the government declared three years later — was Stephen O'Laughlin.

Colonel William Annetti of the Army Adjutant General's office in Washington said in a telephone interview yesterday that Vietnamese who buried the body told the U.S. team the body had washed ashore at a point about 11 miles from Quin Nhon on Dec. 29, 1965, two weeks after O'Laughlin's disappearance.

Annetti said the three years it took to identify the body was "not excessive." He said other remains have taken longer.

The finding in O'Laughlin's case, limited mostly to dental evidence, was made at a central identification lab in Honolulu.

Mrs. O'Laughlin, an active member of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia who still holds hope that her son might be alive, said she had no idea the government possessed remains it thought might be her son until just



STEPHEN O'LAUGHLIN  
He disappeared in 1965

three weeks ago.

Last November the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in Washington asked for any of her son's dental records she might have. She sent records provided by the Naval Reserve, of which her son was a member, and those provided by a retired dentist who had treated her son when he was a child.

Last month, said Mrs. O'Laughlin, a State Department spokesman called her to say they had definitely identified the remains as being her son. She replied she would not accept them until she had an opportunity to assess the information they based their decision on.

A few days later Mrs. O'Laughlin, whose husband died in 1972, was visited by a man from the Joint Casualty Resolution Center, who showed her and other members of the family the medical evidence they had based their conclusion on.

"He said it was overwhelming," said Mrs. O'Laughlin, "but I still think there are some discrepancies."

She had an independent forensic dental investigation conducted by Dr. John Beckstead of San Mateo. He told her the remains "must be my son," Mrs. O'Laughlin said.

One thing that bothers her, she said, was that in the past few months the State Department has been pressuring her and other members of the National League of Families with missing relatives to

accept a change in status from missing to dead.

The services for O'Laughlin will be held at 11 a.m. today at the Carlmont Funeral Chapel, 1101 The Alameda, in Belmont, conducted by the Rev. Lawrence Walter, pastor of the First Congregational Church in Redwood City.

But it's not over yet for Mrs. O'Laughlin, who intends to continue her work on behalf of the National Families organization.

"I'm not convinced in my own mind and heart," she said, "that they are Stephen's remains."