

8 Years After His Death in North Vietnam, an American

NYTimes

By JAMES T. WOOTEN APR 5 1974
Special to The New York Times

ARLINGTON, Va., April 4 —Lieut. Col. Wilmer N. Grubb was buried here today, 2,616 days after his death in a North Vietnamese prison camp.

A misty rain settled softly on his widow, his aging parents and his four young sons as they joined scores of friends and relatives in a final tribute to the Air Force pilot who died a few days after he was shot down in early 1966.

His funeral today, with full military honors, was the first conducted for any of the 23 American prisoners of war whose bodies were released by North Vietnam and returned to this country last month — almost precisely a year after those prisoners who survived their internment were joyously welcomed back.

But the homecoming of Colonel Grubb and the others who died as captives, has gone almost unnoticed, another sign, perhaps, of the country's waning interest in the war, its issues, its anguish and its victims.

It was more than eight years ago that Colonel Grubb's body was interred in a cemetery just outside Hanoi, marked by a small headstone with his name inscribed in Vietnamese symbols. Now it rests beneath silver elms and oaks in Arlington National Cemetery, just down a long, green hill from Gen. John J. Pershing's grave, and within sight of the Washington Monument and the low, buff profile of the Pentagon.

"And so we commit the body of our friend to the earth and his everlasting spirit to the Lord," the Rev. Neil Cline intoned as he concluded his eulogy for his former Lutheran parishoner—and the quiet moment was immediately shattered by the explosive salute of a six-man Air Force firing party.

A Son He Never Saw

With each of their 18 shots, Roy, the seven-year-old son whom Colonel Grubb never saw, trembled and inched closer to his mother. Finally, as the firing died away, he reached up for her hand and stood motionless except for a trembling chin, staring hard at the silvery-gray coffin a few feet away.

The honor guard folded the American flag that had covered the coffin and Chaplain William G. Boggs, a colonel presented the tight, cloth triangle to Mrs. Evelyn Grubb.

"On behalf of a grateful nation," he said, "this flag is presented to you—a symbol of freedom and of liberty and of a country your husband served so very well."

Then, as the sound of taps faded, she and her boys and her husband's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Newlan Grubb of Aldan, Pa., turned from grave No. 8-658-F and were driven away in Air Force sedans.

"He was a hell of a guy," Col. James F. Young, one of eight former P.O.W.'s who attended the funeral and Colonel Grubb's roommate in Saigon for the two months before his final mission, recalled, "and he was one of the best reconnaissance pilots in the Air Force."

Colonel Grubb was 33 when he died. He would have been 42 in August.

He had hone that skill over the years since his graduation from Pennsylvania State University in 1955 with Air Force assignments all over the world, including an earlier stint in Vietnam.

'He Didn't Volunteer'

"But he wasn't all that crazy about going back," said Mrs. Grubb before the funeral. "He didn't volunteer, but when they said go, he went."

That was on Nov. 11, 1965—the last time she saw him. She was pregnant when they said good-by.

His first-born, Jeffrey, was nine years old. Ronald, the next child, was four, and Stephen, their third, was one.

"I was never particularly prescient," Mrs. Grubb said today before the funeral, "so I can't really say that I knew

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P.O.W. Is Laid to Rest in

American P.O.W. Buried in Arlington

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or thought I knew he wouldn't make it back. But I worried. If you love a pilot, you worry."

Colonel Grubb took his RF-101 jet screaming out of the Tan Son Nhut air base in Saigon on the morning of Jan. 26, 1966, with its two cameras loaded with film and a flight plan that would take him straight up the eastern coast of Vietnam, past the 17th parallel and then inland over North Vietnam.

His mission was to photograph bombing runs and to record damage inflicted by previous attacks. In the process, his plane was struck by ground fire, and minutes after his parachute floated him to the ground, he was a prisoner of war.

Causes of Death Given

On Feb. 4, nine days later, he died. A death certificate

provided by the North Vietnamese when his body was returned last month listed the causes of his death as a ruptured spleen and lung congestion.

Nevertheless, his voice was heard on Radio North Vietnam in late February and a picture of him, alive, was released in early March, leading his family to believe that he was still alive.

It was not until December, 1970, that Mrs. Grubb received the first unofficial notification that her husband had died, a fact that was confirmed officially when the North Vietnamese gave the United States delegation to the Paris peace talks a list of names in January, 1973.

"It was inhuman—what they did to us," Mrs. Grubb said today. "All those years believing one thing or not knowing what to believe."

Mrs. Grubb, an active worker in several prisoner-

of-war groups, expressed some bitterness today at what she called the "disgraceful manner" in which Vietnam veterans were being treated and dealt with by the United States Government.

"Everybody is tired of talking about that war," she said. "But there is so much left to say."

That may have been on her mind later when her pastor, Mr. Cline, read from a World War I poem by John McCrae, which said:

*"If ye break faith with us
who die,
We shall not sleep, though poppies
grow in Flanders fields."*

In her only display of emotion, Mrs. Grubb leaned forward toward her husband's coffin and nodded her head affirmatively.

"The things that happened over there have to be talked about so they won't happen again," she said later. "After all, I have four sons."



Mourners following the coffin of Lieut. Col. Wilmer N. Grubb yesterday at Arlington National Cemetery. He left his widow