

The Wichita Eagle

A sister's efforts to find her missing brother finally pay off

By Roy Wenzl

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After Dean Klenda went missing in action during the Vietnam War, his sister worked relentlessly with the U.S. military for decades to keep a search going for his remains.

When they finally called and told Deanna Klenda that Dean was coming home, she felt shock and disbelief. But the military people on the other end of the phone were friends of hers by then. They assured her it was true.

"Thank God," she told them.

The U.S. military's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency on Friday issued a statement announcing that F-105 Thunderchief fighter pilot Maj. Dean Klenda would be given a military funeral next Saturday in Pilsen, Kan., with full military honors. The date, Sept. 17, will be the 51st anniversary of the day Klenda went missing.

His sister, a Wichitan, had traveled the country for decades for military briefings to families of service people missing in action.

"I was always on top of my brother's case," she said Friday.

"What are the odds they'd ever find even a piece of him? He'd ejected and landed in the jungle."

HER BEST FRIEND

For Deanna Klenda, the search for her brother was more than a labor of familial love. That guy in the dress whites in the photograph was not just her brother.

Dean Klenda was the guy who went off to war for love of country and flying. He was above all that her best friend, her fellow farm kid on the Klenda family farm near Marion. He protected and taught and cheered her through childhood.

And because their ancestry was Czech and because Czech DNA tends to infect its owners with an addictive fondness for kolaches, superbly brewed beer and polka dancing, Dean Klenda was her polka partner in all the community dances of her childhood.

He would have been 76 now; he was only 25 when he died.

‘VERY DIFFICULT JOB’

Klenda was a pilot assigned to the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron; the pilots of that squadron flew F-105 Thunderchiefs, providing tactical support for bombing missions during the war.

On Sept. 17, 1965, Klenda’s squadron was helping attack targets east of Hanoi, in Son Law province, in the country then called North Vietnam.

“During Klenda’s mission, his aircraft was struck by enemy fire, causing him to eject from the Thunderchief,” the military’s statement said. “He failed to separate from his ejection seat before it impacted the ground.”

A military review board later amended his status from missing to dead.

Deanna and her parents accepted that verdict. But then she spent decades encouraging the military to find him.

“These are great people who really know what they are doing in doing a very difficult job,” she said.

Between 1993 and 1999, the U.S. military said on Friday, teams including U.S. and Vietnamese personnel found and searched what they thought was Klenda’s crash site. They found the place where they thought Klenda’s ejection seat had hit the ground. But they found no remains.

On Nov. 10, 2011 — 12 years after they’d given up finding remains at the crash site — another joint U.S.-Vietnamese team re-investigated the site after they found a local farmer who told an unusual story.

The farmer told them he’d found human remains at the crash site and had taken them to a farm field five kilometers away.

Three years later, from Nov. 4 to Nov. 29, 2014, U.S. and Vietnamese searchers excavated the farm field — and found remains, including teeth still intact enough to provide dental clues to the dead person’s identity. U.S. military researchers then tested the remains using dental records, DNA and isotopic analysis.

Deanna Klenda got a phone call one day soon after.

They'd found her brother.

"I'm not one of those jump-up-and-down-and-yippee kind of people," she said. "I just stood there in disbelief. I'm still in disbelief. "And I said 'Thank God, thank God, thank God.'"

LOVE OF POLKA

The loss of her brother hurt deeply, but she grins easily when she talks of him. Dean Klenda was four years older than her, a difference some siblings find difficult to span. But not him, she said.

He looked after her, nurtured her.

"He'd rather spend time with me than anybody else," she said.

The Klenda kids were close to their now-deceased parents, Albert and Pauline. And they all loved their polka music.

"There were polka clubs then, and my folks were well known because they could really, really polka," Deanna Klenda said. "And my brother and I learned to really polka, too.

"We'd run up to our parents at a dance, when they were really dancing fast, and we'd call out, 'I bet we can polka dance better than you!'"

And with that, the Klenda clan would kick up their heels, and spin and twirl each other around.

"I tell you what, we had a blast.

"We'd even polka dance at home at the farm after lunch." Her brother studied aeronautical engineering at Kansas State University for two years, before switching his major to agricultural economics. But he still liked flying.

He joined the campus' Reserve Officers Training Corps, then went to war.

She will help lay Dean to rest next Saturday with gratitude to him, to the U.S. military, and to the Vietnamese government, our former enemies.

"It's nice to feel some happy here," she said.

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