

BRINGING DAD HOME

I am not sure how you are supposed to feel when you find out that the remains of your father, who died in 1967 at age 29 during the Vietnam War, have been found 44 years later. I only know what I felt - shock... confusion... joy.... sadness... all of the above. But mostly I was struck with the feeling that my family was extremely fortunate. I was about to find out just how fortunate we were.

This all began in February 2011 during a phone call with Allen Cronin of JPAC (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Commission). Funded in the 1980's, JPAC's primary mission is to return fallen servicemen to their families. I still don't know how or why my father, Captain Darrell John Spinler, USAF was chosen to be found. I know that for whatever reason, despite having been classified as "no further pursuit" twice, JPAC kept going back to the site of his crash to continue searching for him. The search began in 1993. I guess the third time really is the charm because Dad's remains were finally located in November 2010 and positively identified in January 2011.

Dad was born on June 16th and died in Laos on June 21st when his plane crashed while on a bombing mission. The decision was made during the call with Allen to bring Dad home to Browns Valley, MN for burial on June 18th, Father's Day weekend. The timing just seemed right.



Captain Darrell John Spinler

I still remember taking Dad to the airport for Vietnam when I was 5 and crying the whole way to the airport and all the way back home, convinced I would never see him again. During the call with Allen, we were offered the option of escorting Dad's remains home to Minnesota from the JPAC lab in Honolulu, HI and I knew this was something I needed to do. What followed that February was a flurry of activity – phone calls, emails, and travel plans. Our trip to bring my father home would take us from Denver to Honolulu, Honolulu to Seattle, Seattle to Minneapolis, Minneapolis to Fargo, and finally from Fargo to Browns Valley, MN, my father's home town. I was fortunate that Dawn would be able to accompany me on this journey.

Honolulu and JPAC

My flight from Denver to Honolulu on June 13th was uneventful but was also the longest flight I had ever been on. I quickly met up with Dawn, Allen, and Ruben Garza of JPAC, who would be with us through the entire trip and would become our rock through this process.



Ruben Garza, Dwayne, and Allen Cronin

Our first morning in Hawaii, we were fortunate to meet up with Pastor Kenton and Eileen Rohrberg for breakfast. They were in Honolulu for a friend's wedding. Pastor Kenton is the pastor of the Messiah Lutheran church in Hays, KS and is very close to Dawn's family. Upon hearing of my father's return back in February, Pastor Kenton authored the poem below. The poem means a lot to me and was included in the memorial folder at Dad's funeral.

The Bugler

The bugler sounds,
and the haunting melody calls the body to rest
heads bow and many thoughts of what might
have been flood the mind, and the heart weeps.

Long ago, eons it seems more than a life time –
the battle was enjoined and the call went forth,
duty called and the honorable served as asked.

What might have been will never be known, and
yet what was is accepted and treasured as
the well of tears once more opens and flows.

At the sound of the bugler
a grateful nation pauses, looks up and takes heed –
the fallen has returned home, and the
peace of God rests on those who will receive it.

Pastor Kenton Rohrberg

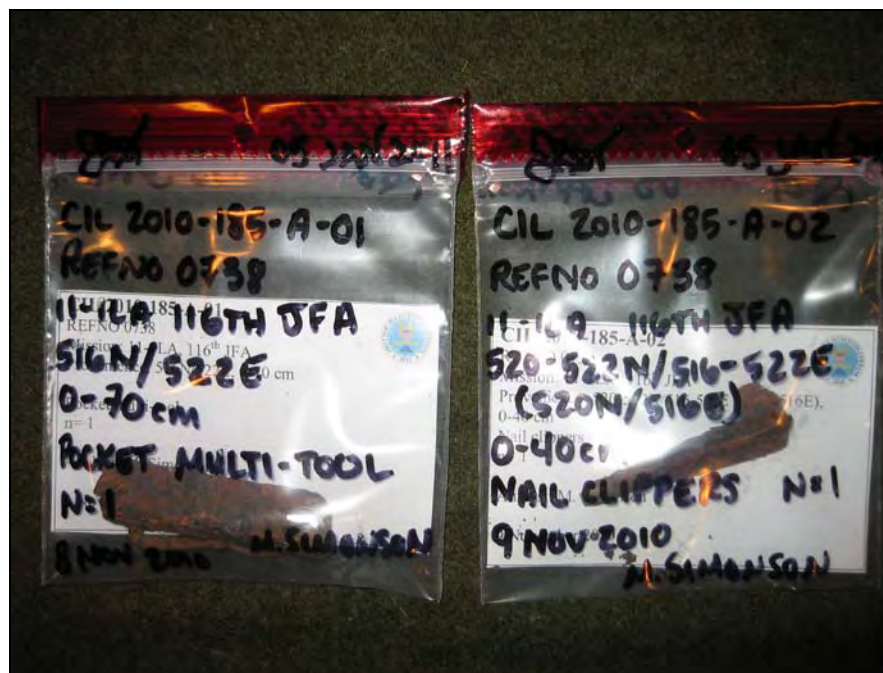
Later that morning, Allen and Ruben took us to Hickam Air Force Base for a meeting with the JPAC team involved in finding Dad. We were first introduced to Johnie E. Webb, Deputy to the Commander for Public Relations and Legislative Affairs at JPAC. Next we met Marin Pilloud, PhD in the Central Identification Laboratory. Dr. Pilloud was the Team Leader in Laos and led the team of almost 100 people who found Dad. Dr. Pilloud was very warm and personable as she shared details of their discovery. When I first learned who she was, I remember wanting to reach out and touch her arm, this person I did not know, so intimately linked to my father.



Dawn, Marin Pilloud, PhD (JPAC) and Dwayne

We asked Dr Pilloud if she had even seen a picture of Dad, unsure yet if she understood what this really meant to our family – that he was a real person and not just bones and teeth. She told us that several pictures of Dad had been posted around the excavation site to help motivate the team and as a more personal reminder of their mission – finding my father. As we finished our tour, I asked Dr. Pilloud if she was okay with my giving her a hug and she agreed. I cried, she cried, and I thanked her for finding Dad. She replied, “It was my honor.”

Allen and Reuben then lead us to the room where Dad's remains were located. Dawn and I were allowed some private time alone with him. Laid out on a green blanket were the personal items recovered from the crash site – three of Dad's teeth, his rusted finger nail clipper, and his pocket knife. Some may question why I would include a picture of my father's teeth below. Here is why - my father was a soldier and soldiers sometimes die. To me, this is an important reminder of the life he and many others choose to live.



Dad's teeth, knife and nail clipper

When we were ready, I was permitted to assist a senior Air Force Officer in preparing Dad for transport. We carefully folded his teeth within the green blanket, creating a long rectangle with the blanket. Together, we lifted the blanket onto a gurney from a hearse waiting outside. We next placed an Air Force blue, fitted blanket on top of the gurney, covering the entire top. This is the moment it first became “real” for me. The JPAC funeral director and senior Air Force Officer slowly rolled the cart toward the open end of the hearse. For the first time, I really saw my father’s body and spirit being placed into the hearse. I remember thinking about Pastor Kenton’s poem...the bugler sounds... what might have been will never be known... I sobbed heavily as I watched it drive slowly away. Still sobbing, Dawn held my hand and we walked back inside the JPAC building. There were several minutes of respectful and solemn silence by all staff and personnel as we wrapped up our visit at JPAC. I would keep the nail clipper and give the knife to my brother, David when we met up later in Minnesota.

Ruben and Allen were phenomenal throughout, allowing our own emotional process to occur while always remaining available to us when needed/requested. They offered to take us anywhere we wanted for our remaining time on the island, but we felt we needed to be close to Dad, to things representing him, and to be close to those who shared similar values. So after visiting JPAC, we headed to Pearl Harbor, the USS Arizona Memorial, and Ford Island.



Dawn and Dwayne at Pearl Harbor

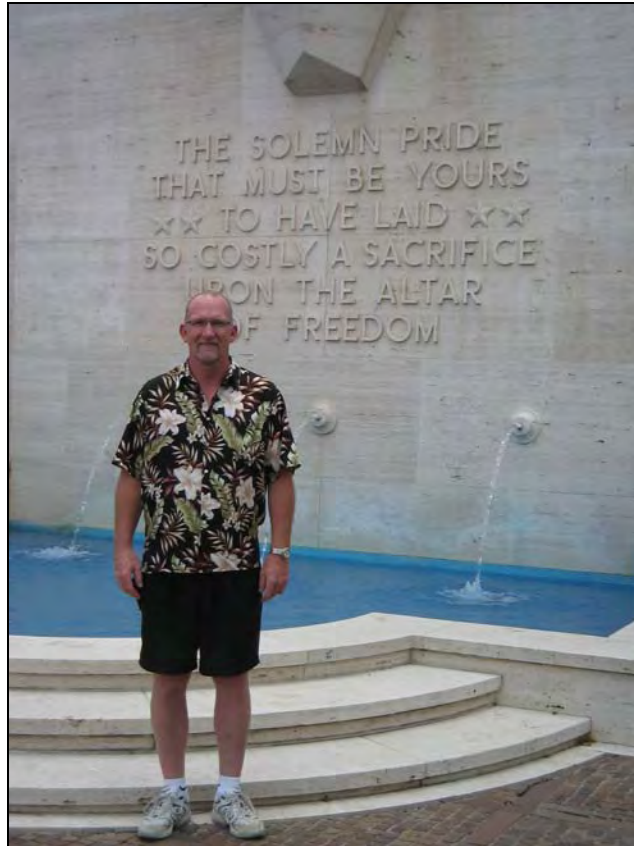


On duty at Pearl Harbor



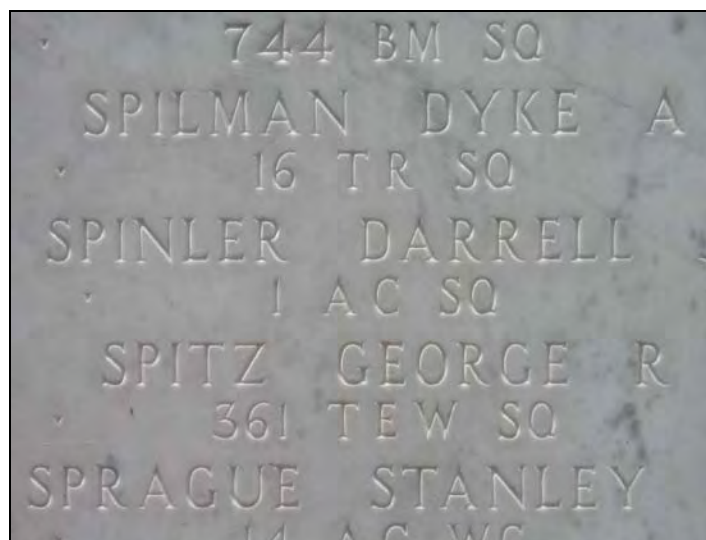
Flag through the top of the Memorial

After Pearl Harbor, we drove to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu.



Dwayne at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (aka Punchbowl Memorial)

While there, Allen and Ruben showed us where Dad's name was engraved on the marble wall section devoted to those who died in the Vietnam War.



Dad's name at the National Memorial Cemetery

I remember thinking about the Vietnam War and wondering why we had been called there. Had my father died in vain? Others may disagree but I got my answer when I saw an inscription on the memorial for Vietnam that read:

THIS MEMORIAL HAS BEEN ERECTED
BY THE UNITED STATE OF AMERICA
IN PROUD AND GRATEFUL MEMORY
OF HER SOLDIERS SAILORS MARINES AND AIRMEN
WHO LAID DOWN THEIR LIVES
IN ALL QUARTERS OF THE EARTH
THAT OTHER PEOPLES
MIGHT BE FREED FROM OPPRESSION

...that those who have not experienced freedom might have this chance.

The next day, we did a little relaxing with Ruben and Allen in the afternoon and headed to the airport for our return flights home. It would be a long journey in a very short 24 hours. Our flight from Honolulu to Seattle departed around 10 p.m. We said goodbye to Allen, as Ruben would take us from here. We were introduced to the pilot and permitted onto the tarmac so I could witness Dad's transport case being placed onto the conveyor and loaded on the plane. The HI airport had just been fined \$50M for violations, so security was tight and we were very fortunate to be permitted this.

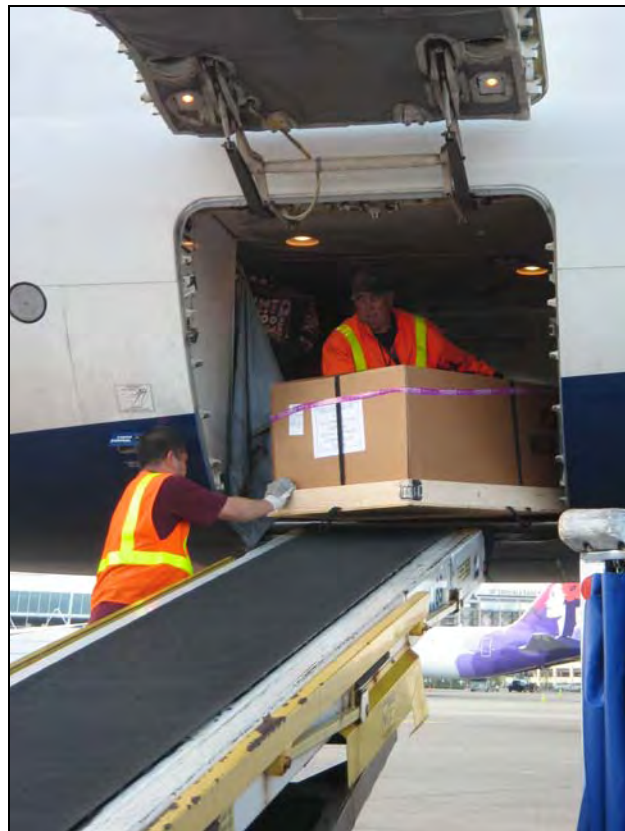
Dad's journey home had begun.



On the tarmac in Honolulu

Seattle

As we were making our final decent into Seattle, the Captain announced that he had the privilege of flying the remains of my father on board and shared Dad's story with the other passengers. He asked everyone to remain seated until Dawn, Ruben and I had departed the plane. The entire cabin applauded following the Captain's announcement. As we left the plane, several people called out, "Thank you for your father's service" and "Sorry for your loss." I remember feeling so touched by the recognition of my father's service and even a little guilty for the attention. After all it was my father who had sacrificed so much and not me. Little did I know the recognition he would receive over the next couple of days. We were again allowed down to the tarmac to witness Dad's transport case being moved from the plane to a hangar for a short layover before our next leg of the journey.



On the tarmac in Seattle

A few hours later, we were ready to depart for Minneapolis. We followed Dad's transport case as we were driven from the hangar to the plane. As we rode, Dawn and I observed a formation of Seattle Port Authority Police and Firemen near an airplane. We found out later we both had the same reaction, "Look, there must be another fallen service person they are lined up to honor." We soon realized that the formation was there to honor Dad, to witness his transport case being loaded onto the plane. We were again overcome by emotions of pride, gratitude, and sorrow.



Leaving Seattle

Many of them came by after to shake our hands and extend their condolences. We were again allowed to board the plane first. As passengers began boarding, finding their seats and stowing their carry-on bags, I noticed an older male passenger wearing a "Go Army" cap who sat down two rows in front of me. Attached to his carry-on duffle bag, I saw a Vietnam Veteran ball cap. He did not appear to be having a particularly good day. I thought to myself that he has no idea how special this flight might become for him.

As the plane taxied for takeoff, Captain Tom Perillo, a Chief Pilot at the MSP Airport, announced that he had the very special honor and privilege of flying the remains of my father back to his home state of Minnesota. He added that Dawn and I were on board escorting him back home. The entire cabin again burst into applause.

When we reached cruising altitude, I got out of my seat to personally thank the veteran two rows in front of me for his service in Vietnam. I told him that I was escorting my father home, as announced at the beginning of the flight. I knelt down on one knee and we shared a firm handshake while exchanging mutual heartfelt tears together. I have always recognized the unique pain seen in the eyes of a veteran. We shared a moment and I then returned to my seat. Within two minutes, this gentleman reached up to his overhead bag, removed his Vietnam Veteran cap, and approached. With tears in his eyes, he humbly asked, "Would you place this in the casket for me on behalf of all our Vietnam brothers?" I told him we would be honored to do so.

As we made our final approach, Captain Perillo announced that we were making our final decent and preparations for landing. He then informed the cabin that he had asked the ground crew to provide a Water Cannon Salute for Dad, typically an honor given only to airline pilots upon retirement and completion of their final flight. Dawn and I again started crying as we saw the fire engines at the gate, spraying water over the plane in honor to Dad. As we left the plane, Dawn heard Captain Perillo firmly order that everyone in the cabin remain seated until Dad's remains had been taken off the plane, again in honor of Dad. He also asked Todd Jacobson, the Traffic Management Officer on duty in the control tower that day to take pictures of the landing and salute, which Todd later emailed to us.



Final approach into Minneapolis



Touching down in Minnesota



Water cannon salute from the ground



Water cannon salute from inside the plane



Water Cannon Salute from inside the plane

As I walked down the stairs to the tarmac, we were greeted by Captain Perillo. With tear-filled eyes, we shook hands and he told me how personally honored he was to captain this flight. Together, we watched as Dad's transport container was removed from the plane and placed on a special Veteran Honor cart. There are only three airports in the US that have this cart. On the side it reads, "ALL GAVE SOME BUT SOME GAVE ALL."





On the tarmac in Minneapolis and with Captain Perillo

Captain Perillo is truly a special, special man. He later emailed me that following this flight he had called his own father, a Korean War veteran. Captain Tom shared his experience and a few tears with his Dad that night. He wrote that it was a special moment for them and thanked my father for giving him this opportunity. We now consider Captain Perillo family.

Once we were inside the terminal, we met a female representative from Delta - I wish I could remember her name – and Air Force officer, Joseph E. Hennessy. Officer Hennessy works at the airport and had just heard about Dad's flight that morning. We later found out he had gone home over his lunch hour to change into his dress uniform. He wanted to be sure he was there to greet us, dressed appropriately. As the Delta representative, seen in the photo below standing next to me, escorted us to and from our flights, I was struck by how much this woman reminded me of my mother, who died of a broken heart in 1985. I knew Mom would not miss this! My parent's love was truly special and my mother never fully came to terms with his death.



Leaving Minneapolis for Fargo

It felt good to be in Minnesota again. It had been about 17 hours since we left Honolulu and we were almost home to Browns Valley.

As we boarded the plane for Fargo, we were met by a very special flight attendant – again, I wish I could remember her name. She was crying as she greeted us, saying “I am a proud American and I am so honored to be on this flight with you. I so appreciate your father and his sacrifice for our county. Thank you.” She and I shared a long embrace before Dawn and I took our seats. Again, we were struck by the warm welcome on the plane. When a couple in the First Class cabin heard why we were on the flight, they offered to give up their seats to us. We declined but appreciated their generous offer.

Fargo

When we arrived in Fargo, the pilot ordered that the cabin passengers remain seated while we were allowed to deplane. As Dawn walked ahead of me down the isle of the plane, a man commented rather firmly, “Where does she think she’s going? Only the escort is supposed to leave the plane.” Dawn softly replied to him, “I’m part of the family”. Dawn later said that she felt grateful that this man cared enough to say something to ensure appropriate respect was paid to Dad. Not everyone would have done so.

We were tired. As we stepped off the plane, we first saw the Air Force Honor Guard awaiting our arrival, standing in formation. We then saw the lineup of Patriot Guards, there to help escort Dad from Fargo to the funeral home in Rosholt, SD. Tears again began to stream down my face. I next saw Aunt Sharon and we ran into each other’s arms, embracing for some time. Soon, my Uncle Bill, cousins Johnny, Jan, Jody and their families joined us. As we gathered around the plane, I remember looking up into the windows of the terminal. People stood shoulder-to-shoulder in each window watching from inside.



Patriot Guard and police escort in Fargo



Aunt Sharon, Dwayne and the Patriot Guard in Fargo



The Honor Guard in Fargo



The Honor Guard in Fargo



Aunt Sharon, Dwayne and Uncle Bill



Dwayne and Cousin Johnny



Dwayne and cousin Jan



Dwayne and cousin Jodi

From the airport, the Patriot Guards and a highway patrol car led us to Rosholt, SD to the funeral home. It was shortly after we started this drive that Dawn and I saw something we will never forget. On a grassy area beside the road stood a father, mother, and their young son, likely 5 or 6 years old. They were standing with their right hands over their hearts, holding American flags as we drove past. I don't know who they are but I will never forget them.



Leaving the Fargo Airport

As we drove the interstate to Eggers Funeral home in Rosholt, we noticed some vehicles starting to pass our car. As they became aware of the Patriot Guard and the hearse in front of us, the vehicles would turn their lights on, back off their speed, and fall in line behind us. I remember feeling grateful to them for their acts of respect. It was close to 10:30pm when we finally made it to Rosholt. Despite the late hour, we saw several people standing in their yards or looking through windows as we drove into town.



Finally arriving in Rosholt

Browns Valley

That night, we drove to Browns Valley to meet up with my son Darrell John, my sister Shannon, her husband Matt, and her son Brandon at the Wing-N-Fin Resort. They had driven from Colorado together. On the way to the resort, we all saw the most incredible moon, huge and hanging low in the clear sky. Despite the moon, it was dark there in the middle of the country and Shannon and Matt missed the resort. After a few phone calls, we met up with Todd Johnson from the Wing-N-Finn in town around 11pm. Only in a small town would the resort owner agree to meet you at that hour and personally see that you found your way there safely.

Dawn's family arrived the next day, including her mom Dee, her father Dorvan and his wife Marge, her brothers Dan and Dana and their families, and her Aunt Karen and Uncle David. We all met up with Aunt Sharon's family that afternoon for BBQ at the park and awaited my brother David's arrival from California. Family came from Kansas, Massachusetts, Wyoming, Arizona, and many other parts of the country, to be together for Dad's coming home.

We also met up with Priscilla Porter and Barbara Tudor, the daughter and wife of Colonel Dave Tudor, a mentor of my father's. Barbara, who is now 90, and Priscilla shared stories of my mother and father. Barbara spoke of dancing with my father the night before he left for Vietnam. He told her then that when he got out of the service, he wanted to become a teacher and start a school for boys with special needs - very progressive for 1965. We all agreed that Dad, Mom, and Colonel Tudor were likely together watching the events unfold and smiling.



David finally makes it to Browns Valley



Shannon and Priscilla

That evening, we went to Eggers Funeral Home to have some private time as a family with Dad. Kelly Eggers told us that the Governor of Minnesota had ordered all flag be flown at half mast on Saturday in honor of Dad and that the Mayor of Browns Valley had designated June 18, 2011 as Darrell John Spinler Day.

The following day was Dad's service and interment. We all met outside of Rosholt and drove into Browns Valley together to the church. As we entered town, I noted things looked very much the same, yet different. I had not been in Browns Valley since my grandfather's funeral, nearly five years ago. Everything was so green, in perfect order, and everywhere we looked we saw American flags. Browns Valley had put on its finest for Dad.



Downtown Browns Valley

What we did not know is that earlier that morning, Patriot Guards from Minnesota, South Dakota and North Dakota had gathered at the church to form a flag line honoring my father.



Patriot Guard Flag Line gathering at the church

As we drove toward the church, we wandered a bit through town. We passed the nursing home where my grandmother had stayed for a short time. Outside sat a group of residents in lawn chairs, pleased to be a part of the town's special day.



Nursing home residents

When we rounded the corner to the church, we saw more than 60 Patriot Guards lining the street and parking lot.



Lining the street to the church

I am not sure I can really express what this meant to me. These gentlemen and women, most of whom had served, stood at attention as we drove by. Those in service saluted as my father's casket was removed from the hearse. I knew that they understood and I felt a strong connection to each one. At the front of the church, we saw a gentleman in camouflage and full Indian headgear. I knew it was his way of honoring my father for both of his cultures.



Paying respects

At the church, we met Nancy Kracht of Wheaton, MN. Nancy presented us with a POW bracelet inscribed with my father's name. She had purchased the bracelet in the 1960s when she heard of my father's death. Before the funeral, Nancy placed the bracelet inside Dad's casket. David also placed in the casket the many letters Dad had written to Mom while he was deployed. Mom had kept all of his letters. I never read any of these letters but know that each was a love letter home. And as promised, my son Darrell placed the ball cap into the casket for the man on the plane. I am very proud of my son, very much his own man at age 25.

The church service was also very special. Uncle Bill read a poem, "Remains" and Dad's cousin Hal shared stories of growing up with Dad. The church choir sang some beautiful songs. Only in a small town – the soloist for my favorite song was Todd Johnson, owner of the Wing-N-Finn.

Following the service, we boarded one of several buses for the cemetery. As we made our way through the countryside to the cemetery, we again saw people honoring my father. Many sat at intersections or at the end of their drives, waving flags and paying their respect. And again at the cemetery, the ever present Patriot Guard and veterans stood by.



Awaiting Dad at the cemetery

As we waited for the interment to begin, I was grateful there was time to thank each and every one of the Patriot Guards for their service and taking the time to be there for my Dad. I wish I could tell you the name of every veteran there but I cannot. I can share with you some of their faces however. Each face is engrained in my memory and my heart. Many veterans were in their formal uniforms. The Patriot Guard showed their American pride in their clothing as well, worn well and clearly demonstrating their love of their country and their time in the service. While I felt strongly about them all, I felt closest to those who had served in Vietnam. One man was particularly interesting to me. He wore an orange shirt and told me he arrived at Pleiku Air Force Base several months after my father had died. He also flew Douglas A1E Skyraiders – the same plane my father flew. I thought again about Pastor Kenton's poem and things that might have been... and was glad he had safely returned to this own family.



Ready to pay respects



The hearse arrives



Thanking the Patriot Guard



Thanking the Patriot Guard

We met many people who knew my father as a child, in high school, or college. We were grateful for the stories they shared of their time with him. We also met people from the area who had never met him but knew of him. Others had never heard of him until recently. Many came to pay their respects while some just knew they needed to be with us but did not really know why.

Soon it was time for the flyover. As we sat and waited, the cargo plane slowly approached on the horizon. As it drew close, the pilot tipped the plane's wings in recognition and then veered off to the north over our heads. It was an awesome sight.



Flyover coming in over the buses

Once the flyover was complete, it was time to begin. Dad's casket was removed from the hearse, the flag folded, and Chaplain Rob Sugg from Grand Forks, ND spoke at the gravesite.



Honor Guard removing the casket from the hearse



Readying the flag for presentation



Chaplain Suggs speaking gravesite

I have always been so impressed with military personnel, especially the care and precision with which they perform their ceremonial duties. These particular gentleman and woman did not let me down. Each action, from removing the casket, to the deliberate slow steps walked, to draping and folding the flag, to the playing of taps and the 21 gun salute, was carefully choreographed. I had finally run out of tears.



Front row: Barbara Tudor, David, Dwayne, Dawn, Sharon and Bill
Second row: Priscilla Porter behind David, Darrell John behind Dwayne



"The bugler sounds....what might have been will never be known..."



Readying the flag for presentation



Presentation of the flag to David

The flag presentation words were haunting but for the first time, I felt a profound sense of peace:

“On behalf of the President of the United States, the Department of the Air Force, and a grateful nation, we offer this flag for the faithful and dedicated service of your father, Captain Darrell John Spinler.”





Clouds reflected in the casket vault

Dad was finally home, my job was done.

Every story should have a conclusion and here is mine. Today is July 4, 2011. I look around and feel such pride and humility at what I see, as if I am seeing it for the first time – flags flying brightly, people of all ages lined up for parades, firecrackers shooting off in the distance. Here is what I have learned or reaffirmed through this experience:

1. People who serve others or their county are indeed a special breed and are worthy of our respect and honor for the sacrifices they make daily. We should all strive at every opportunity to help them know this.
2. Family is not limited by genetics or marriage. You can find family anywhere.

Dwayne Gerald Spinler
July 4, 2011