

RIVER CURRENTS



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A Final Homecoming for PCF-19 Sailor Tony Chandler

Saturday, June 16, 2001

Least we forget, Anthony Chandler was buried here Saturday, 33 years after an explosion rocked his Navy ship off the coast of Vietnam. A piece of Chandler's arm bone is all that made it back, but his family and friends laid that to rest in Centerville City Cemetery, finally home in his family plot.

They buried a bit of themselves, too, and some of the questions that had haunted them about that night, June 16, 1968, when Chandler and four others died as Navy patrol boat PCF-19 sank off a foreign land.

Jack and Bessie Young, Chandler's parents – sat in the shade of a funeral home tent, their daughter and son nearby. A contingent of old soldiers, most of whom never met Chandler but called him brother anyway, stood behind his coffin.

John Davis, who was there that night with Chandler, walked slowly to the podium, showing the painful gait he earned so many years ago.

"I just want to say something about Chandler, and this is what it's all about," said Davis, once Captain of PCF-19. Chandler was a Boatswain's boatswain. He stood out above everybody on our ship, on every ship." Davis looked out over the crowd, more than a hundred under the hot sun, "Some didn't even know him," Davis continued. "But they're here today, to honor him."

A black flag waved nearby. POW/MIA it read. "You are not forgotten." A group of bikers stood off away from the service, quiet in leather vest and jackets. None of them ever met Tony Chandler, they said. But still they know him well. "He's our brother," said one, a Vietnam Veteran "We came to welcome him home."

Davis was elbow to elbow with Chandler that night in Vietnam, he told Jack Young on Friday as they sat outside the families home in Warner Robbins. Davis and about a dozen other men who were near the incident, or just affected by it, traveled from across the country to meet the Youngs and pay their respect. Davis came from Ohio. Jim Steffes who never knew Chandler flew in from San Diego because he was on a Navy boat just south of PCF-19 the night it sank.

Pete Sullivan was on shore that night and coordinated gunfire as an attack broke out on the ocean before him. He never met Chandler, but came from New Hampshire just the same. Larry Lail came from Virginia, never knowing Chandler either. He drew the grim duty of diving through the Vietnamese waters that night retrieving bodies broken in the blast. Larry Lail was the lead Corpsman on the nearby Minesweeper USS Acme. It was his duty to recover and identify the bodies.

Bessie Young greeted each of them with a hug, her dark eyes near tears. You know it's just mind boggling that they loved him so much," she said later. Jack Young, a World War II veteran, sat outside and traded war stories. Eventually the conversation turned to that night in June 1968, and to Chandler, whose deep brown eyes—his mothers eyes—stared at the group from a stand of pictures on the table.

It was dark on the water, Davis remembered. And out of nowhere an explosion shook the boat, slinging David, blinded, into the water. When he put hands to his face, it was like touching a bowl of spaghetti," he said. Davis and crewman John Anderegg floundered in the water. Anderegg tried to keep fellow sailor

Frank Bowman above the surface, but let him go, realizing Bowman was dead. His body was never recovered.

Instead Anderegg, who has since died, swam to Davis. He was badly wounded and still carries so much shrapnel from the explosion that it sets off airport metal detectors. Chandler, then 23, was nowhere to be seen.

The men around the family's table swear they saw a Vietnamese helicopter that night and have no doubt that an enemy attack sunk Chandler's boat. But the U.S. government maintains the North Vietnamese never used helicopters during the war. An official investigation into the sinking of PCF-19 determined an American jet mistakenly targeted the boat and sank it with a missile shot. No disciplinary action was ever taken.

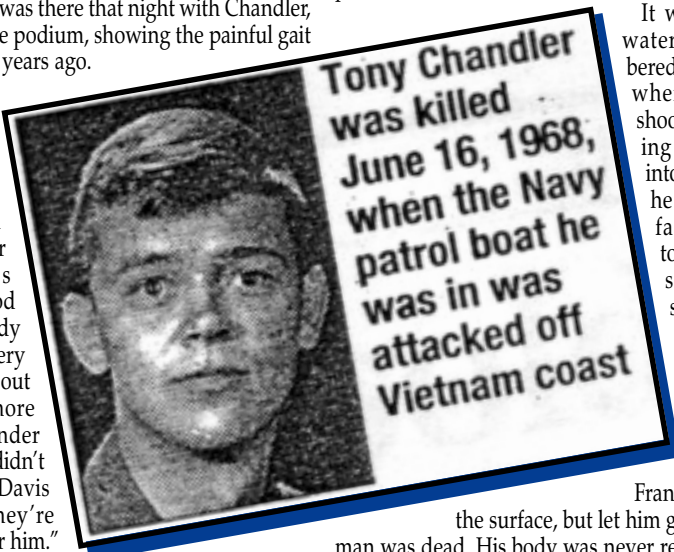
Lail also believes—no, he knows—that he recovered Chandlers body from the scene. He remembers zipping four men into body bags and that Bowman was the only PCF-19 crewmen unaccounted for. But only three bodies made it home, and Chandler's wasn't one of them. I

don't know what happened," Lail said, "I wish to God I did."

That night still haunts Lail so much that he picked up the phone 28 years later and called Chandler's family, tracking them down with help from the Warner Robins library. He said he told the family what happened that night and that their son wasn't just missing. He was dead. It was a hard thing to do but it started the healing process for the Youngs, something they said they'll ever be grateful for. They learned just this year that a fragment of Chandler's arm been found, that it was recovered by a Vietnamese fisherman in 1993, who told a search party he found the fragment and buried it near his home.

DNA testing confirmed in February that it belonged to Chandler, according to military documents. It was sent home to Warner Robbins. Davis, who sometimes

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From the Galley

ALBERT MOORE, NATIONAL PRESIDENT

Just a few short notes and thanks. Another reunion is behind us and we're already gearing up for 2002 in San Diego. For some reason this past reunion turned out to be something special. I'm not sure what it was but it seemed to me we jelled as one unit at this reunion not a unit of the MRFA or the 9th or supporting units but as a unit of Vietnam Veterans. It makes one feel good to see this kind of camaraderie between old friends and the new friends we made. We've received a number of kind remarks on the reunion and they were all appreciated. I've mentioned in the past we, the association, can find the hotel and set the reunions up but it's you the members who make these reunions possible if not for your support this could not happen. I want to thank each and every one of you who attended.

As for your Officers and Board members and their spouses and all the volunteers who assisted, what can I say they each did an outstanding job and should be commended for doing so. Thanks to Cheryl Schmitt and Michelle Shingshang and the rest of the Drawbridge staff for making our stay an enjoyable and memorable one. And the Northern Kentucky Convention Visitors Bureau as always did an outstanding job assisting with registration and furnishing all kinds of info on the area. NKCVB is one the better bureaus in the country to

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