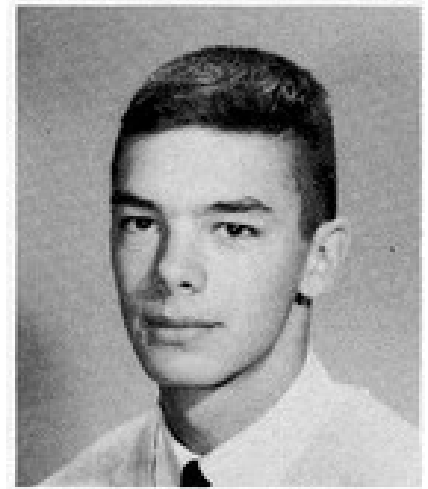




Thomas Fredrick "Tom" Riggs, son of Fred C. and Velma (Spangler) (1930-1983) Riggs, was born 24 July 1946, Wayne County, Michigan. He graduated in 1964 from Okemos High School . Tom enlisted in the US Army 17 January 1967 and was listed MIA 5 June 1973 Binh Dinh, Vietnam. Piloting a helicopter, he was reported downed in the South China Sea. He is eulogized at the Honolulu Memorial, Honolulu County, Hawaii.



The Courier-Journal (Louisville, Kentucky) Sunday 10 June 1973

Pentagon says 5 men died in Southeast Asia

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Defense Department yesterday reclassified five Army men previously listed as missing to dead from non-hostile action in Southeast Asia.

They were:

CWO Dean E. Clinton, son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Clinton, Dix, Ill.

CWO Quentin R. Beecher, son of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel E. Beecher Jr., Terre Haute, Ind.

CWO Thomas F. Riggs, husband of Mrs. Sandra M. Riggs, Troy, Mich.

S. Sgt. James R. Nelson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Melvin N. Nelson, Ludington, Mich.

S. Sgt. Ralph E. Uhlmansiek, son of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph M. Uhlmansiek, Cincinnati.

The Pentagon has been changing the status of men previously listed as missing on the basis of information provided by returned POWs and from other sources.

PENTAGON SAYS 5 MEN DIED IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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They were:

CWO Thomas F. Riggs, husband of Mrs. Sandra M. Riggs, Troy, Mich.

Detroit Free Press (Detroit, Michigan) Sunday 5 January 1975

THEY LIVE IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION

AGONY LINGERS FOR MIA FAMILIES

For most Americans, the Vietnam War is over. It sputtered to a halt almost two years ago, with the return of more than 500 American fighting men who had been prisoners of the communists in Southeast Asia.

For most Americans - but not all.

For the families of the more than 2,000 American military personnel who didn't return, either alive or dead, and for whom there has never been a satisfactory accounting, the war drags on.

Tom after Flight Training



Not knowing for certain whether their loved ones are alive or dead, many of these families have found it impossible to mourn their loss and put an end to their grief.

Instead, they suffer an almost daily anguish, the numbing fear that the missing men could still be caged away in makeshift jungle jails - being tortured slowly starving, going crazy.

They consider it plausible that the communists would hold onto some war prisoners as hostages against future American intervention in that part of the world. They also believe the enemy could wish to take advantage of the advanced technological know-how highly trained American officers possess.

EASY TO UNDERSTAND

For some of the missing men, there is good reason to believe they may indeed be dead. Their aircraft exploded in mid-air or disappeared over water. Army helicopter pilot **Thomas Riggs** of Southfield, for example, is known to have gone down in the South China Sea. His father, Fred Riggs, admits, "Tom is less likely to be alive than some of the other boys."

Unknown source for account below:

On 11 June 1967, WO1 Thomas F. Riggs, pilot; WO Dean E. Clinton, co-pilot; and SP5 James R. Nelson, crew chief; comprised the crew of a UH1D helicopter (serial 63-12958), call sign "Bamboo Viper 47," that was assigned to Company C, 227th Aviation Battalion, 11th Aviation Group, 1st Cavalry Division (Air-mobile). Also on board the Huey were passengers then WO1 Quentin R. Beecher and SP4 Ralph E. Uhlmansiek.



At 1900 hours, Bamboo Viper 47 departed Landing Zone Uplift, Qui Nhon Airfield for an evening operational mission. While en-route to their destination the Huey's flight path was along the coast and slightly out to sea. As the Huey flew south, it encountered bad weather. WO1 Riggs radioed the radar control centers at both Tuy Hoa Airfield and Qui Nhon Airfield requesting assistance in determining his position and directions to the closest military facility.

Both Tuy Hoa and Qui Nhon radar control centers had the Huey's image on their radarscopes. Both tried to direct the aircraft toward shore and a secure location. In addition to the verbal assistance, an airborne search and rescue (SAR) control aircraft was launched to intercept the helicopter and lead it to safety. However, in the

darkness and rain, the SAR aircraft failed to locate the helicopter.

At 2057 hours, WO1 Riggs reported that they were out of fuel, and that they were willing and prepared to make a water landing.

A full-scale search and rescue operation was immediately initiated using sea and aerial assets. Ground teams also searched along the shore in line with and on both sides of the current flow in case anyone or anything washed ashore.

SAR operations continued until 13 June, but found no trace of the helicopter or its crew and passengers.

At the time the search was terminated, Thomas Riggs, Dean Clinton, James Nelson, Quentin Beecher and Ralph Uhlmansiek were inexplicably listed Missing in Action indicating a chance of survival.

The last known location of Bamboo Viper 47 was approximately 21 miles east of the coastline, 25 miles northeast of Tuy Hoa and 41 miles southeast of Qui Nhon, Binh Dinh Province, South Vietnam.

Detroit Free Press (Detroit, Michigan) Tuesday 16 February 1997

MICHIGAN'S MISSING MEN

These are the 67 Michigan men listed as missing in action from the Vietnam War. The U.S. Department of Defense lists 38 of them as presumed dead, 28 as killed in action and one as having died in captivity, but none of their remains have been recovered and identified. Some of their families believe these men could still be alive. By service, they are:

THOMAS F. RIGGS of Farmington; missing since June 11, 1967 in South Vietnam.



[Rodney Ellis \(Alumni Assoc. President\) \(1965\)](#)

The following is a note from our Historian, Sherrie Paty Barber '66. I thought her comments and that of her husband Stephen would help us understand the circumstances and the ultimate sacrifice made by Tom Riggs.

From: STEPHEN AND SHERRY BARBER <sherrieinfla@embarqmail.com>

To: Rod Ellis <rodellis1000@aol.com>

Sent: Mon, Oct 30, 2017 9:47 am

Subject: OHS

Rod: Can't remember if I sent you this attachment on the listed death of Thomas "Tom" Riggs.

I checked the OHS website and located his sister, Jessalyn Riggs Sturtz, and her brief classmate bio. Jessalyn stated, "My younger brother, Tom, died in the Vietnam war." I then went to my newspaper sources and again perused newspapers from 1968-1979 looking for Tom, his marriage, his career, his MIA status, etc. I came up with one more small clip on him from the Detroit Free Press in 1975. I will include it in his bio.

You asked how he died.....from what I can gather his Army helicopter went down in the South China Sea. Someone must have seen it go down (plus tracked with radar) and reported it. I'm sure there was a search and rescue but nothing was found. I have not been able to locate any info on Tom's wife, Sandra. I don't know what happened to her and assume they did not have children. She was living in the greater Detroit area while he was in Nam.....Farmington to be exact.

Yes, Tom was a helicopter pilot. Interestingly Stephen was a Gunney Sgt. during the war and in charge of a unit that repaired helicopters, sending them back into the field. His small group worked day and night to make sure the birds flew safely. Stephen has mentioned several times machines coming in with bullet holes and damage from ground fire and explosions. His signature was the final authority stating the copter was air worthy. He had a lot of responsibility!

I've worked and worked on my memory to resurrect anything about Tom. All I can recall is that he was tall (everyone was, is and will always be taller than me!), thin, clean cut, bright minded and quiet. I doubt I said much of anything to him but saw him in the halls and may have had a class with him. Obviously, he had to be smart to fly helicopter. One of Stephen's cousins flew a copter in Nam (I think he had 2 tours) and then flew in So. America for 5 years. Dan missed more bullets than the Lone Ranger ever fired. He said copter got into the blood and he'd do anything to be flying again (he has only a 40% heart function now). Helicopter pilots are a breed unto themselves.....and Dan is one of them - a real character! I'm betting Tom was one of the breed. [Sherrie Paty '66](#)

[Laurel Winkel \(1968\)](#) July 21, 2018

The Riggs family lived across the street from us in Tacoma Hills; in fact my older sister dated Don Riggs, the oldest. The youngest, Ric Riggs was a childhood friend - I remember playing board games with him, "SOR-RY!" Tom was always the quiet one, so I don't have any distinct memories other than perhaps a little youthful crush? When he was declared MIA there was a bracelet campaign that had swept the nation; a donation provided you with a stainless steel bracelet with a service person's name on it. I'm not sure how I managed it (perhaps you could write in a request?) but mine had Tom's name on it. I wore it a long time, and remember feeling a little guilty when life moved on and it was time to take off the bracelet. It was sad to learn that he had been reclassified as dead, even though he had most likely perished at the time of the incident.

From: [Don Riggs <riggsdc@gmail.com>](#) (Tom's Brother and Okemos grad Class of 1960)

Date: Thu, Jun 6, 2019 at 2:00 PM

Subject: Re: Military Honor

From: [Don Riggs <riggsdc@gmail.com>](#)

Date: Thu, Jun 6, 2019 at 2:00 PM

Subject: Re: Military Honor

To: [Melody Ellis Glick \(1963\)<mjglick45@gmail.com>](#)

I would love to have you use my email to Melody....Nice.... interesting comments. I hear about Tom from people around the country occasionally. Usually someone who had a bracelet seeking details about Tom and his life. There are chapters of an organization whose members have adopted a service member who is missing or whose remains have not been returned. They have remembrances on Memorial Day where they share what they know about the soldier they have adopted.

I recently heard from a Vietnam Vet in Indiana, who had "adopted" Tom. This fellow had nearly reached the end of his life (dying of cancer). He wanted someone in Tom's family to know before he died, that Tom was remembered, along with other MIA or KIA at their event each Memorial Day and that Tom was his soldier. He said that after he died someone else would take Tom as their soldier. I have a feeling that these types of groups are dwindling in number. Age taking its toll.

[Don Riggs \(1960\)](#)

Alaska Public Media, Nov. 10, 2017, by Zachariah Hughes

"Officially, as of September of 2017 there are still [1,602 Americans](#) unaccounted for from the Vietnam War."