



A Hero's

WELCOME

KILLED DURING THE VIETNAM WAR, RAY KROGMAN '64 FINALLY RETURNS HOME TO WYOMING • *By Jeff Holmquist*

For decades, Sally (Harris) McClellan has visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and stopped at one particular name on the massive granite wall.

Then she leaves flowers and creates a rubbing as a way to remember and honor her friend and high school classmate — 1st Lt. Alva Ray Krogman '64.

Today, McClellan says she's anxious to return to the wall to capture a new rubbing. The symbol next to Krogman's name is no longer a cross, indicating he's missing in action. On Memorial Day 2021, a new rosette symbol was affixed to the wall, indicating that Krogman had finally been found.

"It's been a long time — 54 years," she says. "It's nice to have closure."

Krogman was shot down over Savannakhet Province, Laos, on Jan. 17, 1967. Because of the remote location of Krogman's crash, his remains were never recovered.

That is until 2019, when some of his remains were unearthed along with two identification tags, several coins, pieces of his uniform and his first lieutenant bars.

In July 2020, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) positively identified Krogman's remains through dental records and informed surviving family members of his official change in status to "accounted for."

Unfortunately, his long-awaited funeral was delayed for a year due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. But on July 21, 2021,

Krogman's remains came home to Worland, Wyoming, to a hero's welcome. Hundreds of family members, friends and community members turned out to honor and remember the Academy graduate.

ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

At the time of his death, Krogman was assigned to the 504th Tactical Air Support Group, 7th Air Force, on temporary duty with the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron operating out of Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand.

On the morning of Jan. 17, 1967, he was flying an O-1F Birdog aircraft — call sign "Nail 48" — as part of a flight of two planes conducting a visual reconnaissance mission. Early in the mission, Krogman's aircraft was hit by enemy fire and went down. ▶

LEFT: During his cadet days, Alva Ray Krogman is pictured at his desk in the orderly room of 17th Squadron.

RIGHT: Memorabilia from Ray Krogman's life was on display outside Worland Middle School's Auditorium. (Photo by Jeff Holmquist)



Recovery operations began immediately, but efforts were halted when one of the search-and-rescue aircraft was also shot down.

Krogman's body was never recovered, and he was declared killed in action on Jan. 31, 1967.

Between 1993 and 2019, according to the DPAA, several investigation and recovery efforts were undertaken to find Krogman's crash site. Even though many years have passed, the Air Force and DPAA continue to search for the remains of missing military personnel in hopes of recovering, identifying and repatriating remains.

Finally, in early 2019, Krogman's crash site was fully excavated. A team recovered Krogman's ID tag and human remains, as well as other material evidence. Later that year, another ID tag was recovered along with more human remains, aircraft life support equipment and other material evidence.

On July 7, 2020, Krogman's remains were positively identified at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii and his status was officially changed, setting up a chain of events that led to his return home.

ACTIVE-DUTY DEATH

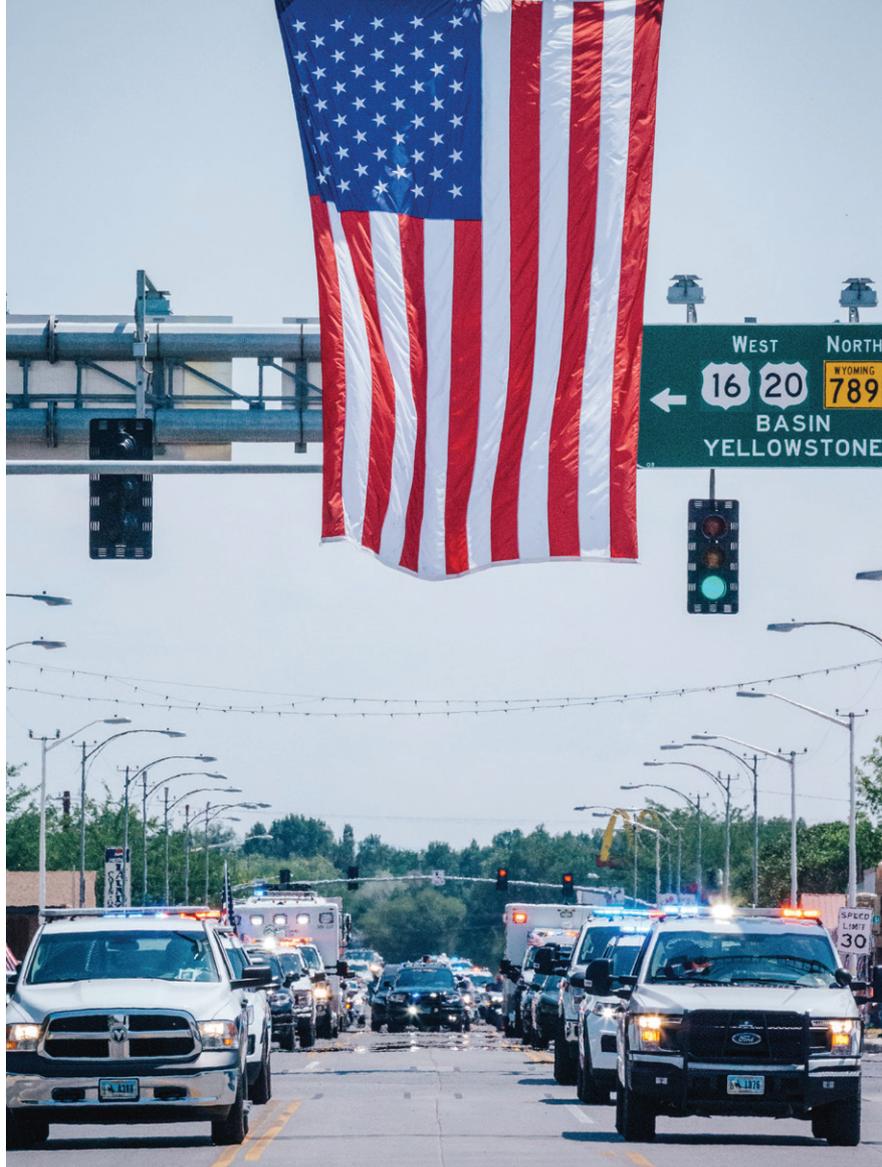
Edward Conway, a mortuary affairs specialist with Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations (AFMAO) at Dover Air Force Base who works specifically with the return of fallen heroes from past conflicts, notified Krogman's only known living relatives — two nephews and a niece — with the news.

Conway's usual face-to-face meeting with the family members was delayed due to the pandemic, but they finally connected earlier in 2021 and began making plans for a funeral with full military honors.

"We accommodate whatever the family would like us to do for their loved one," he reports.

Initially, the family was planning a quiet, private ceremony for Krogman. All of that changed as the community caught wind of the war hero's pending homecoming.

In early 2021, before finding out about the returning remains, high school classmates of Krogman launched a campaign to nominate him for the Worland High School Hall of Fame. The application was approved, and Krogman will be inducted later this fall.



When those same classmates learned about the upcoming funeral service, they worked with family members to invite community members and others to the ceremony.

WELCOME HOME

The Air Force supplied a "dignified arrival" for Krogman's remains on July 19 at the nearest major airport, which was more than two hours away in Billings, Montana. The Honor Guard from Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana met Krogman's casket on the tarmac and transferred it to a waiting hearse from Bryant Funeral Home in Worland.

With the Montana Highway Patrol and Patriot Guard Riders leading the way, the hearse made its way south to Worland. At each small town along the route, hundreds of people lined the roadway waving American flags and welcoming the long-lost Wyoming resident home.

"It was just overwhelming," says Alex Ogg, a high school classmate of Krogman's.

"There is no other way to describe it. It made me proud to be a friend of Ray's and proud to be a member of the community."

Two days later, several hundred family, friends and community members gathered at Worland Middle School for a stirring memorial service.

Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Alan Rogers '64 was on hand to represent the Air Force Academy, the Class of 1964 and Cadet Squadron 17 — which both Rogers and Krogman were assigned to as cadets. Krogman is one of 17 members of the Class of 1964 who were killed in action during the Vietnam War.

"Ray was a wonderful guy," Rogers remembers. "He was a man of values, he was a quiet person, and he was a superb cadet and a superb officer."

Rogers admits he never thought Krogman's remains would be found.

"I hoped for it, but I never thought I'd see this day," he says, fighting back tears. "This is an emotional experience, and I wanted to be here to honor him. This



ACROSS: Law enforcement personnel and first responders led the procession through Worland, Wyoming, on the way to delivering 1st Lt. Alva Ray Krogman's remains to his final resting place.

TOP: Inside the casket that included Alva Ray Krogman's remains was an Air Force uniform honoring the 1967 active-duty combat death.

RIGHT: The Honor Guard from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota was on hand to carry Alva Ray Krogman's remains to his graveside funeral ceremony.



will bring closure to the important story of Ray's life.”

When the funeral service concluded, a caravan of law enforcement personnel, firefighters, Patriot Guard members and private vehicles accompanied the hearse to the Riverview Memorial Gardens cemetery west of town. Again, community members lined the streets, flags in hand, to honor Krogman.

Because Lt. Krogman's case is classified as an active-duty combat death, a 20-person Honor Guard team was dispatched from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota to render military funeral honors at the cemetery. The group included a seven-person rifle team; six casket bearers;

the color guard; a bugle player; and the team leader.

In addition, because Krogman was a pilot, he also was due an Air Force flyover at the graveside ceremony, which was performed by the 120th Air Wing out of Great Falls, Montana. Krogman's final resting place is near his parents, Marx and Lue Krogman. According to family members, Lue died in 1990 but never gave up hope that her son would be found.

Conway says it's his honor and privilege to help coordinate the return of such fallen heroes to their hometown or a government cemetery.

“It's quite humbling to serve a nation that takes seriously the black flag — the MIA flag — so that our service members are not

forgotten,” he says. Some 1,479 Air Force personnel remain missing from the Korean War and Vietnam War eras, he notes, and efforts continue to find them.

At the conclusion of the graveside gathering, local churches partnered to prepare and serve a lunch to the hundreds in attendance.

A BIG THANK YOU

Kelly Krogman Steindorf was only 6 years old when her uncle was killed in action, but she has fond memories of his visits home while at the Air Force Academy and during his service in the Air Force.

Throughout the three-day celebration of life for Krogman, she says she appreciates hearing all the stories about her uncle. ▶



“It just brings him back to life,” she says.

She really wishes, however, that her father — Roy (Krogman’s brother) — and her grandmother were still alive to witness this momentous day.

“It’s unbelievable,” she says. “We’re bringing him home.”

HOMETOWN MEMORIES

In the days leading up to the funeral, Krogman was remembered as a driven individual with a penchant for leadership. He became an Eagle Scout at the age of 14, and was his senior class president, the center on the high school football team and an actor in most of the high school plays.

In addition, he was apparently a great dancer. “I got to dance with him a few times,” McClellan says, “but I didn’t get to dance with him steadily.”

High school friend Robert E. Korenke remembered Krogman as a positive and kind person.

“He always looked after the needs of others before self, which is basically the motto of the Boy Scouts of America,” he says. “He was a super guy.”

Although he always hoped that Krogman would be found, Korenke admits he never expected the remains would return to Worland during his lifetime.

“When you get to be about 75 ... I maintained the faith that at least a few of the classmates would be here on this grand

ABOVE: (From left) Kelly Krogman Steindorf, Jerry Krogman, and Tom and Phyllis Krogman accept a flag flown over the Academy on July 19 and letters of condolence from Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Allan Rogers '64 (right) at the graveside ceremony for Lt. Alva Ray Krogman.

(Photo by Jeff Holmquist)



“

Fifty-four years ago, Ray gave his life for his country. For that many years, you have lived with grief amidst uncertainty. As a class, we never forgot Ray's sacrifice. We hope that the return of Ray's remains to his final resting place will give you the measure of peace you so richly deserve.” —Lt. Gen. Jay Kelley '64

day,” he says. “Thanks to all of the people who are still looking for our missing soldiers. It’s wonderful.”

Classmate Ogg agrees.

“This tribute means a lot to our class and to the family,” he says. “We certainly thank the Air Force for the effort and the time they’ve put into this.”

ACADEMY RECOLLECTIONS

Rogers shared a few written memories from members of the Class of 1964 who couldn’t attend the memorial service.

Col. (Ret.) Harold Watson recalls a camping trip near Estes Park with Krogman. They found a perfect campsite near a stream.

“I don’t remember solving any of the world’s problems,” he writes. “However, I do remember that we did talk about our previous three years at the Academy, our final year, and entering the Real Air Force.”

Watson called it a “wonderful memory that has survived more than half a century,” even though a park ranger eventually kicked them out of the campsite.

In their last summer as cadets, Maj. (Ret.) Don Hall remembers driving with Ray to Worland to meet Lue Krogman. The pair visited Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons, and Krogman taught Hall how to fly fish. After graduation, Krogman was the best man at Hall’s wedding.

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Jim France writes about heading to Southeast Asia at the same time as Krogman. On one occasion, as the pair was fishing off the shore, they landed some exotic puffer fish.

Knowing the fish could be poisonous, they asked the locals how to prepare them for eating.

“We decided to give it a try and hope for the best,” he writes. “They tasted pretty good, and we didn’t get sick.”

Michael Holcomb writes that he thinks of his fallen friend often.

“He really was one of those unique individuals that never met anybody he didn’t like, and the feeling was mutual,” he says. “We were all fortunate to have him as a classmate and a friend.”

Rogers remembers a spirit mission during his and Krogman’s second-class year. The football game against West Point was nearing, and the squadron mates noticed window washing scaffolding along Fairchild Hall.

“A very tempting sight, I must say,” he recalls.

That evening, Krogman, Rogers and others used the scaffolding to tape large paper letters along the building.

“We ran out of time and only got up ‘BEAT A...’ We planned to come back the next night,” Rogers recalls. Unfortunately, the scaffolding was removed before the job could be completed.

“We lost that football game to Army, and I always wondered if we had finished the Army sign maybe we could have won,” he says. “Ray and I were front and center in that crazy stunt.”

Rogers presented the family members with a flag flown over the Academy on July 19 in honor of Krogman’s return home. He also delivered condolence letters from Association of Graduates Chief Executive Officer Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Gould ’76 and the Academy Ladies and Gentlemen organization.

Lt. Gen. Jay Kelley, president of our 1964 USAFA Class, offered a closing note to the family on behalf of the class.

“Fifty-four years ago, Ray gave his life for his country. For that many years, you have lived with grief amidst uncertainty,” he writes. “As a class, we never forgot Ray’s sacrifice. We hope that the return of Ray’s remains to his final resting place will give you the measure of peace you so richly deserve.” 



To view an accompanying video, visit www.usafa.org.