

Fallen Hero Returns Home

BOISE, Idaho — Passengers on Tuesday afternoon's United Airlines flight from Denver to Boise refrained from the typical chaos of getting off a long flight and instead sat quietly in their seats while two somber passengers deplaned.

The crowd was hushed until it gave a standing ovation to Ron and Jeff Phelps, and their precious cargo.

The Phelps brothers were bringing their father home. **Chief Warrant Officer Don Phelps**, a decorated helicopter pilot, was killed in 1965 during the Vietnam War. His aircraft, his body and the bodies of three crewmates were missing for nearly 44 years until the crash site was uncovered earlier this year.

"As we were landing, the flight attendant was choking back tears. She said that [United Airlines] is honored to be transporting the remains of a fallen soldier in Vietnam," Ron Phelps said Tuesday night. "As we were getting off, we got an ovation from everybody on the plane. Emotionally, I was already pretty well spent. ... That was it. I was tearing up."

The brothers were returning from the military's special forensics lab in Hawaii where their father's remains had been identified. When they stepped onto the tarmac at the Boise Airport, their mother, brother and sister were waiting, along with a military honor guard in crisp blue uniforms.

It was an emotional family reunion as the flag-draped casket emerged from the airplane's belly. The red, white and blue stood in stark contrast to the gray skies and the gunmetal-colored commercial airliner.

Lori Phelps, the youngest of the couple's children, sobbed as she caressed the casket of the father she had never really known. Dan Phelps was somber and quiet.

Phelps' widow, Dee Phelps, dabbed at her eyes with a blue and white gingham handkerchief.

"The first thing I said, I leaned over and said, 'Mom, I brought him home,' " Ron Phelps said. "It is a happy occasion. There might be a little closure here, and think happy thoughts.' "

Law enforcement officers, veterans and a group of Patriot Guard Riders on motorcycles escorted the family and the casket in a funeral hearse to Cloverdale Funeral Home in Boise.

Phelps, who was 28 when he died, had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroism. He flew more than 125 combat missions in less than four months.

Phelps is the third missing-in-action serviceman to be brought back to Idaho since the Vietnam War ended.

He will be buried Thursday at the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery in Boise.

(See obituary on the following page)

Jesse Donald Phelps "Don"



CWO2 Jesse Donald "Don" Phelps 1937-1965 CWO2 Jesse Donald "Don" Phelps, 28, was killed in action when his helicopter was shot down near An Khe, Vietnam on Dec. 28, 1965. Jesse "Don" was born Oct. 1, 1937 to Jesse and Macxine Fisher Phelps in Ogden, Utah. Jesse had two younger brothers, Paul and Howard. He attended school in Vale, Ore., Rupert, Idaho and Nampa, Idaho, and graduated from Nampa High School in 1955. Jesse "Don" married Dolores "Dee" Eytchison in June, 1955. He entered the Idaho Army National Guard at the age of 17, and then enlisted in the regular Army the following year. He completed basic training in Fort Ord, Calif. While in the Army, Jesse "Don" served in Japan, Hawaii, California, Germany and Georgia. In 1963, he was accepted into flight school and began his career as an aviator at Fort Wolters, Texas. He completed his flight training at Fort Rucker, Ala. graduating as class president. The younger pilots, many of whom were in their early twenties, referred to him as "The Old Man." After completing flight school he was

assigned to A Co., 229th Helicopter Battalion, and 11th Air Assault Division in Fort Benning, Ga. In May of 1965, Jesse Don flew the second Huey helicopter to land at San Isidro during the communist takeover of the Dominican Republic. In August of the same year, he received orders to deploy to Vietnam under the 1st Cavalry Division. Three months after arriving in the theatre, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroism in the Ia Drang Valley Mission, the bloody battle memorialized in the book and movie, *We Were Soldiers Once*. On the final day of the conflict, Jesse "Don" volunteered for a mission to fly ammunitions to a unit under heavy enemy fire. According to the presidential order announcing his award, "Displaying exceptional courage and bravery under fire, he remained on the ground to permit the unloading of his cargo and the loading of the seriously wounded American soldiers even though he was advised to depart the area due to increased enemy fire." The following month, Jesse "Don" received the Air Medal for flying more than 125 combat missions in less than four months. Early in the morning of Dec. 28, 1965, Jesse "Don" and three other men flew a short supply mission from the airstrip at An Khe in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Ten minutes into the flight, radio contact was lost. Nothing more was known of the fate of the men aboard Huey 808 for 43 years. Jesse "Don" left behind his wife Dee, three sons, Ron, age nine, Jeff, age seven, and Dan, age six, and one daughter, Lori, age four. His parents Jesse and Macxine Phelps, his brothers Paul and Howard, his grandparents Bert and Alice Pewtress, and William Fisher, and Ransom and Lola Phelps. Many aunts and uncles. Sadly, many of his loved ones, including his parents and brother Paul, have since passed away not knowing his fate. In November, 2008, the wreckage of Jesse "Don's" helicopter was located in the jungle. Excavation was begun in March, 2009. Over the next several months, the Joint-Task Force MIA team recovered a dog tag, some personal effects, and human remains of the four crew members. On August 24, Dee was informed that positive identification of Jesse "Don's" remains had been made. Later this month, his remains will be returned home from Hawaii with full military honors. Waiting to welcome Jesse "Don" home will be his widow Dee, and their four children. Left to mourn Jesse "Don" are his son Ron along with wife Jill and their daughters Nicki and Ally, his son Jeff and his three children Sarah, Jared, and Elise, his son Dan along with his wife Becky, and his daughter Lori and her children Jenny Dee, Sami and great-granddaughter Hannah, and Jaime, his brother Howard and his wife Annie and their children, his brother Paul's widow Jolene and their children, his sister-in-law Marj Janlois and family and his brother-in-law Ron Eytchison along with his wife Pat and family. A memorial service with military honors will be held October 1, at 10 a.m., at Capital Christian Center, 2760 East Fairview, Meridian, ID. Chaplain Robert Morris will officiate. Internment will follow at the Idaho Veteran's Cemetery, 10100 Horseshoe Bend Road, Boise. A luncheon will follow at the VFW Hall, 3308 W. Chinden Boulevard, Garden City. Funeral arrangements are under the direction of Cloverdale Funeral Home. The public is welcome to attend all services. Those unable to attend the service who wish to honor Chief Warrant Officer Jesse "Don" Phelps are encouraged to stop by Cloverdale Funeral Home on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2009 from 12-8 p.m. to view a tribute display and sign a book of remembrance. The family feels that the best way to honor Jesse "Don's" life is with your presence at his service. Donations or flowers are not necessary. The family wishes to thank Major Matthew Wilson and Chaplain Robert Morris, who have provided extensive help with memorial arrangements and their personal friendship. We appreciate the support we have received from members of the military, Capital Christian Center, Cloverdale Funeral Home, the Idaho Veteran's Cemetery, the Idaho Division of Veterans Services and the VFW for their assistance in planning Jesse "Don's" tribute. "To the world you were just a man, but to us you were the world."

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