

Memorial for a fallen war hero

Air Force pilot from Oakland, missing since '72, gets a resting place

By Paul Avery
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As a foghorn sounded mournfully from the Bay, the remains of Air Force Maj. Stephen Howard Cuthbert — a long-missing casualty of the Vietnam War — were finally laid to rest Thursday at the National Cemetery at the Presidio.

The somber memorial service for a hero of one far-off conflict ironically took place as the United States was poised on the brink of war in the Persian Gulf.

Cuthbert, 29, was on his second combat tour when his F4-E Phantom jet was shot down over North Vietnam on July 3, 1972. For 18 years, his fate, though surmised, was not known.

In September 1989, the government of Vietnam repatriated the remains of 20 American servicemen, but it wasn't until December of last year that the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii was able to determine that Cuthbert's was among them.

Cuthbert, an Oakland native, attended schools there and in 1961 went to UC-Berkeley, where he was a physical education major and member of Delta Upsilon fraternity.

Volunteered for duty

Upon graduation in 1965, Cuthbert squarely faced the hard question of that era: whether to serve his country in time of war. In January of 1966, he signed up to become an Air Force officer and began flight training. Two years later, he was based in Da Nang and almost daily in the thick of risky aerial combat missions.

In 1969, he returned to Califor-



Howard Cuthbert carries encased flag from coffin of his son, Air Force Major Stephen Howard Cuthbert, at memorial service. Following senior Cuthbert are dead flier's children, Lara and Stephen Ryan Cuthbert.

nia, and his wife, Jane, and he had two children, Lara and Stephen Ryan Cuthbert, while he took more flight training. Then he returned to Southeast Asia.

On his second tour, Cuthbert flew his Phantom as a Fast FAC — a high-speed forward air controller whose dangerous job it was, diving at 500 knots per hour, to locate enemy targets, mark them and lead other aircraft for bombing strikes. It was on such a mission that he was downed.

When Jane Cuthbert received the news, she clung to the hope that he might somehow have survived and been taken a prisoner of war. That hope was dashed in 1973 when North Vietnam released the names of all POWs it said it had and her husband's was not among them. After a few years, the Air Force declared Cuthbert as presumed to be dead.

Getting on with life

Deciding that the best thing for

her children and herself was to "not get mired down in forever wondering, but to get on with life," the widow remarried and is now the wife of Dr. William Schmohl of Marin County.

Cuthbert was remembered Thursday by best friend and fraternity brother Sam Dolman as "a guy who did a lot of smiling and a lot of laughing," but who was also quite serious about his life and his responsibilities.

Dolman told of Cuthbert's athletic abilities as a skier and as a swimmer; how he regularly stroked through San Francisco Bay as a member of the Dolphin Swim Club; how as a lifeguard he once found and breathed life back into a nearly drowned child at Lake Temescal in the East Bay; how as a Cal student he'd spent countless weekends playing Big Brother to disadvantaged youngsters.

At the conclusion of Thursday's memorial service, an Air Force squad fired a salute to honor Cuth-



Stephen Howard Cuthbert: Shot down over North Vietnam in 1972.

bert and a bugler blew taps as an American flag that had draped the casket was presented to his son.

"Steve has finally come home," Dolman said.