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Services Planned for Vietnam War Pilot's Return, Funeral

FARGO, N.D. — A Vietnam War pilot who has been missing in action for more than four decades will be coming home to Fargo this week. The remains of [U.S. Air Force Maj. Thomas Beyer](#) will arrive Wednesday evening, and his funeral will take place Saturday afternoon.

Beyer served with the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron at Chu Lai Air Base in South Vietnam. From there, he flew the O-2A Skymaster, a military version of the Cessna 337, as a spotter plane. He went missing while on mission #5096, a visual reconnaissance and forward air control assignment, the afternoon of July 30, 1968. He was later declared dead on May 2, 1978, and his remains were identified Nov. 19 of this year.

Beyer's remains are scheduled to return on Delta Flight 2185 into Hector International Airport at 8:29 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 15. The Air Force will provide a military funeral honors detail, including an 18-member color guard, bugler and firing squad. Vietnam Veterans of America will lead color guards from veterans' service organizations as well as the North Dakota Patriot Guard, which will form a flag line.

"This mission is so important because a brother of ours who has been listed as MIA for about 42 years is finally being reunited with his family and friends," said Russ Stabler, with [North Dakota's Vietnam Veterans of America](#). "As veterans of the Vietnam War, each and every Vietnam and Vietnam-era veteran is eager to welcome home our brother, Maj. Thomas J. Beyer, who has been gone for such a long time. We want to show our love and respect we have for this man who paid the ultimate sacrifice for us and our country and to show he was not forgotten. We are saddened by the loss, but happy he is finally coming home to North Dakota soil. We will be at the Hector Airport to welcome Maj. Beyer home and at his funeral to pay our final respects and say goodbye and thank him for a job well done."

On Saturday, Dec. 18, visitation will begin at 12:30 p.m. followed by the funeral at 1:30 p.m., both at St. Mary's Cathedral, 619 7th St. N., Fargo. Burial will follow at Holy Cross Cemetery, 1502 32nd Ave. N., Fargo.

[Gov. Jack Dalrymple](#) and [Maj. Gen. David Sprynczynatyk](#), [North Dakota National Guard](#) adjutant general, are expected to speak during the funeral service. Veterans groups and honor guards as well as currently serving military men and women will again be present to show their support of their fallen brother, as well as his family.

Beyer is survived by his wife, Karen, whom he met when they attended [North Dakota State University](#) together. They were married Feb. 1, 1963, in Fargo and had two children: Sandra in 1964 and Steven in

1966. Their children are now married with children of their own, and Beyer's parents and brother, Merle, died without ever knowing his fate.

With military reports from that day 42 years ago, coupled with the identifications of Beyer's remains, that fate is now clearer.

Beyer, who was posthumously promoted to major, was 37 years old on July 30, 1968. The day began overcast, with a ceiling of 5,000 feet and visibility of 7 miles. By that afternoon, the weather shifted to scattered clouds and a 10,000 foot ceiling with visibility reduced to 4 miles. It was a hazy afternoon with ground fog and scattered showers.

It was Beyer's 12th day in combat after being commissioned as an Air Force officer through NDSU's ROTC program. He had received pilot training at Vance Air Force Base in Enid, Okla., and qualification training on the B-52 Stratofortress bomber at Loring Air Force Base in Maine before being deployed to South Vietnam as a forward air control, or FAC, pilot.

FAC pilots were intimately familiar with the geography, people and tactical situation of the areas they observed as they flew the Skymaster, which they referred to as "Oscar Deuce" or "The Duck." When they saw a target, the FAC pilots would order fighter jets or bombers, mark the target with white phosphorous rockets and then control the operation while the responding planes were on station. Once the fighter mission was complete, FAC pilots remained to conduct a bomb damage assessment. Their mission was one that was typically low to the ground and at a relatively slow speed.

That was the case that hazy July afternoon in 1968 when Beyer, who went by the call sign "Helix 15," was flying in Quang-Tri Province in South Vietnam, supporting the U.S. Army's Americal Division. He gave a mission report at 1:45 p.m. that day, indicating that his status was normal and that he was heading to Kham Duc to work with "Renegade Delta" and would report back in 30 to 45 minutes. That report never came, and he never returned to Chu Lai at 3 p.m., as scheduled. By 3:45 p.m., he was declared overdue. A five-day search-and-rescue operation commenced with no sign of Beyer or his aircraft being discovered.

U.S. ground personnel whom Beyer was flying in support of were questioned. They reported that an aircraft had flown over them, heading west, and that they heard an explosion once the plane was out of sight. They assumed it was Beyer's aircraft. A U.S. command and control aircraft reported hearing an emergency beeper signal from an area with extremely rough terrain that was a Viet Cong stronghold. The aircraft couldn't establish voice communication with the downed pilot. The search-and-rescue personnel never heard the beeper signals nor located plane wreckage and declared Beyer MIA. Nearly a decade later, he was declared dead.

While listed as missing, Beyer was presented the Silver Star for gallantry. His name is listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., along with the 58,266 others who gave their lives in that war. The name of this particular North Dakota hero is on panel 50W, row 34.

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