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HOME

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[Business news](#)

[e-Technology](#)

[Williamson Co.](#)

[Nation/World](#)

[Space](#)

[Celebrities](#)

[Saving Time/Money](#)

[Traffic](#)

[Weather](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Forums](#)

[In-depth reports](#)

[Photo gallery](#)

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[A.M.](#)

[Dickson](#)

[Maury](#)

[Montgomery](#)

[Robertson](#)

[Rutherford](#)

[Sumner/Gallatin](#)

[Sumner/H'ville](#)

[Williamson](#)

[Williamson/](#)

[Fairview](#)

[Wilson](#)

OPINION / LETTERS

SPORTS

ENTERTAINMENT

CLASSIFIEDS

CUSTOMER SERVICES

Friday, 11/16/01

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35 years after his death, Navy pilot to rest in peace at Arlington

By LEON ALLIGOOD
Staff Writer

His name was John Anthony Feldhaus.

But perhaps only his late mother and the nuns at Sacred Heart School in Lawrenceburg, Tenn., where he attended grade school, called him John Anthony.

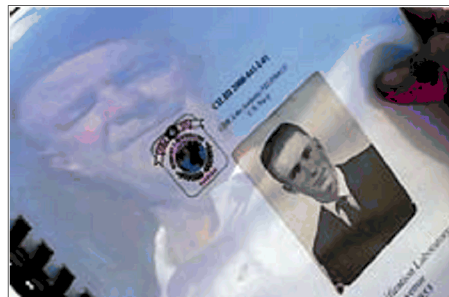
To everyone of a certain age — born before the Vietnam War — he was Jack or Jackie: second son of a brick mason, a give-it-all tackle on the county high school's football team, a firm-jawed young man with an eye for adventure.

To a generation born after the war in Southeast Asia, he was a name on a marker, a grave containing no body.

Feldhaus, a Navy lieutenant, was shot down over North Vietnam's Thanh Hoa province. His A-1H Skyraider was struck by enemy fire as he returned from a bombing mission. The plane went down on Oct. 8, 1966, five days after his 28th birthday.

There was no evidence that Feldhaus, a father of four, survived the crash, and he officially remained missing in action, until he was declared dead about a decade later. The pilot's remains lay in the field where the single-engine bomber drilled a 20-foot-deep crater.

It appeared the rice field would be his permanent final resting



BRADLY BONER / staff
Larry Feldhaus holds a report from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory documenting the recovery and identification of the remains of his younger brother John Anthony "Jack" Feldhaus. Jack Feldhaus, 28, was shot down in Vietnam on Oct. 8, 1966.



place until last month, when the service informed Feldhaus' children and siblings that DNA testing had positively identified remains from the crash as the late Navy aviator.

Tuesday morning, his children and siblings will bury their father and brother with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.

"The Navy's going to do it right. There will be a 21-gun salute and a flyover of jets, if the authorities allow it," said Larry Feldhaus, the oldest of the siblings, now retired and living in Hendersonville.

"It's good that this is finally going to happen. We've waited a long time."

With only 18 months separating them, the two oldest Feldhaus boys were good friends, most of the time. "People would say they'd see us walking to school and we'd be fighting on one block and laughing in the next block," Larry reminisced yesterday, a photo of his uniformed brother in his lap.

"The last time I saw him was August of 1966. He had flown his plane into Dobbins Air Force Base outside of Atlanta, and I met him there," Larry said, a solemn look on his face.

"He wanted to know if I would be executor of his will."

Just in case something happened over there.

Jack Feldhaus didn't have to go to Vietnam. He had been a Navy pilot for several years and was an aviation instructor in Corpus Christi, Texas, where he could have safely served out his Navy tenure and, perhaps, switched to a commercial airline after leaving.

"He never wanted to be on the sidelines. He always liked being in the thick of things," said Jimmy Moore, a high school friend who also still lives in Lawrenceburg. Moore was one of five friends, including Jack, who were inseparable during their high school years.

"The last time I saw him he said he wanted to go to Vietnam. He was a career man and wanted to make rank," said former Lawrenceburg City Commissioner Billy Helton, another of the group of five.

In reality, he was promoted. During the period when the downed pilot was MIA, he was promoted to commander.

Jack Feldhaus perished while returning to the *USS Oriskany* after a bombing mission over North Vietnam.

"The reports state that he still had some bombs and he dipped down below cloud cover to attack some trucks. He radioed another plane that stayed up above that he had been hit. That pilot said that he saw evidence of a crash, smoke and fire," Larry Feldhaus said.

Late on that early fall night, a Navy officer arrived in Lawrenceburg to inform the pilot's parents.

The lieutenant's 7-year-old kid sister answered the door.

"I remember it vividly," said Mary Ann Sanders, now a math teacher at a junior high school in Katy, Texas, near Houston.

"Him being missing was a big focus all the time I was growing up. Whenever there would be POWs on the television, the Navy would call us to see if we saw him. Then after he was declared dead, we always waited for them to make positive identification," Sanders said in a telephone interview.

"My mother always wanted to know that he had been brought back."

Margaret Feldhaus died in May, just days after the report on the DNA match was completed. The Navy did not compile all of its findings until last month, 35 years after the Lawrenceburg man's plane crashed on the other side of the globe.

"It really would have been nice for her to know, but she knows now," Sanders said. "I'm very sure about that."

Leon Alligood covers Tennessee for The Tennessean. Contact him at (615) 259-8279 or by e-mail at lalligood@tennessean.com.

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