

LIFE

# EXERCISING LIKE A SWIMMER

UPPER BODY MOVE WILL WORK YOUR TRICEPS, CHEST AND BACK **B7**



# The Ledger

LAKELAND, FLORIDA | TUESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2011

AIR FORCE MAJ. TOM REITMANN

## Mystery of Missing Pilot Solved 45 Years After Mission

Vietnamese farmer finds remains while working in a cornfield.

By **ANDREW MEACHAM**  
ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

APOLLO BEACH | On Dec. 1, 1965, Capt. Thomas Reitmann climbed into a F-105D Thunderchief for a bombing raid over North Vietnam.

He never returned.

The Air Force notified Carol Reitmann that her husband had been shot down and was missing.

For 45 years, his family accepted his disappearance as a death, though they had none of the finality that brings comfort to the living — no body, no casket, no grave marker.

Kim Lorigan, who was 6 when her dad disappeared,



PROVIDED BY KIM LORIGAN

**ON DEC. 1, 1965**, Air Force Capt. Thomas Reitmann headed for an area north of Hanoi. His aircraft was shot and disappeared, as did all traces of Reitmann.

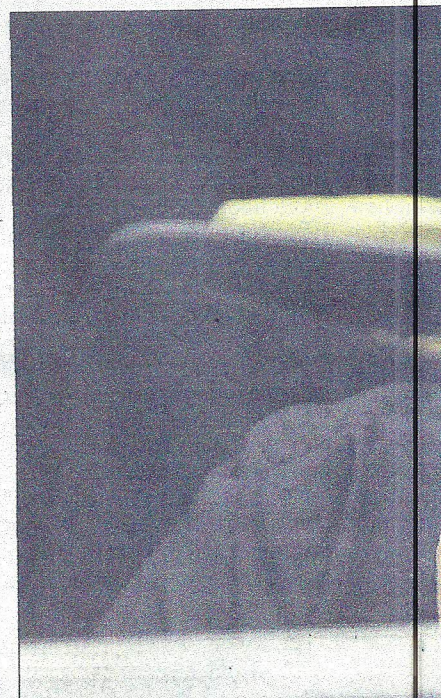
grew up and joined the Coast Guard. The military made her feel closer to the father she barely knew.

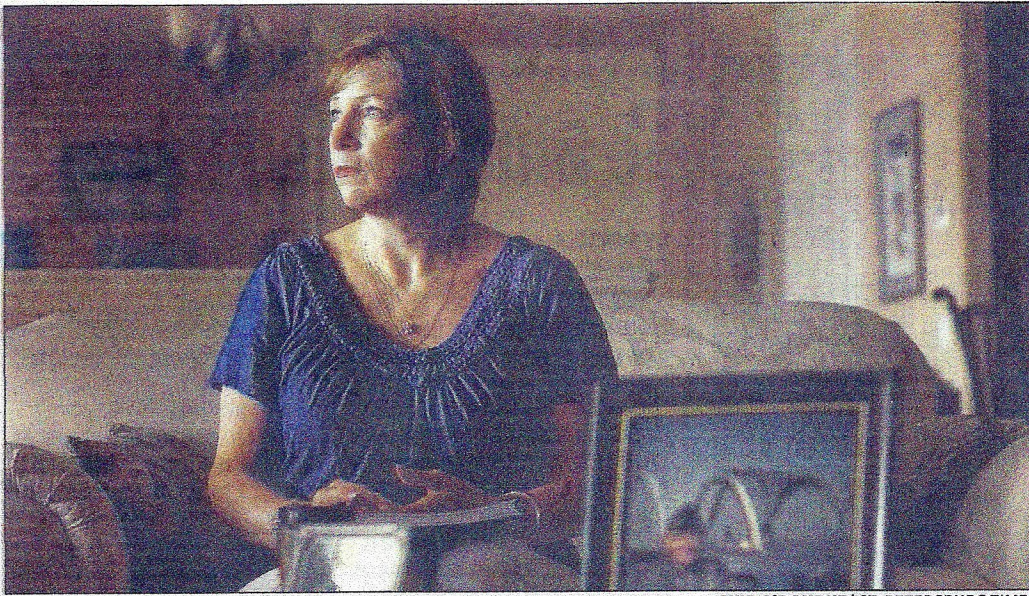
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SKIP O'ROURKE | ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

**KIM LORIGAN SITS WITH PHOTOS** of her father, Air Force Capt. Thomas Reitmann, in her Apollo Beach home. Lorigan was 6 when she learned her father was probably dead. In February, some bones found by a Vietnamese farmer in a cornfield were proved to be a DNA match with Reitmann.

## Missing

[ CONTINUED FROM A1 ]

She retired from the Coast Guard in 1999 and moved to Apollo Beach last year.

In May, an unexpected phone call from the Air Force brought the past crashing back.

She was so stunned she kept asking the same question over and over.

"Are you serious? Are you serious?"

Thomas E. Reitmann was born Dec. 8, 1930, in Red Wing, Minn. Tall, blue-eyed and confident, he joined the Navy right out of high school. After the Navy, he studied broadcasting, sold shoes and worked as a radio DJ.

In 1958, he married Carol, a Braniff International Airways hostess who had spilled a drink on him six weeks earlier. Tom Reitmann loved dry British comedies and the television show *Get Smart*.

His love of flying led him to the Air Force. He wanted to live around the world and have six children. In 1965, he deployed to Thailand and from there his squadron would fly into Vietnam.

### 'I LOCKED MY DOOR'

His wife and four children lived on Seymour Johnson Air Force Base near Goldsboro, N.C. Carol was returning from a shopping trip with a friend

ing near where she left her car. A chaplain was among them.

"I locked my door," said Carol Sumner, now 74. "I decided that if I didn't unlock my door, then they can't tell me anything."

One of the men asked her to slide over so he could drive. No one said a word.

"They didn't have to," she said.

### NO PARACHUTE

Tom Reitmann's formation was approaching its target, a railroad bridge in North Vietnam, when the first two planes came under heavy fire.

Tom Reitmann, who was flying third, was attempting to drop bombs when his plane was hit at an altitude above 8,000 feet.

The pilot behind him shouted into his radio: "Eject! Eject!"

This same pilot looked for a parachute but never saw one. Nor was he able to spot any trace of Tom Reitmann or his plane.

### 'THEY HAD TO UNTELL US'

In 1973, Carol and Kim watched on television as the last American prisoners of war came home. Carol couldn't help wondering: Wouldn't it be something if Tom walked off that plane? It was just the kind of stunning move he might pull off.

The military, which promoted Tom Reitmann to major while

of anthropologists, photographers, linguists and ordnance technicians were brought together to improve efforts to find missing Americans. They interview witnesses, trek to remote sites, comb through news accounts and analyze remains.

Thanks to their efforts, and improved DNA technology, an MIA is identified about every four days.

### REMAINS FOUND

Lorigan volunteers with the LifePath Hospice Circle of Love Center for Grieving Children in Tampa.

Working with children gave her an opportunity do for them what no one could do for her. In the 1960s, no one talked about finding closure or stages of grief.

Giving back also prompted her to "think about what was going on with me sometimes."

On May 10, Lorigan was in a hotel in Washington, D.C., where she had been attending a conference, when her cell-phone rang.

Allen Cronin, chief of the Past Conflicts Branch of the Air Force Mortuary Operations Center, had tracked her down.

Maj. Thomas Reitmann's remains had been found and identified. The Vietnamese government had turned over the remains. There would be a military funeral.

After 45 years, her father

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he was missing, changed his status to killed in action and unaccounted for and gave him a service with gun salutes.

Later that year, Carol Reitmann accepted Tom Sumner's marriage proposal. She had one condition for her longtime friend: Leave the Air Force.

Kids grew up. Photos of Tom Reitmann gradually came off the walls, slipped into drawers or scrapbooks. Maybe he found a Vietnamese woman and had lots of kids now, Carol Sumner joked.

Maybe he has amnesia, his daughter wondered. Both knew better.

In 1988, Vietnamese authorities claimed to have located Tom Reitmann's remains. U.S. officials told his family that he had been found.

The remains turned out to be those of another American pilot whose plane went down the same day.

"They told us," Kim Lorigan said. "Then they had to untell us."

**IMPROVED EFFORTS**

In 2003, the military formed the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, based at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii.

Known as JPAC, the team

was home.

"I was walking in circles, crying," she said.

**IDENTITY CONFIRMED**

The tip that led to Tom Reitmann surfaced in 2009, according to JPAC records. A Vietnamese farmer in the Lang Son province reported finding human bones while working in his cornfield.

In November 2009, the Vietnamese government turned over two leg bone fragments. They were sent to the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Rockville, Md., where they were compared with a mitochondrial DNA sample provided years earlier by Edward Reitmann, Tom Reitmann's brother.

In March of this year, Vietnam turned over the remaining bones, which were analyzed and were found to match the earlier sample.

In May, JPAC concluded the remains were Reitmann's.

**OVERDUE HONORS**

Carol Sumner sent more than 400 thank-you notes to JPAC headquarters, one for each staffer.

"We very rarely get to meet the families," said JPAC spokeswoman Liz Feeney. "Now when you walk around this office, you see her thank-you cards on desks all over the place."

Carol Sumner also wants to visit the farmer in Vietnam, to thank him personally.

A casket containing Tom Reitmann's remains and his uniform, now at Hickam, will be shipped to Arlington National Cemetery. He will be buried Sept. 8 with full military honors. Seven pilots who flew with him, now in their 70s and 80s, will attend.

"This is a celebration," Lorigan said. "We are celebrating him coming home. We are finally able to give him the honors that he is due and bury him on American soil."

family.

Forman, author of Team 6 Early SEALs.

"We're pointing out who's to be rated, and you've brightened their lives from the Navy. It's quit all here of the fa

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