



Pfc. Jose Sanchez
March 15, 1949 - June 6, 1968

As the days became years that faded into history, as Jose Sanchez became a sad, distant memory, a 5-by-7-inch index card bore witness to his short life. The Brooklyn teen's name was typed neatly across the Marine Corps Casualty Card, with the date and place of his last day alive: June 6, 1968, Quang Tri Province. Vietnam.

The Details were sparse; the words terse: "The helicopter he was aboard received small arms fire. After crashing, the helicopter rolled down the side of a mountain and burned. "The body was not recovered." The card, stored for 41 years in a Virginia office, ended with an acronym: KIA – Killed in action. Sanchez, gone before his 20th birthday, was also MIA. His remains were lost in the jungle 7 miles southwest of Khe Sanh, site to some of the war's most intense fighting.

The bodies of three fellow Marines were with him, left behind after their chopper crashed:

Lance Cpl. Kurt LaPlant

Lance Cpl. Luis Palacios

Lance Cpl Ralph Harper

For decades, what remained of the four – a boot fragment, a single tooth, and scattered bone shards – strayed buried in the red Vietnamese soil.

Sanchez and his missing mates were united by fate and enemy fire. Once found, in the next millennium, they would not be separated again. Sanchez was born in Kings County Hospital on March 15, 1949, when the Dodgers played in Ebbets Field and the subway cost a dime.

The son of Puerto Rican immigrants grew up with his kid brother in the Gowanus Houses. Their dad died when Peter Sanchez was just 2, and Jose became the man of the house. “My father figure,” his brother recalls.

Jose left his voice in prayer as an alter boy, and kicked his heels in fun at the YMCA pool. He was a Boy Scout and athlete: baseball, football, and basketball. The teen left John Jay High School and his 8-year-old brother to enlist in the Marines in December 1967.

He reached Vietnam in May 1968. Within days, he was lugging 81mm Mortar ammo along the Laotian Border. On June 6, as the nation awoke to the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, Pfc. Sanchez was caught in the waning hours of a three-day jungle firefight with the North Vietnamese Arm.

He was in a small group of Marines left on Hill 672 after most his company shifted to safer, higher ground 100 yards away. A dozen Marines were already dead. Their commander, Lt. Col. Bill Negron, remembers every-thing about that sun splashed day the booming artillery, the gurgling jungle waterfall, and the fear that every Marine in his command would die.

“We shouldn’t have been there in the first place,” Negron says of their precarious location. The Marines were outmanned, and Negron wanted them off Hill 672. He convinced a general to order an emergency extraction, with a CH46A Sea Knight helicopter sent to Sanchez and the rest.

The Brooklyn kid barely knew the others. LaPlant, from Kansas was an Elvis fan. Palacios followed his brother out of Los Angeles to the Marines. Harper, 20, of Indianapolis, was the oldest.

Negron watched through binoculars as his men scrambled aboard the chopper. As the aircraft lifted, a burst of fire erupted from the jungle floor. The chopper lurched. “We were saying, ‘Get up! Get up!’” Negron recalls.

It did not. The chopper tumbled from the sky; 12 of the 23 Marines aboard were killed. To encourage the survivors, Negron ordered his men to stand and sing “The Marine Hymn” at the top of their lungs. Sanchez and the rest, already gone, never heard a note.

A Marine recovery team pulled the living and dead from the crash, unaware they had missed the bodies of four colleagues. Halfway around the world, a knock on the

Sanchez's door delivered the bad news: Jose was dead, and the worse news: He still wasn't coming home.

A half-dozen posthumous honors, including a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, hardly filled the family's void. His devastated mother, Virginia, began a decades-long vigil of her lost boy. Seventeen days after the crash, the U.S. brass abandoned the Marine base at Khe Sanh. The search for the missing Marines was soon abandoned, too.

It was 1993 when a joint U.S. Vietnamese search team revisited the site. It took another 13 years to find the first bits of remains. Last November, DNA positively identified Palacios and LaPlant. Sanchez and Harper were included in what the military calls "group Remains."

The news once dreaded, now unexpected reaches the families just hours after President Obama's election.

WINDING TRAIL OF DISCOVERY DEEP IN THE JUNGLE

The secrets of Hill 672 remained buried for nearly 40 years, until forensic anthropologist Denise To and her team began digging in June 2006. Little had changed in the remote slice of Vietnam near the Loatian border "the thickest, middle-of-nowhere jungle you can imagine," said To, who led a 12 member squad on separate searches of the area.

The hunt for Pfc. Jose Sanchez and the other Marines MIA's began six years earlier, when a piece of Marine-tissued boot was found at the crash site. A second team, dispatched in 2005 determined a more thorough dig was feasible.

To, based with the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii arrived the next year. She came back again in 2007. Her team worked 10 hours a day, seven days a week, for 45 days. The first dig found a set of dog tags and bits of human remains not larger than a Post-it.

Her workers included some local hires from a nearby village. One of them revealed the hill's most stunning secret, held for 38 long years. The villager, speaking to a team translator, recounted watching the chopper crash as a child.

The Marines were his friends, feeding him their C-rations. And so the youngster went to the crash site, found the body of one Marine and staged a jungle funeral. The now-grown villager, two years ago, exhumed and surrounded the remains. "He felt it was his duty." To said "He thought there was a higher calling."

Sanchez's mother wept. After painful years, her son's recovered remains would be returned. Her mind at ease, Virginia Sanchez died five weeks later. "Finally," says son Peter, "she could rest."

The small band of brothers together for so long on a Vietnam mountain will spend eternity united at Arlington National Cemetery. The burial, with full military honors, is set for early May. They will share a single casket, side by side again, much as they were on Hill 672. It will hold a pressed Marine Corps dress uniform, along with a box engraved with their names and filled with their commingled remains.

“They were always together, “ Negrón says. “And now, they won’t be alone.”