

Who is SSgt Robert L. Berry

by SMSgt (Ret.) Robert LaPointe. . .

SSgt Robert L. Berry (PJ Class 66-1) was born 3 December 1938; died 23 July 1966. He is the recipient of the Silver Star and several other decorations for combat rescues in Laos and North Vietnam in 1966.

Robert Berry was a Pararescue hero who died in 1966 because of catching malaria in Laos during the Vietnam War. His name is NOT on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington DC. It should have been added but was somehow omitted. One of the 2025 DOD criteria for adding names to the VVMW states, "From a diagnosed illness, while in a defined combat zone, provided that death occurred within 120 days from departing the defined combat zone and that the death occurred within 120 days of the diagnosis." Sergeant Berry meets that criteria. There are many names on the VVMW that died of malaria.

Why was his name not submitted? We don't know; but we can speculate. In 1966 the U.S. government agreed that Laos was neutral in the Vietnam War, a status recognized by the 1962 Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. The US, while violating this neutrality in various ways, still sought to maintain a degree of deniability.

Detachment 5, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron based at Udorn RTAFB was tasked with rescuing pilots shot down in North Vietnam and Laos. At the start of the Vietnam War, USAF Air Rescue had no air refuellable helicopters. To conduct rescue ops in North Vietnam, they had to preposition their CH-3 helicopters at forward operating locations. These locations were called Lima Sites (LS); and they were close to the North Vietnamese Border. There the aircrew refueled from prepositioned bladders or barrels, walked to a tent and pulled strip alert. They listened to a portable HF radio which alerted them when they needed to scramble for a rescue. All these operations classified SECRET.

On 30 June 1966, SSgt Robert Berry was deployed to LS 98 where he and his crew were on Strip Alert. While on the ground monitoring air strikes when they heard that an F-105 Callsign Savannah 2 was bailing out. The two rescue helicopters at LS-98 scrambled from that location (see attached 30 Jun 1966, SAR

mission report). Following a successful rescue of the downed aircrewman, he was flown back to our home base at Udorn RTAFB.

Soon after returning to Udorn, Robert Berry began to feel ill and reported to the flight surgeon for evaluation. (Need Sgt Berry's medical records to establish exact dates and medical diagnosis). The best date we have for his diagnosis is from the TSgt Aaron Farior diary dated July 18th which stated that Berry had black water fever which is a very virulent form of malaria. TSgt Farior was the NCOIC of the PJs at Udorn.

Why are we telling you this?

The PJA is working to have Robert added to the VVMW. To do so, we must prove that Robert caught malaria in Laos, and that his death was a result of this illness. To have his name added we need to submit a package to the Department of Defense. We are looking for any PJ's, FE's, Pilots or anyone else who was assigned to Det 5 38th ARRS with Robert. We need statements showing that Robert routinely landed at Lima Sites in Laos. We especially need anyone who knows about his diagnosis and death. So far, we have two notarized statements from PJs who served with him. We will also be soliciting assistance from Robert's Congressional Representatives to urge DOD to approve Robert's addition to the Wall. This is a priority project for your PJA. With your assistance, we will make this happen.