

Captain Peter P. Pitman USAF

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Life after tragedy

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This photo are Peter and Libby Pitman, with their young son, Matt, not long before Peter joined Ryan's Raiders.

Libby Pitman lived a charmed life, a modern-day fairy tale.

But in May of 1967, her life was shattered when her husband, Air Force fighter pilot Peter Pitman, was shot down somewhere near the Laos-Vietnam border while on a risky mission to eliminate a target designated by the highest powers in the United States. Libby still remembers him as the sweet young man from Georgia who stole her heart in only a day.

Even as difficult as it is for Libby to talk about Peter, she can't do it without chuckling.

"I loved him," she said. "I just felt like the luckiest person in the world to have met someone that I loved spending time with and admired. He was the life of the party and everybody loved spending time with Peter."

Libby and Peter

Born in Troy, North Carolina, Libby and her family bounced around as her father, an Air Force Officer, went from base to base.

"He flew the hump in World War II," she said of her father. "He got out after the war for about three years and then went back in. Basically, I just went wherever my father was stationed."

And her father was stationed in some great places. From Bermuda to England, Libby got to experience places and things as a child most adults never do. However, the most permanent duty station Libby experienced as a child was Massachusetts' idyllic Cape Cod, where she spent her teenage years.

After her first year at UNC-Chapel Hill, at age 19, Libby returned home to the cape for the summer to work at a hotel.

"That's when I met Peter," she said.

One day, Libby joined a friend, who was an Air Force captain, for a day at the beach. There were boats and people water skiing, but there was one small vessel dead in the water. In it were a young man and woman.

"My friend laughed and said, 'oh that's Pete. He's always out there in his boat, and he always runs out of gas when he has a good looking girl with him,'" she said.

When Peter, a handsome 24-year-old Air Force officer, made it back to shore, he introduced himself to Libby. That night, he called to ask her on a date, but they ended up talking for two hours.

“I’m not the most social person in the world, so I don’t like talking on the phone,” Libby said. “But I was so intrigued, and I just didn’t want to hang up the phone. I couldn’t remember what he looked like then, but when he came to the door I recognized him.”

Peter had grown up in the Atlanta area and graduated from Georgia Tech with an engineering degree before gaining a commission in the Air Force, where he qualified as a navigator and radar operator before moving to Cape Cod to serve under none other than Libby’s father. Libby said Peter was so well-liked that their relationship wasn’t too big of an issue. But her father still couldn’t help but treat Peter a bit different.

“He was worried and concerned about how it would look if he made Peter look like he was a favorite, so as a consequence, he made things twice as tough for Peter,” Libby said.

After a brief courtship, Peter decided to propose to Libby.

“He apparently asked my father for my hand in marriage, and dad said yes, that Peter was an officer and a gentleman,” she said with an endearing grin.

The two got married on Nov. 3, 1962, mere months after meeting.

“It was during the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Libby recalled.

Although Libby preferred solitude to the company of crowds and Peter loved being around people, they were a perfect fit. The two often rubbed elbows with President John F. Kennedy’s circle of friends when he would visit the Cape Cod town of Hyannis.

“Colonel White, who was head of the base, would have to entertain the people who would come with the president,” she said. “We met a lot of important people that my father would take fishing on his boat and over Washburn Island and things like that.”

Before long, Peter got accepted to pilot training in Big Spring Texas.

“He was graduated third in his class by the hair of his chinny-chin-chin,” Libby said. “The first three graduates got their choice of what kind of plane they flew. He wanted to be a fighter pilot, so he was assigned F-105s.”

The training to fly F-105s was in Las Vegas, which despite not being a gambler, Libby said she enjoyed immensely, especially considering Lake Mead was the perfect place for the couple to enjoy the boat together.

Japan

Once training in Las Vegas was wrapped up, the next stop was Yokota Air Base in Japan. While Peter flew there in his F-105, Libby and their 2-year-old son, Matt, had to take a ship to be able to bring their dogs over.

“Before I left I was so afraid that Matt would fall overboard so I got a dog harness to put on him,” Libby joked.

While Libby liked a lot of places she lived over the course of her life, she talked about Japan most affectionately. The young family rented a home off-base that had a fenced in yard for the dogs.

“When Peter was busy, Matt and I would get on the bicycle and go up into the mountains, which are practically identical to these mountains,” she said.

She and Peter enjoyed as much of the country as they could. From riding the world’s fastest train from Tokyo to Kyoto to enjoying the spectacular local arts and culture, they tried their best to soak it all in.

They would dye silk,” Libby said. “Then there would be 30 feet of silk, and they would wash it in the canals and then you’d see it fluttering like a flag, and the beautiful silks would be all these different colors.”

Libby recalled a visit to The Nijō Castle, the home of a powerful 17th-century leader, which she remembered for both its immense size and beauty and its nightingale floors that creaked loudly under pressure.

“He lived in fear that somebody would sneak up on him and attack him,” she said.

Libby, who has had a lifelong appreciation of aesthetics, can still fondly recall Japan’s splendor.

“The Japanese sense of beauty, I think, is just phenomenal,” she said. “They can take a small space, like outside, and you would think in our society, it would give you claustrophobia. They would make it so tranquil. They’d rake the gravel and the sand and the trees, and if they didn’t have a waterfall, they’d make a waterfall. It was such beauty.”

“We had a wonderful life in Japan,” she added.

Better days



Better Days — The officers that made up a portion of Ryan's Raiders had a party not long before their mission in Southeast Asia. Pictured here are Libby and Peter Pitman enjoying one of their last nights together.

Donated photo

But the couple saw the conflict in Vietnam escalating, and as America's presence in the country grew, they knew Peter would be drawn into it before long.



And it wasn't long before that time came.

"Peter would go TDY (temporary duty) down to southeast Asia and spend a month or two at a time flying various missions," Libby said.

Libby recalled that things got tense at one point when Peter's squadron had taken severe losses and he volunteered to stay down there for an extra month.

"I remember freaking out," she said. "Stupidly, I was thinking about leaving. I was so angry that he would volunteer in such difficult situations."

Nick Donelson not only flew missions alongside Peter but was also one of his good friends.

"He was a great guy," Nick said. "I had deployed with him initially in October or November of '66 ... to replace pilots who had been shot down. That was both of our first experiences in combat with the F-105."

The now-retired Colonel recalled what it was like flying missions over Vietnam and dealing with the constant threat of surface to air missiles and enemy MiG's.

"You always took fire," he said.

Libby struggled while awaiting Peter's return.

"I'm not proud of it. I shouldn't have been that angry," she said. "I wrote him a nasty letter, which I'm ashamed of."

About the time she wrote the letter, Peter was on a mission when a jet he was flying alongside was shot down. Despite taking fire and losing his navigation, Peter opted to continue to fly over the area so he could relay information about where the pilot's parachute ended up.

"He got a silver star for that later," Libby said. "And it was after I had sent him that horrible letter. I just thank God every day of my life that that wasn't the day he got killed."

Ryan's Raiders

Ryan's Raiders was a group formed by General John Ryan, whom Donelson said was also known as "three-fingered Jack." Libby knew Ryan's Raiders would be a dangerous group to be a part of, but Peter ended up a member anyway.

The group was formed when the career-minded general became upset that the Navy was able to conduct numerous air strikes at night, something the Air Force wasn't doing at that time.

“This is my opinion,” Donelson said. “He was promoting the Air Force versus the Navy. The Navy was getting the headlines for being able to fly in at night and drop bombs, but the Air Force is supposed to be the primary air wing of the U.S.”

Donelson said missions that were flown during the day would feature three jets flying together, but night missions were solo, just pilot and “back seater” venturing into danger. Along with Donelson, Peter Pitman joined the group of elite pilots.

After two months of training, the pilots left for Korat Air Force Base in Thailand, from which they would carry out their missions — missions that sought to eliminate high-profile targets selected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“There were a lot of missions that were performed by ground forces and the Air Force that were kind of super-secret and extraordinary,” Donelson said. “That was just one of them.”

Donelson noted that missions originating from Korat Air Force base had a 33 percent loss rate, so the men knew there was a chance they might not come back.

“He was one of the first ones of this specific type of mission to go missing,” he said of Peter.

“This is the really tough part,” Libby said as she began to speak about the day she was told Peter had gone missing.

Understandably, Libby is still angry that General Ryan gave her husband such a dangerous assignment.

“In a way, I kind of hesitate talking about it because it upsets me so much,” she said. “I’m not proud that I’ve held a grudge for 50-something years.”

“He was ordered to do this and it was just insanity to ask somebody to do that,” she added. “It’s like telling him to go die. Peter knew how dangerous it was, so he started talking about what I would do if he was lost. I couldn’t bear to talk about it.”

Before Peter went down, he was en route to a target at Ron Ferry, right along the border of north and south Vietnam near the Laotian border.

“We now know where approximately where he went down,” Libby said.

Search and rescue were sent out to look for Pitman, his backseater, or any wreckage, but nothing was found.

In the dark

Libby, who was pregnant with their second child, initially tried to be optimistic.

“I wasn’t expecting a miracle, but I was certainly hopeful,” she said. “In the following years, the government sent me the address of the Hanoi Hilton where prisoners of war were kept. They said I could send a package to that address and hopefully, they would recognize Peter and tell us if he was there.”

She sent a package, but she made a mistake.

“I foolishly sent photographs without making copies,” she said. “So now I have limited photographs of Peter.”

Ultimately, there was never any indication that he was taken prisoner, and Peter was declared dead on Jan. 9, 1975.

The government sends representatives out to hold annual meetings with families of military members who are missing in action to offer explanations of updates and the process in general. Although Libby hadn’t been to any in a while and Peter had been declared dead, just a few years ago, she decided to go to one.

“I said, ‘as far as I’m concerned, General Ryan is as much responsible for his loss as the North Vietnamese are,’” she said. “And I still feel that way.”

When Libby told them about Ryan’s Raiders, they had no idea what she was talking about, but they promised to figure it out and let her know what they could find.

“They sent it to me,” she said, adding that she can’t get through all the material they sent. “I read about 10 pages, and I never have finished it. I just got so upset. The reason Ryan had chosen F-105s is that when they were lost, it was a cheaper loss than a bigger plane.”

Not long after Peter was lost, Libby and her in-laws sought a warmer climate in Florida.

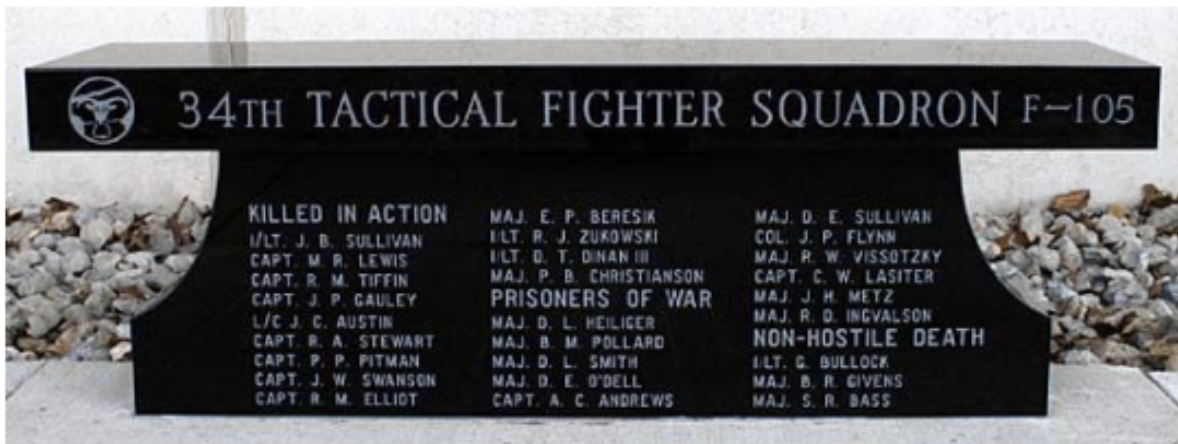
“I moved to Florida and simply because I didn’t know where to go,” she said. “One of the wives of another person that was missing in action was from there and moved back to DeLand. She said come join me, you’ll love it.”

Living on

Libby enjoyed taking her kids to the beach, but she felt the need to get away.

“In 1969 or ‘70, I rented a U-Haul,” she said. “I loaded it up with what I’d need for the summer and got the two kids and two dogs and we just came up to the mountains.”

Libby arrived in Maggie Valley and met a gas station owner who let her keep the U-Haul at his business while she checked things out. Libby and her kids traveled all around the region looking at places to live, but she was drawn to Haywood County. For a couple years, she rented a cabin in Balsam while looking for property by a river or a creek. She spoke to several real estate agents.



Peter's is one of several names on a memorial to those who were killed in action or prisoners of war from the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

Donated photo

Libby today



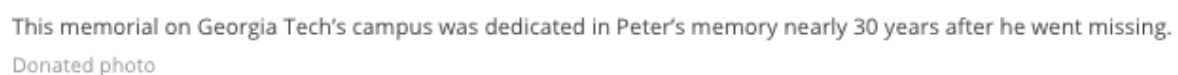
“This man had a photograph of a river on his desk, and I said that’s what I want,” she said. “He said, ‘that’s too far out. A woman with two young kids is not going to buy that.’ But I said I wanted to see it. He wouldn’t take me out there, so I kept hounding him.”

The river she spoke of is the Little East Fork of The Pigeon River. She told her parents, who were recently retired and looking to move somewhere relaxing, about the property.

“Where you turn off onto Little East Fork Road, there was this great big rock in the middle of a field,” she said. “I drove past it, and there was a pig up on top of the rock. I thought, oh my god, that’s a sign. This is going to be the place. And I just loved it.”

Although Libby has spent her time taking care of the home, enjoying nature, and finding hobbies such as pottery and ceramics, Peter is never far from her mind

flat out I'm a recluse; I don't like to be around crowds or in the center of things, but he loved it. And everybody loved him."





Libby doesn't have many photos of Peter left, but she treasures what she has.

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Libby is seen here with some food for the trout and koi fish, which she enjoys feeding often.

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