

What Remains

A Vietnam pilot's daughter
and her fight for answers



— BY JENNIFER MCFARLAND FLINT —

Primary photography by Bruce Weller

What Remains



Colleen Shine '86 had been consumed by the fate of her father since the day his A-7 fighter jet disappeared in the clouds over Vietnam in 1972. Certain that planes and their pilots don't just "disappear," she fought for answers, both for her family and others like them. The year 2012 marked the beginning of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. As of Veteran's Day of last year, 1,655 Americans were still unaccounted for, their families still awaiting answers.

On the decades-old X-rays projected on the wall, Colleen Shine '86 could see exactly where her father's two front teeth had been chipped in a college football game, then restored with porcelain on the front, gold on the back. The dentistry clearly matched the teeth in a piece of jawbone on the table before her in the Central Identification Lab in Hawaii (CILHI). Lt. Col. Robert Temple, an odontologist at the lab, explained the bone's chain of custody to Shine and her brother, Shannon, with quiet respect, as Ann Webster Bunch '86 stood by.

Bunch was a forensic anthropologist at the lab, which has a mission to "search for, recover, and identify US personnel missing from past military conflicts," but her

role that day was primarily that of friend. She clarified points here and there, but the evidence would be obvious to a layperson: The jawbone on the table belonged to Anthony Shine, and he could not have survived without it. It was 1997, almost a quarter-century after his plane vanished in 1972, and at long last his fate was clear.

Colleen and Shannon walked out of CILHI with their father's remains tucked inside a handsome wooden box decorated with the US Air Force emblem. They left with the certainty that they were seeing their father, "though not in the way you had hoped for so many years," she says. And they left with an undiminished resolve to "do all we could to promote an honest accounting ... for the many other [cases] the CILHI scientists were working on at the time and in the future."

The Knock on the Door

Capt. Anthony Shine was a strapping Norman Rockwell footballer type who towered over his 30-year-old wife, Bonnie, and their three children in 1972. He was nearing the end of his second tour of duty that December, when he radioed to his wingman from the cockpit of his A-7 fighter jet that he was descending through a thick cloud cover to get a better look at a North Vietnamese supply convoy near the border of Laos. The wingman didn't hear from or see Shine again. No parachutes were observed, no emergency signals received. Although other aircraft reported a ground fire and possible crash site, a search-and-rescue team turned up nothing. Anthony Shine was listed as missing in action on Dec. 2; his case was assigned reference number (REFNO) 1950.

✱ Ann Webster Bunch noticed Colleen Shine's silver POW/MIA bracelet, inscribed with her father's name. For Bunch, who grew up without any exposure to the military or the POW/MIA issue, the story was an eye-opener and Shine's courage an inspiration.

Opposite: Anthony Shine posed in front of a F-105 at the Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base after completing his 100th mission in 1968. The Anthony C. Shine Award is presented by the Air Force each year to a fighter pilot for proficiency and professionalism.

Colleen Shine remembers the knock on the door that announced the news. She was 8, her brothers 10 and 3. Details of the day are seared into her memory: the snow at their upstate New York home, the look on her mother's face, and the sofa where she sat her two older children to share the raw truth—that they just didn't know what had happened, whether he was alive. Patriotism and military service run deep in the family; Colleen Shine “knew what war was, even as a child. But we had a lot of hope,” she says. They put away their Christmas presents, deciding to celebrate when Tony came home.

They learned nothing for 14 years. Bonnie Shine, not knowing if she was a wife or widow, focused her energy on advocating on behalf of the POW/MIA issue, as did her father-in-law. They printed thousands of postcards with Tony's name and information to drop over Southeast Asian countries, hopeful that they might learn something. They collected signatures for petitions and lobbied for laws requiring more government accountability and openness, “adamant that this is an issue our country needed to make right,” Shine says. But given the raging controversy over the war, the cultural climate was far from supportive. “People threw Coke bottles and spat at [my mother], called her husband a baby killer,” Shine says. The government urged the family to keep quiet. “It was a very isolating experience, particularly for my mom,” she says. But they kept at it, because what else could you do?

'Sister-Like' Friends

On the first day of orientation at Wellesley in the fall of 1982, Ann Webster Bunch '86 unpacked her bags and the standard-issue freshman insecurities in Tower Court East room 316. “The first day of college is intimidating,” Bunch says. “I wasn't sure how much in common I'd have with anyone there.” Until she met Colleen Shine, settling into the room across the hall. “It was instantaneous,” Bunch says. “I felt we would be good friends.”

She noticed Shine's silver POW/MIA bracelet, inscribed with her father's name. The bracelet was “a part of me,” Shine says. Since the age of 8, she had worn it “as a public-awareness tool to let people know about the plight of men like my father and families like mine.” For Bunch, who grew up without any exposure to the military or the POW/MIA issue, the story was an eye-opener and Shine's courage an inspiration. Their friendship developed into one that both describe as “sister-like,” the sort that weathers adulthood and the gaps of communication that busy lives so often engender.

A year out of school, in 1987, Shine was PR director for the nonprofit National League of POW/MIA Families when the first report related to REFNO 1950 emerged. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, communication between the two countries had ended abruptly; Vietnam was silent about the 2,583 Americans who didn't come home. It wasn't until the Reagan administration, when US relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam eased, that reports and human remains started to find their way back home, through a tangle of politics. “This issue has been their bridge to political and economic progress, and bilateral relations with the US,” Shine says. “It's been the biggest leverage they've had.” A few American families got answers; the Shines only found more questions.

The first communication related to REFNO 1950, relayed to the family from the Air Force Casualty Office, was a report from a Laotian refugee; it ultimately revealed nothing. More than a dozen others would follow—including one suggesting Tony Shine was alive



Colleen Shine and Ann Webster Bunch, “very fresh freshman,” within the first month of their arrival on campus in 1982.





On her visit to Vietnam in 1995, Shine found Mr. Quynh and his wife in the hamlet of Huu Kiem. He gave her the helmet, which was instrumental in bringing about a resolution for her father's case.

and in captivity. Each one would lift and dash the Shines' hopes in painful reprise. Colleen had taken over the family's efforts, analyzing each dispatch and urging the Air Force Casualty Office to do more and better. "I'd say, 'You need to go back and ask this question, ask that question, and has this person been debunked?'" With her PR savvy, she was able to use diplomacy and leverage the media at times to "compel more responsible action." Shine says that government personnel handling these cases suffered from high turnover and, at times, apathy; she was dogged and meticulous. "I needed them to do it well, and I knew it better than they did," she says. "He was my father, not theirs."

On the Ground in Vietnam

In the early 1990s, investigators from the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting located a crash site about 15 kilometers from the Laotian border. The team interviewed villagers, one of whom, a Mr. Quynh, remembered seeing two aircraft fly overhead around the time of Anthony Shine's disappearance. The villager showed them a helmet he had recovered from the area shortly after the incident. The investigators found "no identifying markings" on it, Shine says, and no human remains substantial enough to test for DNA.

Satisfied that they had done what they could, the Defense Department assigned REFNO 1950 a "pending"

status, effectively dropping the case. "They said any other remains would have been washed away by floods or destroyed by acidic soil, and airplane parts would have been scavenged by villagers for scrap metal," Shine says.

So she flew to Vietnam. It was February 1995, before the full normalization of relations; she went with the attitude that "if there's anything further I can do on the case, I will. And if there isn't, I'll have to come away knowing I have to move on with my life, that I don't want to spend every minute of the rest of my life trying to do this," she says.

On arrival, Shine navigated thick layers of Communist bureaucracy, hired a Soviet Jeep and driver, and bumped along the country's rudimentary roads, carsick, wondering if the potholes had been cut by bombs her father had dropped. In the remote hamlet of Huu Kiem, she found Mr. Quynh. With flip-flops on his feet and a machete in hand, he led Shine and her government minders up the mountain, thick with growth, just as he had led the investigators before them. The crash site sat at the top of a steep ravine; pieces of wreckage lay scattered on the ground. Shine filled several bags with debris. Investigators had previously done a "very cursory" digging of the spot where they believed Anthony Shine had been buried. Colleen Shine sat down, her feet in the grave, her heart full with the realization that there was more to be learned there.

After tea in Mr. Quynh's hut, she asked to see the helmet. Turning it over in her hands, Shine looked inside. "I almost fainted," she says. In faded but legible black ink, "Shine" was written by hand. The American investigators had taken "23 pictures of the helmet and never saw this big name inside," she says.

The helmet didn't leave her possession again until she got back to the US, where it caught attention. Shine met with officials from the State and Defense departments, President Bill Clinton, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Shalikashvili. She testified before Congress, using the helmet as a tool to urge for better handling of all POW/MIA cases. She also met with a general who headed the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting. He looked at Colleen Shine, who is as petite and blonde as she is articulate and assertive, and he said, "Tell me, did you write the name in this helmet?" Shine remembers she nearly "levitated out of my seat" with anger in that moment, but she is surprisingly magnanimous about the whole trial: "It doesn't matter if it's ignorance, incompetence, or mal-intent. The bottom line is this is a case that we could get more answers on. I felt really glad to be able to use [the helmet] as an example, because other families had not had the opportunity."

The Defense Department sent a team of investigators back to Vietnam for a full-scale excavation a few months later. The grave appeared to have been looted by then, but they found a piece of the plane's wing with a serial number and enough bone particles—fragments of finger bones, clavicle, vertebrae, among others—to test for DNA.

Into the Lab

Ann Webster Bunch was mailing résumés around this time in 1995, in her final year of teaching at the University of Kentucky. She had received her M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Chicago, where she had researched animal bones from South American archaeology sites. She saw a posting for a forensic anthropologist at the CILHI and thought she might have a shot, given her osteological research.

In a phone call with the lab's scientific director, Tom Holland, Bunch happened to mention that the father of a close friend was among the missing. "Who's your friend?" Holland asked. A heavy silence fell when he heard the name; Shine was well-known at the lab, as a result of her active involvement. From that point forward and after landing the job, "The fact that I knew Colleen—I tried not to play that up," Bunch says. But she continued to follow the case closely.

She traveled constantly for the new job, conducting fieldwork in Southeast Asia, camping in jungles, and fending off the occasional land leech—all in the name of helping to identify the remains of Americans lost to war. The personal connection to the Shine family served as a poignant reminder of the value of her work. One day

she turned on the TV in her Hanoi hotel room, and there was Colleen Shine on CNN International, pressing for international cooperation on the POW/MIA issue. Bunch marveled at the convergence of their paths, the unexpected turn of their friendship.

✿ Shine flew to Vietnam. It was February 1995, before the full normalization of relations; she went with the attitude that 'if there's anything further I can do on the case, I will. And if there isn't, I'll have to come away knowing I have to move on with my life. ...'

When Bunch joined the lab, forensic anthropologists were analyzing fragmentary remains thought to be those of Anthony Shine. They turned a sample over to the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Maryland for mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) analysis. A relatively new tool at the time, mtDNA analysis would become a standard for MIA identifications. Mitochondria are the structures of a cell that produce energy, and mtDNA is passed down along maternal lines. Its analysis is far from foolproof and not as exacting as nuclear DNA analysis. But sometimes it is the best tool available, particularly when combined with other forensic evidence.

Scientists at the Armed Forces laboratory matched two sequences from the bone fragments to blood samples from Anthony Shine's mother and siblings. The longest sequence was compared against the lab's database, where it occurred in fewer than 4 percent of their records (which then included only 715 individuals). It was a weak statistical probability, but the lab declared it a match. The helmet and handwriting were also determined to be Tony Shine's.



BRUCE WELLS

Colleen Shine has about 20 POW/MIA bracelets bearing her father's name that were worn by others and returned over time. Lt. Col. David Chaney wore this one for 24 years, until he retired from the Air Force in 2011.

One Family's Resolution

The Casualty Office prepared to present the family with a collected body of evidence, including findings from all the labs, as their investigation concluded. As part of the process, CILHI would have to return remains related to the case. In a break with the professional distance Ann Bunch had maintained on the case, Director Holland asked her to inventory the bones before their return to the family. "I think he knew I had a vested interest in getting it right for Colleen," Bunch says. As she held each bone in her hand, such an unusual intimacy, "It was kind of a spiritual experience," Bunch says.

The Casualty Office's case file review arrived, together with the bones and physical evidence, in the summer of 1996; the Shines gathered in upstate New York to make their determination on whether to accept the findings. Of all the siblings, aunts, uncles, and parents, Colleen was the person closest to the case, the evidence, and the scientists. "It was a tremendous amount of weight on my shoulders to be the one ... to say, OK, I recommend we accept this as the fullest possible accounting," she says. Even with many pieces of the puzzle still missing, they felt they could accept this answer.

✱ Shine has been an instrumental advocate for veteran-related organizations, serving on the staff and board of the National League of POW/MIA Families and throwing her PR and fund-raising know-how behind many others that support Vietnam veterans, their families, and the Wall.

Opposite: The wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., honors more than 58,000 men and women, including Anthony Shine.

In October 1996, Bonnie Shine walked alone behind the horse-drawn caisson to the burial at Arlington National Cemetery; her children followed. Four F-15 fighter jets flew overhead in a missing-man formation. Family and friends, scientists and government officials honored the life and sacrifice of Anthony Shine, who had been posthumously promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Colleen placed her POW/MIA bracelet in the casket, which was buried with a full uniform and a plastic bag of bone fragments. With "a truth to face and move forward from," however incomplete, Shine says, the grieving could begin.

Four months later, a partial jawbone was turned over to the US Embassy in Vientiane, Laos. Records of Anthony Shine's dental work superimposed against this mandible were indisputable. "I remember crying when I got the phone call that his jawbone was found, because then the pressure was off," Shine says. "Then it is science revealing truth. Period. The end. Total clarity." She and Shannon flew to Hawaii, where they met with Bunch and Temple. They brought their father's remains home to New York, and buried them privately with family.

For Today's Soldiers

On a cold, overcast morning in November 2012, Colleen Shine visited her father's grave in Arlington National Cemetery. It was a month before the 40th anniversary of his death, a date that coincided with her daughter's 10th birthday—a bittersweet convergence of "heavenly" and "earthly" birthdays, as she says. The grave lies in section 60, where many of today's war casualties are buried and where the grieving process is raw and visible.

Shine has been an instrumental advocate for veteran-related organizations, serving on the staff and board of the National League of POW/MIA Families and throwing her PR and fund-raising know-how behind many others that support Vietnam veterans, their families, and the Wall. She feels equally connected to the families grieving more recent losses. She has been an active volunteer for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors; she has spoken to spouses of those killed in Iraq and Afghanistan; she has written about grieving.

Last May, at a Rolling Thunder parade in Washington, D.C., she met with the father of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, a POW in Afghanistan who has been missing since 2009. The Bergdahls had broken their silence, after "being told many of the same things we were: Stay quiet, let us handle this," Shine says. When they met, Bergdahl's father lowered his sunglasses. "Did the government do right by you and your family?" he asked.

"It just breaks my heart, but I had to say to him, 'No sir, they absolutely did not. You need to fight this. You need to be your son's advocate,'" she says. Shine is quick to say that many people, from scientists to those involved in policy, helped bring about answers. But without the family's involvement, the Shines would still be living under the punishing weight of uncertainty.

"If nothing else, the government has learned that the families aren't going away," Shine says. "Does that make it easier for Sergeant Bergdahl's mom and dad to go to bed at night, knowing he's a prisoner? Probably not. But men and women who don the uniform, I believe they know we've got their back in a way they didn't 20 years ago." That difference is, in some small part, due to the advocacy of the Shines and so many other families like them, waging their own war for answers and a full accounting.

Last September, Colleen Shine attended the National POW/MIA Recognition Day ceremony at the Pentagon, where a joint review of troops paraded past the secretary of defense and the vice president. Watching the fresh faces, soldiers all in their 20s, "totally spit-shined," Shine says, she realized that they are the reason she keeps advocating. "It's not just for the Vietnam veterans, it's not just for my mom or my grandmother or me and my brothers or my dad." It's for our uniformed finest—and the daughters and sons, fathers and mothers who wait for them to return home from their missions.

Jennifer Flint is an associate editor at Wellesley.



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Colleen Shine '86 and her daughter, Chiara, visit the grave of Colleen's father at Arlington National Cemetery. Chiara turned 10 on Dec. 2, 2012, 40 years to the day after Anthony Shine died in combat. For more of Colleen Shine's story, see "What Remains," page 26.