

Gregory Peter Thomas, T-32

24 December 1913 – 16 March 1962

(aged 47)



Search continuing for Plane Missing with 107 Aboard.

U.S. military planes and ships resumed a hunt between Guam and the Philippines tonight for a chartered airliner which vanished at sea with 107 persons, -- chiefly American Army men, on a flight to war-town South Viet Nam.

A full 24 hours passed since the four-engine Super Constellation owned by the California-based Flying Tiger Line, radioed its last message. This was a routine report to Guam from a position 270 miles west of that U.S. base in the western Pacific, as it headed for Clark Air Force Base, north of Manila.

Search craft crisscrossed 35,000 square miles of the Pacific fruitlessly by daylight and were continuing through the night. Weather was excellent and the sea normal.

93 ARMY PERSONNEL

The Super Constellation carried a crew of 11 Americans, 93 U.S. Army personnel and three South Vietnamese, Travis Air Force Base in California said. Four women were among the crew.

Military sources in Saigon assumed the troops were due to bolster the American forces backing South Viet Nam's government in its war against the Viet Cong guerrillas.

Fifteen aircraft based at Guam launched the hunt for the Flying Tiger plane. Spread over a 100-mile front, they flew 350 miles westward—in a point about midway between Guam and the Philippines—and then retraced their course eastward.

9 HOURS OF FUEL

The plane took off from Guam at 8:37 p.m. Thursday night carrying fuel for about nine hours flying for the 1,900-mile, eight-hour trip to Clark Air Force Base, north of Manila. It was last heard from 80 minutes later when the pilot sent a routine radio message to Guam from about 220 miles west of the American island base.

The Clark Field Rescue Coordinating Center declared the airliner missing this morning. A U.S. Navy spokesman said it was believed the plane went down closer to Guam than to the Philippines.

U.S. bases in the Western Pacific marshaled a task force of surface ships and Air Force, Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard planes.

The searchers scoured an ocean area stretching 750 miles west of Guam and 100 miles wide.

The airliner, piloted by Capt Gregory Peter Thomas of Red Bank NJ, left Travis base in northern California Tuesday. Travis is often the originating

point for troops being ferried across the Pacific by plane. Flying Tiger is often the carrier. Guam is a regular refueling stop.

Military sources in Saigon said the plane was due in South Viet Nam this morning. It was assumed in the Vietnamese capital that the military personnel aboard the plane were to join U.S. forces bolstering the South Viet Nam government's fight against the Communist Viet Cong Guerrillas.

Red Bank pilot, soldiers honored 59 years after plane vanished on the way to Vietnam.

Capt. Gregory Thomas was a 48-year-old pilot with nearly 20,000 flight hours under his belt. Described as "colorful and heroic," he flew with the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II and later safely landed a cargo plane on a beach after all four engines quit. He lived on a 55-foot yacht in Red Bank.

On March 16, 1962, he was at the controls for one of the biggest tragedies — and mysteries — in U.S. aviation history.

Early that morning Thomas was piloting Flying Tiger Line Flight 739, a military-chartered transport plane that disappeared over the Pacific Ocean with 107 people aboard, including 93 American soldiers. They were headed to Vietnam on a mission whose objective remains secret to this day.

The military ruled a mid-air explosion occurred, but never announced a cause. No trace of the aircraft was found. Because the explosion supposedly happened outside of the theater of war, the names of the victims are not listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Plane Piloted By Red Bank Man Missing

107 Aboard Flying Tiger Airliner Sought in Pacific



GREGORY P. THOMAS

Pilot Cited As Hero In 1957 Mishap

RED BANK—Capt. Gregory P. Thomas, pilot of the Super-Constellation missing over the Pacific with 107 persons aboard, was the hero of a plane mishap in 1957.

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—A chartered airliner, piloted by Capt. Gregory P. Thomas, Red Bank, N.J., and with 106 other persons aboard, was missing and presumed down in the western Pacific today.

The plane, bound for South Viet Nam, reportedly had 93 U.S. military personnel, three South Vietnamese, and a civilian crew of 11, including Capt. Gregory, aboard.

The Super-Constellation of the Flying Tiger Lines was lost on the Guam-to-Philippines leg of a transpacific flight from Travis Air Force Base in northern California.

U.S. bases in the western Pacific mustered an armada of planes and ships to search for the missing plane.

All they had to go on was the pilot's last routine radio message to Guam sent about 270 miles west of that American base.

Had Nine Hours Fuel

The plane took off from Guam at 8:57 p.m. yesterday, carrying fuel for about nine hours of flying. It was due at Clark Air Force Base, north of Manila, at 3:16 a.m. today. (4:16 p.m. EST Thursday.)

The search began from Clark and Andersen Air Force Bases on

That's a gaping wound for the loved ones of those lost. On May 15, 59 years later, a monument to them will be unveiled in Maine. More than 150 relatives are coming from all corners of the country. Maine resident Jen Kirk, whose uncle Donald Sargent was on Flight 739, has tracked down and invited 40 families.

"I've been working on this for almost two years now," Kirk said. "I don't want them to be forgotten. And that is my fear — that they are forgotten."

Her quest to reach Gregory Thomas' relatives has come up empty, so far.

This column is an attempt to close the gap.

'A good pilot, a very assertive guy'

The front page of the Asbury Park Evening Press on March 16, 1962 featured two

articles about Thomas and Flight 739. The main story was headlined, "Plane Piloted by Red Bank Man Missing," and contained basic information about the flight. The sidebar, "Pilot Cited as Hero in 1957 Mishap," shed some light on who Thomas was.

"If anyone has the presence and coolness of mind to put down a plane in trouble, Greg is the man," neighbor and friend Roger Korky is quoted as saying. The sidebar recounts how, five years earlier, Thomas was commended for "exceptional meritorious conduct" for landing "a Flying

Tiger Airline DC6 aircraft which was forced to ditch in Jamaica Bay, New York City ... without loss of life or serious injury.”

The Flying Tiger Airline was founded after Word War II by a group of fighter pilots. It was the first scheduled cargo airline in the U.S. and also became a major operator of military charters. Thomas came aboard in 1950.

Larry Lefever, a senior member of the Flying Tiger Line Pilots Association, joined the airline shortly after Flight 739’s disappearance and heard all about Thomas.

“He was a good pilot, a very assertive guy,” Lefever, now 80 and living in Washington state, told the Asbury Park Press via phone Thursday. “He was a gruff kind of guy, but once you got to know him, you liked him. I remember people who didn’t know him speculating that (Flight 739) got hijacked and one guy who did know him said, ‘You don’t know Greg Thomas.’”

The Asbury Park Press’ sidebar on Thomas in 1962 said he was living on a yacht docked at Red Bank’s Marine Park that had previously belonged to composer Sigmund Romberg. He was divorced and his ex-wife Doreen and their three children — Peter, 10, Doreen, 9, and Terry, 7 — lived on the West Coast. Korky, the neighbor, said he looked after Thomas’ chihuahua when he was away on flights.

How did Thomas, who originally hailed from Memphis, wind up in Jersey? “In those days (Flying Tiger) had bases on the West Coast, and Newark was the only East Coast base,” Lefever said. “He was based in Newark.”
'They should know he was a hero'

For 59 years, speculation about what happened to Flight 739 has run rampant. The U.S. military released very little information to the public. Crew members of a tanker reported seeing an explosion and vapor trail in

the sky, around the coordinates where the plane was supposed to be at the time.

There is no evidence of a malfunction. Theories range from a lightning strike to sabotage to a hijacking. Lefever said some former Tiger pilots believe the U.S. Navy accidentally shot the plane down.

The Flying Tiger Line was absorbed by Federal Express in the late 1980s. The pilots' association has organized reunions, and Lefever said one of Greg Thomas' sons showed up at one about 20 years ago in Seattle.

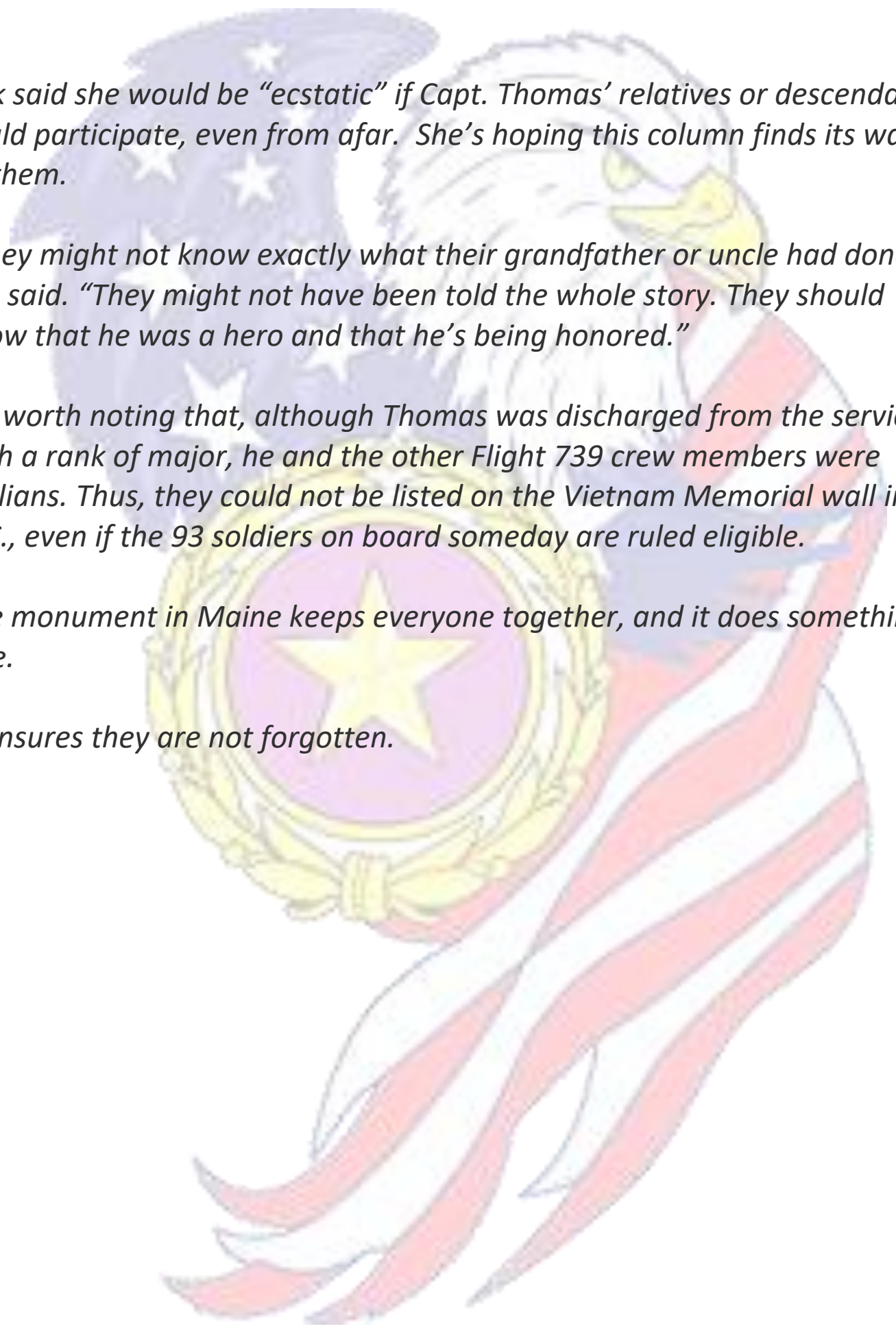
"I remember meeting him and he wanted to know if there was anybody left that might have been with his dad on that DC-6," Lefever said. "I did know a guy, the co-pilot (now deceased), and I put him in touch. I think he was fairly anxious to talk to somebody that knew or flew with his dad."

Lefevre said the son was working for Reno Air, which was acquired by American Airlines in 1999

"I think he wanted to try to cement a connection with his dad since he was in the aviation business," Lefever said.

On May 15, the families of Flight 739 may finally attain a measure of closure when the memorial is unveiled. The monument is located in Columbia Falls, Maine, on land donated by Morrill Worcester — the founder of Wreaths Across America, a nonprofit known for placing wreaths at veterans' headstones.

This is the first gathering associated with Flight 739. Those who cannot attend will be able to watch a live stream of the unveiling and accompanying ceremony.



Kirk said she would be “ecstatic” if Capt. Thomas’ relatives or descendants could participate, even from afar. She’s hoping this column finds its way to them.

“They might not know exactly what their grandfather or uncle had done,” she said. “They might not have been told the whole story. They should know that he was a hero and that he’s being honored.”

It’s worth noting that, although Thomas was discharged from the service with a rank of major, he and the other Flight 739 crew members were civilians. Thus, they could not be listed on the Vietnam Memorial wall in D.C., even if the 93 soldiers on board someday are ruled eligible.

The monument in Maine keeps everyone together, and it does something else.

It ensures they are not forgotten.