

is honored on Panel 1W, Row 39 of
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Full Name: ROBERT ALLAN ROBERTSON
Wall Name: ROBERT A ROBERTSON
Date of Birth: 12/12/1945
Date of Casualty: 6/9/1972
Home of Record: SARATOGA
County of Record: SANTA CLARA COUNTY
State: CA
Branch of Service: ARMY
Rank: CAPT
Casualty Country: SOUTH VIETNAM
Casualty Province: PLEIKU



A Note from The Virtual Wall

On 9 June 1972 an OH-58A (tail number 68-16938) from the 201st Aviation Company (Corps) was detailed to fly a US civilian, John Paul Vann, from Pleiku to Kontum. Vann was an erstwhile career Army officer (LTC, WW2, Korea, Vietnam (62-63); DSM w/ OLC, DFC, PH, ARCOM w/ OLC) who returned to Vietnam as a civilian with the Agency for International Development. In 1971 he was appointed the II Corps Senior Advisor.

Three people were aboard the OH-58 when it departed Pleiku: the pilot, 1LT Ronald E. Doughtie, Mr. Vann, and Captain Robert A. Robertson, an Army intelligence officer assigned to the US Army Element, Pleiku. Departure was at 2050 in deteriorating weather conditions. Doughtie had not requested an instrument flight plan or radar flight following, but the flight seemed to be routine. The last contact with the OH-58 was at 2100, when Mr. Vann radioed the US Advisor unit at Kontum estimating arrival at about 2115.

The OH-58 did not arrive, but at 2130 a unit operating along highway QL14 did report what appeared to be a helicopter crash. A rapid survey indicated that Doughtie's aircraft was the only one unaccounted for in the area and a SAR effort was begun. The wreckage was located by a helicopter, which landed nearby while ARVN troops were directed to the site. Mr. Vann had been thrown clear of the wreckage and his body was recovered that night. The bodies of the other two men were recovered the following morning.

Robbie was my best friend in Vietnam

It was dark, the wind was blowing, and Kontum was under attack. Mr. Vann decided to make a flight from Pleiku to Kontum to cheer the troops and carry mail, fresh bread, and such to the besieged troops.

Robbie was in the TOC, standing watch. Pleiku and the surrounding area had been under attack. Pyle Barracks, the location of II Corps Headquarters had a collection of killed Soviet T-54 tanks inside the compound. Some had been killed by ground forces - most had been killed by US Air Force systems.

Robbie was the US Army Installation Pleiku Security Officer. He worked for me. I was the Deputy Commander. He was actually off duty, but filling in for his NCOIC when he was asked to fly to Kontum.

When Mr. Vann's (Nixon's appointee to II Corp) pilot asked if Robbie wanted to ride shotgun during the flight to Kontum, it was a normal mission. Robbie was a qualified aerial observer - and it meant that one of the troops wouldn't have to respond to a "hey you" roster - so I gave the clearance for him to go. With the wind and rain, it was a quiet night for the defenders. Robbie was building a model airplane while monitoring the security radio. So he put it on the shelf, his sergeant came in, and Robbie was off with a smile. It was the last time I would see him. Smiling, eager to go, just a great guy.

Area weather was isolated thunderstorms. Sadly, one of those isolated storms was on top of the pass through which Robbie had to fly to get to Kontum. But we didn't know that. No one did.

Mr. Van's chopper (OH-58) never made it to Kontum. We believe the adverse weather forced the craft into the side of the mountain, in the narrow pass. We began the search that night. Both with air and ground surveillance devices and a ground search. Early in the morning we found the three occupants dead in the crashed helicopter.

I took R&R a few months later and made it a point to meet with Robbie's wife and mother in law. Sad to have to tell the account of his death. But somehow better to know that Robbie was doing what he wanted to do when he lost his life.

He was a great guy with a great smile. Focused on his job, well liked by the men and officers of the command. The best of the best. So very sad to have him die. Some would say it was needless. Robbie would say different. Those of us in Vietnam were focused on the day to day operation - not the politics of war. For Robbie the flight to Kontum was a mission designed to make life better for those who were in harms way. It should have been a safe flight - not much different than a training flight in the States.

Its purpose may appear small - compared to the loss of life. But the Kontum defenders were cut off - isolated - and the daily flights of mail, fresh bread and contact with the outside world were key elements of maintaining high morale.

It is sad that he is gone - all who knew Robbie miss him still.

Posted by: Terrence R. Redding, Ph.D.

Relationship: We served together

July 25, 2000

A fine young Artillery Officer doing his best for his Country

CPT Robertson and I shared duties as Duty Officer in the Pleiku 1st Field Force Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and had neighboring 'hootches' in the BOQ Area on Artillery Hill. I remember him being 'gung ho'. It is my understanding that he was with John Paul Vann, the civilian commander of the Central Highlands, when his helicopter crashed enroute to Pleiku from Saigon (*Pleiku to Kontum*). I saw an article on Vann in the Army Times, 15 Aug 11, and used the date of his death to search for 'Rob'. I have always thought that could have been me with Vann. Welcome home CPT Robertson.

Patrick Costello, LTC (USAR Ret)
Served with CPT Robertson in Pleiku
24 Cashanacur Drive Nashville GA 31639

Robert is buried at San Francisco National Cemetery



Mr. Vann and Lt Doughtie a few days before the fatal crash

Information about the pilot of the aircraft

I met Ronald Doughtie in flight school, we were stick buddies with the same Instructor Pilot at Fort Wolters, Texas. During our flight training at Fort Rucker Southern Airways, which had the contract to train my class in instrument flying, went on strike and what cursory training we got by Army IPs was more like survival skills in case of inadvertent IMC. In August 71 we met again in Seattle and flew to Vietnam together. We went to separate bases but met and talked in the Spring of 72 when he had just started flying Vann. I met him and his wife again in April 72 on R&R.

When the crash occurred I was assigned to the accident investigation team and had the unpleasant task of going through his things and interviewing the people who spoke to him just before the flight. Ron did not want to go, but may not have spoken his mind to Vann. As I said Ron had not been adequately trained in Instrument flight (we got a Tactical Ticket only, not a Standard Instrument Rating) and the OH-58A helicopter did not have a complete instrument suite. This was not the first case of inadvertent IMC by a classmate in an OH-58A resulting in a crash by an inexperienced pilot. Also, Vann often flew the helicopter himself and may have been flying then. No one will ever know for sure. Vann had made the radio calls.

The night of the crash ARVN troops at a nearby firebase heard the helicopter pass by as it entered the pass. There were low clouds and intermittent rain showers in the area. Helicopters flying under the weather weren't visible on radar and there is a good chance that Ron didn't even know how to request radar flight following. I certainly didn't know how to and never did use it during my entire tour of duty flying in the same area in a UH-1. Nor did we file IFR flight plans. As far as I know there was no instrument approach at Kontum and I am sure I flew in and out of there a lot more than Ron did. The conclusion of the accident investigation team was that the helicopter flew into a rain shower in the dark and the pilot lost all reference to attitude. The OH-58A began a left descending spiral and after approximately 270 degrees of turn came flew into the hillside in the pass under power. The helicopter came down through trees and came to rest against the trunk of a tree where in exploded and burned.

The OH-58A did not have a VSI and the little attitude indicator it had was not that accurate. The purpose of this trip at night and in the rain was to deliver a cake to the ARVN Commanders and advisers to celebrate their recent victory over the NVA at Kontum. Ron had misgivings about going, but he went anyway. That was the kind of guy he was.

From a friend,
Captain Stephen E. James (Ret)
29 Jul 2005

Helicopter OH-58A 68-16938

Information on U.S. Army helicopter OH-58A tail number 68-16938

The Army purchased this helicopter 0470

Total flight hours at this point: 00001095

Date: 06/09/1972

Incident number: 720609161ACD Accident case number: 720609161 Total loss or fatality
Accident

Unit: 201 AVN

The station for this helicopter was Nha Trang in South Vietnam

Number killed in accident = 3 . . Injured = 0 . . Passengers = 3
costing 240161

Original source(s) and document(s) from which the incident was created or updated: Defense
Intelligence Agency Helicopter Loss database. Army Aviation Safety Center database. Also:
OPERA (Operations Report.)

Loss to Inventory

Crew Members:

P 1LT DOUGHTIE RONALD EDWARD KIA

Passengers and/or other participants:

CIV VANN JP, NOT, A

UNK UNK, MCO, G

CPT ROBERTSON ROBERT ALLAN, AR, PX, KIA

Accident Summary:

On 9 June 1972 the city of Kontum was officially declared as safe and cleared of all NVA elements. It was a great victory for both the ARVN and Mr. Vann, Senior Advisor for II Corps. It was also the departure date for Brigadier General John Hill, Deputy Senior Advisor to II Corps. Mr. Vann was in Saigon that morning and scheduled to return to Pleiku that evening to attend a party celebrating both the victory and Brig. Gen. Hill and Mrs. Hill's departure from the RVN. After several toasts Mr. Vann announced that he was going to depart Pleiku to spend the night in Kontum. Having visited the troops in Kontum every day during the battle he did not want to forget them on the eve of their great victory. The crew had been notified, LT. Doughtie, the pilot, was standing by the OH-58 (68-16938) at the Team 21 Helipad. CPT Robertson, a passenger from Pleiku Installation Coordinator's Office was also going along for the ride. No flight plan was prepared or filed with any known agency. LT Doughtie did know that the weather enroute was marginal having commented on the fact to CPT Schwartz, USAF pilot assigned to SRAG. The aircraft departed Pleiku at approximately 2050 hours and did not establish flight following with any known facility. At approximately 2100 hours Mr. Vann contacted the Advisors at Kontum and said he expected to land there in about 15 minutes. There is not much known from this point on, no distress call was heard by any of the aircraft operating in the vicinity. At approximately 2130 hours it was reported by Task Force 14, clearing the highway to Kontum that a LOH had possibly crashed in the vicinity of QL-14. A check was conducted by 17th Group of all units having LOH aircraft, none were flying. A check was made with SRAG and Mr. Vann's aircraft was reported out. A SAR package of a C & C aircraft, a Lightship and a Lightfire team were launched in addition to an OV-10 FAC. USAF SAR was notified and a C-130 (King) was diverted to the scene. Aerial flares proved ineffective due to the heavy trees and the Lightship was put down to look for fires and wreckage. An aircraft fuselage was located in a stand of trees and ARVN soldiers vectored to the crash site. Mr. Vann, whose body had been thrown clear of the wreckage was put on board the C&C aircraft and flown to the 67th Evac hospital. The other bodies were recovered the next morning. This record was last updated on 09/20/1998