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## CAPTAIN SIMMONS

# 'Once I Get Home'

By EDNA WILKINSON

What force could compel a 33 year old devoted husband, father, son and brother, with a medical degree safely tucked away, and who for two years had been on the way to really living a dedicated life of service to his community, decided "this's just not for me?" We'll never know and can only surmise that "A man must do what he must do."

I refer to Dr. William P. Simmons, flight surgeon and chief of the Flight Medicine Section, 12th USA Hospital, Cam Ranh Bay, South Viet Nam, who died in the crash of his plane in the jungles of Viet Nam on September 3.

### **Letter to Brother**

Perhaps some passages from a letter dated June 6, of this year from Captain Simmons to his younger brother, Capt. Armond Simmons, who was then a helicopter pilot with the 42nd Field Hospital will give us a clearer insight as to the flight surgeon's feelings. The letter reads in part: "Dear Armond, I got your letter yesterday, and yes, I did get the first one too. I've been lazy about writing.

I just finished my first six months over here and I guess you might say I'm over the hump, but I still have a helluva time to go. The town hasn't been bad at all, except for the separation from my family, which is really bad. I try to keep busy and keep my mind off going home - of course that's hard to do."

The letter goes on to describe the situation there at the time and then the Captain wrote:

"Sounds like the Army is about to put the screws on you. I don't regret the year here, but I never want to see VN again, and I'm sure you feel the same way. I'm all for the Air America Plan. That isn't bad living, especially when you can bring your family to Bangkok. I don't think Marilyn could survive another separation. She took it real well for about five months, but now she's beginning to weake nandlcanunderstand.

Congratulations on the VN Cross of Gallantry. I'll do my best to pick you up several of them and the stars."

### **Insists on Flying**

"Most of the flying is in the F4. I had to stand down from flying strike missions for two months because 2nd Air Div. surgeon sent out a letter telling us not to fly. After two months of frustration I finally talked our wing commander into letting the flight surgeons fly anyway. So, we're back in the saddle again. Marilyn doesn't know I'm flying again, so don't mention it in the letters to home. No point in her worrying about it. I guess I'm just a fighter jock at heart. I've gotten spoiled on flying and get miserable when I can't fly. I only fly one or two missions a week. I have only 38 strike missions right now, but over 100 (total) combat missions.

"Most of our missions are against supply areas, trucks and roads. We occasionally get a good

close air support mission, which is most interesting. I am not flying north of the 17th Parallel, so don't get a crack at a Mig.

"I have precarted for Germany and will probably get it. If I don't I'll probably go ahead and start a residency in one of the clinical specialties. Marilyn is hinting for me to get out, mainly because of the possibility of future separation, but I could never go back into general practice again. I think she'll see it my way once I get home.

"Both my boys will be playing baseball this summer, Bill in Little League, if he makes the team and Bob in Shirt League. I sure wish I could be there. They are little dolls. I miss my little gals too... Poor wives have to suffer sometimes. You really learn to appreciate them when you are away. If we go to Germany I may not see you for some time, unless you can swing a town in that direction. I wish you could.  
"About time to close shop. Write again soon. Tell Lydia hello for me. Love, William."

These passages tell something of the wishes and desires of Dr. Simmons. There are two other letters written to Mrs. Simmons from the captain's friends after he was reported "missing in action." The first is from MAV Bob Foster, Cam Ranh, Sept 12. They are exact quotes:

### **Letters From Friends**

"Dear Marilyn, I would have written sooner, but I've waited, and hoped, and prayed. At first I was optimistic, but now things just don't look very good at all. We have searched, and given 'Doc' every opportunity to make contact with us and there has been nothing. We know the wreckage is within 15 miles of the base, however, the area is covered with jungle that is 150 feet thick. It will take time to locate it.

"I know how tragic the loss is. 'Doc' and I became so close here that I also feel as if I've lost a part of myself. Every man in the squadron feels the same, and I want to express the deepest sympathy from each of us.

"Doc thoroughly enjoyed his work here and distinguished himself almost to the point of becoming a legend in his time. Knowing and associating with him was one of the most pleasant experiences of my life. He was a devoted husband and father, and was anxiously awaiting the time when he would get all of you together again and to Europe.

"You will certainly be kept abreast of any new developments and until then, may God bless you and yours. Sincerely, Foster."

### **Second Letter**

The second letter was written on September 17, to Mrs. Simmons by Capt. Marvin M. Gradert, an F-4C aircraft commander with the 557th Tactical Fighter Squadron. It reads:

"Dear Marilyn, I received your letter two days ago and since I have searched extensively, I am convinced that Bill had the two letters in question on his person. We found the tape you sent, but not the letters. Dave Cochard said that he had lunch with Bill that day. Dave said he remembered he and Bill stopping by the post office and as nearly as he can remember, Bill did have some mail. I would rest assured that Bill did get your letters, Marilyn.

"Yes, Marilyn, I'm convinced I saw their airplane after we came out of the first cloud. What happened after that I'm unable to say.

"Marilyn, Bill was, and is, I pray, still the finest flight surgeon I've ever met, but better still, a person

of great loyalty, honesty and guts. He was accepted not only as a flight surgeon, but also as a damned nervy guy who had to be where action was. You asked me how long he had been flying combat missions. He had been flying again with us about six weeks, as I recall.

“Bill touched all of our lives and made them a little better. I’m convinced that he is the main reason I’m back on flying status. He always was ready with a smile and joke - this is a sorely needed commodity over here.

“Please accept both Donna’s and my sympathy and prayers. Sincerely, Marv.”

### **Follows Squad**

Dr. Simmons was called to active duty with the National Guard during the Korean conflict for one year. After service he finished his education and received his MD degree from the University of Mississippi School of Medicine and interned at Womack Army Hospital, Fort Bragg, N. C. He then moved to Arcola with his family in 1962 and was engaged in general practice for two years. He entered the U. S. Air Force in 1964 and attended the School of Aerospace Medicine at Brooks AFB, Tex. Upon graduation he became a flight surgeon and was assigned to the 557th Tactical Fighter Squadron at MacDill AFB, Florida. He received his tropical survival training in the Panama Canal Zone and trained further in Norway.

When the 557th was sent to Cam Ranh Bay, South Viet Nam in October, 1965, Capt. Simmons was left behind. He volunteered for an assignment with the wing, and through the determined efforts of wing officials, followed his pilot friends to Cam Ranh Bay.

Before his death on September 3rd Dr. Simmons had been diagnosing ills for the pilots of the 12th for more than a year. It was his conviction that his flying gave him a better understanding of the pilot and his problems. He said, “By taking part in the pilot’s daily life, you attain a mutual trust between doctor and patient, akin to the old family doctor. We are almost like personal physicians to the men. I live in the same barracks with the pilots and this gives me a closeness which enables me to spot problems and tensions long before the man ever steps into my office.”

Dr. Simmons was asked what was the biggest problems faced by the pilots.

“Combat flying,” said the father of three, “has its dangers, and I know ground fire, but no one is going to cut and run because of it. As a matter of fact,” he said, “the biggest problem is when they can’t fly. These guys are happiest when they’re flying and very unhappy when they’re not.”

### **Taps For The Captain**

Now, one month and a day since Captain Simmons was reported missing in action, his body, accompanied by the Color Guard, will have been gently borne by members of the Air Force to its final resting place, the 21-gun salute will have echoed into the stillness, and the bugler will have blown taps for Dr. William Prestwood Simmons, flight surgeon, and captain of the U. S. Air Force - Mission accomplished.

We bow our heads and lift our hearts and thank our heavenly Father for having let this man walk among us for 33 years.

“He did what he must do.”