

# **Remains of Hero Finally Return Home - The story of PFC Jose Ramon Sanchez**

**By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago**



**PFC. Jose Ramon Sanchez**

One of the most dreaded moments in the life of every parent who has a son or daughter serving in combat is that one day an officer will show up to your door to inform you that your loved one has perished, but even more dreadful is to be informed that your loved one is MIA (Missing in Action) because you will live the anguish of having countless unanswered questions. Is he/she still alive, captured, tortured? Did he/she suffer and will he/she return home someday. I just can't imagine the suffering throughout the years that parents and loved ones have to endure under these circumstances. That was the case of Virginia and Peter Sanchez, mother and brother respectively of Marine PFC Jose Ramon Sanchez whose family waited for 41 years.

## **Early years**

Joe Ramon Sanchez was born in Brooklyn on March 15, 1949. His parents had moved to New York City in the 1940s from Puerto Rico in search of a better life as did many other Puerto Rican families during what became known as the "Great Puerto Rican Migration". His family struggled and lived in the Gowanus Public Houses . In 1959, his mother had another child whom she named Peter, to whom Jose would become a father figure after the death of their father in 1961.

Jose was an exceptional teenager and role model to follow. He was a religious Catholic whose voice was loudest when it came to praying as an altar boy. Instead of becoming a gang member like many of the youth at the time, Jose was a member of the Boy Scouts. He also spent his time swimming, playing football, baseball, basketball, you name it at the local YMCA, he was an all around athlete and role model to his brother Peter.

If you think that things are tough for Hispanics now, in the 1960s it was even tougher. In New York there were restaurants with signs on their windows which read "No Dogs, No Puerto Ricans allowed". Yet, despite the fact that discrimination was rampant, Puerto Ricans, descendants of the great Taino Chief Agüeybaná, have never hesitated to serve their country and were among the first to fight in Vietnam in defense of democracy. On December 1967, Jose left his school and joined the United States Marine Corps.

## **Vietnam War**

Jose received his basic training in Paris Island, S.C. and advanced training in Camp Lajuene in North Carolina. Jose, whose MOS was that of an 81 MM Motarman was sent to the Republic of Vietnam and he was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division.

On 6 June 1968, he was among a group of fellow Marines who comprised a patrol operating in the rugged jungle covered mountains southwest of Khe Sanh, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam. Their mission was to block NVA troops and supplies from infiltrating toward Khe Sanh. The Marines engaged a communist force of unknown size in heavy combat. As the fierce firefight raged around them, the Marines, who were outnumbered and rapidly running low on ammunition, requested an emergency extraction. A CH46A Sea Knight helicopter was sent for Sanchez and the rest of the patrol who were on Hill 672. As the helicopter gained altitude, it was immediately struck by intense and accurate enemy ground fire causing it to enter into a nose-low attitude and crash onto an east/west mountain ridgeline, roll down to the bottom of the hill and burst into flames. Within an hour and a half, a search and recovery (SAR) team was inserted into the crash site. The team members pulled the charred bodies of the aircrew and passengers from what was left of the burned out helicopter and placed them in body bags. Of the 12 of the 23 Marines aboard who were killed, 4 were reported as MIA/KIA, besides Sanchez the other three were L/Cpl. LaPlant, L/Cpl. Palacios and L/Cpl. Harper. Various attempts to recover the bodies of the four were made to no avail.

### Heartbreaking News

Unaware of the events which occurred on June 6, the same day that Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated, the Sanchez family received the dreaded knock on their door by a military representative with the delivery of the bad news and were notified that not only was Jose dead, but worse, that he was Missing and therefore wasn't coming home. The military decorations which were handed to his mother Virginia and brother Peter could not fill the void in the family which Jose had left. As a mother, Virginia suffered greatly and began a decades-long vigil for her lost boy. His name was inscribed in panel 59W 013 of the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

In 2006, a team began excavating the site and recovered human remains and non-biological material evidence including La Plant's identification tag. While at the site, a Vietnamese citizen turned over to the team human remains he claimed to have found amid the wreckage. In 2007, another team completed the excavation and recovered additional human remains, life support material and aircraft wreckage. On November 05, 2008, The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced that the remains of four U.S. servicemen, missing from the Vietnam War, were identified. The unexpected news reached the families just hours after President Obama's election. The Sanchez family, who had been waiting to know any news in regard to Jose for 40 painful years, wept. Jose's mother died five weeks later, almost as if she had been waiting for this moment in order to die in peace with her mind at ease.

The four men will share a single casket, side by side again, much as they were on Hill 672. It will hold a pressed Marines Corps dress uniform, along with a box engraved with their names and filled with their commingled remains. They will be buried this May at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. To PFC Jose Ramon Sanchez and his comrades - God Bless You - Rest in Peace.