

CIA'S FIRST FALLEN

UNDERCOVER BARBARA ROBBINS
WAS KILLED IN VIET CONG ATTACK

By Cathryn J. Prince



Barbara Annette Robbins checked her luggage at the United Airlines desk, passed through the doors and walked toward the airplane waiting on the tarmac at Denver's Stapleton airport in August 1964. In film footage captured by her father, the young woman in a simple pastel suit turns and waves before boarding the silver aircraft. He kept filming as the plane took off. Three layovers later, Robbins touched down at Tan Son Nhut Air Base on the outskirts of Saigon and was eager to begin her job fighting communism. There would be no film of her happy return home. Less than a year later Robbins became the first American woman and first CIA officer to die in Vietnam and remains the youngest CIA employee killed on duty.

ROBBINS WAS BORN ON JULY 26, 1943, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to Buford and Ruth Robbins. At the time, her father was stationed in World War II's Pacific theater loading ordnance onto Consolidated PBV-FA amphibious flying boat bombers. She grew up in Denver, with younger brother Warren, in a three-bedroom ranch house in the West Colfax neighborhood. Her father was a butcher at King Sooper's grocery store, and her mother worked in the complaints department at a window factory.

At Thomas Jefferson High School in southeast Denver, Robbins demanded a lot from herself while also demanding she receive proper credit for her work. "I remember she got a B+ in one class and thought she deserved an A, and she went to her teacher and made her case," Warren said. "Her grade was changed."

Barbara Robbins, in South Vietnam working under cover for the CIA, enjoys a day with friend Bill McDonald on a rented fishing boat off the coast of Nha Trang in fall 1964, just months before she was killed.

Robbins was determined to do well in high school because she had college in her sights, unlike many of her peers. Less than 40 percent of women graduated from college in the 1960s.

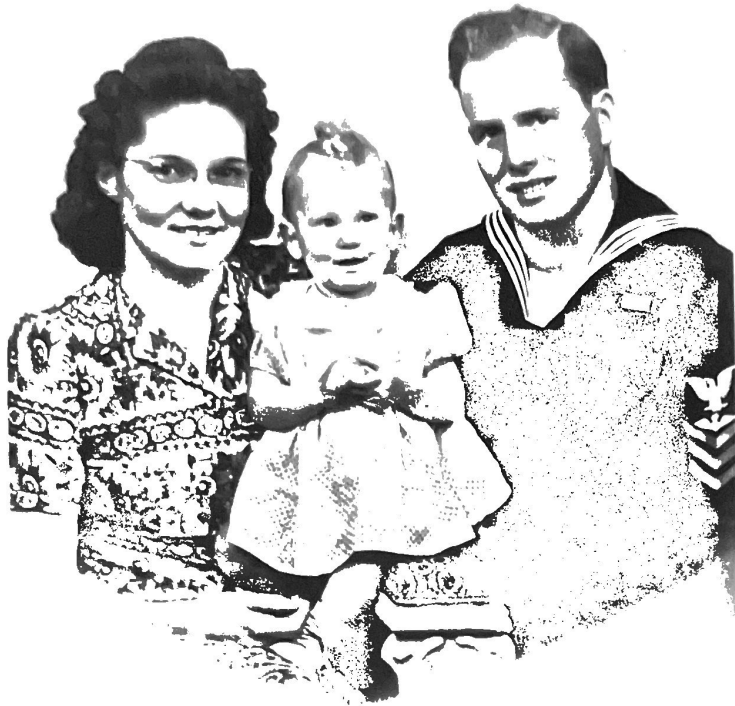
Robbins was "a terribly bright little girl" and "unconventional," recalls older cousin Dolores Schneider. Although the girl had a taste for Dairy Queen vanilla ice cream cones, "she didn't always like to eat the ice cream, but she liked the cones." Robbins was always a little independent, Schneider added. "She was like that as a girl, so naturally she grew up to be that way."

After high school Robbins enrolled at Colorado State University in Fort Collins to study French and learn secretarial skills. While there, she was recruited by the CIA. The Robbins family wasn't especially political, but it was patriotic. Fourth of July meant large extended family barbecues and parking alongside Interstate 25 to watch fireworks burst in the night sky over Denver's newly built McNichols Arena. This patriotism that had been imbued in Robbins inspired her to answer President John F. Kennedy's call for Americans of all ages to ask themselves what they could do for their country.

A few semesters before completing her degree, Robbins told her family she was going to join the State Department and volunteered to serve in Vietnam. "I remember a conversation about how she wanted to fight communism," Warren said. "That was her goal, and she was adamant about that."

Addressing her father, Robbins even evoked the potential threat to the family's home. "When they get to West Colfax, mister, you'll wish





Robbins' parents, Ruth and World War II veteran Buford, get a family picture with baby Barbara. Their daughter told them she was going to Vietnam with the State Department. She didn't mention it was a CIA cover.

you'd done something," she said.

Robbins concealed the fact that the State Department job was just a cover for her work with the CIA. She left college in 1963, without a degree. Her parents "were nervous about her decision to volunteer," Schneider said. "She wasn't nervous at all."

THE FAMILY'S NERVOUSNESS was understandable. In summer 1959, six Viet Cong guerrillas had attacked a compound that housed eight American advisers with Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, in Bien Hoa, a few miles northeast of Saigon.

MAAG-V was formed on Nov. 1, 1955, to oversee a U.S. military contingent that had been growing since President Harry S. Truman sent the first advisers to Vietnam in 1950 to support colonial ruler France, which had been trying since the end of World War II to quell a communist takeover of Vietnam.

In May 1954, communist-led Viet Minh independence fighters defeated French forces at Dien Bien Phu, a small village in northwestern Vietnam near the Laotian border, bringing nearly a century of French rule to an end. In July 1954, the Geneva Accords sliced Vietnam in half at the 17th parallel. Communists led by Ho Chi Minh

governed the North. The pro-Western government of the South was led by President Ngo Dinh Diem, buttressed by French and American support. Tensions between the two sides soon flared into violence.

The attack on the Bien Hoa MAAG-V compound occurred on July 8, 1959. Six of the American advisers were in the mess hall watching *The Tattered Dress*, a 1957 crime drama starring Jeff Chandler and Jeanne Crain. Just as someone flipped on the lights to change the reel, Viet Cong attackers thrust their weapons through the open windows and sprayed the room with automatic fire. The VC killed two South Vietnamese guards and two Americans—Maj. Dale R. Buis, 37, and Master Sgt. Chester M. Ovnand, 44, the first U.S. troops killed by enemy fire during the American war in Vietnam.

The simmering conflict in Vietnam had not yet resonated with most Americans or even found its way into U.S. military classrooms. The attention of the nation's leading military educators and strategists seemed to lay elsewhere—namely on how best to repel the hordes of Soviet soldiers seemingly poised to troll through West Germany if the ongoing Cold War ever turned "hot."

"There was zero attention paid to Vietnam," said retired Col. Alan Phillips, a Silver Star recipient who

graduated from West Point in 1959 and did tours in 1963 and 1967. "We had half a million troops stationed in Germany then, and there was nothing like counterinsurgency plans being developed or taught."

DURING ROBBINS' TIME at Colorado State, the situation in Vietnam remained on the periphery. The peace movement did not fully reach the campus until 1968 when students occupied the agricultural building. *The Rocky Mountain Collegian*, the student newspaper, focused on various club activities, guest speakers and sporting events.

The Saigon station had an opening. Robbins volunteered. If she was going to make a difference, she was going to do it where it most counted.

After leaving the school, Robbins returned to her parents' house and packed for Washington while listening to Pat Boone on the record player she had bought with her saved allowance. While her parents believed she was working in a State Department building, Robbins spent 12 months as a trainee in the CIA's Directorate of Plans, the forerunner of today's National Intelligence Service.

In late spring 1964, after the last of Washington's famed cherry blossoms had fluttered to the ground, an unexpected opportunity arrived. The Saigon station had an opening. Robbins immediately volunteered. If she was going to make a difference, she was going to do it where it most counted.

Before she left for Vietnam that summer, Robbins, her parents and brother piled into the car and drove to the Four Corners Monument in Monument Valley, Utah. A home movie shows the four skipping, dancing and smiling their way around the metal marker at the point where Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico touch.

A week later the family returned to their home. Robbins stood in her bedroom considering her clothes. She laid out airy linen shifts and pastel



suits, low-heeled pumps and a few pairs of gloves. She packed pencils, pens and lightweight stationary. She was ready for her trip to Vietnam. On the drive to the airport with her parents and brother, bursts of quiet interrupted the chatter. Warren recalled it as “a nice day and just sort of exciting, too, to see Barbara off.” Buford parked, popped open the trunk and lifted out Robbins’ suitcases. She headed for the United Airlines desk.

AFTER THE ARRIVAL AT TAN SON NHUT, Robbins, a leather purse in hand and sensible pumps on her feet, boarded a bus. Chicken wire covered the windows to protect against bomb blasts, and the seats reminded her of buses in elementary school. The bus took Robbins to the Astor Hotel in downtown Saigon. She stayed there for a week and then moved into a fully furnished apartment, complete with linens and maid service.

“There are many other Americans from the Embassy also living here so I feel very safe,” she wrote to her family. “Security-wise we do have to be careful—but you’d never feel that way right here in Saigon if it weren’t for the Vietnamese police all over the city.”

Over the next year Robbins sent 30 letters home. She never wrote about how she typed top-secret CIA reports during the day. Her letters described searching the black market for piasters (Vietnamese currency) and dollars, what women wore, training her new dog “Captain” and occasional weekends in Nha Trang, a coastal city about 200 miles north of Saigon with beaches and fine French dining.

Every now and then she nonchalantly mentioned Buddhist protests in the square near the Rex Hotel in Saigon, bombings at various cafes and fighting on the outskirts of the city.

“You probably see more of what’s happening on television than I’ll ever see here,” she wrote, adding that her family would read about curfews and Vietnamese students marching in protest as if the “country doesn’t have enough problems trying to win against the VC.”

Hoping to bolster South Vietnam’s prospects for victory, U.S. military personnel had jumped from 16,263 in 1963 to 23,310 in 1964, and by the end 1965 would reach 184,314.

Robbins took pains to contrast the war news presented in the States with reality on the ground, whether in the portrayal of Saigon politics or daily dangers American personnel faced.

LEFT: The Brinks Hotel Bombing on Christmas Eve 1964, which killed two Americans, was noted in one of Robbins’ letters to her family. **RIGHT:** Deputy U.S. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, spattered with blood, is taken from the embassy in the wake of the March 30, 1965, bombing that left Robbins dead.

“We in the embassy were in no danger whatsoever,” Robbins wrote after a bomb exploded Aug. 25, 1964, on the fifth floor of Saigon’s Caravelle Hotel. It didn’t kill anyone, but several were wounded. Reassuring her parents, she remarked that the hotel’s rooftop was still probably the safest place in the city for dinner. Robbins wrote about meeting military personnel who volunteered for service in Vietnam, the “very unusual group” of helicopter pilots “you’re always reading and hearing about,” and the close-knit American community that came together for dinners and dancing.

“Well, I was here during a coup—or at least an attempted one—it’s pretty busy in the embassy at a time like that,” she noted. Robbins mentioned a military parade on the anniversary of the successful Nov. 2, 1963, coup that overthrew and assassinated Diem. During “the night of our party it was a 2 a.m. curfew instead of 12 midnight and so we were all outside and could hear the gunfire at Bien Hoa.”

In December 1964 Robbins marked her nine months in-country with a renewed sense of purpose. She meant to attend Christmas Eve Mass, but two men in a four-door sedan changed those plans. She explained: “I didn’t go to Xmas service because the Brink’s BOQ [bachelor officers’ quarters housed in the Brinks Hotel] was just bombed at 6 p.m. and it was all but impossible to get to church from where I live. I heard the explosion

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

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658P CST MAR 30 65 DKAB32

K DVAB18 (P WA521) PD WUX WASHINGTON DC 838P EST MR AND MRS

BUFORD ROBBINS

3000 SOUTH GRAPE WAY DVR

MRS. JOHNSON AND I WERE DEEPLY SADDENED TO LEARN OF THE DEATH OF BARBARA. WITH DAUGHTERS OF ~~THE~~ OWN WE KNOW THE EXTENT OF YOUR GRIEF. BARBARA GAVE HER LIFE IN THE SERVICE OF HER COUNTRY HELPING TO PROTECT THE CHERISHED IDEALS OF OUR NATION. WE ARE ALL IN HER DEBT. PLEASE ACCEPT OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHY

LYNDON B JOHNSON .

(24).

President Lyndon B. Johnson sent a telegram to Robbin's parents expressing his sympathy. Among the other condolences was a telegram from Secretary of State Dean Rusk, as the government maintained her cover.

dered the driver to leave, but the man refused. The officer fired at the vehicle. Suddenly a man on a scooter pulled up alongside the car and shot at the police officer.

Hearing the commotion outside their office, Robbins and other CIA secretaries scurried to the window. As Robbins got close, 300 pounds of explosives in the car exploded. In the blast, a piece of iron grating covering the windows broke free, sailed through the air like a javelin and impaled the 21-year-old CIA employee, killing her as she looked out the window.

Outside, firemen sprinted toward the building, ambulances screeched to a stop, and more shots rang through the air. A young American woman, blood streaming from her ear, stumbled around dazed. On the sidewalk, shattered glass sparkled in rivulets of blood. A man on a stretcher held a cigarette between nicotine-stained fingers.

It was the most brazen attack against American interests in South Vietnam to date. The bomb killed 21 people—Robbins, Petty Officer 2nd Class Manolito Castillo, a Filipino serving in the U.S. Navy, and 19 South Vietnamese. Additionally, 183 were wounded.

The South Vietnamese police arrested one of the men involved in the bombing, Nguyen Van Hai, and took him to a local hospital. Hai admitted he was with the Viet Cong, and a military tribunal sentenced him to death. In retaliation, the North Vietnamese announced they would execute Gustav Hertz, a 46-year-old American aid mission officer they had taken hostage. At the urging of the U.S. government, the South Vietnamese did not execute Hai. Nor was Hertz executed, although he died of malaria in 1967 while in captivity.

On May 25, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed legislation appropriating \$1 million to build a new embassy compound on a more secure site. Johnson would not yet support military leaders' push for retaliatory raids on North Vietnam but vowed that "the Saigon bombing fires our will to fight on."

ROBBINS' PARENTS TURNED on the evening news just as reports were being aired about a bombing at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Buford phoned a contact at the State Department to

and at first thought it was thunder, but when the radio went off the air I knew it was an explosion and a large one. Not a very pleasant way to start the holiday."

Two Viet Cong had driven a car with 200 pounds of explosives to the hotel, parked it and detonated the explosives. Two Americans—one military, one civilian—were killed, and dozens of Americans and South Vietnamese were injured.

With the arrival of the new year, Robbins pushed through a brief bout of homesickness and immersed herself in her work. She considered extending her stay in Vietnam.

ALL THE WHILE THE SITUATION in Saigon grew increasingly fraught. In February 1965, as conditions deteriorated, dependents of American diplomats and military personnel were evacuated. Robbins' letters became more serious.

She wrote: "Many demonstrations are backed and infiltrated by the VC. It's sort of like in the U.S. with the communists in some of the clubs, societies, etc. who are influencing and persuading in a sort of behind-the-scenes act. You don't know who they all are, and so that makes it twice as difficult to fight them. Even then the American advisors are out in the field fighting with the Army of the Vietnam North—they don't know who the enemy is. During the day he may be a simple farmer with his rice paddies and when the night comes he is the enemy."

On the morning of March 30, 1965, Robbins sat at her metal desk on the second floor of the U.S. Embassy on Pasteur Street. Gunfire erupted outside. According to accounts of the incident, a car that sagged from being overloaded was parked too close to the embassy. A policeman or-



CIA's Memorial Wall

In 1974, the CIA dedicated a Memorial Wall at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to honor fallen employees with a star carved into a marble wall. Originally proposed to recognize CIA officers killed in Vietnam and Laos, the concept was expanded to honor all who died in the line of duty. The initial stars represented 31 members killed since the agency's founding in 1947. Today there are 139 stars. Displayed with the wall is a "Book of Honor," containing the names of those memorialized with a star. Some stars don't have corresponding names in the book because they remain classified even in death to protect intelligence sources and methods.

learn more. An hour later, Warren came home and realized by the look on his parents' faces that something serious had happened.

Around midnight Warren closed his bedroom door and tried to sleep. Two hours later, Buford called the family's pastor and asked him to keep them company while they waited for news. At 4 a.m. there was a knock on the door. Opening it, Buford and Ruth saw a State Department official standing on the stoop. They crumpled. Their daughter was dead.

In Saigon, on Thursday, April 1, a South Vietnamese and an American honor guard stood at attention during a short ceremony at the American chapel at Tan Son Nhut. Acting U.S. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, whose face had been cut in the blast, stared at the caskets holding Robbins and Castillo. Assistant Prime Minister of South Vietnam Tran Van Do pinned the Vietnamese medal of gallantry on the flag-draped coffins.

After the plane bearing Robbins' body touched down at Stapleton, her parents and brother drove to the funeral home. A State Department official escorting the 21-year-old's remains met the family there and gently explained that one of the handles on the coffin broke in transit. He asked Ruth if she wanted to see her daughter. She shook her head. Buford and Warren also declined.

After finalizing the funeral arrangements, the three drove home to discover local and national press camped across the street. For the next three days Buford and Ruth remained cloistered inside their home, leaving Warren, now 18, to run the occasional errand and bring in the mail. Among the many condolences were telegrams from Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

Three days later on April 4, 1965, the funeral procession wended its way to Chapel Hill Cemetery on the outskirts of Denver. At the grave, Ruth, wearing sunglasses and a white hat, pressed her white-gloved hands to her mouth. Buford, in a black suit, bowed his head.

That Sunday, the University Hills Lutheran Church dedicated its service to Robbins. State Department co-workers, friends and family donated an illuminated cross that was affixed to the wall behind the altar.

Weeks later, Buford, Ruth and Warren traveled to Washington. The family had learned only recently that their daughter worked for the CIA,



Robbins' coffin is transported to Chapel Hill Cemetery outside Denver on Sunday, April 4, 1965. About 325 family members, friends and neighbors attended the services. On April 3, a service honoring Robbins and a sailor killed in the blast was held in Saigon.

not the State Department. Since Robbins was stationed inside the U.S. Embassy, Rusk wanted to meet her family. He presented the parents with an engraved plaque: "Barbara A. Robbins (Posthumous) Who gave her life for her country at the American Embassy, Saigon, Viet-Nam, On March 30, 1965." Rusk and the family then moved to the dining room for a meal of lamb chops and apple pie with cheddar cheese on top. "It wasn't a depressing thing," Warren said. "It was nice for my parents."

Thirty years later, on June 1, 1995, the Robbins family returned to the nation's capital to attend a private service in honor of their daughter, who had a memorial star carved into the CIA's Memorial Wall, which recognizes agency employees who died in service to their country. But Robbins' name was not in the accompanying Book of Honor that lists fallen CIA officers.

Warren said a CIA official told the family that Robbins' name was not listed for what the agency termed "cover considerations," an indication that some related documents had not been declassified yet. Buford wished to see his daughter's name inscribed, but he died in 1998. Robbins' name wasn't listed until 2011. By then, Warren's mother had died. He was the only one alive for the ceremony, held in the agency's hall on May 23, 2011.

CIA Director Leon Panetta said: "To this day, Barbara is the youngest officer memorialized on our Wall. She was the first American woman to die in Vietnam and the first woman in our Agency's history to make the ultimate sacrifice. Nine women since then have fallen in service to our mission. Today we remember them all, with great love and admiration." ▼

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