

Woman Uncovers Details About Dad She Never Knew (Anthony J. Lanzetta '60)

11Oct07 - She would have been daddy's little girl, had she been given the time to get to know her father. But 41 years after Air Force Captain Anthony Lanzetta's plane submerged beneath the Arctic Ocean, Lesley Mateer has little more than a smattering of information about her real father who reportedly died the day before her first birthday.

And for her, that's enough.

Mateer, a Gulf Breeze businesswoman who lives with her husband, Craig, and their three children on Pensacola Beach, has recently uncovered details about her father, who reportedly died in 1966 while flying with a crew over the Arctic Ocean. For years, she always wondered about the man whose name was never mentioned. It wasn't until she read the new book, "Lone Survivor," written by Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell with Patrick Robinson, that she began her own journey of discovery.

"He takes great lengths to describe his fellow SEALs and how they're real people," Mateer said, recalling reading the book. "He talks about their sense of humor, love for family, how funny they were, who loved music, trivial pursuit and who could surf.

"I was envious. No one ever told me stories like that about my father. I thought, 'There's got to be somebody out there that has a story for me.' "

The book, which details how Luttrell was the only survivor of a platoon of SEALs who fought against a Taliban stronghold in the borderlands of Afghanistan, inspired Mateer to search for details about her own father. The search has ended with a scrapbook filled with pictures, stories from her father's roommates and old friends and a sense of peace.

Do you know my dad?

A New Orleans native, Lanzetta graduated from the **Naval Academy** in 1960. Soon thereafter, he married his high school sweetheart, Jean, and excelled in flight training school, graduating first in his class in the interceptor pilot training program for the F-102. When he died, Lanzetta, then 27, was stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska; he planned to attend the University of Michigan to become an astronaut.

Mateer's mother got the news of the crash, but was told that search and rescue attempts were futile, and the plane and the five bodies aboard were never found. Jean became a widow responsible for two small children, Kristy Ann, 3, and Lesley Marie, who had her first birthday the day after the crash, Sept. 17, 1966.

Jean returned to New Orleans and three years later, she married Don Rice, a U.S. Marine, who was determined to make the family work. Having a child of his own, he and Jean looked forward. He removed any evidence from the home that Lanzetta ever existed; picture albums that once showed Lanzetta holding his children or captured memories of him and Jean.

Coming from a rough background of broken homes, Rice had the best of intentions to start over, Mateer said.

"He was bound and determined to have this new family as his family," Mateer said. "We weren't allowed to talk about our first dad. I don't have any animosity toward him. I truly understand where he was coming from."

The newly married couple had two children of their own and Mateer and her sister never referred to Rice as their stepfather. He was the man who raised them and taught them how to tie their shoes and ride their bikes.

After he died in 1998, Jean petitioned to receive the declassified documents about Lanzetta's plane crash. The report revealed little about the crash, mostly paragraphs that contained line after line of blacked out words.

Mateer's own search remained tepid until just recently. While making her bed one morning, she saw lead petty officer Marcus Luttrell on the television talking about his book and the experience of losing three Navy SEAL brothers on a clear June night in 2005. Coming from a family rich with patriotic pride and military service, Mateer has always enjoyed reading biographies and fictional portrayals about military heroism. She mentioned to her husband that she'd like to read Luttrell's book. A few days later, he gave her the book and, after reading, instantly became a fan. The book's details peer beyond the curtain of macho heroics and silenced reconnaissance and gives insight into his comrades' personalities, their character and their humanity. The story inspired Mateer to dig into the past for stories about her own father.

In good company

A search for her dad's 1960 graduating class, uncovered a Web site for members of the class. Mateer told her story on the site's forum.

" 'Do you have a story for me?' I asked. I was just hoping that someone would remember my dad and shed light on his military service," she said.

That was July 12. Three days of silence followed. On July 16, the 41st anniversary of Lanzetta's death, Mateer's e-mail inbox was flooded with messages from his comrades.

"I sat next to him in a class," one responder said. "I marched alongside him at the **Naval Academy**," another replied. "I was in a jet engine class with your dad. He knew as much about jet engines as the instructor," another wrote.

One responder knew that Lanzetta was a member of the academy's fifth company. He forwarded the message to other members of that company.

The next day, Mateer's 42nd birthday, her receptionist walked into a meeting and handed her a sticky note.

"You should call this guy," the receptionist suggested. "He says he was your dad's roommate and that your dad was the best man in his wedding."

Mateer was stunned.

"I was stepping into a world that I had never been part of at all," Mateer said. "I wasn't even sure if I should have sent that initial e-mail. I sort of thought it was sacred ground."

Nervous and uncertain about what to say, Mateer called Larry Sarno, now 72, and who was Lanzetta's roommate for two years while at the academy. The two men met one day walking away from freshman baseball tryouts. Both were cut from the team and sulked as they walked away from the field.

"We started to console one another," said Sarno during a telephone interview from his Ormond Beach home.

The men were both taking German as a foreign language. In those days, roommates were paired based on what foreign language they studied. They decided to room together and their friendship grew and Lanzetta was the best man at Sarno's wedding.

Mateer and the family visited Sarno recently and talked for hours about her father. Sarno even created a photo album with images of Lanzetta at his wedding, at the academy and out on the town.

On her trip to see Sarno, she learned about her dad's character, his infrequent but genuine sense of humor and his goals to enter the astronaut program.

"As Mr. Larry was telling stories, I was saying, 'that's why I'm like that,'" she said. "I'm a huge part of my dad, and I had no idea whatsoever."

'I'm at peace'

Last week, Luttrell signed his new book for Mateer at Barnes & Noble Booksellers in Pensacola. The event was the final chapter in Mateer's search for her father, she said.

She wanted to personally thank Luttrell for inspiring her to pursue her own journey to know her father.

Since her search began, she has been invited to become an affiliate member of her dad's 1960 graduating class. She now has a surrogate uncle that she talks to frequently. She knows things about her father that she only dreamed of knowing for the last 40 years.

"I believe that both my dads wanted this to happen," she said. "They knew that I needed it. I'm at peace."

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October 10, 2007 Wednesday