

Lt. Col. Rob Lutz loved only his wife more than flying

Dying vet planned a final mission

SERVICE

Robert Lutz will be buried at Tahoma National Cemetery at 2:45 p.m. Friday. In lieu of flowers, his family suggests remembrances to the American Heart Association.

BY CAROL SMITH

P-I reporter

Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Rob Lutz, a former Air Commando pilot, had less than 72 hours to live. A failing heart and kidneys left Lutz, 55, too sick to withstand an operation for a heart pump, let alone a heart transplant.

After nine weeks in intensive care

at the University of Washington Medical Center, he was told by doctors that there was nothing left to do.

No, Lutz said. There was something.

A free-fall paratrooper whose steady nerves and fierce intelligence guided him through years of clandestine missions with Special Forces in

SEE LUTZ, A6



Rob Lutz, center, with his wife, Ida Lutz, and pilot Ed Hrivnak, prepare for Lutz's final flight. Hrivnak flew his longtime friend over the Green River toward Mount Rainier.

LUTZ: He flew a talon Blackbird in an Air Commando group

FROM A1

the military, Lutz had one last special op in mind. That it was nearly impossible didn't faze him. And so he set about executing a plan from his hospital bed.

At 10 a.m. May 17, he told his doctors that they could take out the balloon pump that eased oxygen into his weakened heart but kept him flat on his back.

Then he told them to remove the dialysis catheter in his groin that was unable to clear the nearly 50 pounds of fluid weighing on his heart.

Next he told them to discontinue all but one medication – a move that he understood would hasten the inevitable.

Then he asked for a plane.

There was nothing in life – except his wife – that Lutz loved more than flying.

Born in St. Louis, Lutz joined the Young Marines in high school and later graduated from the Air Force Academy in Colorado.

He flew a Combat Talon Blackbird as part of an Air Commando group known as “The Quiet Professionals” – named for members’ habit of slipping into the night sky and staying tight-lipped about missions.

In 1985, he was picked to be the first squadron commander of an elite para-rescue operation for the Army Special Forces. But during a routine physical for that assignment, doctors discovered a cardiac valve problem and took his wings.

It about broke his heart, said his wife, Ida Lutz, who met him in 1978 when he was stationed in Bad Tölz, Germany. “When he got grounded, it put a big crush on him for a while.”

After that, he became a squadron maintenance officer, overseeing a crew of more than 600 that maintained the fleet at McChord Air Force Base. But he always missed being in the air, she said.

Later, after he retired in 1994 from the military, Lutz, who was also a skilled mountaineer, lent his expertise to Tacoma Mountain Rescue and the Puget Sound Urban Search and Rescue Task Force.

And he sublimated his love of flight into a hobby, carried over from childhood, of building model airplanes, which he did with obsessive attention to detail that aggravated his less-patient friends and earned him multiple awards in model-building competitions.

Deanna Mau, a cardiac critical care nurse, and his doctor, Ryland “Trey” Melford, knew some of this – the man liked, maybe even needed, to fly – and they wanted to help.

But as his clinical care team, they had misgivings about issuing a day pass to a dying man. They doubted that he would survive a car ride, much less a climb in altitude. Hospital liability might be an issue. They worried for his family.

They also knew that Lutz was a calculating man who always asked careful questions and considered all his options. He pursued with them every possible path to survival.

And they knew that when he set his mind on something, they would rather not get in his way. So they started making calls.

Lutz himself got on the phone to a pilot friend. Mau overheard him say something like, “I can’t go Saturday. I’m dying today or tomorrow. I have to go today.”

Someone in the room chided him for being so demanding, which made everyone laugh.

He had a great sense of humor, Mau said. And he made things happen.

Ed Hrivnak was the pilot who got the call. A longtime friend from their days in search and rescue, he scurried to find a helicopter. Glacier Aviation in Olympia helped, producing a fu-

eled-up R-22 two-seater that could be at Boeing Field in a matter of minutes.

Ida Lutz and Skip Davenport, his original flight instructor who became a lifetime friend, helped load Lutz into the car. They took along a small oxygen tank and a supply of morphine.

Against the odds the doctors had given them, the ad-hoc flight crew made it to Boeing Field with Lutz still breathing.

“Just another adventure,” Rob Lutz liked to say, his wife said.

And so just after 7 p.m., as the sun was going down, Rob Lutz’ heart lifted into the sky one last time.

“The air was calm, and there were light puffy clouds in the sky,” Hrivnak said. “The sky was lit and the mountains were lit. He just kept looking out the window.”

Hrivnak and Lutz flew into the foothills of the Cascades with Mount Rainier dead ahead. They flew low through the valley of the Green River. They talked about life and letting go.

He didn’t want to go, Hrivnak said. But he knew he had to.

When he landed, he just had a huge grin on his face.

Lutz died a few days later.

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