

PISMO BEACH, Calif. – Captain David Michael Barber, decorated Air Force veteran and experienced pilot, died peacefully Oct. 9, surrounded by his wife Leslie and sons Mick and Chance Barber after a battle with Parkinson’s Disease and Lewy body dementia. He was 79.

A veteran of the Vietnam War, Barber flew air rescue out of Thailand on the Ho Chi Minh Trail for a year during his service. He rose to the rank of Captain during his seven years of service and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1971 for his actions in Southeast Asia on April 9, 1970, when he piloted an HH-53 Aircraft Commander to save three injured American soldiers.

Barber also received the Air Medal for Meritorious Achievement in Aerial Flight for actions between August and October 1969, and the MAC Outstanding Individual Safety Award for his response in an in-flight emergency situation on May 28, 1970.

“He didn’t talk about it a lot,” Barber’s son Chance, of Woodridge, Illinois, said. “He mentioned rescuing pilots was rewarding, but it was a hard place to be. One morning you’d eat breakfast with someone and the next day they’d be gone.”

Barber was born June 15, 1944, in Kansas City, Missouri, to John Francis Barber and Dorothy (Haynes) Barber. His brother John Francis Barber Jr. was 2 years old. They relocated to Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1946, where Barber’s father had accepted a job as a building engineer for the town.

The Barbers returned to Kansas City in 1951, including sister Beth Anne, who was born earlier that year. The family moved between Kansas City and Colorado Springs, Colorado, for the next few years. Barber and his mother Dorothy eventually returned to the Midwest so he could graduate high school with his friends, and in 1962 he received a diploma from County Mission East High School in Prairie Village, Kansas.

Barber always had an avid fascination with cars and mechanics.

“Mike was always interested in cars,” John Barber, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, recalled of his brother. “He didn’t even have a driver’s license when he bought his first Model A coupe and tore it all apart, put it all back together again and sold it. He was like 15.”

Barber left Kansas for Tucson, where he attended the University of Arizona, studying business with a real estate minor. He graduated in 1965, completing the program in just 2 ½ years, while also working to support himself. A member of the ROTC, Barber attended the United States Air Force Officer Training School after graduating from college.

At Arizona, he met Claudia (Ray) Stropes, and the pair were married in 1966. Barber and Ray had two children, Mick in 1968 and Chance in 1972, before divorcing in 1973, though the pair remained friends throughout their lives.

In 1988 he met Leslie (Balleweg) Barber after being set up by friends, and they were married in Incline Village, Nevada on July 17, 1990. Together for nearly 35 years, the pair shared numerous trips around the country and the world. Travel was one of Barber's motives for learning to fly.

"I'd never been east of Utah before, so he kind of introduced me to the world," Leslie Barber, of Pismo Beach, said. "He was well-traveled, I was not. Our trips were all wonderful."

Leslie recalled that they'd initially try to take four trips per year, to Europe, to ski, a sailing trip and a scuba trip, but as Mick and Chance got older and their family grew, the trips became more centered around visiting family. The expeditions to Europe remained, though, but they decided to "start doing tours instead of just winging it."

One of their last trips was also their most enjoyable, in 2019 to France for the 75th Anniversary of D-Day.

"We were in Normandy for the night just before the actual official ceremony, and [Mike] was kind of a student of World War II, so that was pretty thrilling for him," Leslie said.

Travel was always one of the most important facets of Barber's life. When Mick and Chance were in elementary school, he took the boys to Roatán, Honduras.

"He loved them to pieces, and he wanted them to experience travel. He wanted to expose them to different parts of the world. He took them to Roatán when he did, because he wanted them to see what it was like to be somewhere remote before all the hotels and runways took over," Leslie said.

Chance Barber said that some of his earliest memories are looking at different maps of the world with his dad and laughing at the pronunciation of places like Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, two cities in Burkina Faso.

"It was cool how excited he got to show us places," Chance said. He recalled a trip the pair took to Taos, New Mexico, to see the Mabel Dodge Luhan House, a historic Adobe-style inn that Mike loved.

"He sent me some email [before the trip] and his sign off was 'the game is afoot, Watson!' He was just so excited," Chance said.

After Barber was honorably discharged from the Air Force, he was hired in August 1972 by the Flying Tigers, a cargo airline that was later bought by FedEx, where he was employed until his retirement in 2000.

Barber never lost his passion for vehicle mechanics and restoration, working on projects out of his garage constantly. He also maintained a fairly thorough real estate portfolio, owning and renting various properties in California, and one in Park City, Utah, during his life.

Barber is survived by wife Leslie (Balleweg) Barber, brother John Francis (Mary Ellen) Barber Jr. and sister Beth Anne (Barber) Krasovec, sons Mick (Tere) and Chance (Lorie), and grandchildren Madison, Sarah and Cade.

There are no services scheduled.