A decade after his heroic death in Iraq, the remains of a beloved airman were finally brought home.

Though he recovered at only 200 feet above ground after the first, successful strafing run, Maj. Troy L. Gilbert kept his eye on the second enemy truck. He returned for a second, even-lower attack despite ground-collision warnings.

Ten years ago, on Nov. 27, 2006, Gilbert saved the lives of US Special Forces troops who were under fire in Iraq, but lost his own life in the process. His F-16 crashed after it passed below a recoverable altitude during the second strafing run.

Despite using a Predator remotely piloted aircraft to try and protect the crash site until US forces could fight their way to it, Gilbert’s body was taken away by enemy fighters.

The Gilbert family’s efforts to bring his body home would take a decade, but on Oct. 3, 2016, the final remains of Troy Gilbert were brought back to the United States and his family.

Gilbert’s widow, Ginger Gilbert Ravella, said she was speechless when Gilbert’s former commander and friend, Gen. Robin Rand, called to tell her Troy’s remains had been found.

“You know, one of the greatest tragedies would have been if Troy was forgotten,” she said, “and to know that he certainly wasn’t [forgotten] at all, I think that’s probably one of the most amazing things.”

Ravella and Gilbert met while students at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas. He grew up in an Air Force family and was in the ROTC program there.

“I think he just had a different perspective on life that maybe small-town Texas people like me didn’t have,” Ravella said.

They both transferred to Texas Tech, and Gilbert quit ROTC. Shortly after graduating in 1993, however, he realized he missed the Air Force and got into Officer Training School at Maxwell AFB, Ala. A building there is now named after him.

After completing OTS, Gilbert received a personnel slot and became the chief of protocol for the 48th Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath, UK, in January 1995.

Top: Airmen carry a flag-draped coffin with the remains of Maj. Troy Gilbert at Dover AFB, Del., in October. Inset: Gilbert on the cockpit ladder of an F-16 at Luke AFB, Ariz. He was deployed to Balad AB, Iraq, from Luke when he crashed and died.
Gilbert’s wingman dropped a GBU-12 on a building enemy fighters were using and then left to refuel. Gilbert and a joint terminal attack controller worked to identify three trucks that had fled the area of the targeted building.

**KEENLY FOCUSED**

Then-Brig. Gen. David L. Goldfein, who headed the crash investigation in 2006 and is now USAF Chief of Staff, noted in his report that communication between the JTAC and Gilbert was “challenging and prolonged” because of the need to save coalition lives while avoiding civilian deaths.

“He didn’t want to harm civilians. He’d seen the devastating effects. He certainly wasn’t going to harm our guys,” Ravella said.

After several minutes, Gilbert located two armed trucks and rolled in for the first strafe with his 20 mm cannon, damaging the lead vehicle.

“While engaged in a dynamic environment with friendly forces under attack, [Gilbert] was at all times keenly focused on the well-being of both coalition ground personnel and Iraqi noncombatants,” Goldfein concluded in the accident investigation report. “Tragically, [Gilbert’s] channelized attention, excessive motivation to succeed, and target fixation caused him to press his attack below a recoverable altitude.”

He and his fellow pilots weren’t surprised at how Gilbert died. “The way he lived is the way he died,” said Col. David G. Shoemaker, now the 56th Fighter Wing vice commander. He had flown with Gilbert at Aviano. He said, “That integrity and excellence showed in his last act.”

Gilbert “fought like a tiger in battle that day,” Rand said in an Air Force press release.

Ravella was home with the children in Phoenix when she heard a knock at the door.

“And I opened it and then I see just a sea of blue Air Force uniforms,” she recalled.

Gilbert’s fate was still unknown, and Ravella held out hope he had ejected and would be found alive. But once investigators were able to inspect Gilbert’s jet, they found skull fragments and concluded he died on impact, after the results of DNA tests came back several days later.

Ravella said the finding at least brought some closure.

“I can’t really imagine anything worse than thinking he was alive and being held by the enemy somewhere,” she said.
Gilbert was the first Viper pilot to die in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Army major in charge of the ground element wrote Ravella a letter two days after Gilbert’s death to offer his unit’s condolences.

“I feel that it is important you know what Troy did to save us from almost certain disaster on that day,” he wrote. He said he and his men were outnumbered and outgunned and though they had repelled an attack, the enemy was preparing a mortar barrage.

“The pending attack would have been absolutely disastrous for us. With no ability to protect ourselves on the desert floor, we would most certainly have sustained heavy casualties,” he said. “Troy, however, stopped that from happening. His amazing display of bravery and tenacity immediately broke up the enemy formations and caused them to flee in panic.”

“My men and I will never forget the ultimate sacrifice your husband made … and we will always be in his debt,” the letter concludes.

Gilbert was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with valor device for his actions. A funeral service and burial of the partial remains was held at Arlington National Cemetery in December 2006.

Ravella remarried in 2008—to now-retired USAF Col. Jim Ravella, an F-15E Strike Eagle pilot who had lost his wife to cancer—but didn’t stop pushing the Air Force for information on Gilbert’s remains.

She did not watch propaganda videos that al Qaeda posted the next year, showing Gilbert’s body—but pointed to them to remind authorities he still wasn’t home.

The trail seemed to grow cold, and she knew that the odds of finding him went way down after US forces pulled out of Iraq in December 2011.

“It just became more than a needle in a haystack, I think at that point, in everybody’s eyes, that his body would ever be recovered,” she said.

But in 2013, Rand, now head of Air Education and Training Command at JBSA-Randolph, Texas, called and asked her to stop by. He told her five small bones from Gilbert’s foot had been turned over to US authorities.

Ravella said the additional small amount of remains brought her peace because “to me, that was a message from the Lord—‘I have him head to toe,’ … and I just wept.”

Seven years to the day after the first burial, the additional remains were interred. Gilbert’s children were now all old enough to take part in this second ceremony.

Just about three years later, on Aug. 28, 2016, an Iraqi tribal leader approached US advisors and said he had information about Gilbert’s remains. Ravella said the tribal leader provided part of a jaw bone as proof.

On Sept. 7, the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System at Dover confirmed it was Gilbert’s. The advisors returned to the tribal leader, and the rest of the remains, along with a flight suit, flight jacket, and parachute harness, were turned over.

Ravella said she heard some of the special operators who took part in the mission to recover the final remains were members of the same unit Gilbert saved in 2006.

“I’m just so grateful and am so humbled. I know that it was personal to them,” she said.

US forces in Iraq held a dignified transfer for the remains onto the aircraft, and a 56th Fighter Wing pilot on a six-month deployment to Iraq returned home a week early to escort them.

Testing hadn’t yet confirmed them as Gilbert’s, but Rand told Ravella that officials were confident enough to have the family present for the return at Dover on Oct. 3.

“They knew the value of bringing a brother home and that we would want to be there, and they didn’t want us to miss it,” Ravella said.

Gilbert’s family, Goldfein, Rand, Ryder, Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James, CMSAF James A. Cody, and base officials were there to receive Gilbert’s remains. “It’s really something powerful to watch,” Ravella said.

DNA tests confirmed the remains were Gilbert’s and the examiner told Ravella all of them have now been repatriated.

“It was just amazing to watch the Air Force put its arms around the family,” Ryder said, describing the dignified transfer ceremony at Dover. “It was just very heartening, and as [an] airman it just made me very proud of the Air Force in that they had not given up on this.”

LoForti, the AFRC division chief, said the return brought closure, “but we already know who he was. … He was already a hero to us.”

A memorial service for Maj. Troy L. Gilbert will be held at Arlington National Cemetery on Dec. 19, 2016, at 1 p.m.