

6Feb67 Richard Kibbey MIA KIA

Family of missing Vietnam War pilot receives his dog tags in emotional event at Patrick AFB

[Rick Neale](#), FLORIDA TODAY Published 2:34 p.m. ET Nov. 20, 2017 | Updated 2:55 p.m. ET Nov. 20, 2017



Rick Kibbey (center) holds his father's dog tags with his brothers Dave and John. A dog tag ceremony was held at Patrick Air Force Base Monday morning to return the dog tags to the sons of Col. Richard A. Kibbey, who was killed in Vietnam in 1967 while flying a rescue mission. His dog tags were recently discovered by a local farmer in Vietnam. The sons, Rick, Dave and John Kibbey were presented their father's dog tags, a flag, the Silver Star and Purple Heart medals at the ceremony. MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE — Fifty years after Col. Richard Kibbey vanished in North Vietnam after a fiery helicopter crash, his three sons stood on stage during a military ceremony with hands joined, palms turned upward.

Then U.S. Rep. Bill Posey gave the long-grieving brothers their father's dog tags, helping them close a painful chapter from their childhoods.

"It's always been a bit of an open wound in the family. We just never really knew," said Carol Barrick, Kibbey's niece. She was born the year after "Uncle Dick's" crash, which occurred on Feb. 6, 1967, near the Mu Ghia Pass.

"You hold out hope. He's MIA. As you grew up, you watched the Rambo movies and you're like, 'Oh my God, he could be alive somewhere,'" said Barrick, who lives in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.

"This at least gives us some closure, a little more certainty," she said.

Monday morning, the 920th Rescue Wing hosted an emotional ceremony at a Patrick Air Force Base hangar marking the discovery of Kibbey's dog tags. A Vietnamese farmer handed the tags to a military recovery team in September 2015, and they had been sealed inside a plastic bag until Posey handed them to sons Rick, Dave and John.

The brothers graduated from Satellite High while their father remained missing in action. The day of the crash — when Rick was 12, Dave was 7 and John was 2 — Richard Kibbey was co-piloting an HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter on two sorties to rescue a downed American pilot behind enemy lines.

"Despite poor weather and limited visibility, Kibbey and his crew succeeded in picking up Capt. (Lucius) Heiskell, but they were hit repeatedly by 37 mm AAA fire. The burning HH-3E flew for about a mile before colliding head-on with a limestone cliff," Posey read into the Congressional Record on Sept. 15. He re-read those remarks to the audience Monday.

"Of the five men aboard Jolly Green 05, only one survived: pararescueman Dwayne Hackney, who was found after the incident," Posey said.

It was Kibbey's first — and only — mission of the Vietnam War. His remains were never found. He was promoted to colonel while missing in action, and an Air Force review board later deemed him deceased.

Kibbey's sons also received a flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol on Aug. 30. Dave Kibbey — a woodworker, like his father before him — crafted an oak flag box earlier this month to display his father's dog tags, the flag and military medals. The flag box was featured on center stage during Monday's event.

Inside his Port St. John home, Dave Kibbey keeps his father's worn, brown leather zippered pouch. Inside are stacks of Air Force records, military correspondence, yellowed newspaper clippings and a Christmas card to the family from President Richard Nixon.

During Monday's event, the Brevard Police & Fire Pipes & Drums honor guard performed "Amazing Grace" on bagpipes. Rick Kibbey, who lives in Viera, saluted the bagpipers, then struggled to fight back tears.

Other relatives across the country watched Monday's ceremony via Facebook Live.

Col. Kurt Matthews, 920th Rescue Wing commander, presented Kibbey's sons their father's Silver Star and Purple Heart.

"As a second-generation Air Force pilot and son of a Vietnam veteran, I understand what it means to serve as a family. But my father came home. Rick, David, John and Terry (Brayton)'s, their sister, did not," Matthews said.

"I can only empathize with the sacrifice of you and your family. But today, representing the Air Force rescue family, I get the honor of thanking you and your father for his service to our great nation," he said.

Richard's wife, Mary Ann Kibbey, was living in Vero Beach when three officers from Patrick AFB delivered the news of his helicopter crash. She moved to North Wherry Housing at Patrick AFB during the summer of 1967 for support, and she later bought a house in Satellite Beach.

Mary Ann Kibbey passed away in 1979, and Dave Kibbey told reporters Monday that she died of a broken heart. She is buried at Florida Memorial Gardens in Rockledge. If her husband's remains are found, the children hope to inter them side-by-side at Arlington National Cemetery.

"People need to know there's still 2,000 missing Americans in Vietnam. And we hope to get as many of them as we can back," Rick Kibbey told reporters after the ceremony.

The family of Col. Richard Kibbey, who died in Vietnam, will be presented his dog tags, found by a Vietnamese farmer. Video by Tim Shortt. Posted 12/13/17.

Space Coast family gets missing dad's Vietnam War dog tags -- 50 years after copter crash

[Rick Neale](#), FLORIDA TODAY

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Missing for 50 Years

Though U.S. military recovery teams visited the crash area in North Vietnam's Quảng Bình province many times, no trace of co-pilot Richard Kibbey was found. But an unexpected breakthrough occurred.

Shortly after rescuing a downed American pilot behind enemy lines, Air Force Capt. Richard "Dick" Kibbey's first daring mission of the Vietnam War proved to be his last — haunting his grieving family for the next half-century.

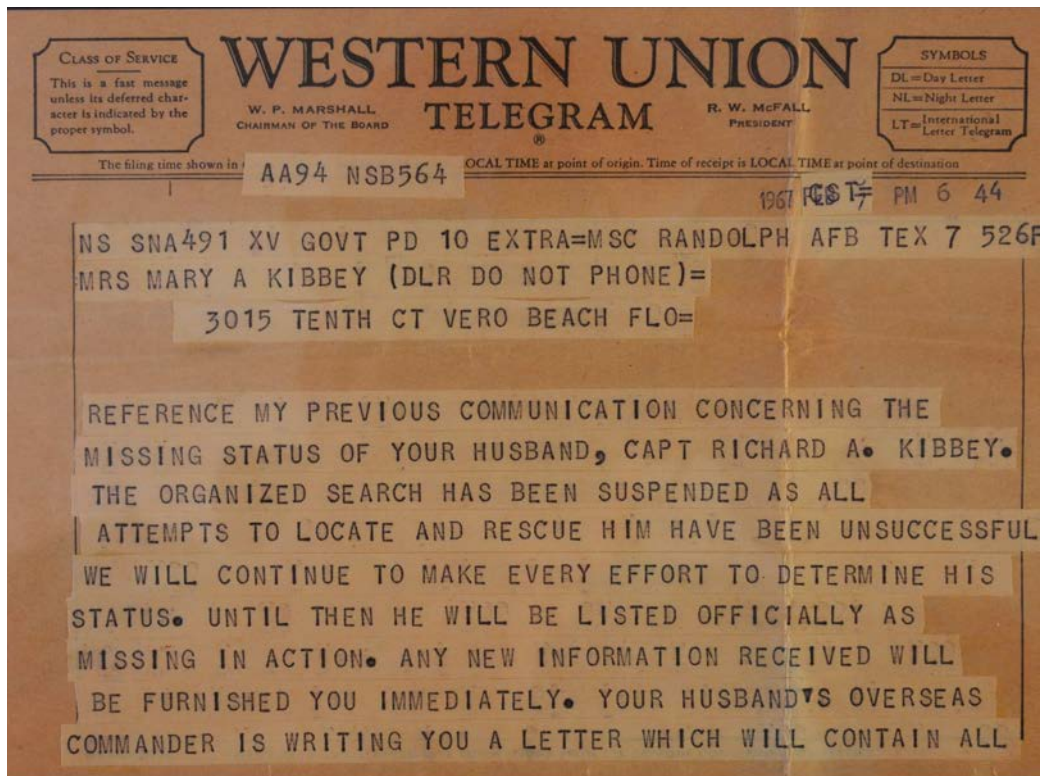
North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire raked the fuselage of Kibbey's HH-3E helicopter, which burst into flames on Feb. 6, 1967. The doomed "Jolly Green Giant" slammed into a sheer limestone cliff near the mountainous Mu Ghia Pass on the Laos-North Vietnam border.

Kibbey was listed as missing in action after the crash. His wife, Mary Ann, moved that summer from Vero Beach to North Wherry Housing on Patrick Air Force Base for emotional support, and their four children went on to graduate from Satellite High.

The children say their mother died in 1979 of a broken heart, wondering whether her husband was alive.

"She hung on for years and years, hoping. It's really kind of an odd sensation. When they come to the door, you think the worst. When they say 'missing in action,' it kind of leaves you in limbo for wondering," said Viera resident Rick Kibbey, the couple's oldest son. He was 12 when the crash happened, and he is now 63.

"We were all wondering, hoping, praying," Rick Kibbey added.



Mary Ann Kibbey received this telegram on Feb. 7, 1967, from Air Force Maj. Gen. G.B. Greene Jr., informing her that her husband had been declared missing in action.
(Photo: Courtesy of Dave Kibbey)

Air Force officials promoted Richard Kibbey to major, then colonel as years passed. Though U.S. military recovery teams visited the rugged helicopter-crash area in North Vietnam's Quảng Bình province many times over the decades, no trace of him was found. Then, in September 2015, an unexpected breakthrough occurred.

"They were looking at the old crash site, and this farmer came up with a box. In the box were Dad's dog tags and some remains of Pat Wood, who was the pilot," Rick Kibbey said.

"And when they were saying, 'Where did you find them here at the crash site?' he said, 'Oh no, I didn't find them here — I found them up there,'" Rick Kibbey said.

The military had been searching in the wrong place.

Kibbey's Children to Receive his Dog Tags

Mary Ann Kibbey is buried at Florida Memorial Gardens in Rockledge. The children hope to eventually reunite their parents by interring them side-by-side at Arlington National Cemetery.

Monday morning, U.S. Rep. Bill Posey will present Richard Kibbey's dog tags to his relatives during a ceremony at Patrick Air Force Base. The Air Force Reserve's 920th Rescue Wing will host the event.

"We are proud to host this tribute to Col. Kibbey and his family. Not only did he give the ultimate sacrifice while flying a combat mission to save the life of another, but the Kibbey family has endured the trials and tribulations of his unknown fate for the last 50 years," said Col. Kurt Matthews, 920th Rescue Wing commander.

"Families like the Kibbeys represent American endurance and pride. Throughout our history, military families have served as the warriors of the home front, sacrificing much," Matthews said.



Mary Ann Kibbey's family decorated her gravesite in August at Florida Memorial Gardens in Rockledge. (Photo: Courtesy of Rick Kibbey)

For Rick Kibbey, brothers Dave and John, and sister Terry, the discovery of the dog tags has rekindled hope that their father's remains will finally be unearthed and returned home.

Mary Ann Kibbey is buried at Florida Memorial Gardens in Rockledge. The children hope to eventually reunite their parents by interring them side-by-side at Arlington National Cemetery.

"I had absolutely no expectations of ever finding anything at this point. And so it was a big shock to me," Rick Kibbey said of the dog-tag discovery. A retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, he now works as anti-terrorism program manager with the 45th Security Forces Squadron at Patrick AFB.

Dave Kibbey, 58, is commander of Sons of the American Legion Post 359 in Port St. John. He was 7 when his dad vanished.

"It's just one more piece to the puzzle to a final end. It's that one more step. I've known in my heart, but this is another page to the final chapter," Dave Kibbey said.

Rick Kibbey hopes Monday's ceremony helps his family come to grips with the situation.

The Vietnamese farmer led Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency personnel to the previously unsurveyed crash site, where they found a rotor blade and other helicopter parts. During a November 2016 follow-up visit, they found the remains of Donald Hall, the helicopter crew chief.

Growing Up With a Missing Father

John Kibbey was a 2-year-old toddler when his father's helicopter crashed. He seems to recall a memory of his dad giving him a bath in the sink, but he can't tell if that actually happened.

During a 1971 TODAY interview, Mary Ann Kibbey recalled a dream she had one week before her husband's ill-fated rescue mission:

"I dreamed he was in a coffin surrounded by me and my family. I kept saying that he wasn't dead, he wasn't dead! Finally he got up out of the coffin and walked away. I think it was a warning sign of what was to come — a sign that he isn't really dead," she told the newspaper.

Mary Ann Kibbey regularly mailed brown paper-wrapped care packages addressed to her husband, in hopes he might receive them in captivity. For example, for Christmas 1971, she mailed his favorite pipe and tobacco and Polaroid photos of the family posing in front of the Christmas tree.

Her care packages were returned to sender.

MRS. RICHARD KIBBEY is one of thousands of American women whose husbands or sons are either prisoners of war or missing in action in Southeast Asia. In the four long years since her husband was reported missing, there has been no word from him or the North Vietnamese government to confirm or deny his being alive. But Mrs. Kibbey, shown with the youngest of her four children, 5-year-old John, hasn't given up hope.



Meet Brevard's Military Families

'All We Can Do Is Wait'



One of a Series

By AMY CLARK

TODAY Staff Writer

She woke with a start.

It was the middle of the night two months ago. Mary Ann Kibbey was positive she heard the familiar tinkling sounds of "Auf Wiedersehn, We'll meet again, Sweetheart."

The carved, German beermug with the built-in music box played the sentimental tune until it ran down.

Mrs. Kibbey heard the sounds that came from the darkened living room, where the beermug stood on a book shelf. She listened — suspended in agony.

The tune — once so gay — now sounded ghostly. It brought back memories of happier days — when her husband Richard bought the mug

while the family was stationed in Germany.

"IT PLAYS OUR song," she said. "But I didn't turn it on, not that night. And neither did the children."

"To me it was a sign that he's still alive. I never believed in signs like that before. But more and more I do."

Maj. Richard Kibbey has been missing in action almost four years. Four long years. No word has come from Major Kibbey or from the North Vietnamese government to confirm or deny his being alive.

Was he killed when his helicopter was shot down over North Vietnam so many long days and longer nights ago? That's the question the Kibbey family lives with every day.

"I WAS IN Vero Beach when it

happened," said Mary Ann. "My parents live there. Three officers came from Patrick Air Force Base to tell me that his helicopter had been shot down. They had searched for him all day with aerial reconnaissance. I wasn't informed until they were sure they couldn't find him right away."

"I guess I was mostly in shock at first. I can't remember just how I did feel. I told the kids. But they didn't really understand what it meant. At first I kept saying it will all be over next week. Now I say it will all be over next year."

One week before her husband went down on his first rescue mission in Vietnam, she had a dream. Or perhaps nightmare is a better word for it. "I dreamed he was in a coffin surrounded by me and my family."

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John Kibbey was a 2-year-old toddler when his father's helicopter crashed. He seems to recall a memory of his dad giving him a bath in the sink, but he can't tell if that actually happened.

The Orlando resident served in the Air Force from 1983-87 as a surface-to-air missile operator/maintainer. Now 52, he recalls seeing his mother glued to 1970s television news coverage of Vietnam War POWs returning to California.

"She watched that TV for over two hours, watching the men coming off the plane, just hoping," John Kibbey said, fighting back tears.

Their sister, Terry Brayton, 62, who grew up on the Space Coast, now lives in Westfield, Massachusetts.

During Rick Kibbey's junior year, he was one of three Satellite High wrestlers whose fathers were missing in Southeast Asia. Mary Ann Kibbey joined POW-MIA Families of Brevard County and became a letter-writing-campaign advocate, attending meetings in Washington, D.C., and lobbying for release of prisoners of war.

'I've Always Hoped for the Day My Father Could See Me Wrestle'



MAJ. RICHARD KIBBEY AND SON RICK LT. COL. LAWRENCE GUARINO AND SON JEFF LT. COL. JOHN S. FINLAY III AND SON JOHN

They're Upholding Fathers' Tradition

By DAVE LARIMER
TODAY Sports Writer

John Finlay is unbeaten as a high school wrestler this season. Yet there is a victory that has eluded him, one that would mend the tear in his heart. One he would gladly trade his 14-0 record for.

The Satellite High School senior wants to see his father again. It's the one fight he has not won.

Lt. Col. John S. Finlay III has never seen his son wrestle. He has been held for the last three years by the North Vietnamese as a prisoner of war.

Young Finlay is determined to win the ultimate fight. "I always have hoped for the day my father would see me wrestle," he says faithfully.

But as the season winds to a close this month and the North Vietnamese continue their stubborn resistance, Finlay adds realistically, "I guess he's not going to see me wrestle..."

Finlay will be graduated in June and he hopes the battle will be won by the time "Pomp and Circumstance" wafts among the senior class.

"I hope he'll be back in time to see me graduate."

Finlay is one of three Satellite wrestlers who yearn for the return of their fathers. Rick Kibbey, a 16-year-old junior, said goodbye to his father at the Melbourne airport in December, 1966. Two months later, Air Force Maj. Richard Kibbey was reported missing in action after flying a rescue helicopter in North Vietnam.

Sophomore Jeff Guarino, 15, was nine years old when his dad, Air Force Lt. Col. Lawrence Guarino, was taken prisoner after flying over North Vietnam in June, 1965.

Young Finlay, Kibbey and Guarino have carried on a sports tradition born by their fathers.

Guarino was playing Little League baseball when his father was called to duty. Kibbey was a first baseman for the Ogden (Utah) Indians, a Little League team. His father was the coach. Finlay played quarterback for a junior high football team in West Germany.

Little League and junior high behind them, the three have become avid, competent wrestlers. Finlay, 18, participates in the 129-pound class and is the only undefeated Satellite wrestler. There is a good possibility he will gain a berth in the state tournament.

Kibbey has lost only twice in 13 outings in the 149-pound category and Guarino has a 4-3 record on the junior varsity team.

The absence of their fathers sparked an interest in sports that extends beyond wrestling.

"I want to have something Dad can be proud of when he gets back," said Kibbey. "When my father was reported missing in action, I asked my mom what sports he liked. She said football, so I tried out for the team and liked it."

"My father really likes sports," said Finlay. "He was captain of the boxing team in high school. I was named after him and I want to make his name good."

"There's a special drive to excel in me, now that my father is not here," said Guarino. "The family likes sports and I want to uphold the tradition."

Finlay, Kibbey and Guarino are fine wrestlers and outstanding individuals, observes Satellite coach Ken Lunderman.

"You won't find three better young men," said Lunderman. "Anyone else would be making excuses because of their hardship. But not these three. They are hard workers who have not lost their sense of humor or humility."

They also have not lost faith.

Each one knows he will see his father again. Time is the only heartbreaking factor.

"I'm quite positive I'll see him again," said Finlay. "There is no doubt in my mind." Kibbey and Guarino nodded in determined agreement.

Finlay believes the only reason the fathers are being held is for propaganda. "The enemy can get all the information it wants in a month, the only reason they are still being held is for pressure and propaganda," said Finlay. "And we have to fight back with pressure."

The mothers of Finlay, Kibbey and Guarino are members of the POW-MIA Families of Brevard County. They are pressuring the North Vietnamese with a torrent of letters. More than 130,000 have been sent.

The ultimate result — release of the POWs — is yet to be reality. But the faith that someday the fathers will return home is evident. You can see it in the eyes of John Finlay, Rick Kibbey and Jeff Guarino.