

Children of men who died in Vietnam have a lonely experience in common. Now they're getting together to talk about it.

TONY CORDERO WAS ONLY 4 YEARS old when, on Father's Day in 1965, he lost his dad. Air Force Maj. William Cordero disappeared when his B-57 crashed in dense jungle along the Vietnam-Laos border. His wife, Kathleen, was expecting their fifth child.

"Every night for the next four years," Tony recalls, "with Mom standing in our bedroom doorway, we'd pray for Dad wherever he was." In 1969, after the crash site was discovered, Tony traveled with his mother to Major Cordero's burial in Arlington National Cemetery.

Today, Tony is manager of a Los Angeles bank branch and is the father of two small girls. He is not only keeping alive the memory of his father; he has formed an organization, Sons and Daughters in Touch (formerly called They

—a weathered Air Force footlocker that contains his father's legacy: one-piece flight suits, military award certificates, photos of the major with his flight crew and of him climbing confidently into his cockpit. Lovingly, Tony opens a letter that his father sent him from Asia, wishing him a happy third birthday. "My brothers, sister and I grew up wondering: 'What if he came home? What would he be like today?'" Tony recalls.

"When I played high school football, I always hoped that one day a man would walk up to me on the practice field and say, 'Hi, I'm your dad.' Even now I wonder what it would be like for Dad to be with my children, or to have a beer and watch a ballgame together."

Like many Americans who tried to put the painful Vietnam experience behind them, until recently Tony and his family avoided discussing their feelings. Tony's mother, Kathleen D'Ambrosi, confides: "I now realize that for 15 years after my husband was buried, I was numb. The kids were too young to deal with those feelings. And the war was so unpopular that we just didn't talk about it with outsiders."

However, in May 1989, the emotional impact of the 20th anniversary of Major Cordero's funeral motivated Tony to reach out to others. "At that time, I was a couple of months shy of my 28th birthday," he says.

"I realized that within the next two years I will have outlived my dad. I look at him as my hero, and to venture into an age he never knew is scary. And my daughters are becoming old enough to learn about their grandfather. That pushed me to ask questions. I wondered how many other surviving children are afraid to come out and talk about it."

Tony called his state Veterans Affairs Department and learned that there was no organization for children of men killed in the war. He was referred to the office of the Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a private organization in Washington, D.C., that sponsors special projects and services at the memorial. Wanda Ruffin—a Friends project coordinator whose husband, James, a Navy aviator, was killed off the coast of Vietnam—agreed to help Tony to

get the sons and daughters to communicate and to search for veterans who had served with the fathers of these young people. The first name she gave Tony was that of her own daughter, Wende, now 24, who was born three months after her father perished.

"I volunteered to work for the Friends because I found the memorial to be a healing place," says Wanda, who has degrees in nursing and grief counseling. "I believed that it was a good idea for the young people to get in touch. Even though my daughter and I are very close, there are some feelings she could better discuss with her peers. After Tony first talked with Wende,

continued



Tony Cordero formed Sons and Daughters in Touch to help perpetuate the memory of Maj. William Cordero.



Were Our Fathers), to bring together the children—now young adults—of servicemen who perished in the war.

"The average age of those who died in Vietnam was 19 or 20," Tony explains. "Some had children who never knew their dads. And many sons and daughters grew up isolated, not having any friends who lost their dads in the war. The loss of a parent is always ingrained in a child's heart. You cannot run from those emotions. I've found that we have a common bond, and it's time we shared it."

In his home in Wilmington, Calif., Tony shows me his most treasured possession



Michelle Mitchell was 5½ months old when her father, Michael, died near Tam Ky. Her mother says she looks like him.



Andy Levin



Wende Ruffin's father, James Thomas Ruffin, was a Navy aviator who died at 25 off the coast of Vietnam.



Andy Levin

'We Never Knew Our Fathers'

By Al Santoli

FATHERS/continued

the impression I got from both was that they shared experiences that no one else was able to comprehend."

Wende grew up in Montgomery, Ala., where many of her schoolmates had fathers who served in Vietnam. But knowing no one else who had lost a father in the war, she was never able to confide in her friends. "Tony was the first person who knew what I was feeling," Wende says. "I had tried with other friends, but they really didn't want to talk about Vietnam or my dad. Even though I didn't know what Tony looked like, I immediately considered him my pal. We shared secret hopes that one day our dads might show up, and questions about who our dads were."

"Tony and I feel we had to achieve for ourselves and our dads, because their lives were cut short," she adds. "We try to do things that would make them proud. And I've felt anger about the reception veterans received when they came home... By talking with Tony, I was able to sort out my thoughts and know my dad better. And I've come to know myself better."

Some 58,000 U.S. servicemen and women died in Indochina, and more than 2300 are still listed as miss-

ing. However, there is no accurate figure on how many widows and children were left behind. Through the Friends network and some reports in the media, Tony and Wende have been in touch with sons and daughters from widespread areas of the country. In all cases, it was their first opportunity to express their feelings with others who understood. While some seek camaraderie, others are searching to learn more about their fathers. Wanda says, "We've heard from sons and daughters who would like to talk with veterans who served with their dads. There are some questions that only a veteran can answer."

Sharrie Downing was 2 when her father, William McJimsey, died in Vietnam. "I loved him very much, even though my only memory is sitting on the front porch together with our dog in Oakland, Calif., sharing an ice cream cone." Her dream is to find someone who served with him in Company C, 2nd Battalion, 199th Light Infantry Brigade from July 1967 until he was fatally wounded near Binh Chanh village on Feb. 12, 1968. Her mother, Linda, widowed at 21 and devastated, told Sharrie little about her father. "I have an outline of him and would just like to get it filled in," Sharrie says. "I would like to be able to tell my son

more about the grandpa he'll never meet."

Michelle Mitchell, 21, of Tampa, Fla., was born while her father served in Company A, 1st Battalion, 198th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam. She was 5½ months old when Michael "Mitch" Mitchell was killed in an ambush near Tam Ky. "As I've gotten more mature, the urge to know more about Dad grows stronger," she says. "When I turned 18, my mother gave me a hope chest filled with Dad's things. Everytime we look into it, we both cry. There are letters Mom sent that he never received. One was postmarked on the day he died."

"What's hitting me now," she adds, "is that when he was my age in Vietnam, people were being killed every day. Mom tells me that I have my father's looks and disposition—easygoing but real stubborn. But it would be important to hear from a veteran who knew him. I want to know more of what he was like. Because a lot of that has to do with who I am."

Her mother, Mary Anne Weeks, has gently encouraged Michelle to come to terms with her quest. "Michelle started going through an identity crisis when she discovered she looks like her dad," she observes. "The surviving kids are the last casualties of the war. Because they're just now reaching an age where they comprehend the impact—20 years later."

On a cool afternoon, I joined Tony Cordero and his wife, DeAnna, Wanda and Wende Ruffin, and Michelle Mitchell at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. We joined the stream of families and friends, some with tears of wonder and pride, as they huddled before the names of loved ones etched in the wall of polished black marble. Tony, Wende and Michelle posed for our photographer near their fathers' names.

On the walkway beneath the panel bearing her dad's name, Michelle placed the prayer card given out at his funeral. On it, she'd copied a poem that he had sent her mother from the battlefield in 1968. Later, when we stopped near the comforting archway of the Lincoln Memorial, Michelle told me: "I wrote a letter to Dad on the back of the prayer card that I left at the wall. I wrote how much Mom has never been the same. How much I want him to be proud of me. Yet I know he is. I often feel him with me. Thinking about Dad has helped me through many difficult times."

Tony, Wende and Michelle each revealed that although they had never met before, standing together at the wall, they felt a closeness, a common bond. They could see a lot of themselves in each other. This is their healing process.

"In my wildest imagination," Tony Cordero says, "I'd like to have a picnic for all the young people who lost fathers in the war. We would share laughter and tears and our experiences together."

"My goal is to develop a network of friendship with sons and daughters in all areas of the country, regardless of their ethnic background or religion—the same way that race has no meaning to soldiers fighting side by side. The political stuff is something that a previous generation had to contend with. We are the legacy of the 58,000 men and women who died over there, and the good they represented."

If You Wish To Join

If you wish to join Sons and Daughters in Touch, send your name, address, phone number and the name of your father to Tony Cordero or Wanda Ruffin, c/o Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Dept. P, 1350 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036. In addition, the "In Touch" program provides a service to connect veterans with families and friends of persons whose names are on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall.

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