

News

Searching For An MIA Brother For 48 Years

American Homefront Project | By [Patricia Murphy](#)

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Lt. Kelly Patterson, USN (left) and brother 2Lt. Luck Patterson, USMC (right) - in South Vietnam - 1967

More than a thousand service members remain listed as Missing In Action from the Vietnam War. The brother of one of them still holds out hope.

It was 48 years ago this month that the family of Lt. James Kelly Patterson last heard from him.

Patterson went MIA 48 years ago, after his plane was shot down near Hanoi during the Vietnam War.

Patterson, a navigator with Navy Attack Squadron VA-35, and the pilot were both ejected from the plane. His squad mate, Dave Cable, remembers it as the worst day of his life.

“We knew that the Vietnamese were close to Kelly,” Cable said. “We were kind of hanging on our fingernails waiting for this word to come back.”

And then the rescue mission was called off. Years later, Patterson was presumed dead.



An A-6 Intruder from the USS Enterprise over Vietnam. It was the type of plane James Patterson flew in for the Navy.

On this Memorial Day weekend, 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War, more than a 1,000 service members and civilians remain missing. Most likely are dead.

But for families, there are no grave sites to visit; and no certainty about what happened to their loved ones, or their loved ones' remains.

The search for answers can become an obsession for relatives.

In Patterson's case, his little brother George is still looking for him, hoping that he might come home. The pilot in the A-6 that day was a prisoner of war for six years, released in 1973.

That's when the U.S. negotiated a release of 591 prisoners of war. The Pattersons hoped their son would be on the list. But it wasn't to be.

"The casualty officer come over to our house, and we were waiting in anticipation," George Patterson said. "He said, 'Your brother's not on the list.' So that was very devastating," he said.

Since then, George has scoured government records, photographs and witness reports, trying to piece together what happened on that day that his brother's plane was shot down. He has even returned to Vietnam. Some have urged him to move on, but he says he can't.

"I'm not stupid, I'm not illogical," George Patterson says. "His chances of being alive today are miniscule, and I realize that, but it's not an absolute yet. I feel like if I just dust my hands off, and say, 'I'm not going to pursue this anymore' – that feels like abandonment."



Lt. Kelly Patterson, USN onboard the USS Enterprise (CVN-65), 1966

Patterson has been missing in action for 48 years. His brother has been looking for him since.

Dave Cable, too, struggles with his friend's memory. For decades he has hauled around the shattered windshield of an A-6, the same type of plane Patterson was flying. A few days ago, he put it on display near his house in Friday Harbor, Washington, and raised a toast to his old friend.

They also honored Patterson with a ceremony – a color guard, a 21-guard salute and a flyover by Navy Growler planes from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island.

Cable says the ceremony gave him a sense of peace. But more than that, he hopes it inspires other Vietnam veterans to open up about their stories. He hopes to honor the men and women who served, remember the ones who died, and perhaps one day answer the questions about the servicemembers whose fates remain a mystery.