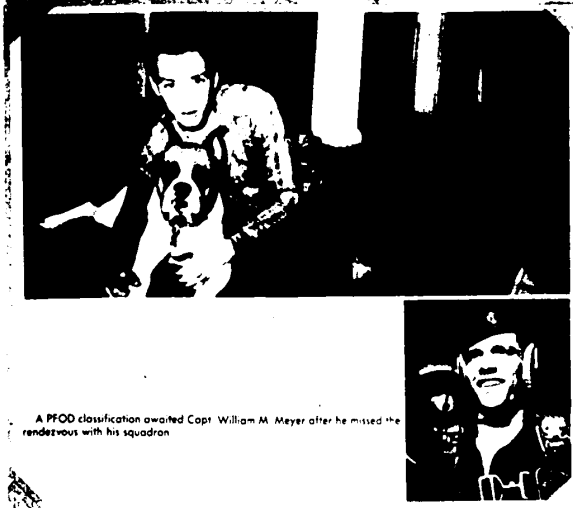




Basketball star Maj. E. Lawrence Perrine disappeared when the lead plane he was piloting blew up



A PFOD classification awarded Capt. William M. Meyer after he missed the rendezvous with his squadron

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Forget-me-not: the haunting message of MIAs and their desperate families

By SHELLEY EICHENHORN

Mike O'Connor is afraid time is running out for our men missing in action in the Vietnam War. He thinks the government is forgetting about its moral responsibility to these soldiers and their families. "Anyone who is upset about Watergate should be indignant that these men haven't been accounted for," O'Connor said. The former POW thinks those responsible for sending men into war should try to get them back. "Five hundred thirty-five men in Washington helped send those men to Vietnam. Hardly a one will help get them back," O'Connor said. Including the MIA problem in our national priorities is something O'Connor thinks is necessary. But he thinks Vietnam is one issue most politicians want to forget. "THE MIA problem doesn't help a politician's campaign. It's an issue that's no longer worth while politically," said O'Connor, who lost a race for public office after returning from Vietnam. According to O'Connor, President Ford has not been sympathetic to the plight of the families left in limbo. He claims representatives from MIA committees all over the U.S. went to Washington to request a meeting with Ford but were refused. "That week, the President talked to Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) a famous draft dodger and refused to talk to the prisoner of war committee." The committee members brought 1,300 forget-me-not flowers, each representing one of the men missing. According to O'Connor, the flowers were thrown on the White House lawn in protest. "Since Ford has taken office, he's given amnesty. Yet, he hasn't

fulfilled his obligation to bring the men back," said O'Connor. LARRY SPEAKES, a spokesman for President Ford, said that the President is very knowledgeable and concerned in regard to the MIAs. "Whenever the President is speaking to a veterans group, he always mentions the MIAs," Speakes said. As for the alleged turning-away of the committee, the spokesman had no knowledge of the incident, although he did acknowledge that Muhammad Ali dropped in on the President. IN LEGISLATIVE branch of government, Bob Turner, special assistant to Sen. Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, says the government will continue to use diplomatic pressure on the North Vietnamese. "But, they have adamantly refused to comply," Turner said. "I think few Americans would be in favor of stronger military action." According to Turner, the U.S. was conducting searches into Communist-held territory in South Vietnam. "In December of 1973, one of our teams was ambushed while trying to inspect an old crash site. We notified the other side that we'd be searching, but they opened fire killing one person and wounding the rest. We've stopped our investigation for this reason." According to Turner, Sen. Griffin sent a letter with Christmas cards for each MIA to the North Vietnamese. In it, Sen. Griffin wrote: "I cannot overemphasize the great importance the people of America place on securing full accountability consequences your continuous refusal to comply with the provisions of Article 8(B) may have on further relations and opportunities for peaceful cooperation between our two countries."

SEN. GRIFFIN has not received an answer from Hanoi. Yet O'Connor still doesn't think it's impossible for the government to get an accounting of the missing men. "We can apply economic pressure on the Chinese and Russians to stop supplying the North Vietnamese. They give them 80 per cent of their military aid," O'Connor said. He thinks we've been living up to our end of the agreement by not getting involved in the current fighting in South East Asia. O'Connor thinks we can use the trade agreements with the Chinese and Russians as leverage with the North Vietnamese. There are 87 men that the military admits the Communists have absolute knowledge of according to O'Connor. "Everyday we wait, the chances of finding the men alive grow slimmer," he said. And O'Connor should know. He spent 61 months as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese. "My helicopter was shot down on Feb. 4, 1968 near Hue City. We traveled north and spent two years in a camp outside Hanoi. But we were moved around a lot. "The conditions were very harsh. In the jungle, there's less than a 50-50 chance of survival." O'Connor describes the best conditions to be a cement floor and a wooden plank to sleep on. The worst was six weeks in an 18 inch hole in the ground. "I WAS GIVEN five minutes a day out of that hole and fed two cups of rice for my meals. The hole was infested with insects, ants, lice, snakes and rats. It could drive you nuts. But it didn't, and O'Connor is now a student at Oakland University and has enlisted in the Na-

tional Guard. As vice president of the POW Committee of Michigan, he's actively trying to help other families still living in desperation. On January 27, the second anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreement, the committee will begin a new campaign to rekindle concern for those missing. The committee will sell forget-me-not flowers and seed packets each with a story of one MIA on it. "WE HAVE also made up WIN buttons which call for the release of our MIAs. We are trying to encourage the government to add our cause in their list of priorities," O'Connor explained. February 23 has been declared Michigan MIA Prayer Day by Gov. William G. Milliken. The Michigan Jaycees and other service groups will be involved in community observances. MAYOR MAJ. PERRINE'S sister, the parents of PFC Dennis Gauthier haven't given up hope either. "You can't give up hope till there's definite proof," said Mrs. Harold Gauthier of Rochester. She says it's surprising how many people don't realize that so many men are still unaccounted for. "People are stunned. If it doesn't hit home, people don't think about it," she said. A year after graduating from Rochester High School, Dennis went into the army. In August of 1969, he was sent to South Vietnam. "My son was out on a scouting party. The enemy appeared and started shooting. Dennis was wounded in the shoulder and treated by the Red Cross. They put him behind a log for protection. When they went back to get him, he was gone." Since Oct. 31, 1969, Sgt. Gauthier (he's been promoted even though missing) has been an MIA. The area he was in is now Com-

retiation and torture for our boys. RIGGS'S SON, TOM, was just 20 years old when he left for Vietnam on June 1, 1966. He was a graduate of North Farmington High School and left a young wife behind. CWO Thomas F. Riggs was flying his helicopter back to base. The craft was blown out over the South China Sea. Radio contact was made, but attempts to pick it up on radar were unsuccessful. "For six years, Tom was classified MIA. Then two years ago he was reclassified presumptive finding of death (PFOD). "We had a memorial service for Tom. But we still haven't given up. The CWO's wife has since remarried and there is no contact between the Riggs and their ex-daughter-in-law. "We feel she has a right to her own life," Riggs explained. NOT ALL WIVES living in limbo have remarried though. Maj. E. Lawrence Perrine has a wife and two daughters still waiting. He also has a younger sister who has trouble forgetting her favorite big brother. "My brother was in the lead plane flying with two others. His plane blew up. We don't know if he had time to parachute out or not," explained Susan Van De Moortell of Rochester. She thinks Americans are forgetting about men like her brother. "For a while, all you heard about was the POWs and

MIAs. Then Watergate came and wiped out people's interest." Mrs. Van De Moortell says sometimes she thinks the government is doing all they can. "But, then it's irritating when you realize the Vietnamese aren't living up to their agreement." Although Maj. Perrine has been missing since May 22, 1967, his sister hasn't given up on him. "If there's any way he's alive, I just know he will be." He was a stubborn person. "I won't give up that idea and haven't given up on him." LIKE MAJ. PERRINE'S sister, the parents of PFC Dennis Gauthier haven't given up hope either. "You can't give up hope till there's definite proof," said Mrs. Harold Gauthier of Rochester. She says it's surprising how many people don't realize that so many men are still unaccounted for. "People are stunned. If it doesn't hit home, people don't think about it," she said. A year after graduating from Rochester High School, Dennis went into the army. In August of 1969, he was sent to South Vietnam. "My son was out on a scouting party. The enemy appeared and started shooting. Dennis was wounded in the shoulder and treated by the Red Cross. They put him behind a log for protection. When they went back to get him, he was gone." Since Oct. 31, 1969, Sgt. Gauthier (he's been promoted even though missing) has been an MIA. The area he was in is now Com-



MIKE O'CONNOR

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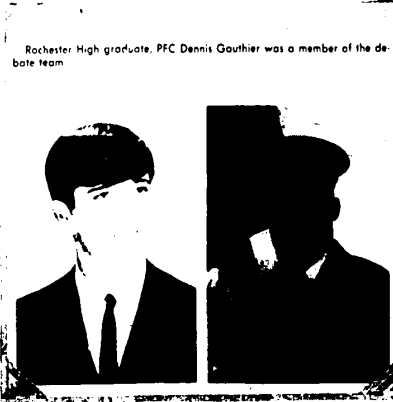
By SHELLEY EICHENHORN

Maybe we just got sick and tired of hearing about Vietnam. For most of us, the Paris Peace Agreement in 1973 brought a convenient end to an ugly national nightmare. But the nightmare goes on for the families of 1,300 men missing in action. In Michigan, there are 50 families still wondering whether their sons are miserably alive or perhaps mercifully dead. "I like the rest of us, they can't forget. "ALL WE'LL DO is work to make the government account for all the boys. Our government owes them that much," said Fred Riggs, vice president of the Prisoner of War Committee of Michigan, located in Troy. Only 550 of the 2,000 POWs and MIAs have come home. "When the POWs came back, they were heroes," Riggs said. "But, hero worship doesn't last too long." He feels that the government periodically tries to pacify the MIA families without a real effort toward enforcing the Paris peace agreement. Article 8(B) calls for American search parties accompanied by communist guides to be allowed to look for the graves of missing soldiers. Although two years have passed, the Vietnamese have not been made to live up to this part of the agreement. "We should have taken a stronger stand in the beginning," Riggs said. "We were told not to rock the boat because of possible

retaliation and torture for our boys. RIGGS'S SON, TOM, was just 20 years old when he left for Vietnam on June 1, 1966. He was a graduate of North Farmington High School and left a young wife behind. CWO Thomas F. Riggs was flying his helicopter back to base. The craft was blown out over the South China Sea. Radio contact was made, but attempts to pick it up on radar were unsuccessful. "For six years, Tom was classified MIA. Then two years ago he was reclassified presumptive finding of death (PFOD). "We had a memorial service for Tom. But we still haven't given up. The CWO's wife has since remarried and there is no contact between the Riggs and their ex-daughter-in-law. "We feel she has a right to her own life," Riggs explained. NOT ALL WIVES living in limbo have remarried though. Maj. E. Lawrence Perrine has a wife and two daughters still waiting. He also has a younger sister who has trouble forgetting her favorite big brother. "My brother was in the lead plane flying with two others. His plane blew up. We don't know if he had time to parachute out or not," explained Susan Van De Moortell of Rochester. She thinks Americans are forgetting about men like her brother. "For a while, all you heard about was the POWs and

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against him and the Gauthiers have no proof whether their son who would now be 25 is dead or alive. "When the POW list came out, our son was not on it." ANOTHER NAME NOT on the list was Capt. William M. Meyer of Bloomfield Hills. "Our son was missing in action," said Alice Meyer. "There were four planes that were shot down. But our son didn't make it back." Early in 1974, Capt. Meyer was reclassified PFOD after a review was requested by his wife. She then remarried. Capt. Meyer has two children. "We can't appeal the classification," said Mrs. Meyer. "Because we are not considered next of kin." Mrs. Meyer feels that the PFOD classification is a mistake. Along with other families, she thinks the classification is a convenient way for the government to relieve itself of the responsibility of accounting for the missing men. But, if the Prisoner of War Committee of Michigan has anything to do with it, they hope to make the government accept its responsibility. "We don't think we're asking the impossible. It was in the peace agreement that our missing be accounted for," said Mrs. Meyer who's very active in the committee. "Even in Korea, yes, they couldn't account for 389 men. But that's a far cry from 1,300. "I'd like to know what the stalemate is. Our government should fulfill its part of the peace agreement and see that the North Vietnamese do the same."



Rochester High graduate, PFC Dennis Gauthier was a member of the debate team