

JANUARY 2003

THE ASSOCIATION OF FORMER STUDENTS

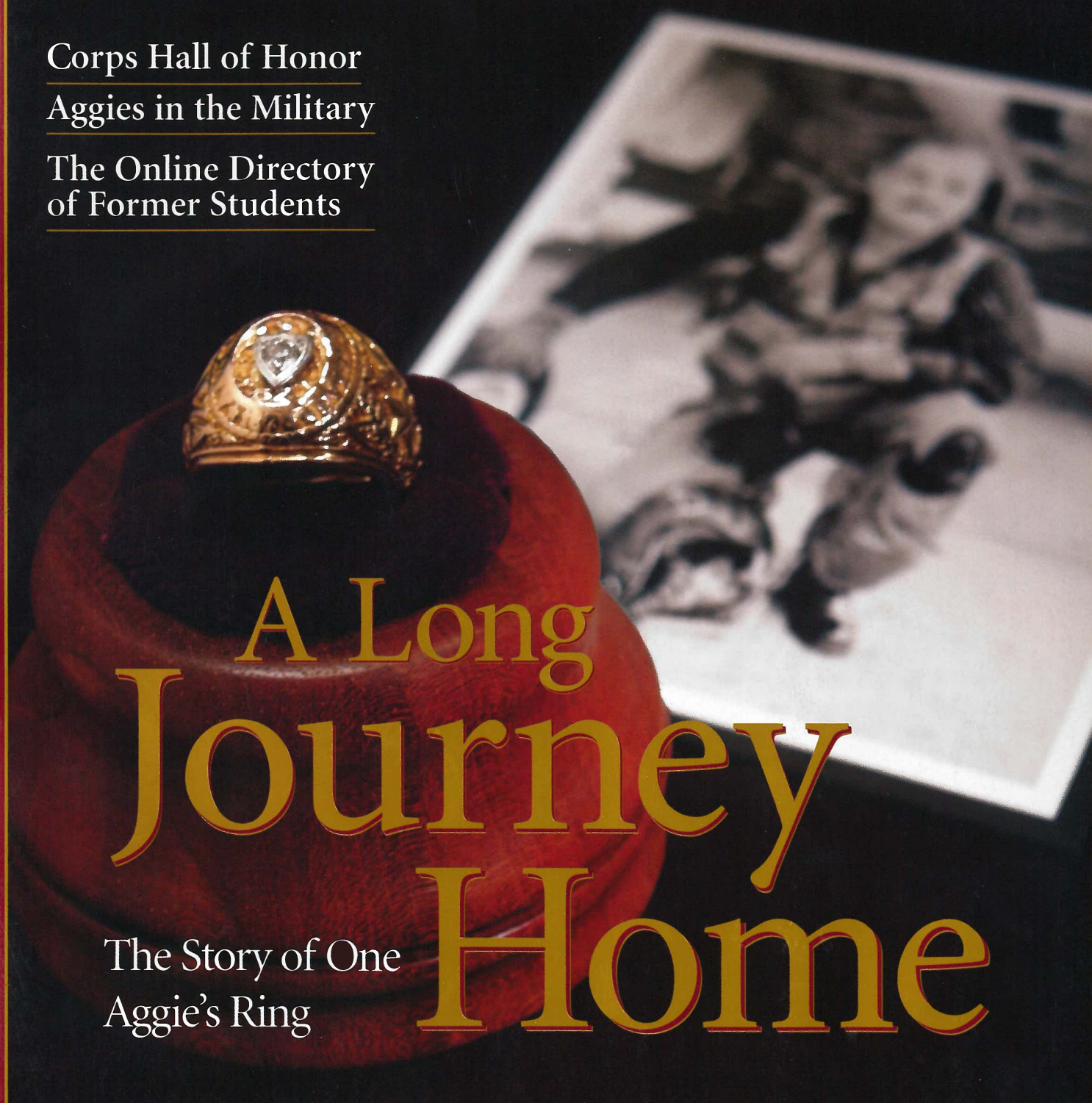
TEXAS AGGIE

The Official Magazine of the Aggie Network

Corps Hall of Honor

Aggies in the Military

The Online Directory
of Former Students



A Long Journey Home

The Story of One
Aggie's Ring

Col. William E. Campbell '52



On October 4, 2002, the family of Col. William E. Campbell '52, MIA, dedicated his Aggie Ring to The Association of Former Students. Col. Campbell's Aggie Ring is the single personal item returned to his family since he was declared Missing in Action on January 29, 1969. In a ceremony fitting of an American hero and proud Texas Aggie, Col. Campbell's four children presented the Ring to The Association of Former Students, providing a final resting place for their father's memory and a permanent reminder of his Aggie Spirit.

A Long Journey Home

The Story of One Aggie's Ring

by Joan Fithian Tatge



Boo and Bill Campbell '52 with their four children in 1967. l to r: Dale, Cindy, Cathy and Bill.

Cadet Bill Campbell '52 was active in A-Company, and the Marketing and Finance Club while a student at Texas A&M. He remained close to his high school sweetheart Claretta "Boo" White after leaving

McAllen, TX to attend school, and married her in 1951 during his junior year.

In 1952, when it came time for senior Ring Dance, it was Boo who turned Bill's Aggie Ring so his Class year would proudly face the world. Bill Campbell always wore two bands of gold; his wedding band, and his Aggie Ring.

base to base over next six years. Their four children-Cathy, Cindy, Dale and Bill-were all born in Texas.

"Although we lived in states all over the country, we always had a sense that, first of all, we were Texans," Cathy Campbell said of her family.

The Campbell's continued to live the life of an Air Force family, moving across country from California to New York by Volkswagen bus to answer Bill Campbell's call of duty.

"We made it over the Rockies by Daddy instructing us to, 'Lean forward!' as he drove up those mountain roads," Cathy said.

By 1967, now Major Bill Campbell had earned his Master's degree in logistics through the Air Force Institute of Technology and the U.S. was fighting a war in Vietnam. In 1968, Bill Campbell volunteered for a tour of duty in the Vietnam War. He returned home for Christmas that year, then said goodbye to his family for what would be the last time in December 1968.

Stationed in Ubon, Thailand, and having trained as a pilot in Hondo, Texas, Major Campbell flew the F4 Phantom, then considered among pilots to be one of the "hottest" planes around. On January 29, 1969, Campbell and bombardier/navigator

Campbell in Ubon, Thailand in October 1968.



Boo Campbell turns her husband's Aggie Ring at Senior Ring Dance 1952.

By the time Bill graduated, he and Boo had one child, Cathy Campbell. Commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Air Force, Bill and Boo's family grew as they moved from



From left to right, Cindy Stephenson, Cathy Campbell, Dale Campbell and Bill Campbell show off the Aggie Ring Remembrances they each received in honor of their father, Col. William Campbell '52, MIA.

*"Your Dad was, is
and always will be
a Texas Aggie.
He wore our
cherished Aggie
Ring. And that is all
we need to know."*

Porter Garner '79

Capt. Robert E. Holton were assigned a mission that would take them to the Mu Gia Pass area of Laos. During the mission, Campbell's plane was hit by enemy fire and crashed.

When soldiers knocked on the front door of Maj. William E. Campbell's home in Independence, Kansas, Boo Campbell was tending to her children. Bill's oldest daughter Cathy, then 17, was upstairs making posters for a school dance. Her youngest brother, Bill, then 11, came into the room shaking.

"Daddy's been shot down," he said.

Cathy ran downstairs. Her mother was sitting at the dining room table praying. Boo Campbell's husband had been officially listed as Missing In Action.

"We were told that he was coming back," said Cathy's sister, Cindy Campbell. But Campbell was never found. In the years that followed, Bill was promoted to the rank of

Colonel. In 1978, he was declared Presumed Killed in Action, and his wife submitted to a memorial service. Then in 1998, U.S. officials received word of a Thai store owner who had access to an Aggie Ring. After two years of

negotiations, the government acquired the Ring once worn by Bill Campbell.

When the Ring was returned to Boo Campbell in July 1991, it had been cut to fit a smaller finger, but the engraved name of William E. Campbell was still visible on the inside surface. Boo added a gold metal strip to the Ring so it would fit her finger and wore it in honor of her missing husband until she died suddenly in her sleep in 1995. Boo Campbell was 64 years old.

"It was our mother's wish that eventually the Ring be donated to Texas A&M," Cathy Campbell explained. "Unfortunately she died before realizing her wish."

Fifty years after Bill Campbell graduated from Texas A&M, and 33 years after he fought in the Vietnam War, his four children returned their father's Aggie Ring to The Association of Former Students for safe keeping.

The Association hosted a Ring Return ceremony and built a case that would

serve as a permanent memorial to Col. William E. Campbell '52 and a tribute to his Aggie Spirit.

During the ceremony, Association Executive Director Porter Garner '79 welcomed the Campbell children into the Aggie family.

"You are surrounded today by your loved ones and by many more people, most of whom you have never met," Garner said. "Yet, I can assure you, every person in this room counts you and your children as one of our own. Because your Dad was, is and always will be a Texas Aggie. He wore our cherished Aggie Ring. And that is all we need to know."

Bill Campbell's children traveled with their families to College Station from points across the country to honor their mother's wish and give a final resting place to their father's memories. During the ceremony, Cathy and Dale each spoke of their father and shared a video compilation of home movies.

"They taught us to love one another," Dale said of his parents.

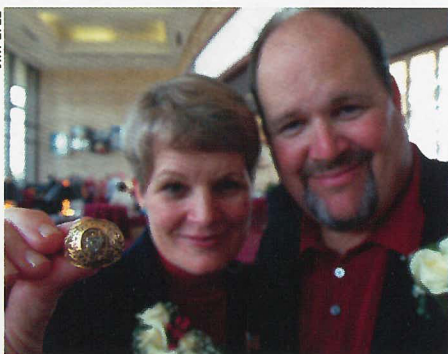
All four children stood together as Cindy Campbell placed her father's Ring in its case among pictures from his life and his MIA bracelets.

Echo Taps played as the audience stood to honor a loving husband and father, an American hero and a proud Texas Aggie.

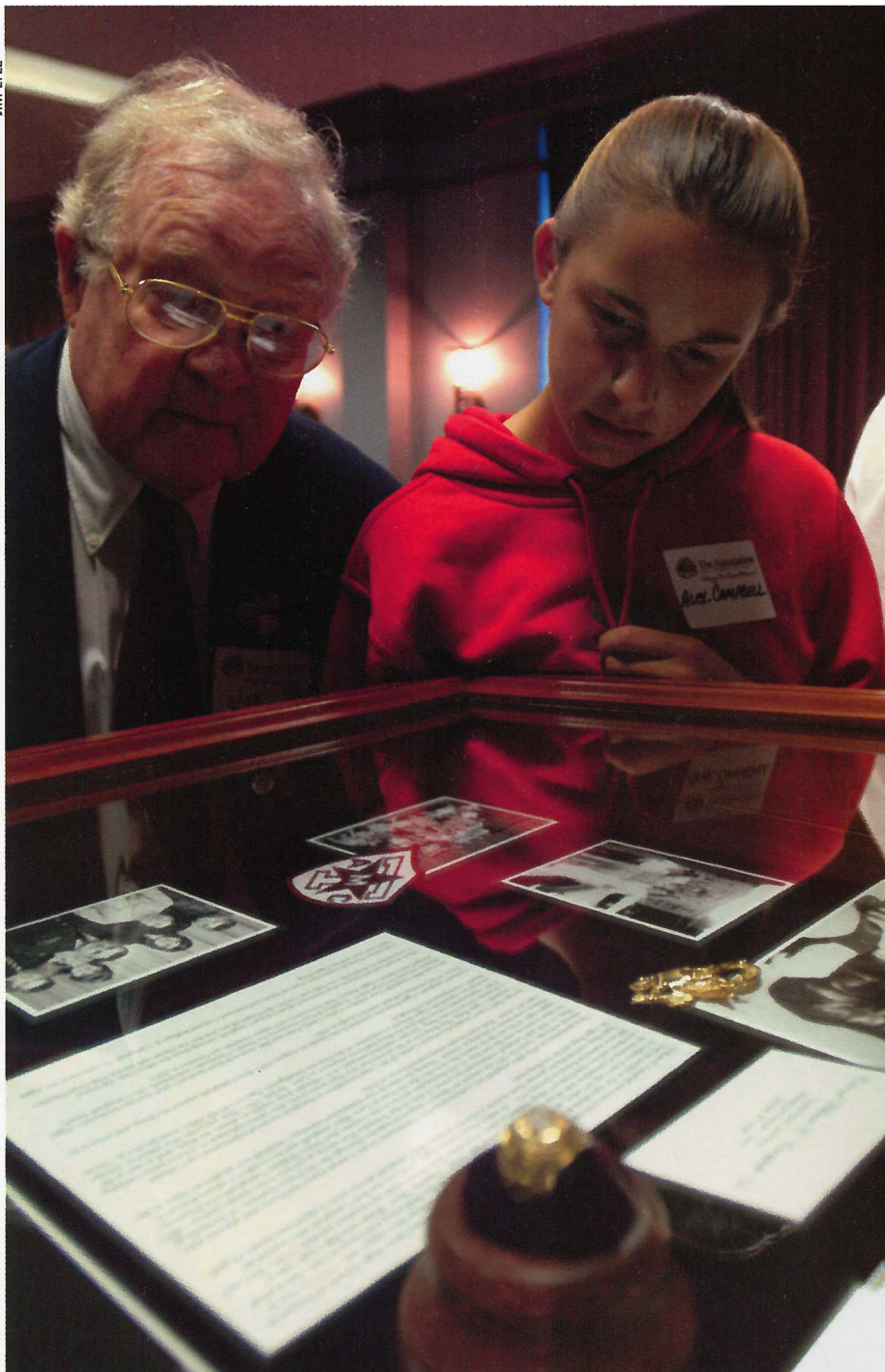
The Campbell family does not know how their father's Ring was found. They did learn that his gun and holster were on display in a military museum in Hanoi, leading Cathy to believe that her father survived the crash and died sometime later.

"Thank you for giving our father's Ring a final resting place," Cathy said during the ceremony. "Thank you for giving us a sense of closure. The circle and the legacy of his Texas Aggie Ring is now complete." ■

Below: Cathy and Dale Campbell proudly display their Dad's ring.



*Right: All four of Col. Campbell's children were on hand to dedicate their father's Aggie Ring.
l to r: Dale, Cathy, Cindy and Bill.*



Col. Campbell's Classmate Joe Davidson '52 looks at the contents of the Ring Case with Campbell's granddaughter, Alex Campbell, following the Ring Return ceremony.

