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Sheila McDaniels of Wayne Lakes, Ohio, with a photo tribute of her son, William McDaniels II, an Air Force F-117 Stealth fighter crew chief whose body was never recovered after a helicopter crash in the sea off the Philippines in 2002.

Ohio family waits 6 years for word on missing airman

JAMES HANNAH
Associated Press

WAYNE LAKES, OHIO — The images are engraved in their memories and captured in photos hanging on the walls and fanned out on the kitchen table.

They still bring smiles and tears to his parents because they show his transformation: a skinny, towheaded kid balancing on a skateboard. A bodybuilding trophy winner. Air Force crew chief for the F-117 Stealth fighter. Para-rescue man. Husband. Father of two young boys.

William "Bub" McDaniels II filled the lives of his parents for 36 years. Then, on Feb. 22, 2002, he was gone.

A helicopter carrying McDaniels, another airman and eight U.S. soldiers crashed into the Sulu Sea off the Philippines after taking part in a counterterrorism training exercise. The bodies of eight were recovered.

Not McDaniels.

Since that day, Bill and Sheila McDaniels have been searching for information, hoping, praying, wondering.

"I'm 64, and I'd like some closure before I go," said Bill McDaniels, a retired autoworker who was in the 82nd Airborne Division in the early 1960s. "I want to bring him home."

The McDaniels are part of a growing cadre of American families whose loved ones disappeared in recent years while in military service.

A week before the fourth anniversary — April 9 — of the capture in Iraq of Army Staff Sgt. Keith Matthew Maupin of Batavia, his parents got the confirmation they had long dreaded: An Army general broke the news that Matt's remains had been found.

"My heart sinks, but I know they can't hurt him anymore," Keith Maupin said. The Maupin family held a "let us never forget" dinner on the anniversary of the capture to honor their son and raise scholarship money.

Air Force Capt. Mary Olsen, spokeswoman for the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office, said the military is still searching for three soldiers missing in Iraq.

McDaniel's helicopter was one of two returning to base after dropping off special forces that were involved in an exercise aimed at helping Philippine troops destroy extremist rebels. Witnesses said the Army Chinook chopper was on fire and exploded as it hit the water.

U.S. authorities said it was unlikely hostile fire was involved, although the Office of Special Investigations won't comment on the cause of the crash.

Sheila McDaniels said she collapsed when she learned of the crash.

"It was pretty much a nightmare," she recalled, dabbing tears with a tissue.

"It'll shake you down to your boots," her husband added. "I don't ever want to see anybody go through that stuff, which I know a lot of people have."

The couple have written letters to members of Congress, governors and President Bush, asking if a search for their son can be resumed.

Kenny Pruitt, spokesman for the Air Force Personnel Center, said McDaniels' helicopter crashed several miles from land shortly after refueling in the air. Para-rescuers, boats and a helicopter searched the waters until there was no reasonable hope of finding survivors or additional remains, he said.

Aircraft then surveyed the

coastlines, and people in the area were asked to report any debris or information.

The Air Force later concluded there is no reasonable possibility that McDaniels survived. Pruitt said that the chances of another recovery effort producing additional physical evidence is highly unlikely but that Philippine authorities remain on alert in case material or remains are recovered. The fact that McDaniels' body has not been found makes it difficult for his parents to rule out hope that he may be alive, especially since he was highly trained to survive in hostile environments.

Para-rescuemen are trained to recover downed air crews, provide emergency medical treatment and evade the enemy. They scuba dive, parachute, practice mountain rescues and undergo grueling physical tests and training. McDaniels once parachuted with a broken foot during training, not telling his superiors because he wanted to pass the test. Bill McDaniels said his son could have been captured by guerrillas.

"As far as believing he could still be alive, I won't say 100 percent that I've given up that hope," his wife added.