

Daughter of an MIA

'Life in Limbo'

A PEACE settlement in Vietnam will mean many things to many people, but for the families of prisoners of war and men who are missing in action it will mean erasing the big question mark that has dominated their lives so long.

For in the long run, it is the uncertainty more than anything else that gnaws at the families.

It is this uncertainty that 19-year-old Patty O'Grady, a junior at the University of San Francisco, expresses so well in "My Father Is Missing in Action," her article in the November issue of Seventeen magazine.

"Perhaps the hardest thing we had to cope with those first three years was the uncertainty. There had never been a body or a funeral. Nothing to show that Daddy was dead and nothing to show he was living. We were compelled to exist in a limbo... I couldn't live and couldn't mourn," she wrote.

Patty's father, Colonel John F. O'Grady (USAF), was reported missing in 1967.

In 1969 Patty, her mother and six brothers and sisters listed the North Vietnamese embassy in Paris in search of news. They were informed that O'Grady was of in the prison camps.

"Now, for me Daddy had finally died," Patty wrote.

But her closing sentence takes on a hopeful note, "My heart yearns for Daddy to come home and for this war to end."

Does Patty think her father might be alive? "I really don't know whether I feel he's dead or alive," she told The Chronicle this week. "I'm so glad you picked that up in the article," she added, clearly enjoying her newly found skill as a writer.

"I wanted people to feel that uncertainty because we will always feel it until the Missing in Action are accounted for."

The impending peace settlement has kindled Patty's anticipation. "I think it's the most encouraging news since Dad was shot down five years ago. It's sad that it took so long. And coming right before the election it sounds a little like political expediency. But I'm very optimistic.

"I think a peace treaty will mean a lot to both POW and MIA families. It won't be as joyous for the MIA families, but at least they can start living again."

As the oldest child in an MIA family, Patty grew up fast—probably too fast, she muses—under the strain of the experience.

"For a long time I felt

screwed up by it. And so did my brothers and sisters. But eventually it makes you stronger."

"For a long time, I really didn't tell very many people about my father. It was really a hard thing to tell people—I can't explain why."

For some time, Patty, who is not a particularly political person, took no stand on the war.

"I had never even heard of Vietnam until my father was sent there when I was 13," she said. "During high school sometimes I felt that people who were attacking the war were attacking my Dad. Finally by the end of high school, I became against the war and went on a couple of peace marches."

"I like to divorce the POW and MIA issue from politics. I think these men are victims of America's mistake. We can't make it up to the dead, but we can help these men."

"I began to feel guilty because I really hadn't done anything constructive for my Dad. I thought this article might put a little humanity into the suffering of the families."

"People my own age really don't know the story be-



USE'S PATTY O'GRADY
Overwhelming uncertainty

hind the families of the missing and captured. I thought maybe I could tell them what it's like."

Perhaps writing her story was therapeutic too. "I think it helped me get a lot of things out of my system," Patty said.

Patty is interested in a career in psychotherapy for emotionally disturbed children.

She would like to get married eventually but she has

already learned the importance of having a life of her own. "I have seen what can happen to a family when one element is taken out of it. I saw a perfect life shattered in a day."

Patty's social conscience finds an outlet in person-to-person volunteer work. "I just think you get more done when you do it personally than when you become involved in the political process," she said.

—B.A.S.