



*Her airman-husband was shot down  
18 months ago over Russia  
and never heard from since;  
now, as Mr. Eisenhower prepares to visit the U.S.S.R., she pleads:*



# Help Me Get My Husband

By MRS. JAMES E. FERGUSON, JR. as told to Mary Pankowski

**M**Y HUSBAND is an American airman, missing in action. He was shot down by the Russians Sept. 2, 1958. No word has ever been received from him. I don't know where he is, or if he is even alive.

For more than a year, I have known only the agony of waiting. Even hope has been denied me in recent months. But maybe I have reason now to hope again. In June, President Eisenhower will visit Russia. It's a remote hope, but possibly he will be able to learn what the Russians did with my husband.

I must not hope too much, though. When Premier Khrushchev visited Washington last year, the President personally inquired about the fate of Jim and four of his crew also missing. The President later wrote me:

"To my deep regret Mr. Khrushchev's reply has failed once again to provide any new information. . . . In spite of this I assure you that the government of the United States will continue to do everything that can be done to determine the fate of those missing men."

Perhaps, then, there still is reason to hope. Perhaps in June something will happen to end my agonized waiting.

It is not easy to be neither wife nor widow. I have two children to raise—three-year-old Debbie Ann and one-year-old Keith, who was born after his father vanished in a remote region near the Russian-Turkish border. What faces us in this in-between world we live in? How will endless waiting affect us? How will it affect Jim when he returns? And what if he doesn't return?

I do not think I am presumptuous to hope that the world leaders will consider how important these questions are to one woman and her children. They are not great summit questions; yet they fill our lives. At least I must hope that Mr. Khrushchev and Mr. Eisenhower will take time from complex questions to try to answer my simple ones.

Jim's and my story began on a happier note in

March, 1958, when he arranged for us to join him overseas. We rented a small house in a German village not far from Frankfurt and lived pretty much like any other couple—except Jim's job was flying over the most dangerous air routes in Europe.

On Sept. 2 that year, I was alone with my little girl, waiting for Jim to return from a routine flight to Turkey. In the afternoon, I was putting on water for some tea when a blue Air Force car pulled up in front of our house. Another followed. Two officers, grim and silent, came up to our door. My heart skipped, I recall, but I convinced myself this was nothing to worry about.

One of the officers was Captain Tarbucks, Jim's commanding officer. The other was introduced as Major Swanson from the air base at Frankfurt. "I have some news for you," the major said softly, and I knew this was the news every flier's wife dreads. "Why don't you sit down?"

"What's happened to Jim?" I insisted.

They had little information. Jim had been aboard an unarmed transport returning to Adana, Turkey. The plane and its 11 crew members were missing. Beyond that, they knew nothing. When any further news came in, they would let me know.

They stayed about 10 minutes. They gave me a phone number to call and asked if I had enough money. They asked if there was anything they could do for me. Then they left.

**F**OR MINUTES, I sat stunned and helpless. Then suddenly I grabbed my little girl and ran out the door into the narrow street, stumbling on the rough pavement. Joyce, a neighbor girl of my own age, called to me, and I ran to her. Still clutching Debbie, I gasped out the horrible news.

Joyce helped me back to my house, and, somehow, I finished making the tea. An hour later, I had gained control of myself and accepted the news. After all, Jim was only "missing." There was hope. He would come back to us, I was sure.

We had just finished dinner with Joyce that night when Sergeant Burgeron from Jim's outfit drove up. "You've got to come to the base, Rita," he said. "It's no good for you to be out here alone."

I didn't want to go. The house held all that Jim and I had built together.

"I'll be okay," I said.

"There's more to it than you," he replied. "You're five months pregnant. Suppose the baby came early? There's Debbie to think about, too. You'll be better off at the base, and when any news comes you'll get it faster."

I protested that I didn't know anyone at the base. How could I move in with strangers?

"It's all arranged," he said. "You're to stay at Sergeant Kresge's."

Sergeant Kresge was on the ball team with Jim. I had met him a few times. I had never met his wife. I looked at Deborah. Without understanding what had happened, she had sensed this alien feeling that had come into her home. It would be better for her elsewhere.

"I'll go," I said.

I gathered up the few things we would need for the night. The sergeant said we could come out the next day to get anything else we needed.

Margaret Kresge welcomed us as if she had known us all her life. An only child, she had never been around babies very much. Stanley, their son, was four months old and teething. We talked babies. We fed babies. We washed babies. I kept as busy as I could. And I waited.

For 10 days there was no news. Then, on Saturday morning, as I was dressing Debbie, Captain Tarbucks came to the house with a medical officer. They said Russia had found the plane and reported all aboard dead.

Still holding Debbie, I walked into the bedroom and collapsed on the bed. I had never let myself cry before—now I couldn't stop. There was no hope after all. My husband was dead.