For as far back as her memory carries, Karoni Forrester ’99 has loved to listen to stories. She’s drawn to tales stretched long with fantastic detail, or short with frequent punctuation. No matter. If they are about her father, she’ll sit spellbound. As a child, she’d collect the “oh, I remember whens” and the “did I ever tell you abouts,” like marbles. She’d hold each story tightly, allowing the weight of the words to imprint into who she was. And who her father was.

When Karoni was 2, her dad flew away with bravery in his heart and a return home on his mind. Vietnam was a long way away, but he sent Karoni letters. He was a pilot. He soared over bridges and barracks and bases. He flew across rivers and hills and green forested mountains. Until he didn’t. Ronald W. Forrester ’69 didn’t return from a night mission over North Vietnam on Dec. 27, 1972; he had been flying as co-pilot. Since then, much of her life has been about getting to know this man from the stories, the man who carried her home from the hospital with A&M booties, gave her his eyes, adventurous spirit, loyal heart and mischievous sense of humor. The one who signed off every letter home with “give a kiss to Karoni for me.”

She followed her father to A&M in 1995. “When I was a freshman, a good friend of mine from high school was a junior in the Corps (Squadron 3 and 17),” she said. “He invited me to go to Midnight Yell with him.” He told her that they were going to escort the band into Kyle Field; that all the juniors were going to lock arms around the band. “I was to hang onto his belt loop and keep up,” she said.

When it was time to go, the drum major lit his baton and the fire crackled. The band started its song, and the drums pounded. The Corps started moving, and Karoni, a freshman political science major from Midland who came to A&M because of the inspiration of her father, wrapped her fingers around her friend’s belt loop just as she had been told. Somewhere before hitting the green of Kyle Field, “it hit me,” she said. “My father had done the same thing.” Her father had walked this path. He had heard the baton’s crackle. He had felt the drum’s pounding. For the first time in her life, Karoni said that she was doing what her dad did more than 20 years before. “There’s no place but Texas A&M that can bridge that chasm of time,” she said.

Karoni was 14 when she first joined The National League of POW/MIA Families. A few years back, Karone said, she met a man who rides in “Run for the Wall,” an awareness-raising, emotionally healing cross-country motorcycle trip to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. He wanted to carry a photo of Karoni’s dad on his trip. Since then, she’s joined in by putting together photos and bios of other MIA/POW servicemen for riders to display.

There are many ways to describe Karoni. She’s a woman of gentle wildness, someone who views each day as an intoxicating fresh start. She carries a hula hoop with her on trips, dances to the music in her head and laughs easily. But one thing she’s not—a motorcycle rider. “I’m not cool enough,” she said.

But when invited to ride along for this year’s trip, she couldn’t say no. From her spot on the backseat of a motorcycle, Karoni watched the country pass by. She saw supporters crowd the railing on overpasses to wave American flags, she filled her stomach with barbeque provided by local communities, and she reached yet another level with her father.

Arriving in D.C., she was asked to fulfill the honor of placing a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was Memorial Day. They asked for silence at the Tomb of the Unknowns. There were hundreds of visitors; all went still for the changing of the guard and wreath laying. Placed at the top of the stairs, Karoni said she’d never had that view before. Everything was so real, so poignant that it made her dizzy. “Somehow I’d forgotten how to walk,” she said. So, instead she floated.

Representing her father, she laid the wreath. Representing her father, she wears her Aggie Ring.