
POW Families Praise

By George Lardner Jr.

"I was completely heart-sick over it," said Mrs. Vernon Alford, "but for the simple reason that there was no one there."

"I've been screaming with sheer joy," said Mrs. Howard J. Hill. "The only thing that disturbed me was that lousy Sen. Fulbright calling it an invasion. Ha! He should be in one of those camps."

Like many other mothers and wives of servicemen swallowed up by the war in

Southeast Asia, the two women had little but praise yesterday for the bold U.S. rescue attempt at a prisoner-of-war camp near Hanoi over the weekend.

They were stunned that it should be attempted, delighted that it had been and disappointed only that the camp proved empty.

Mrs. Alford, from Pasadena, Tex., last heard from her son, Terry, 23, three weeks before the Army helicopter he piloted was reported missing, on Nov. 4,

1969, some 15 miles outside of Nhatrang.

Mrs. Hill, who lives in Alexandria, has been more fortunate. Air Force Capt. Howard J. Hill was shot down over North Vietnam in Dec. 1967. For nine months, his wife had no word of him. But, then, released prisoners passed the news that he was a prisoner, and since spring, Mrs. Hill has had six letters from him.

The thought of reprisals by the North Vietnamese against the prisoners

Rescue Attempt

seemed not to bother most of the women, though for widely differing reasons.

"What else can they do to our men other than kill them?" asked Mrs. Alford, who would be delighted simply to hear that her son is a captive. "For some of these men, this would be a great blessing. They've done everything they can to break them down. Time is running out for all of them—mentally, physically, emotionally."

Mrs. Hill said she had no

apprehensions on that score at all. "If anything, I think

Hanoi will afford them better treatment," she said. "If the helicopters had brought out men in terrible condition, some maybe on the verge of death, how would that have looked for North Vietnam?"

There were, as might be expected, dissenting views. Mrs. Valerie Kushner, of Danville, Va., said she thought the raid a "political

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Families of POWs

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move" by the Nixon administration, empty of any solid, lasting commitment to secure the release of American men in captivity. It was the timing, she said, that upset her the most.

"They've known for many years those men are dying," said Mrs. Kushner, whose husband, an Army doctor, has been reported by some to be a prisoner somewhere in South Vietnam. "I think it's very unusual that they finally decided to make the raid at the same time they were violating North Vietnamese territory with those massive air raids. I think Sen. Fulbright was right in saying it was a provocative act. And it wiped the bombing raids right out of the headlines. I think they were exploiting the anguish of the men and their families, using the (prison camp) raid to try to justify a military act."

The mother of the American prisoner held the longest, Navy Lt. (j.g.) Everett Alvarez Jr., was also unhappy.

"You can call me a big dove," said Mrs. Sally Alvarez of Santa Clara, Calif., whose son was shot down

Aug. 5, 1964, during Gulf of Tonkin reprisal raids. "I am behind McGovern, Church and all of them."

All the women belong to the 2,500-member National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, whose national leaders praised the rescue effort yesterday in a press conference at their headquarters on Capitol Hill.

Mrs. Bobby G. Vinson, national coordinator of the league, said the families would "surely be heartened by this new evidence of concern on the part of the administration. Despite the failure of the rescue mission, it was daring and courageous in concept and execution, and we owe a debt of gratitude to those volunteers who were willing to risk their own lives in trying to aid our husbands and sons."

Flanking Mrs. Vinson at the press conference were two other women whose eyes were brimming with tears before it was done.

One of them, Mrs. Wilmer Grubb of Colonial Heights, Va., said she was told just this month that her husband, an Air Force major "whose capture was announced by the North Vietnamese" more

than three years ago, is now dead.

Bitterly, Mrs. Grubb said she got the report by way of the Committee of Families of a New York-based antiwar group in contact with the North Vietnamese.

Evidently, it was the committee's report, announced at a press conference in New York Nov. 13, that served as the basis for Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's recommendation to go ahead with the raid.

Laird has said he approved the move on the basis of "new information that we received this month that some of our men were dying in prisoner-of-war camps."

Though most of the women said they would be happy to see the administration give it another try, few saw much hope for another raid on a North Vietnamese detention camp. As Mrs. Vinson put it, "I think the surprise element will be gone."

Afterwards, Mrs. Kushner, one of a dozen POW wives from Virginia who flew to Washington yesterday aboard a plane provided by Gov. Linwood Holton, said she still fears that efforts to secure the prisoners' free-

dom will die out in the pressure to settle the war.

She said Secretary of Defense Laird met in July, 1969, with some POW wives and told them there would be no substantial withdrawal of troops until the POW issue is settled.

One of her near companions, Mrs. A. J. Palenscar of Virginia Beach, said she, too, thought the administration could do more. Her husband, a Navy pilot, has been "lost" since 1967.

"I think the raid was a good idea," she said. "And I feel the administration had to go ahead with the troop withdrawals. They were caught between a rock and a hard place: Hanoi's intransigence and American public opinion. But they can come down a lot harder than they have on the prisoner issue . . . The President should make more efforts."

Mrs. Kushner reminded her of the abortive efforts made to get them to see President Nixon yesterday afternoon. "Linwood Holton tried to get us an audience three times today," Mrs. Kushner said. "He worked and worked to get us in, but he couldn't arrange it."