

The Viet war's agonizing toll

By Larry D. Hatfield
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SAN DIEGO — He is only 12 years old and his father is one of 900 to 1200 Americans still listed as missing in action (MIA) in Southeast Asia.

"I dreamed my father returned but he was in two parts," the youngster said. "One half was alive and the other half was dead."

The terrifying dream and its vast ramifications are recounted in a study of "Children in Limbo," a section of a new book published this week.

The remarkable document is rather prosaically titled

"Family Separation and Reunion — Families of Prisoners of War and Servicemen Missing in Action."

Though scholarly and often technical, the book is an engrossing series of reports on how the Vietnam War affected the lives of the 591 Americans who survived as prisoners of war, their families and the families of the men still missing.

It documents the medical — both physical and mental — and other problems resulting from either the long-term imprisonment or the agony of waiting at home.

The book was prepared by

the Center for Prisoner of War Studies, a small research unit tucked among other military outposts on the Point Loma peninsula here.

Dr. John Plag, a scholarly civilian who directs the center (founded in 1971), says the publication is the first of several that he hopes will serve as basic source material for planning wartime survival techniques.

Beginning this summer, the center will test RPWs (meaning returned prisoners of war) against a group of non-POWs who, other than that, have highly similar backgrounds.

Researchers hope to iso-

late physical and mental problems that can be attributed to the long stretches in Communist prison camps. "This way, we can design our training — our survival training, if you will — so some of these problems can be avoided if there is a next time," Plag said.

Besides training for better survival in the prison camps, Plag suggested the military programmers could come up with better counseling and other methods for easing the POW's return to society.

"There is a definite payoff in this kind of research," he says. "We have evidence that better understanding

on POWs, families

can increase survival."

The survival rate in Vietnam, Plag says, was vastly greater because of what was learned in Korea, "where thousands and thousands of Americans died in prison camps."

Not only can such research better prepare men for future wars, Plag said, it can help the families at home.

The way the military treated the MIA families might be changed as a result of research here, Plag said.

"I would assume there are probably some people in Washington now with strong

doubts about whether it is advisable to have made so many of our (lost) men MIAs because of the detrimental effect this categorization had on the families," he said.

While not suggesting they instead should have been listed as KIA—killed in action — Plag said it might have been handled differently. For instance families could be given more information.

"In Vietnam," Plag said, "families were told very little. I tend to think the military should meet with the wife and lay open to her all the details on the incident so she can in her own mind

form some judgment if her husband is dead or alive . . . so she can think in terms of how to redo her own life and square it with the kids, if they're mature enough.

"It makes the future more certain and may avoid some of the problems we saw as a result of the not knowing, the uncertainty and the waiting . . ."

Other programs offered by the government to POW and MIA families in future wars also could be devised from the \$500,000-a-year research here, Plag said.

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