

# THE POW CON

## How Families of

By Dick Barnes

WASHINGTON — (AP) — The young woman seemed to be fighting back tears as she talked on the telephone about the prisoners of war in Vietnam.

"Well, the publishing charge runs a total of \$5, and God knows we need the help if we're ever going to get our men out of there," she said.

That appeal brought in thousands of dollars from residents of Orange County who thought they might help the POWs by placing their names, for \$5 each, in an obscure tabloid called Veterans News.

The Orange County district attorney's office closed the operation by court injunction this summer, charging it with "false, fraudulent, deceptive, or misleading" representations, and found a convicted armed robber in charge.

### Play On Sympathy

The incident is just one of an increasing number where self-promoters have capitalized on public sympathy for the plight of the POWs or on the tendency for families of prisoners or men missing in action to grasp at any hope.

In recent months:

- A California promoter now in jail on a bad-check conviction gained the cooperation of POW-MIA family groups in California and Arizona for fund-raising activities which left one organization holding the financial bag.

- An ex-convict operating from a succession of locations has raised large sums — from, among others, the brother of Bing Crosby — with his claim he can negotiate prisoner release through Asian contacts.

- A Texas promoter lured an Atlanta POW group into grandiose plans for a benefit show, then abruptly left town, leaving a string of unpaid bills.

A man who claims he's a lawyer and lists addresses in Idaho and Amsterdam has approached POW family groups in Miami, Norfolk, Va., and Phoenix, asking \$25,000 to finance negotiations with Buddhist monks to care for prisoners in North

Vietnamese camps. So far as is known, he hasn't collected a dime on his pitch.

Four men and a woman, however, hired teen-agers to solicit on street corners in Jackson, Miss., for the POW cause and got out of town a stop ahead of the police after three days of collections.

As the petition-signing and letter-writing for the POWs and MIAs has mounted nationwide this year, so has the fund raising.

The State Department privately takes a dim view of most of it. Officials question what could be done with the money that would benefit imprisoned or missing men. An exception is the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing, to which the government lends its tacit support as representing POW and MIA relatives.

### Heighten Concern

The Family and other POW groups finance publicity programs designed to heighten public concern and outcry over the fate of the POWs and the MIAs. They also have financed trips abroad by relatives or others who have sought to meet with North Vietnamese or officials of other countries to try and negotiate release of prisoners.

Another group which has had some success is the Committee of Liaison, headed by Cora Weiss, in New York. Mrs. Weiss says the committee has spent \$10,000 over the past 18 months. Most of the money, she said, has come from small, unsolicited donations. The committee has established contact in North Vietnam, and brought out letters from the POWs.

Increasing public awareness of the POW-MIA situation, brought on by legitimate organizations such as the League and the Committee, has opened the door to fast-talking operators.

Veterans News opened its Orange County operation in May. Its leader, Jack K. Armstrong, served time in jail during 1965 after pleading guilty to armed robbery. His record also lists a bad-conduct discharge from the Marines and courtmartial

convictions for unauthorized absence and theft of a .45 caliber pistol.

A pool of 70 telephone girls solicited funds for Veterans News and a team of runners picked up donations, said James J. Shaw, investigator for the district attorney.

The girls, each of whom used the name Kathy Johnson, told people: "What we're doing is printing a special edition of the Veterans News for the POWs. We're sending copies to every congressman, senator, as well as to President Nixon, the Pope and world leaders everywhere.

"The reason I called was to find out if we could print your name in a special edition for the POWs and also if we might be able to ask you to help us out on the printing costs."

After the district attorney's office filed its complaint in Superior Court, Veterans News agreed July 21 to quit the solicitation and to pay \$1500 to two recognized POW-MIA organizations.

A final accounting has not been completed, but investigators said about \$10,000 to \$15,000 was taken in by the operation.

Martin Cohen, attorney for the defendants, said: "I can assure you they did not personally profit." Cohen said he is still trying to pay off their creditors.

### Orange County Action

The activities of promoter Al Edwards also centered partly in Orange County. Mrs. Stephen Hanson, wife of a missing Marine pilot and board member of POW-MIA International Inc., of Tustin, Calif., said Edwards came into touch with her group last February through aiding a restaurateur who sponsored a fund-raising dinner for the organization.

"Then he came in and said he wanted to help us," said Mrs. Hanson. "After the successful dinner, we had no reason to doubt him. He was going to initiate some fund-raising projects."

"He was going to revamp the organization and go national. We were going to raise millions, and he would receive 10 percent of the proceeds from the projects he started.

# GAME

## Prisoners

## Fall Prey

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## Promoters

### Volunteers Upset

"But he began to claim 10 percent of other projects we had already started," she continued. "The volunteers and families were upset."

About this time, the neighbor of the POW wife saw Edwards by coincidence and recognized him — under a different name.

A police check showed Ed-

wards was wanted on charges of passing bad checks, a practice that got him a prison sentence in 1959 and two years probation in 1970.

With the collaboration of POW-MLA International, Edwards was arrested in mid-April. "Except for the time, worry and trouble, we didn't lose vast sums of money," said Mrs. Hanson.

Soon after, free pending a court appearance, Edwards showed up at the Phoenix Area Families of POWs, and persuaded that organization to sign a contract with his Showcase Productions for a benefit performance in July at the 15,000 - seat Phoenix Coliseum.

But attendance for two shows totaled fewer than 1000 persons. The POW organization lost \$750 it had advanced for Coliseum rent and also used its \$1382 share of the \$6168 gross to pay other bills. Showcase wound up owing more than \$8000.

Gerald W. Alston, attorney for the POW group, said that after the show "Edwards stuck around for a week, trying to pull strings together."

"He got pretty nasty after it was over," said Alston.

"He was a drowning man; he had suffered a severe reverse. He said he was going to smear us. Then he took a powder."

### Bad Check Sentence

Back in California in late August, Edwards was sentenced to 60 days in the Orange County jail for the latest round of bad checks.

John G. Fairfax, formerly of Spokane, proposed negotiating the release of POWs through Asian contacts, an

Larry Crosby, brother of crooner Bing Crosby, financed a Fairfax trip to Asia last March at a cost of \$2500. It was unsuccessful.

Crosby said he returned money solicited to back Fairfax' effort to donors. Fairfax objected, said Crosby, and a resultant argument led to their split.

Fairfax also has solicited memberships at prices from \$10 to \$100 in an organization called both Allied War Prisoners Rescue Mission and Allied War Prisoners Rescue Legion, and has distributed membership cards in a group called International Prisoners Rescue Legion.

Postal investigators are looking into the activities of Fairfax, who has variously listed addresses in Washington, D.C., Honolulu, San Francisco and Portland, Ore.

Fairfax, now about 60, was released from Walla Walla, Wash., state penitentiary in 1957 after serving more than three years on a rape conviction. He had prior convictions on charges of possessing counterfeit money, possessing a stolen slot machine and assault.

A promoter who breezed into Atlanta from Texas in April told a POW family group there he would put on

a fund-raising event at Atlanta Stadium. The dangling of star entertainers' names, rushed timing and unexpect-

ed soliciting of Atlanta business for contributions combined to raise the POW wives' suspicions.

And then the man was gone, leaving behind tabs for a motel, car rental and aircraft charter.