

Letters Ease Pain Of POW Families

Examiner News Services

For the families of 18 American servicemen the edge of anxiety was eased today, the agony of not knowing was gone. Their men are prisoners of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, but their men are alive.

"I feel grand, I can't tell you how grand I feel," said Mandy Davis in Clayton, Ala., after learning yesterday that her son, Thomas, missing in action since March 1968, was among the 18.

"How would you feel if it was your son?" replied Gerhard Mehrer of Omaha, Neb., when a reporter asked his reaction to the news that his son Gustave was one of the prisoners.

Some of the families had not heard from their men in years. One man had been listed officially as killed in action. Sixteen had not been heard from as prisoners previously.

The names were released by Cora Weiss, co-chairman of the Committee of Liaison With Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam, which serves as a conduit for

mail from the prisoners.

Letters from the 18 were among 1001 letters from 332 war prisoners brought here Tuesday by the Rev. Richard Fernandez, a member of the committee, from North Vietnamese and Viet Cong representatives in Paris.

Believed Dead

Since the summer of 1967, the family of Sgt. Alfonso Ray Riate had believed him dead. The Marine Corps listed Riate as missing for 60 days, then notified the family he had been killed in action.

"It's really hard to believe. It's really shocking," said Riate's half sister Zelde Lovinto in Bell Gardens, Calif.

Mrs. Mary Pepper, a sister, added, "It's really a good time of year to hear something like this — if it's true."

'Open It Quickly'

Mrs. Valerie Kushner of Danville, Va., wife of Army doctor Maj. Floyd Harold Kushner; said a telephone call from New York Tuesday was the first direct word she had received about her husband since 1967.

She said the caller told her that her husband had sent a Christmas letter. "Open it quickly and read it to me," she said.

When the woman caller hesitated, noting that the contents might be personal, Mrs. Kushner said she replied, "After all this time, what's personal any longer? Read it!"

The letter contained best wishes to her and their children, she said, and a special birthday wish for their daughter, Tonie Jean, who will be 8 on Christmas day.

"After so long a time," noted Mrs. Kushner, "everything helps."

'Good Treatment'

In the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, Mary Daly said she had learned from a returning prisoner that her son, reported missing in action, had been captured.

But there was no word from him until Mrs. Daly got the letter through the committee. She said he reported he was "getting good treatment." was "in good health" and added, "Pray for the war to end and peace to come soon."