

L.I. Wife of a War Prisoner Continues 75-Month Vigil

By JOSEPH LELYVELD
Special to The New York Times

BAY SHORE, L. I., Jan. 9 — Think back to September, 1965: The Pope was planning to visit New York, where a Republican named Lindsay was running for Mayor, and "The Making of the President 1964" was first on the best-seller list.

Though 75 months have intervened, Eileen Cormier has no trouble summoning back that September. It was then that her husband, an Air Force sergeant, left her here with their four preschool children and went off to his second tour of duty in Vietnam.

Arthur Cormier had become what the Air Force calls a "para-rescuer" so he could take part in the retrieval of space capsules. In wartime that military specialty meant he was supposed to parachute on land or sea to rescue downed airmen, even if it meant jumping into enemy territory.

He told his father-in-law that he would be lucky if he lasted six months. In fact, he was taken prisoner in North Vietnam after his tour of duty began.

Seven Christmases have now passed and later this month, in bitter solitude, Mrs. Cormier will mark her seventh wedding anniversary since her husband was captured; they have had only five together.

Kevin, an infant when his father left, is now a second-grader. Sean, the oldest child and the only one with vivid memories of his father, is in junior high school.

"The children have always been the only ones in school whose father was in Vietnam," said Mrs. Cormier, who long ago abandoned her last shred of belief that the prolongation of the war and her husband's detention served any useful purpose.

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"I mean, whose father goes to Vietnam? They ask, 'Why did he go?' And I say, 'That's what I'd like to know.' Once they asked, 'How come you have a father and we don't?'"

She has vowed, she said, that neither of her sons will serve in the armed forces.

When she read Christmas week of new bombing raids over North Vietnam and new American prisoners taken there, she was not really surprised or shocked because, she said, "Nothing shocks me anymore."

But she couldn't help thinking that some of the airmen flying now must have been in high school when her husband was captured ("in high school, for God's sake!") And she couldn't help wondering, she said, "Those people who get shot down today, where were they yesterday? Who in his right mind would fly those planes? I mean, don't we learn anything?"

Mrs. Cormier can remember an especially bleak moment in 1965 when she despairingly told a friend that her husband would be gone for eight years. "Oh no, Eileen," the friend said,

"they'll never let it last that long."

Now she hopes her prediction was correct. "It will mean I only have a year to go," she said. But for her own emotional stability and that of her children, she has learned to guard against her hopes and to live her life as if no change could be expected soon.

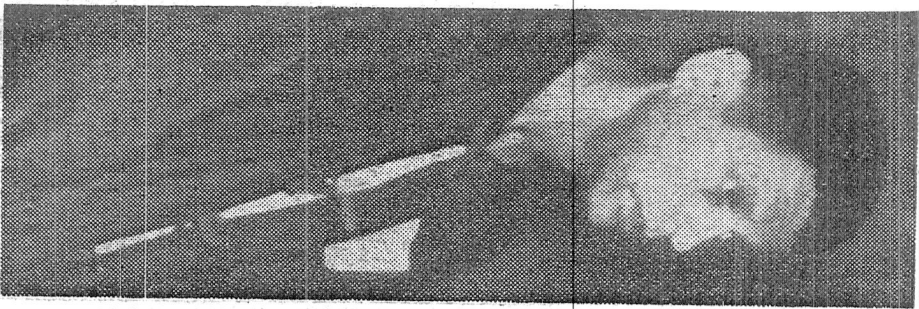
She is in her seventh year as librarian at the Connetquot Elementary School in nearby Islip Terrace. It was her husband's idea, she said, that she return to teaching during his absence. Now she thinks it was an inspired idea, for she found salvation of a kind in the fact that there was some place she had to go the Monday morning after she received her first telegram from the Pentagon, saying he was missing in action.

A year after he was captured, she went back to school to earn a master's degree. The next year she bought a house.

Only later did she become active in organized activities on behalf of the prisoners. Most of the wives live near military installations. In the metropolitan area, there are only five whose husbands are known prisoners; of those, Sergeant Cormier has been held the longest.

For more than a year she served on the board of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, which meant she was invited to regular meetings with Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser.

As "a note of protest,"



Left: Air Force Sgt. Arthur Cormier in North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp in photo recently mailed to Mrs. Cormier. Right: Mrs. Cormier at work in library of an Islip school.

The New York Times/Robert Walker

when she visits the White House she always wears a faded Air Force fatigue jacket belonging to her husband. "There's no point in going in white gloves and high heels," she said. "I'm just not in that kind of mood."

Mr. Kissinger now calls her by her first name. He has convinced her that he is sincere in his belief that Vietna-

minization is the best policy. But he hasn't convinced her that his policy will bring her husband home, so she is never reassured when she is told that it is progressing well.

"They say, 'Have faith in the President.' I answer, 'Which President?'" she said. "This is the third Presidential campaign since my husband

first went to Vietnam. I've told them, 'I'm the one who's the constant. You're the variable. I was here before you and I'll be here after you.'"

Unlike many wives of American prisoners, Mrs. Cormier isn't burdened by fears that her husband will return as a physical or an emotional wreck. As a charter inmate of the

"Hanoi Hilton"—the most frequently photographed prison camp—he has shown up in many films brought back from North Vietnam. From his appearance in those pictures and his testimony in the 30 letters he has been allowed to write, she believes him to be in good health.

She has always admired her husband's resilience. Now

she thinks she finds something "deeper" in his letters. "I guess we both realize how fleeting life is," she said. "That sounds kind of trite. But oddly enough, I feel very close to him now."

A long time ago, she said, she would worry about what she would wear to the airport when he got back, or whether she would lead him in the

front or the back door of the house he has never seen. Now she worries only about his adjustment.

"There aren't going to be any ticker-tape parades down Fifth Avenue for the returning P.O.W.'s," she said. "How do you explain to your husband who has gone through so much that no one really cares?"