

'The Man in the Sky Is a Killer'

By GRACE PALEY

There's a good deal of sentiment and dreamy invention attached to the American prisoners of war in North Vietnam. Politicians and newsmen often talk as though these pilots had been kidnapped from a farm in Iowa or out of a canoe paddling the waterways of Minnesota.

In reality, they were fliers shot down out of the North Vietnamese sky where they had no business to be; out of that blueness they were dumping death on the people, the villages, the fields. And none of these men had been forced into the job. They were not drafted, they volunteered. They were trained. Then, out of the American sanctuaries in Thailand, the carrier nests at sea, they rose, a covey of brilliant down-swoopers, high fliers to do their work. Each one of these men may have accomplished half a dozen Mylairs in any evening.

The Vietnamese have a saying: The man in the sky is a killer, bring him down; but the man on the ground is a helpless human being. The men who were shot down, the human beings who fell alive into the shallow paddies, on beaches, into villages they'd just bombed, became P.O.W.'s. Their Vietnamese captors were often half their size, half-starved, stiff with the grief of continuous loss of dear family, but survivors with a determination to win.

They shared their squash and spinach with these captured Americans whose great frames immediately (it's been reported) suffered the lack of beefsteak.

Nine prisoners of war have been returned to the U.S., the last in 1969. I was a member of the peace movement delegation which escorted the last three from Hanoi to home. While in North Vietnam we talked to four other prisoners. I believe that the Vietnamese had great hopes for this program of P.O.W. return. With obvious logic, they had asked that the United States Government not use these returned pilots against them again. But the United States was not ready then for any easing of war or righteousness.

Therefore, at the present time, they are all in or associated with the armed forces. Some are training younger pilots to fly out again and again over that tortured country, that laboratory for American weapons engineers. Some are part of the propaganda mill that continues the air war and enlarged it to include Laos and Cambodia—that makes new P.O.W.'s.

I submit that the families of these men who, on the ground, are human beings, whose time of life is being used up in prison camps—these families must know that their men will not come home until the war ends. Removing American ground troops from South Vietnam will not end the Indochina air war. Automating the battlefields will not end the Indochina air war. Propaganda and punishing war will not bring those men home.

I would like to add two recollections that are painful to me, but I want to share the recollection and the pain.

At a festive dinner in a Hanoi hotel, a celebration of departure after arduous years of imprisonment, one of the pilots turned his ingenuous American boy's face of about 30 to me. Over the water spinach and the squash, he said, "Gosh, Grace, I have to admit it, I really loved bombing."

Before I left for North Vietnam one summer day, a woman called me at home. She was a pilot's wife. She had not heard from her husband in two and a half years. She asked me to get information about him in Hanoi, if any existed. I tried. But no one had seen or heard of him, neither the Vietnamese nor the pilots we talked to. When I came home I had to call and tell her this. She asked me why the Vietnamese insisted on keeping the pilots.

I explained that they were considered war criminals who had come 10,000 miles to attack a tiny country in an undeclared and brutal war.

She said, "Well, they're airmen. They're American officers."

I told her about the villagers living in wet dark tunnels for years, shattered by pellets—seared by napalm—I told her only what my own eyes had seen, the miles of maniac craters—

She said, "Oh, Mrs. Paley, villages and people! My husband wouldn't do that."

I held the phone for awhile in silence. I took a deep breath. Then I said: "Oh? Well, I guess it must have been someone else."

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