

POW Wives: Women in Limbo

The first fliers to go down over enemy territory in the Vietnam war met their fates in the year 1964. Some are known to be prisoners of war. Some still are listed as missing in action.

"In all the wars before Southeast Asia, no man had ever been a POW or MIA for more than three years. Now our men are going into their eighth year of being gone to wherever they are. Can you imagine what that does to their wives?"

Mrs. Joan Silver not only imagines. She knows. She's spent more than a year talking to POW and MIA wives and mothers. "And the more you get into it — the way they react, and the way they're treated by the military — the more unbelievable it becomes. Some women can handle the situation quite well, feeling a great sense of the irony of the situation. Some can't cope, and are falling apart at the seams.

"One woman with three children just simply disappeared with her family. She didn't even leave word where she was going, so she could receive her husband's paycheck. She just told the casualty officer who was assigned to help her. 'Don't try to find me. I've got to get away.'"

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AND THERE ARE SOME young wives of missing men — no one knows how many because it's something the Pentagon doesn't care to dwell on — who want desperately to have their husbands declared dead. "One husband has been missing more than three years," says Mrs. Silver. "His wife had no reason to believe he was alive.

"Now she's involved with another man, and wants to have a good married life — but there's no easy way out." A missing man cannot be declared officially killed in action until two years and six months after "cessation of hostilities," whenever that might be.

Mrs. Silver became involved with the tormented wives of these men after she saw one of them on a TV interview program, and "couldn't get her out of my mind." A writer and film producer, she began talking to POW and MIA families around the country, and turned their stories into a screenplay titled "Limbo" — because no one is in a state of limbo quite like theirs. The film is being shot in Florida.

Then Mrs. Silver enlisted the aid of another freelance writer, Linda Gottlieb, and they wrote a novel based on what she'd learned (published recently by Viking Press). The main characters in this four-handkerchief story are fictitious, but all of the actions — by the women involved, and by the military — are authentic.

Among the procedures the military follows in dealing with POW and MIA families, a few came as saddening revelations to the author.

"Periodically, wives are called into their nearest Air Force station for what are called 'film identification sessions.' They are shown movies, usually taken by Asian or European photographers, of action in prison camps — and asked to spot their men, if possible." But the movies are often fuzzy and blurred, and lead many women to greater despair than they'd felt before seeing them.

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"ONE WOMAN ALMOST hysterically told the officer in charge that she saw her husband. She knew it was him. The officer sympathetically listened and then said he felt it was necessary to inform her that 17 next-of-kin had already identified the same man."

Trying to prepare the wives for the day their husbands come home is the main concern of organized POW and MIA groups. "The men who have been released and returned," says Mrs. Silver, "have reported being treated with brutality and/or isolation. When and if the wives whose husbands are still over there get them back, they know things will be very different in their family lives."

They will be out of limbo. But they could be into a situation equally tormented.