

Political Activists

POW's Families Drop Stoic Stand

By Ken Ringle
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Three years ago when her husband was declared missing in action in Laos, Sharon Walsh—as she remembers—was a typical military wife: non-political and unquestioning in her acceptance of U.S. foreign policy, war and military duty.

Today Mrs. Walsh, the 39-year-old wife of a career Air Force lieutenant colonel and the mother of five children, is making antiwar speeches in her hometown of Minneapolis, taking part in ad hoc "war crimes" trials against corporate munitions makers and working for the presidential candidacy of Sen. George McGovern.

Her actions are in stark contrast to the tradition of silence and stoicism of American POW wives in World War II and the Korean War. The break with that tradition, once unthinkable, is made even more startling by the similar actions of a growing number of families of the 495 men known imprisoned in Southeast Asia and the 1,228 listed as missing in action.

Silent by official design in the 1968 presidential campaign and hawkish in their first public statements on the war two years ago, an increasing number of POW-MIA families in 1972 are turning against the war altogether and are becoming politicized and even radicalized in their efforts to end it.

The result is deep and sometimes bitter cleavages in the 2,500-member National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia between those who support the Nixon Vietnam policy and those who favor immediate, unconditional withdrawal.

60-40 Split

Sarah Frances Shay, 53, of Lithicum, Md., assistant national coordinator of the league, estimates the nonpartisan, once-hawkish organization is presently split "about 60-40" between the two groups, but adds "the 40 per cent favoring immediate U.S. withdrawal is rapidly becoming 50."

The erosion of league support for the Nixon policy comes at the very time the President speaks of POW safety as the highest priority item in peace negotiations.

"This war has done to us in a very personal fashion what it's done to the whole country," says Valerie Kushner of Danville, Va., one of the first and most vocal of the POW wives to speak out against the war.

"In 1968 both candidates promised to end the war and bring our men home and we believed them. But the baby I was nursing when I heard those promises is four years old now. He's still never seen his father and the war is still going on."

In 1970, convinced that public knowledge would do more to secure fair treatment for her than silence, Sybil Stockdale of Coronado, Calif., organized the National League of Families. Her husband, Navy Capt. James B. Stockdale, is the highest ranking American POW.

Now headquartered in the American Legion building at 1608 K St. N.W., the league with its volunteer five-woman staff supports a multitude of efforts ranging from a "Write Hanoi" advertising campaign designed to improve POW conditions to personal help for individual POW-MIA families.

It also distributes buttons and bumper stickers whose slogans are notably more pointed this year. Reads' one: "POWs-MIAs—Dying to Vote in '72."

Many league families remain convinced that a military victory can be obtained in Vietnam, and that anything less would dishonor the U.S. servicemen who fought there.

Mrs. Stockdale, for example, when asked May 16 what would happen if the resumption of U.S. bombing didn't end the war, replied:

"My suggestion would be after a reasonable period of time—a couple of weeks—we should land U.S. Marines on North Vietnam and claim it as U.S. territory."

Others, like Jane Denton, 46, of Virginia Beach, Va., who were critical of the President's policy earlier this year, now say they have adopted a "wait and see attitude" since the harbor mining and the resumption of bombing.

The major force in the league recently, however, has been the anti-war politicization of a growing number of POW-MIA families.

Says the league's Mrs. Shay, mother of an Air Force pilot missing in Laos:

"Many (league) people who haven't been active before believe this is the year that something must be done. There is a desperateness there, a fear that if no breakthrough is made in this year they'll face another four years of the same kind of waiting."

Last January, describing the war as a "political problem re-

quiring a political solution," 500 families impatient with the league's nonpartisan stance set up a separate organization called Families for Immediate Release. Its primary task is working against the re-election of President Nixon.

After fielding workers for several candidates—including GOP Rep. Paul McCloskey (R-Calif.)—in the early primaries, FFIR last month voted formally to endorse George McGovern.

Sharon Walsh and Valerie Kushner are both FFIR members. They are convinced that the North Vietnamese will never consider any return of prisoners until all U.S. forces are withdrawn from Southeast Asia.

This weekend they will take their convictions to Miami as alternate McGovern delegates to the Democratic National Convention.

Still others have worked for other candidates and some wives are working for the President's re-election.

At least two other POW-MIA wives will be McGovern delegates or alternates and dozens more have participated in state conventions and party mass meetings urging immediate U.S. withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

Valerie Kushner, who has stumped for McGovern in several states and spoken at several anti-war rallies, says there are definite hazards in political involvement.

"We've been so badly exploited by both sides. The administration has exploited us in one way, using the loyalty and patriotism of so many wives.

"The reaction of the political left, on the other hand, has been that our husbands are war criminals who got what they deserved. It has been difficult to make contact with a legitimate peace group. You have to assume you'll be exploited and then pick your group. There are certain ones I just will not work for."

Even among those families of career military POWs continuing to support official U.S. war policy, new questions are being asked about the war and the country's role in it.

Evelyn Grubb of Colonial Heights, Va., the league's national coordinator, said she had "always been pretty much hawkish until a year or so when the futility of it all began to hit me."

Bonnie Metzger, 29, of Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., another assistant league coordinator, said when her husband was captured in North Vietnam 5½ years ago "the war was just an issue." Now it's the most important thing in my life.

The heightened political consciousness of the POW-MIA families in 1972 is the result of many factors, league members say, but nothing so much as the cycle of raised and shattered hopes that has marked their lives for the past four years.

Minnie Gartley, 55, of Dune-
din, Fla., whose son has been a
POW for four years, says the
league consists of "several
groups."

"There are those who
... say 'My son would not
want me to surrender the
things he fought for.' They
back Nixon.

"Then there are those with
husbands or sons missing.
They are the largest group in
the league and they are un-
sure just what their position
should be. They usually think
it's best to support whatever
the administration in office is
saying. They want to make
sure that in any settlement
there is a full accounting of
the missing so nobody will
give up the hunt.

"Then there are those of us
who think we'll never get any-
thing done until the war is
over.

"There are others. Some
stay home and pray a lot.
They figure that will do it.

"And there are even a very
few who deep down inside
probably enjoy the whole
thing. They are probably
unique in their community,
have a little status, get their
names in the paper and now
and then even get on TV.

"We all know each other so
well by now that we can
hardly stay in the room with
each other. There is fighting,
cursing, bitterness and recrim-
ination."

Evelyn Grubb, who has a
one-year term as the league's
national coordinator realizes
some have lost faith in the
organization.

But she believes a continued
umbrella organization is
needed to support all the dif-
fering efforts on behalf of the
prisoners and missing.

"As you begin to settle into
this situation (of a POW-MIA
wife) you begin to question ev-
erything and lose faith in ev-
erything," she says. "And then
you just suspend everything
and wait.

"It's like an uncompleted
phone call. We're living our
lives on 'hold'."