

Post 7/4/72 JW

A POW Wife's Angry, Endless Wait

Valerie Kushner, 29, is married to Maj. F. Harold Kushmer, a doctor who was captured by the Viet Cong Dec. 2, 1967, two days after the helicopter in which he was riding crashed on a mountainside in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam.

Raised in New York, she now lives in Danville, Va., with her children, a girl, 8, and a boy, 4½. She has a bachelor's degree in history and sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Her husband was listed for four months as missing in action before being confirmed as a prisoner of war. She has been one of the most vocal critics of the Vietnam war and the Nixon administration, but in a recent interview she described the constant tension of the life of a POW wife—a condition she described as "apolitical."

"The only healthy reaction to this situation is nonacceptance. Each wife's form of nonacceptance differs. Mine is not accepting the war at all. I write a lot of nasty letters. Others don't accept the tactics of the war, or convince themselves every day that a miracle is just around the corner. If you accept it as it is, you go crazy. And some of us do. . .

"I think the best thing is the

uncertainty of it all; you can't live with an indefinite time period. I could live with the knowledge that he will be home in five years. Or if it was 10 years I could live with that. But you can't live with no time frame at all. So you cut time up into sections. I'm living from now to November.

"I think it's been easier for me than for a lot of wives. Harold and I had a particularly good thing going. We were married five years. We had something to build on. But these girls who got married on R and R (rest leave) and were together for two weeks or, in some cases, just a few days . . . these are young girls. They have to be given a chance to live their lives. They don't even have any memories.

"One family whose son is on the missing list arranged for their daughter-in-law to get a Mexican divorce. They wanted her to have a chance to live again. Some of the wives give up and get divorces on their own. There are a lot of divorces.

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Families of POWs drop stoic stand. Story, Page C6. JW



VALERIE KUSHNER
... 'no time frame'

KUSHNER, From A1

"I haven't fallen into the drinking thing, thank God, but a lot of others have. And we use a lot of Valium (a tranquilizer). And there's therapy. Almost everyone's having some kind of therapy. The Army pays for it, you see.

"They send out forms from the surgeon general's office that say, "Do you feel the need for psychotherapy?" I sent mine back saying: "The only thing wrong with me is my husband is

a prisoner. If you will please stop this bloody war and let him come home I'll be all right." I got a form letter back saying, "We realize you're upset . . ."

"The strain on families is terrific, particularly on those with teen-age children. Some of the mothers have been able to do an incredible job by themselves. But in others the lack of a male for the family to relate to is tremendously damaging.

"It's been easier for me because my children are younger. But when my

daughter's school had father's day, she had to take her grandfather. I cried all night. And my little boy. I actually worried for awhile that he would never learn to stand in front of the toilet like a male. He wanted to sit down like us girls. I figured he needed some sort of male identity so I bought him a toy razor. He used it to shave his legs. . .

"Once we're back together again, I know the period of readjustment is going to be worse than the separation. We will be four individuals

who have shared no experiences in five years.

"Studies after Dachau showed that after a prolonged prison confinement many men were impotent as long as six months. I'll have to put him on a steady diet of steak and oysters. He left a wife of 25 and he'll be coming back to a woman of 31 or 32. What's that going to do to him? We'll have to face the possibility they were forced to homosexuality.

"I'm not worried about whether he will approve of

my antiwar activities. My husband was not professional military. He didn't think the war had any value.

"But he's bound to resent me because, whatever I have done while he was gone, it wasn't enough. It didn't set him free. And I'm bound to say sometime, "Well, you damn fool, you walked down the wrong side of the mountain and got caught. How smart was that?"

"And some time—it may take 15 or 20 years—but sooner or later he's going to ask if I was faithful to him.

"I've thought about all

that and I think we can make it. I have only one loyalty now . . . loyalty to my husband . . .

"But you can't live with the indefiniteness forever. If Nixon wins in November and the war continues, at that point I'm a widow. I'll have to assume my husband's dead to me. I'll probably move to Daytona Beach, Fla., where we had talked of moving, buy a house and restructure my life. I'll let down some of the walls I've built up around me. If he comes home, fine, we'll try it, but I

know I won't be the same . . .

"You see, what you have to do is kill your husband to yourself. That's the kind of appalling step we have to take to be free of this unless the war ends. That's the kind of nonacceptance I was talking about . . .

"I can take a lot of the things that bother other wives . . . paying the bills, things a lot of wives never did, they don't bother me too much.

"But every time I can't get the top off a jar of pickles, I just cry like a baby."