

Bittersweet Event for Wife

A War Captive's Letter

By Mary McGrory

Washington

Major Floyd Harold Kushner, a 31-year-old Army doctor, whose family lives in Danville, Va., was captured by the Viet Cong almost five years ago, on Nov. 30, 1967. This May, from his prison camp, presumably in North Vietnam, he wrote a letter:

"Dear Mom, Dad, Valerie, Toni-Jean and son:

"My health and spirit remain fine. Haven't received a letter yet, but hope springs eternal. Condense five years in ten lines and tell me about health, location, state of affairs, darling Toni-Jean and wonderful son (name! looks!)

"Instill in them a sense of propriety and unbending morality. They will grow straight and true despite the times. I read 'I cannot rejoice' and the script of 'Sixty Minutes.'

"Your love and loyalty are my sustenance. If this war lasts a thousand years, I am lucky — I married you. My spouse, my love, my dearest friend, you are the unfortunate one. Neither be bitter nor cynical. Maintain hope and strength. Mom and Dad, Bob and Ben, your presence is a great comfort to me. Take care of them and don't mourn me. Live normally, we shall count our blessings together."

CLARK

The letter was brought from North Vietnam by Ramsey Clark, the former attorney general who was voluminously denounced as a traitor at the Republican national convention last week.

It was received by his wife, Valerie, who has become the most prominent prisoner-of-war wife in

the country since she seconded the nomination of George McGovern at the Democratic national convention on August 9. A beguiling, buoyant redhead who turned 30 last month, she has spent most of the last year and a half agitating for an end to the war.

The reference in the major's letter to "I cannot rejoice" is to an article Valerie Kushner wrote for the New York Times "to upset people" last Christmas. On the CBS broadcast, "Sixty Minutes," she bitterly protested the Christmastime bombing of North Vietnam.

'YELLING'

"I have no great love for the North Vietnamese," she says. "They give my husband a newspaper and a television script, but they won't give him any of my letters or a picture of his son. He only learned he had a boy (Michael was born in April, 1968) because I yelled through the Times, and I'm going to keep right on yelling."

Valerie Kushner knows her husband agrees with her about the war. She found out through eight tapes he recorded for the North Vietnamese, three for the family and five addressed to various U.S. groups and officials.

She got the first of them last June, shortly after she, with four other POW family members, publicly attacked President Nixon for using her husband as an excuse to continue the war.

'PROPAGANDA'

It never crossed her mind that the major was making "propaganda for the enemy."

"Nobody could make him do that," she says. "He's not

just a patriot, he's a chauvinist. He cries when he hears 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' He meant every word of the oath he took as an officer. He wouldn't let anybody say a word against this country. He was always talking about the responsibility of being an American almost in a white-man's-burden kind of way."

On one tape, he said, "My captors are fond of saying this is an imperialist war, waged by the many for the benefit of the few. I don't believe that."

On another, he said that the "war was hurting the country," but that "nothing can destroy America."

'BRAINWASHED'

She heard him say he had been "brainwashed" — by Life magazine and Newsweek and the Geneva accords and the Pentagon Papers.

He quoted Winston Churchill, the man he most admires, about the necessity for a great nation to admit a mistake: "We did not come all this way because we are made of cotton candy."

Valerie Kushner thinks she's lucky, because, unlike some POW wives, she knows her husband is alive. But last Friday, she was feeling low. It was her tenth wedding anniversary, her fifth without Spanky, as the major is called in the family.

REMEMBRANCE

She was remembering how it was before he became a political issue and a figure on the Pentagon rolls.

They met at the University of North Carolina, where he had been an honors graduate and catcher on the varsity baseball team. He was an instructor in chemistry. She was failing the course.

"I passed chemistry and got engaged in one semester," she said with a giggle.

They were married in New York at a Unitarian church — a compromise. She is a Catholic, he is Jewish.

"At the medical school of Virginia, he had one of the first Hondas ever seen in Richmond. He rode it all over town, and everybody knew him. He's brilliant, and he knows it, but not a trendy intellectual. He's an American history buff, and he can tell you about the Whisky Rebellion and all that. But we went out every Saturday night, the only med student who did. The other

girls were so jealous. He was fun. That's what I miss most."

His helicopter was shot down two months after he arrived in Vietnam.

She was glad to get his beautiful letter. It was the second she has had in five years.

"It's not enough," says Valerie Kushner. "I want him."