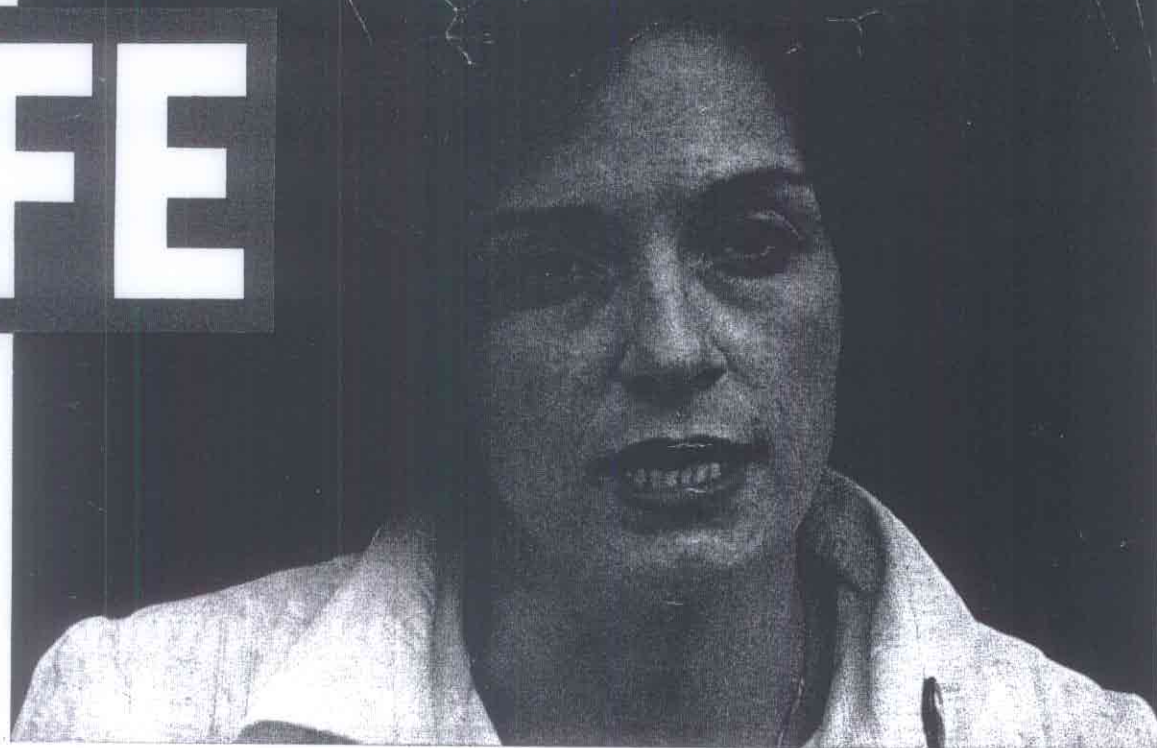


LIFE



As Hanoi releases three fliers, anger and agony over a husband still gone

P.O.W. WIFE

Above, Valerie Kushner. Right, a North Vietnamese wall painting boasts of U.S. planes shot down in one province



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Three American POWs, Navy Lts. (jg.) Mark L. Gartley and Norris A. Charles and Air Force Maj. Edward K. Elias (below), await their release in Hanoi. At right, Army Capt. Harold Kushner, a flight surgeon, before his capture by the Vietcong.



As the POW issue heats up, Valerie Kushner turns political

A campaign to get a husband home

Hanoi released three American pilots last week—the tenth, eleventh and twelfth American POWs to be freed by North Vietnam. That still leaves in Southeast Asia some 537 men known to be prisoners and another 1,241 MIA—missing in action—their fate officially unknown. Without so much as a by-your-leave, these men have become part of the U.S. political end game. Nixon invoked the POWs to justify bombing the North and holding on in the South. McGovern promises to bring them back home by putting an end to the war immediately.

Caught in the political cross fire over the POW/MIAs are their families, thousands of relatives whose number keeps growing. Uncertain and torn, they were first told by the Johnson administration to keep a low profile. Then, in

1969, Nixon decided to make a public issue out of POWs and encouraged the families to speak up and be seen. The “nonpolitical” League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia, claiming a membership of 2,700 relatives, quickly became identified with the administration position. But as the war dragged on and nothing happened, about 450 of them broke off to join the more activist POW/MIA Families for Immediate Release.

Mrs. Valerie Kushner (right) is a founder. Her husband, a flight surgeon, was captured five years ago. Reluctant to play the role of a docile service wife, she seconded McGovern’s nomination at the Democratic convention and is now an active worker in his campaign. He is the last hope, she now believes, for her husband’s safe return.

Photographed by LEONARD McCOMBE

Below, Valerie Kushner gamely takes on an unsympathetic audience in Appleton, Wis. “She has nice legs, but she’s been brainwashed,” a Kiwanis

member said later. Only in moments when the public eye is no longer on her (right) does the strain of her long fight begin to show.

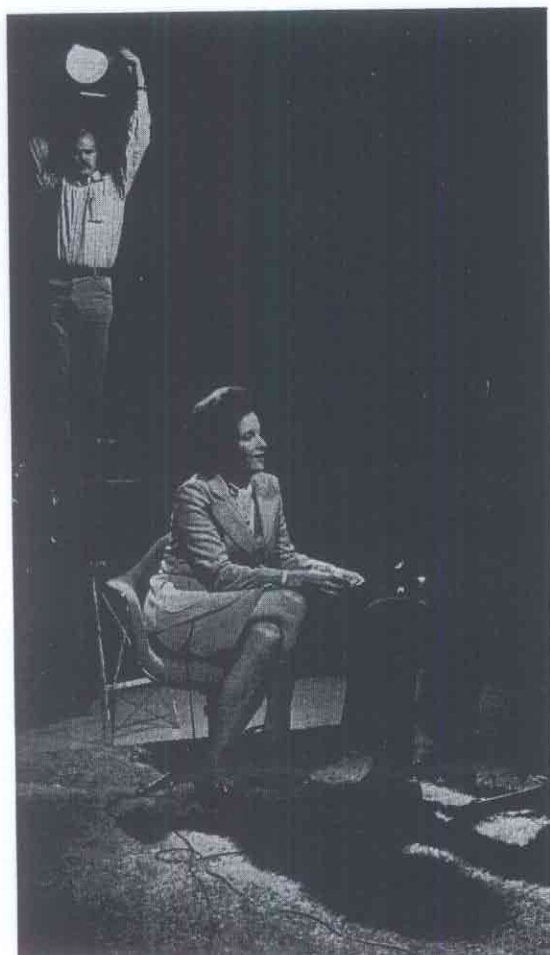






There's no man around to help Valerie with her luggage, so she carries it herself (above, in Danville, Va.) throughout her whistle-stop tours.

A debate club star from high school days, Valerie can turn on a calculated quaver that brings her listeners to tears. Usually unimpressable journalists admit to being incredibly moved. Valerie hits as many as a dozen media spots in one day, interspersing these sessions with high school lectures, McGovern staff pep talks and local club luncheons. At right, Valerie is interviewed by WFRV-TV in Green Bay, Wis., and below, in Alexandria Minn., KCMT-TV's Natalie Johnson listens to her with sympathy.



She gets out and stumps for McGovern

Since Harold ("Spanky") Kushner's helicopter crash in November 1967, Valerie has received only two letters. The Vietcong have never passed any of her letters on to him. She knows that they have shown him press clippings of her activities, however, and she in turn has transcripts of the few short broadcasts he made pleading for peace, sent out by Radio Hanoi. It is enough to keep Valerie Kushner from giving up the fight. In the past five years she has traveled to Cambodia, Paris and Budapest, stalked the marble halls of Congress till her legs cramped, and worked hard on press, radio and TV exposure. This year she is a star speaker for George McGovern and again traveling all over. She was born in New York State, but now lives with her two children in her husband's hometown of Danville, Va. She is proud of being a Virginia Democrat and quotes Jefferson in her speeches. "I'm a true patriot," she says. "After all, patriotism is defined as concern for the welfare of one's country."

If her husband weren't a prisoner of war, Valerie admits, she might just be sitting home this year. But she insists that she believes in McGovern's campaign beyond her conviction that if elected he will end the war and bring her husband home. "I may not agree with him on *everything*, but then I've yet to find any person I agree with 100%. And that includes my husband!"



An intense Valerie delivers one more speech (left) in River Falls, Wis., and hobnobs with local political types at McGovern headquarters in Eau Claire. To maintain the pace of her grueling schedule, she chain-consumes Coke and cigarettes.

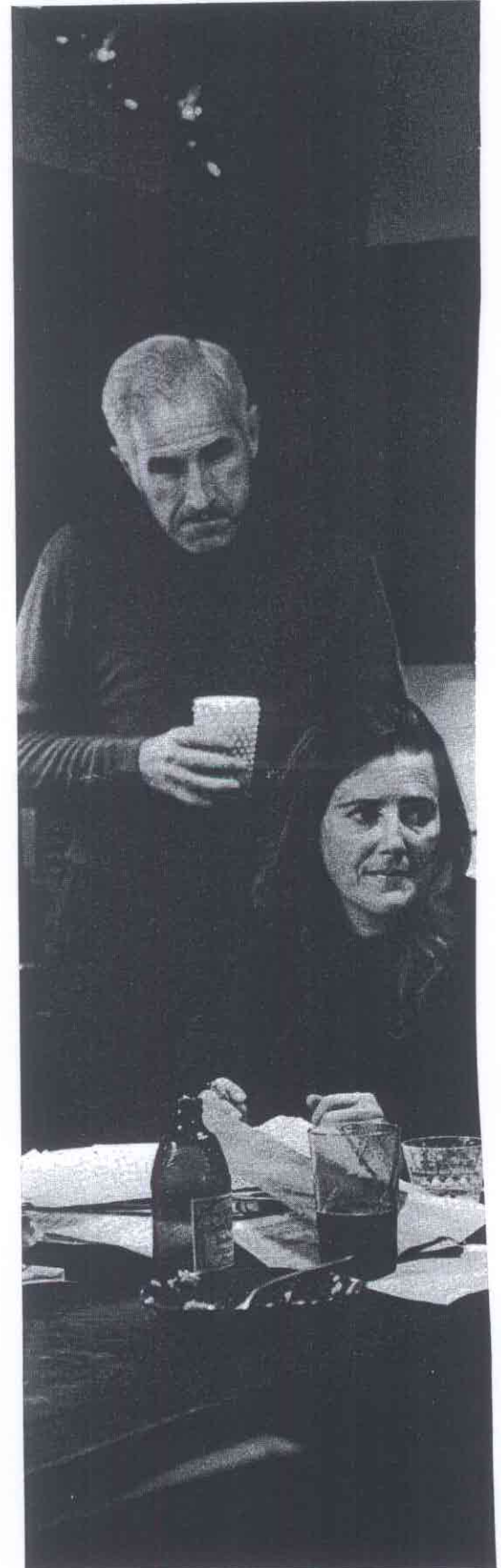


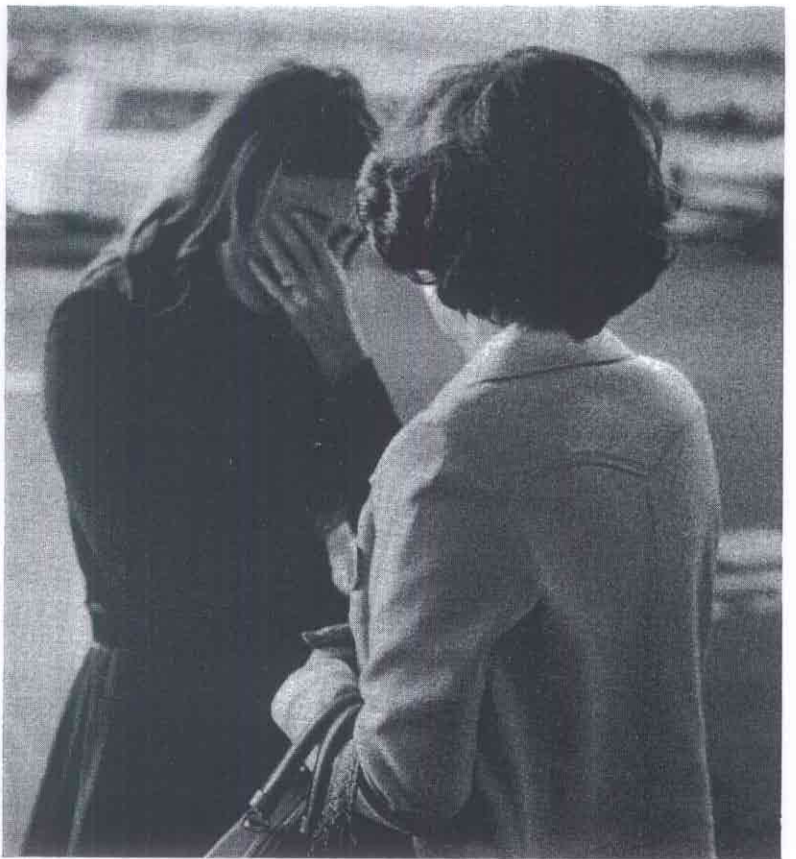
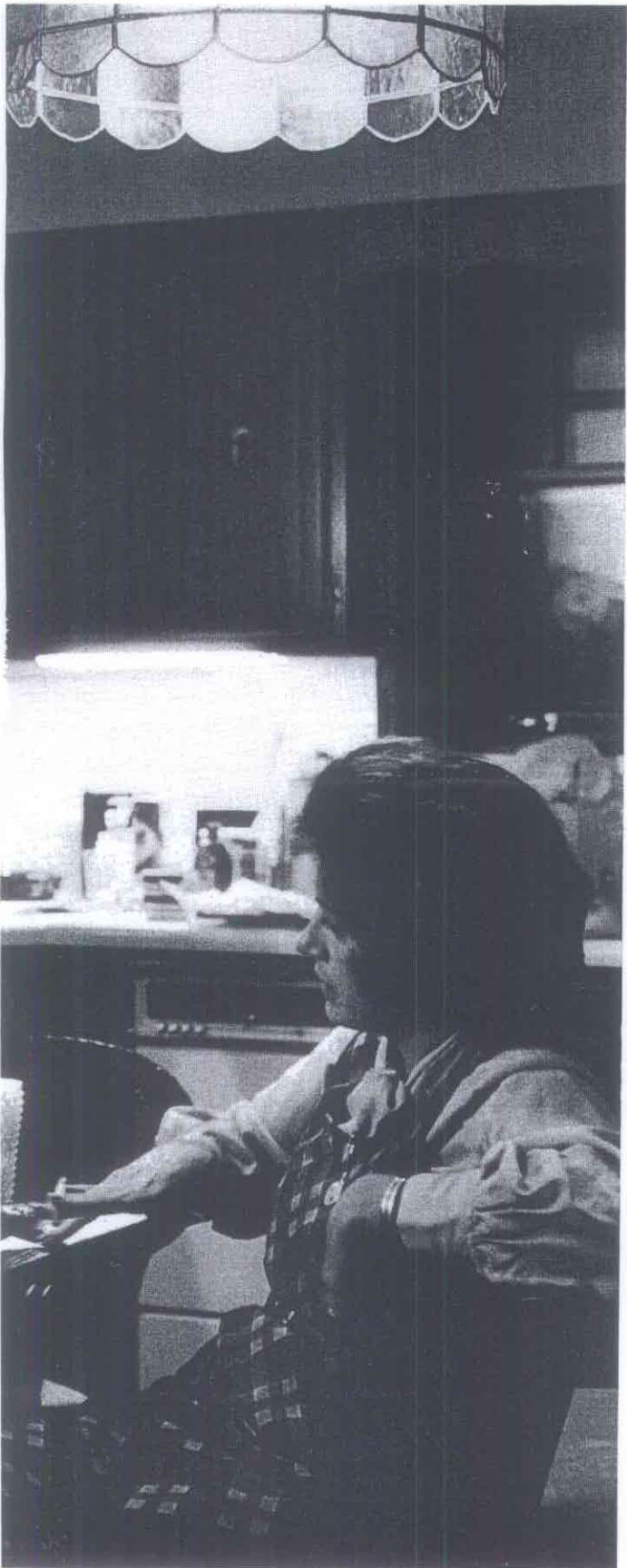
Phyllis Mott's air force husband has been MIA since May. In Moorehead, Minn., she challenged Valerie: "How can McGovern bring *my* husband home? He's an unacknowledged prisoner!" "McGovern was a combat pilot," Valerie replied. "He won't abandon his brother."

Mr. and Mrs. Vern Anshus, below, have a POW son, but they told Valerie in Hamilton, Ohio that they plan to vote for President Nixon. Although their son, Richard, added his name to a plea for peace made by Captain Kushner from Hanoi, they can't believe he was serious. "It was just a means of letting us know he's there."



She argues with one wife, consoles another





Sharon Walsh's husband was shot down in February 1969 and is now listed MIA. Like Valerie, she also works for McGovern. "But," says Sharon, "my activities are strictly political. I don't expect my husband to come home." Valerie admits, "I still feel guilty around Sharon when I mention that I got a letter from Spanky." On a campaign stop in Minneapolis, where Sharon lives, they had time for a long talk in the kitchen (left) with Sharon's friend Dick Faunce. Later (above), Sharon and Valerie share an emotional goodbye at the airport.

'The family is incomplete without him'

by KAREN THORSEN

Toni Jean Kushner is 8 and has some vague memories of her father. But her brother Mike is 4½ and understands only that somewhere there is a distant figure who asks for news of him in letters and broadcasts but doesn't even know his name. He thinks this is normal. Valerie was two months pregnant with Mike when Spanky was captured, and she has been coping with problems like that for five years now.

"I answer all the questions, but I don't try that hard to remind my children of their father. I refuse to say 'Okay, sit down, here's lecture No. 72 about Daddy,' or 'Don't forget to kiss Daddy's picture goodnight.' He comes up naturally in our conversation, frequently, but not daily. It's quite simple: the family is incomplete without him.

"The children may be a little too used to getting their way, but Spanky was never a disciplinarian, so why should I try to be? My father-in-law, Bob, provides a masculine image, but he acts just like the grandfather he is and spoils them rotten. I do ask male friends to take Mike along to the bathroom, so that he can see how men do it. There are some things I just can't do.

"I know Spanky will want another child when he returns. He'll want to make up for what he's missed in the raising of his first two children. I just hope I don't let him talk me into it. Once he comes home, it will be hard enough with two children around already."

Until that day, Valerie has her life arranged to

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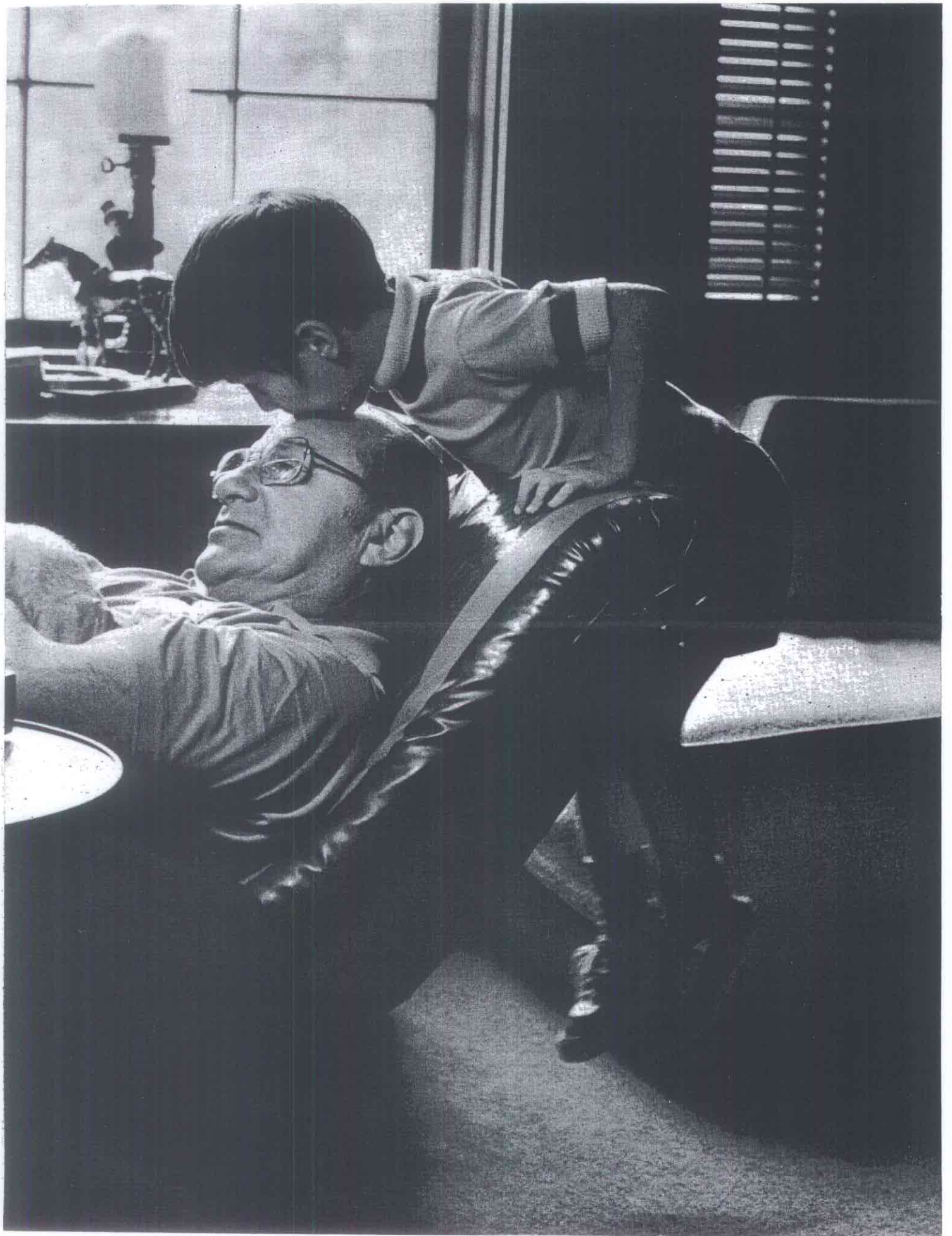
Mike loves his granddad, Bob Kushner (right), like a father. Kushner, a dentist, tries hard to fill in for his missing son: he takes young Mike fishing, buys him toys and the two of them meet every Wednesday for lunch. "When Mike's father comes back Mike can start calling me 'Grandpa,'" Kushner says, "but until then I'm Bob and he's my buddy."

Eight-year-old Toni Jean (below in a tender moment with her mother) was only 3 when her father was captured in South Vietnam. She still tells stories of things she and her daddy did together, however, and still answers the family phone, "Hello, Dr. Kushner's residence."



Mike has a picture in his room of his father in a flight suit standing near a helicopter. When he plays with his GI Joe Rescue Helicopter (above), he questions his mother, "Is this helicopter anything like my Daddy's?"





'I just hope the impotence doesn't last'

CONTINUED

allow little time for brooding. Constant reading, compulsive conversations fill in the moments between campaign tours and caring for her children. Although she knows it's always meant in kindness, it angers her when strangers marvel at her competence.

"I never had any doubts about my own capabilities. I worked a great part of my married life; I always kept the books and bought our stocks because Spanky was too busy with medical school. We always had our own spheres, we both did what we wanted.

"It is true that many of the missing men's wives aren't used to independence. A large number of them turn to alcohol or drugs. I don't happen to like the taste of liquor, and I'm too drug-reactive to get into 'ups' or 'downers.' Other wives depend on their psychiatrist, or bare their traumas in group therapy. The worst off of all, however, are those who drown themselves in self-pity. It's not a functional emotion, while anger is. I use my anger to direct my energy.

"Of course I know perfectly well that all of my activity is a substitute for sex. Everyone expects such an atmosphere of virginity from the POW/MIA wives. We can't discuss sex with our civilian friends; all the wives begin to think we'll be after their husbands. Only with our closest friends among the prisoners' wives can we talk openly about our sexual frustrations, and then we really get raunchy—"How about a nude-in at the White House?" The energy has to go somewhere.

"Some wives have gotten divorces from their POW husbands, in Mexico or Haiti. One pair of MIA in-laws I know, whose son is most probably dead, talked it over with their young daughter-in-law and then took her to Mexico for a divorce. It was the best thing they could do. Many wives aren't even bothering with a divorce. They've simply moved in with another man and they're still getting their husband's paychecks. But whatever they do, I can't criticize any wife for her decisions. Each situation is different, and all of them are untenable."

Many of the waiting wives have quarreled with their in-laws, but Valerie has remained very close to Spanky's parents. They live within five minutes of each other and see each other almost daily. Spanky's mother, Jean, is a particular friend. She backs Valerie up on politics (they picketed the White House together last September), and understands that it's harder to be a POW wife than a POW mother.

"My mother-in-law has told me, 'If I honestly thought an affair would help you, I would close my eyes.' But I've decided to wait for Spanky. My decision isn't entirely morally structured; I certainly don't think God would strike me dead

nor do I think Spanky would divorce me for a casual affair—but the thing is I haven't yet fallen out of love with my husband.

"I've had my share of passes—in fact it's nice to feel a little lust in the air—and in traveling around I've learned how to handle them. I have to watch out, especially for the 40-50 age group. Some of them even think they're doing me a favor. But you have to have a sense of humor to survive, so I just say something like 'Will you marry me if I get pregnant?' They're so taken aback that it becomes a joke. Of course, POW wives are so vulnerable: I'm always careful to leave my door open if someone visits my hotel room, because everybody loves to gossip."

Without the "passes," Valerie would shrivel. She can turn on a charm just suited for the man she's with, and any concentrated male attention leaves a glow on her for hours.

"There are things that you miss more than sex, however. I miss being loved more than being made love to. I love flirtations and flattery that hide no ulterior motives. The nicest compliment I've had is when one man said, 'I'd love to make a pass at you, but it would be like desecrating a national monument.'

"But I miss Spanky most of all in those silly moments of hard-to-open pickle jars and doing the laundry. I did some washing for my in-laws, and when I was folding my father-in-law's underwear, it suddenly hit me: how long has it been since I folded a pair of boxer shorts? That's when I could cry like a baby."

Valerie passes quickly over any signs of personal weakness. She hides all her pain in some deep inner corner, behind a shield of tautly woven resolutions. But to maintain this, Valerie hangs desperately onto a high opinion of herself.

"Strangers don't understand how much our self-esteem has suffered. They forget that we've aged, that we've lost our prime years. We go to league meetings and see all those fresh young new faces—and they look at us, all sagging and wrinkled, thinking, 'My God, is that what we'll be like a few years from now?'

"My husband missed me in miniskirts, and my figure has changed since our last baby. Certainly, Spanky will be older too when he comes home—I know he's had malaria and dysentery—but somehow I don't expect the change to be that dramatic. I just hope the impotence doesn't last.

"You know the army has kindly been preparing us for such things. They warn us that homosexuality is not unusual in prison camps, and that impotence upon return should be an even greater problem. We're also told that the mortality rate for ten years after their return is 50% higher than that of other men their age—many will die of traumatic injury, suicide, self-incited homicide, renal failure or cirrhosis of the liver.

"I worry most for Spanky's sake about possible nerve damage in his hands. He wanted so much to do microscopic surgery. He spent a year just practicing tying knots. 'These are trained hands!' he would exclaim proudly, and then tell me to go mow the lawn. But it will take him so long to get back into shape physically, to regain

his motor skills, to catch up on new medical events and vocabulary, and to go through a four-year residency that he'll probably never open up his own practice; most likely he'll teach medicine. So many hopes have died with this war.

"There will be many more divorces once the men return, and I can't blame the wives for this at all. Some of the husbands will walk in the front door of their home, take one look and want to walk out the back door. The children will expect all problems to be solved and flowers to bloom in the middle of winter, once their father comes back. They won't be prepared for the shock of being No. 2 all of a sudden, they won't be the only ones to decide if we'll have hamburgers for dinner. My son loves the feeling of being my No. 1 boyfriend, but when Spank comes home, I'm going to say, 'Go find your own girl, Mike.' It won't be easy for any of us."

Five years of Valerie Kushner's energy have been poured into bringing her husband home, and she truly expects that to happen if McGovern is elected. But what happens if he loses? Valerie turns suddenly vulnerable, one of the few moments when her carefully programmed responses don't come to her aid. She talks unconvincingly of hiring professional mercenaries to go find her husband and bring him home, of moving all the POW/MIA families into Resurrection City until the men return, even of self-immolation in front of the White House. Or she looks away nervously, and describes a life that would include only herself, and the children. At such moments she seems close to tears.

But Valerie Kushner is not a weeper. She prides herself that she hasn't cried since this spring, when she first heard the eight-minute version of *Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie*. "It was not any one particular line," she says. "It was just that it reminded me of all my generation, and all that Spanky and I have lost." ■

Valerie Kushner has tried to be both mother and father to her kids—and that includes the chore of lugging her son's tricycle up from the street to her house.

