

POW Families - - Bitter and Hawkish

By Mary McGrory
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 Washington

Lieutenant Markham Gartley, one of the three pilots recently brought back from North Vietnam, got a warm welcome here from the National League of Families, but Cora Weiss, his anti-war deliverer, was identified as Public Enemy No. 1.

Gartley gave the convention of war prisoners' relatives the first good news some of them have heard in years.

He spoke behind closed doors, and was ushered to and from the conference room through an adjoining kitchen so he would not meet members of the press, who were elsewhere being denounced for failure to tell the prisoners' story.

The mention of Cora Weiss brought boos and hoots in one meeting. A resolution was introduced which would bind family members not to use her organization, COLFAM (Committee of Liaison

With Families of Americans Detained in Vietnam), as channel for mail.

Although the members generally would do almost anything to please the Administration, they may balk at this final step of cutting themselves off from contact with their men.

Wallace Webb of Pittsburgh, whose son has been imprisoned for five years, and who shares the hawkish majority views about the bombing and the shortcomings of the press, voted against the anti-Weiss resolution in committee.

"These same people who resent her so much take the letters she brings them," he said. "They say Cora Weiss is using us, but I say we're using her. We've gotten three messages from my boy in five years through her."

The pretty wife of an Air Force pilot, Mrs. Myron

Donald of Syracuse, has reservations about Mrs. Weiss, but none about using the COLFAM mailbox: She's



CORA WEISS
 "Public enemy"

had 18 letters and three messages in the last four years.

"I think her prime interest is to end the war, not in the prisoners," she said, "but if she's going to get letters, I'm going to send them to her."

The League, although overwhelmingly pro-Administration, is "non-political." George McGovern was asked to speak and declined. It was probably just as well. The few doves in the group were bedraggled and exhausted, and no protest such as last year's modest picket line in front of the White House was even considered.

No thought was given to asking Mrs. Weiss to attend. "She would be crucified," said Lou Stockstill, the League's public relations director.

The choice of Gartley for release was discussed informally among the members, some of whom murmured that the vehement anti-war activities of his mother may have prejudiced his North Vietnamese jailers in his behalf.

Gartley himself made no

reference to the three pilots' dramatic dash across the world under Mrs. Weiss' wing. He did not speak of her at all. But he did tell the League that the families

should send letters by whatever means they can, because it means so much to the men. That may have settled the argument.

His report, as well as his appearance, was balm for the suffering families. He said he had not been abused. When first captured in August, 1968, he was put in solitary confinement.

His treatment progressively improved, markedly in 1969. This news was especially welcome to the families who began their activities that year.

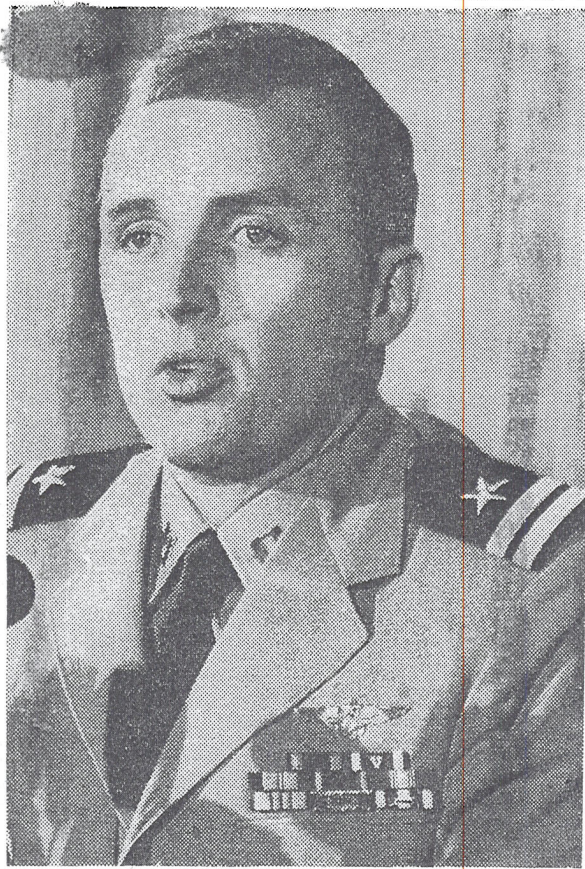
For some family members his gentle, informative address was the day's only respite from bitterness and agitation. In an earlier meeting, they had been warned by David Martin, senior analyst of the Senate Internal Security Committee, of the dreadful fate of previous prisoners taken by Communists. Martin recalled in graphic detail the Katyn Forest massacre of World War II, when the Russians slew thousands of Polish officers.

Jean Kushner of Danville, Va., whose son was shot down over South Vietnam five years ago, took heavy flak from unsympathetic members about the activities of her daughter-in-law, Valerie, who has been stumping for McGovern and recently made the cover of Life.

"I'm not defensive," says Mrs. Kushner, a small, spirited woman. "I say to them, 'It's a democracy, isn't it?'"

Mrs. Samuel Beecher of Terre Haute, whose son has been missing for seven years, was "appalled" by what was going on. Recently she and her husband helped their daughter-in-law to get a Mexican divorce so she could remarry. At the last League meeting one of the members said to her, "If you think your son is dead, why do you belong to this organization?"

"It's terrible," she said. "They have no compassion for anyone who disagrees with them."



LIEUTENANT MARKHAM GARTLEY
He gave the convention good news