

'Moment of Truth'

Families of POWs and Missing Apprehensive, Cautious, Happy

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For the families of the nation's 545 prisoners and 1,154 men missing in action in Southeast Asia, news of peace proposals brings apprehension as well as cautious hope and joy.

For the majority are relatives of the missing—those servicemen who simply disappeared on a night patrol or from a crippled plane somewhere in Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia during the past eight years.

For them, the crucial issue in the reported peace agreement is North Vietnam's promise to account for all the missing—either as hitherto unreported prisoners or as men killed in action.

"Everyone clings to a shred," said one wife. "This will be the moment of truth," said a mother.

Phyllis Galanti's "head is spinning" at the news that she may soon be reunited with her husband, a Navy lieutenant commander. "But we've been stung so many times, I've talked myself out of being excited."

Joe McCain, whose brother is a prisoner, put it this way: "We're not exactly running out and buying Christmas trees."

For some families, any news will be better than not knowing whether they have a husband, brother or son alive.

"It will be the final chapter of a book I'm ready to close," said Evelyn Grubb of Colonial Heights, Va., whose husband has been missing for six years. She believes he is almost certainly dead.

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Mrs. Grubb received at least one report that her husband died in a POW camp, but most of the other MIA wives have heard nothing.

One woman, whose husband has been missing since 1969, faces the possibility that he might be dead easier than the possibility that he might be alive.

"It's not that I don't want him back, it's just that I've made my decision about it already. It's very hard to live in a limbo and maintain a psychological balance.

"Most of us (among the MIA wives.) have made a decision about it and lived our lives accordingly. I don't think my life will be any different now.

"But don't use my name and say I've decided he's dead. Say you found me here at McGovern headquarters working for an end to the war. Say if he comes home we'll be here to welcome him."

Many of the wives, citing "too many false alarms in the past," refused to let themselves get excited about the prospects for an early cease fire and return of the POWs.

But those most active in the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia found sharp differences between the current peace prospects



Iris Powers, left, Libby Hill and Jean Eaton are careful to suppress hopes.

and those rumored in the past.

Henry Kissinger, they said, has met regularly with the league directors over the past two years to discuss peace prospects and—said one wife—"he has not always been optimistic. I think he has been very honest with us."

Kissinger's report, combined with that of Radio Hanoi, give the current proposals a "ring of credibility," the wives said.

Some, politicized to the antiwar movement, still mistrust Richard Nixon.

Others, like Sybil Stockdale of Coronado, Calif., distrust the North Vietnamese.

But when she allows herself to think about it, Mrs. Stockdale views her POW

husband's return with a calm—if longing—detachment.

"I'm a Navy wife. We have been separated often, but we had been married 18 years before he was captured. We know each other extremely well. Some of the other wives, I'm sure, will react differently, but I am . . . I guess most of all curious about the reunion.

"It's going to be an incredibly emotional experience, and of course joyous.

"But sometimes when I'm waiting for someone in an airport I'll see a man who looks a little like my husband, only with white hair. And I'll think 'I wonder if his hair has turned white.'

"After all our time together, I don't think the big things that made our marriage possible will have changed. But little things, physical things will have changed.

"We've grown seven years older apart from each other," Mrs. Stockdale said. "I wonder how much he'll be like I remember him. And I'm sure he wonders the same thing about me."

When they talk about the start of the prisoner of war issue, most people talk about the capture of Everett Alvarez on Aug. 2, 1964.

That was the day three North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, triggering the congressional resolution that authorized a full-scale Ameri-

prisoner. I told them I didn't want him in there long enough to become an admiral."

"Look up and you'll see us on the ceiling," said Iris Powers, but then she planted her emotions back on the ground and added, "Our hopes have been up a number of times. We're so scared that something will jerk the treasure out from us."

Mrs. Powers, of 905 6th St. SW, was giving the institutional view of the National League of Families to the announcement that "peace is at hand." She was one of the organizers of the league, largest of the organizations formed by relatives of POWs and MIAs of the Vietnam war.

As the mother of a helicopter pilot missing in South Vietnam since April 2, 1969, however, Mrs. Powers viewed the news with "tremendous apprehension."

"The moment of truth" also is at hand for "the bad news you've been putting off for years," she said. Over the years, the news has played with her emotions "like a yo-yo, now you're up, now you're down."

"Now, pretty soon, you're going to get that piece of paper," she said. "The odds are in favor that there is no hope any more" she said of her son, Army Chief Warrant Officer Lowell S. Powers.

"Some MIA families have a chance. You cling to a thin, gossamer thread of hope. But many of us will be able to face it. He's gone. Irrevocably," she said in a tone that reflected long practice.

"You are walking toward a man who is holding a sledgehammer," she said of the dilemma. "You keep walking closer and closer, yet you know you are going to get hit with it."

Then Mrs. Powers the business executive, the league board member, the public spokesman, got hold of herself.

"For the POW families, it's here at last," she said, bubbling vicariously. "They can turn their attention to holiday plans, and wondering if he'll think his son's hair is too long."

Libby Andersen was working at the jewelry counter at Sears in Ft. Walton Beach, Fla., for the 1966 Christmas season, when "this guy tried to pick me up. I thought he was a mugger, so I reported him to the head of the department and asked that he be thrown out of the store."

But before Howard J. Hill could be evicted, Libby's college classmate, who was working at another counter,

came to his rescue and introduced her to the fighter pilot.

Libby, naturally, now is Mrs. Hill, and has been for more than five years. But if she sounds a bit formal when she speaks of "Howard," it may be because she has had more letters from him, 15, as a prisoner of war, than she has had days, 12, as a husband.

"We had planned to wait (to be married) until he had finished his commitment, but when he got a leave and could come to California, we were married," Mrs. Hill said.

They were married Aug. 15, 1967, and after a 23-day honeymoon, he returned to his base in Thailand.

Air Force Capt. Hill was shot down, "south of Hanoi and Haiphong," Dec. 16, 1967.

His first letter, the first word that he was alive, came two years and four months later.

"I was fortunate," she said, adopting a common attitude among the families of always thinking, at least publicly, of those who aren't so fortunate. "Most didn't hear for four, five or six years," she said.

News of the impending cease fire left her "numb. for the first time, I can sit back and say 'Howard is going to be home,' probably within three months."

"I expect that as far as the known prisoners, such as Howard, they are going to come home," she said. "We should now direct our full effort to make sure everyone is aware of the plight of the MIAs, and insist on a complete accounting of the missing."

Mrs. Hill, 27, who graduated from Surrattsville High School in Prince George's County, moved back to the Washington area after her husband became a POW. She lives in Alexandria and works in the rental office of the apartment tower in which she lives.

"I really can't allow myself to become optimistic any more," said Jean Eaton, whose husband, Air Force Col. Norman Dale Eaton, was lost over Laos on Jan. 13, 1969.

"I will wait. I will live in my limbo until I see something actually happening," said Mrs. Eaton, who is one of the wives who has made a pilgrimage to Southeast Asia in an unsuccessful effort to get news of her husband.

"You can go up so high," she said, pausing, "but the harder you fall . . . The intelligent thing to do is to wait."

She spoke with the discipline of military wife.

First word of the nine-point agreement came to her in a telephone call from her eldest son, Paul, 22, a recent West Point graduate who is stationed at Ft. Benning.

Paul is following the potentially perilous footsteps of his father, a 1949 graduate of the military academy. Their other sons are Dwight, 19, a sophomore at Duke University, and Frankie, a sophomore at Ft. Hunt High School in Alexandria.

Dr. Kissinger's announcement came on the eve of an examination Mrs. Eaton had in a Chinese-Japanese-Korean art course at George Washington University.

"I guess I'm looking for a sense of identity with Dale," she said of the class. "I just know (because of the news) I'll fail that test."

"What's being done in the final negotiations" is of primary importance to Mrs. Eaton and relatives of other MIAs. "The men lost over Laos have never been identified. We want the agreement to get the names. We want this reinforced," she said.

Barbara May is able to bounce from hope to hopelessness, faith to fatalism, in a single thought:

It's fantastic. I'm very optimistic. I'm very pleased.

I have reason to believe he's very much alive."

Then: "Eventually it's going to be over for us, the wives of the missing. We're still very young. We can make a new life if necessary. It will be an end to a tragedy, but a beginning of something more pleasant."

Barbara May is young, 25. David May is young too, 27. David May Jr. is just 3. He was only nine months old when his father left.

Capt. David May, an army aviator, set his burning helicopter down in Laos on Feb. 20, 1971. "We know he exited the aircraft and was running into the enemy. The sister ship observed that much," his wife said.

Since then, Mrs. May has kept herself busy. She takes one class at a time at the University of Maryland, on her husband's GI Bill, does volunteer work and belongs to the wives club at Ft. Meade, and takes care of their son, at her home in University Park.

"If he comes back, depending upon the kind of shape he's in, the chances of making a career of it are pretty high," she said.

Young David "knows his father is away, and that he is a pilot. But not where. He doesn't understand," she said in a voice that quavered, perhaps because she realizes the child knows as much as his mother.

can war effort in Southeast Asia.

Alvarez, then a 26-year-old Navy lieutenant j. g. from Santa Clara, Calif. was piloting a jet fighter from the U.S.S. Constellation. His plane was shot down over North Vietnam and within hours he became the first American prisoner of war in that country.

Now, 8½ years later, Alvarez is 34 and has spent nearly one fourth of his life in a prison camp near Hanoi. His wife divorced him several years ago. His sister turned to the anti-war movement to help free him.

Thursday, when she heard the news of the latest peace plan, his mother "took it right in stride."

"We've been through a lot of these rumors before," said Mrs. Everett Alvarez Sr., who lives in Santa Clara. "I hope it comes through this time: It can't be soon enough. But I'll believe it when I see my son. Eight years is a long, long time, and I feel it has all been for nothing."

"They have promoted him twice since he has been a