

# P.O.W. Wives Await Peace With Joy and Dread

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By NAN ROBERTSON

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 5—The knowledge that a cease-fire in Southeast Asia may truly be at hand has thrown the families of the 1,268 missing Americans and 554 prisoners of war onto the cruelest of roller-coasters, swooping between exhilaration and dread.

The cry of Janis Dodge of San Diego, the wife of a Navy pilot shot down five years and six months ago, echoes their universal agony: "Oh, God, just get it over with, even though I'm scared to death how it will turn out."

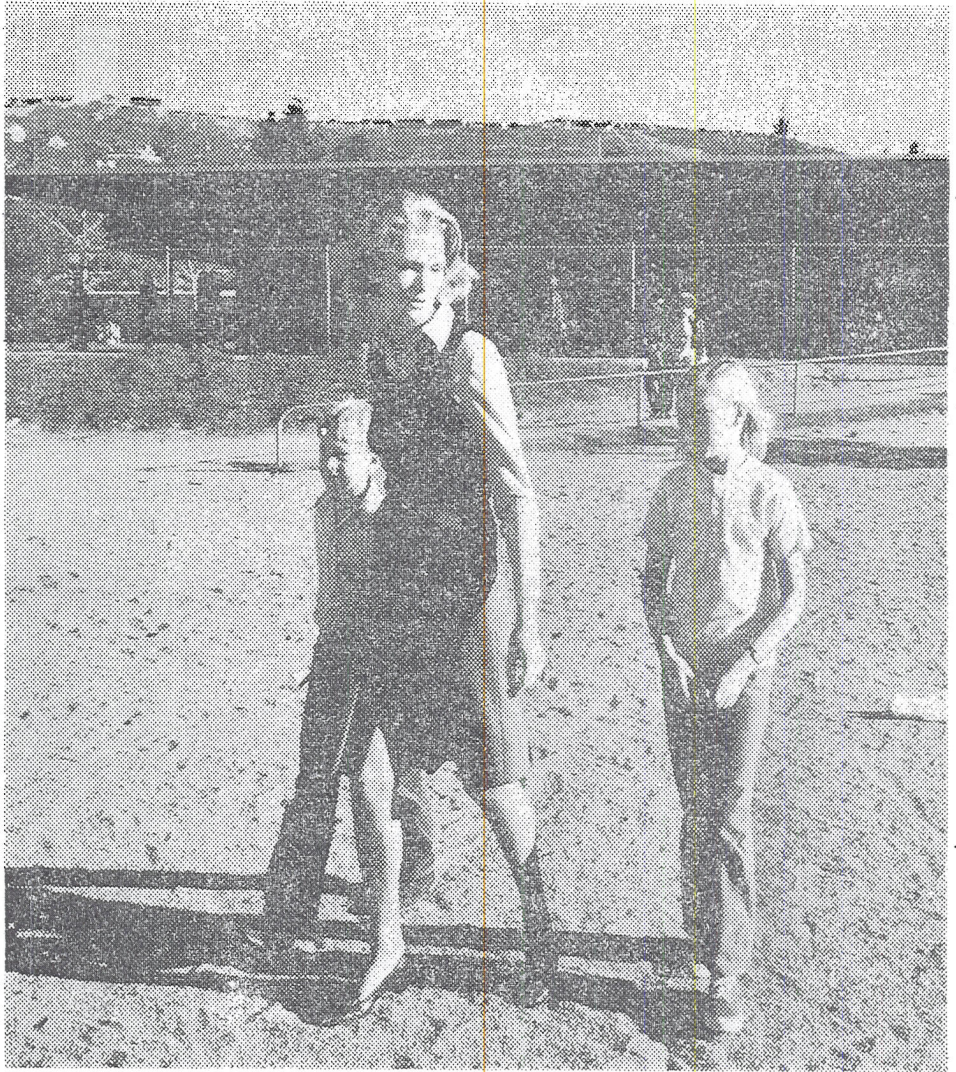
Interviews around the nation reveal similar feelings of heightened apprehension as the efforts to end the Vietnam war move into what appears to be a decisive stage.

A fortnight ago, in Frederick, Md., Jo Ann Flora was remembering how it all began for her. The news was broken the way it almost always is.

Two men—a chaplain and a casualty assistance officer—came up the walk to her door in Frederick, Md. "You don't have to tell me," she said. "He's dead."

"Now wait a minute—it's not that bad," the chaplain said. "He's missing." The other day, Mrs. Flora, recalling the chap-

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The New York Times/D. Gorton

Mrs. Ronald Dodge in San Diego with her children, Brad and Wendy. She has identified a picture of a war prisoner as that of her husband, but his name is not on Hanoi lists.



The New York Times/Gary Settle

Mrs. Mildred Pilkington at home in Morton Grove, Ill., with a photograph of her son, Lieut. Thomas Pilkington of the Navy, missing in Vietnam for six years.



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lain's remark, said, "He thought he was being kind."

That was five years and four months ago, and all Mrs. Flora has had to cling to since is a "broken cry for help" heard after her wounded husband, a Green Beret sergeant, tumbled from a helicopter into the jungle "somewhere near the DMZ" in Vietnam.

"I loved my husband dearly. I think I still do. But how can I be sure I love a man I haven't seen or heard of for five years?" she asked. "I want it to be the way it was but I'm afraid it might not be."

The Floras had been married less than three years when he went to Vietnam, leaving behind a two-month-old son and a 7-year-old step-daughter.

The plight of Janice Dodge is more dramatic. She at least has had something more solid to cling to—a photograph that has haunted her and Government officials during her years alone.

A striking close-up of her husband being led through a Vietnamese street by his captors, his head bandaged, his face charged with what appears to be anger and bewilderment, was published in Paris-Match magazine in September, 1967, a few months after his plane was shot down.

She identified the picture as that of Lieut. Ronald Dodge after going over the photograph "feature by feature" with friends. The Pentagon put him on P.O.W. status.

#### A Couple in Limbo

But two years ago, when Hanoi released its "definitive" list of prisoners, his name was not on the rosters of those either still alive or dead after being captured in North Vietnam. Ronald Dodge is in limbo, and so is his wife.

A marine told Mrs. Dodge and other relatives at a recent briefing to prepare them for the return—or permanent disappearance—of their men: "Rest assured, we will leave no stone unturned to find them" after the war is over.

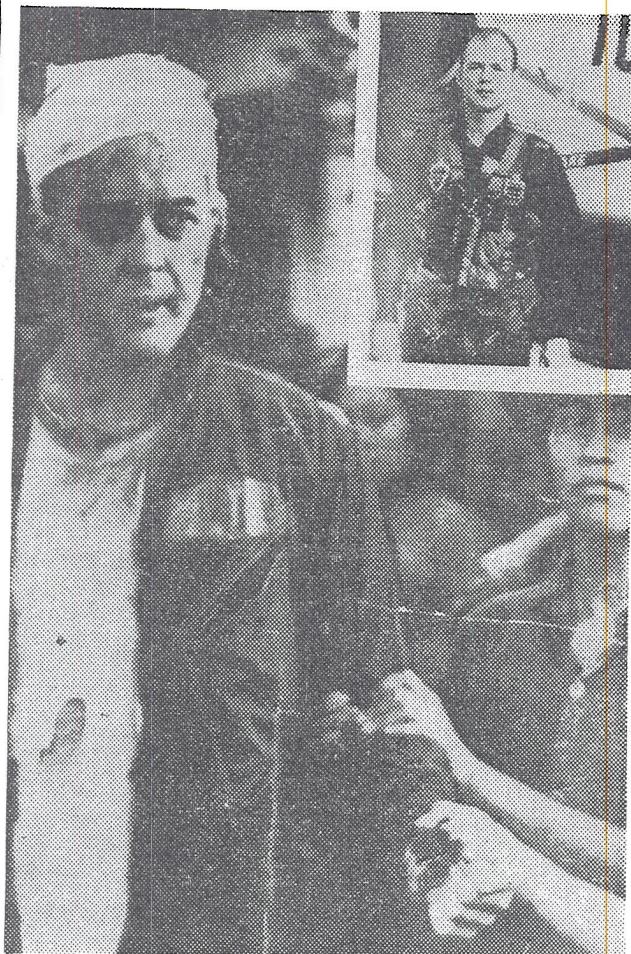
Her heart sank. "I got the impression at that meeting that I would be an admiral's wife before I found out if Ron's alive," she said. The absent men have been systematically promoted while missing or in captivity.

Interviews here at the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, and private talks with wives and mothers across the country, reveal a special hell not experienced in other wars.

#### Compounded by Uncertainty

The expected sorrow and loneliness are compounded by uncertainty and a conflict of unprecedented length, with missing and known captives dating from 1964.

Further, the families of P.O.W.'s and missing servicemen have been isolated from the rest of American society because of their relatively small numbers, and, for five years—from 1964 to 1969—the absolute public silence imposed on them by the Pentagon.



The larger photo, published in Paris-Match, shows a prisoner of war in Hanoi. It was identified in 1967 by Mrs. Ronald Dodge as that of her husband, shown in the inset. But Lieutenant Dodge is not listed by Hanoi.

In those years, until Sybil Stockdale of Coronado, Calif., established a private grapevine and then the league, the families did not even know of others in the same plight with whom to share their sufferings. On the East Coast, Evelyn Grubb described the secret swapping of problems with a group of Navy wives at Virginia Beach, Va., as being "like a cell."

#### The Greatest Tragedy

But largely, "You grieved alone," said Iris Powers, the mother of a missing Army helicopter pilot. "This was the greatest tragedy of all."

The Pentagon warned the families that, for the men's "safety," they should keep quiet. They were told: "He may be treated better; he may be able to write, he may be returned."

That early policy has long been regarded by leaders of the league, which now includes about 3,000 family members, as misguided at best and cruelly inhumane at worst.

Mrs. Stockdale, the wife of Capt. James Bond Stockdale, the highest-ranking Navy prisoner of war, organized the San Diego wives secretly in 1967.

"In 1968, I went to the press," she said, "confident that the men back there in Washington had made a mistake."

For many, getting together to talk about common problems and to dramatize the stories of the "forgotten" men and those waiting for them at home has been a salvation.

#### Acute Problems Ahead

For there are problems—acute problems—that may continue or worsen after the men come back.

The women have changed. Typically, they are tougher and more independent. They will find it hard or impossible to revert to their passive "yes, dear" roles. They have raised children by their rules alone. They have coped with a society that avoids them or is baffled or embarrassed by their ordeal.

"People want to put you in a slot," Evelyn Grubb said. "You're not a widow; you're married, not a divorcee. You don't fit in the psychology of this society."

Her husband, Wilmer Newlin (Newk) Grubb, then an Air Force captain and now a lieutenant colonel, was shot down and captured six years and 10 months ago. Photographs of him looking strikingly healthy despite his captivity were released by Hanoi through 1969.

#### Died of 'Grievous Wounds'

But Mrs. Grubb never heard from her husband after he was shot down, and, in 1970, North Vietnam announced that he had died of 'grievous wounds' suffered in his 1966 plane crash.

Both Mrs. Grubb and Mrs. Stockdale are shored up by long, stable marriages, and each woman has four sons to sustain her.

The wives of the long-term missing or possible P.O.W.'s, married for only days or months before their men went away, are most susceptible to breakdowns.

Iris Powers says of them with compassion: "They're no Penelopes. Their youth—they're losing it." About 14 of these women have remarried or are contemplating remarriage soon. "Those others living with men without benefit of legalization—there are a bunch," Mrs. Powers adds.

Wives who have established relationships with other men feel "terrific, terrific guilt," according to one woman who began going with a divorced man shortly after her husband was captured. It was also an escape for both of them. "We were two lost souls," she said. Now that her husband may return soon, she says, her lover is on the verge of suicide.

Some women in her predicament are ostracized by friends, particularly military men who are scandalized by their infidelity and feel they are letting down both their husbands and the service.

One was told by an officer



that she ought to feel as if her husband were "just on a long cruise." She could barely stifle her impulse to burst into derisive laughter.

In one instance, the parents of an Indianapolis man missing in action for years arranged a Mexican divorce for their daughter-in-law. They finally came to the conclusion that she was "tied to a specter." But this reaction from parents is rare, perhaps unique.

Far more common is the growing friction and estrangement between wives and mothers-in-law. Mrs. Grubb said:

"Each one of us feels she is suffering in a special way. The mother thinks, 'How can his wife know how I feel? She can get married again but I can't have another son.'"

The wives, in turn, feel that marriage is the ultimate physical and emotional commitment between two human beings. They believe no one else can imagine their need—and their emptiness.

#### 'Sisters' Drift Apart

One woman said her husband had left for Vietnam comforted by the thought that she and his mother, living near by, were "like sisters."

Since he was reported missing, the mother "won't even talk about her son," the wife said. "I don't know if she thinks he's dead or alive. When we're together, I desperately try not to mention his name. I never say any more, 'Remember when he used to...?'"

She added, "I'd like to hope he won't find out how far we've drifted apart."

Chances of platonic dating—or dating of any kind—are scarce. It is difficult, says Mrs. Flora, now 35, because "everybody in my age bracket is attached."

Once several couples took her to a dance, and "I was miserable," she said. "All the husbands felt obligated to dance with me while the wives felt resentful." Saying that they feel like "odd-balls" or "fifth wheels," many wives of P.O.W.'s cluster together for entertainment.

#### Evening Is 'Worst Time'

But more often than not, there are no other P.O.W. wives in the area for companionship. For Janis Dodge and many more, "the worst time of day" is toward evening, when she sees the husbands in the neighborhood coming home.

The children are also deeply affected by the never-never land they live in. The younger children were infants or still unborn when their fathers went away. They may alternately demand that the mothers produce them issuing men—"Where is my daddy? If my daddy loved me, he'd be here"—or they resent the thought of their

father's homecoming as an intrusion.

In one phase, Dwayne Flora, who is now 6 years old, used to kiss his father's picture constantly and urge visitors to do the same. Later, he came home from school to ask: "Will my daddy beat me? If that's the way it is, I don't want my daddy back. I like it the way it is—just the three of us."

Yet the little boy and his sister, now 13, "miss their father terribly," Mrs. Flora said. "Whenever a man is in the house—a friend or relative—they're pulled to him. They're so hungry to have male attention."

The longings and the resentments of children and the efforts of the mothers to play the father role when possible could be expected. But there are many, unforeseen aggravations.

#### Legal and Money Problems

And there are legal and money problems. Even women whose husbands gave them unlimited powers-of-attorney before they went overseas—struggle to get credit or to buy houses or cars. Some got powers-of-attorney that have run out.

One wife of a missing man tried for a year to buy a home. An agent told her. "Why don't you go back to your apartment and wait seven years, until your husband is declared deceased?"

"If I'd been a man, I would have socked him," she said.

Evelyn Grubb and others spoke of troubles to come with Social Security, the Internal Revenue Service and the Veterans Administration.

"There will be the date 'Newk' was shot down, the date of his possible death and the date of the future finding of his presumptive death," Mrs. Grubb said. "Each of those agencies will take the date most convenient for them in considering benefits; getting benefits of the K.I.A.'s [killed in action] will be awful."

#### Worried About Taxes

She said she was worried about taxes, too, unsure of just what she might owe on stocks and bonds she had cashed in while she believed her husband was alive. "I did all these things in good faith. To think I might have to go back seven years [since her husband was declared a P.O.W.] and account for all this—my God!"

The women have managed somehow, and they know they have changed. Long imprisonment may have deeply changed their husbands, too. But Frank Sieverts, a State Department official who has dealt with P.O.W. families for years, believes there is little danger that the husbands will come back as "nuts" or "zombies."

As one example, he and the waiting women were heartened by the apparently excellent mental and physical condition of Lieut. (jg.) Mark L. Gartley of the Navy, who was released last September by Hanoi after four years in captivity.

In addition, the Pentagon's Operation Egress Recap program is aimed toward a sensitive, personal and extensive after-the-war rehabilitation never before attempted.



The New York Times.

**Mrs. James Bond Stockdale, wife of a Navy captain, highest-ranking naval officer held prisoner, prepares gifts for him.**

#### Warned by Psychiatrists

But psychiatrists briefing the wives have warned that the men may be temporarily impotent, and may have periods of depression, bewilderment and withdrawal.

One P.O.W. wife in Tacoma, Wash., asserted: "I'm not going to worry about that now; I'll wait until I see the whites of his eyeballs. I'll work for him 24 hours a day. If he's just a little bit bad, he'll get my full attention. If he's all the way bad, I'll have to live my own life without him with visiting rights" for him to see their daughter.

A few of the wives confess they fear frigidity in themselves. "I don't know if I can be a wife to him again," said one. "I've had that bed all to myself for such a long time. Yet I know the first thing he'll want will be another child. How can you cheat a man out of that?"

Some of the women suffer

terrible, recurrent dreams. They can be evoked by a traumatic but necessary ordeal that the Defense Department puts them through.

Enemy films showing Americans with their captors in Southeast Asia, usually taken under hurried conditions and of very inferior quality, are screened for groups of wives and other close relatives at bases throughout the country. These films, and still photographs, are the only way that the identity of missing or captured men can be established.

The movies are run over and over, stopped and rerun if a shout of recognition comes from the tense crowd. There are bandages, wounds, tantalizing but mostly insufficient glimpses. A dozen or more families may identify one man as their own.

The worst dream for the wife of one missing man occurred six months ago, when she felt her husband snuggling close beside her in the middle of the night and smelled the Old Spice lotion he always wore. She awoke, frozen with terror, unable to call out or turn around. "After awhile," she said, "it got up and went away."

The women have suffered their private purgatories all these years with an almost universal outward show of dignity, strength and loyalty. The last thing they want or need, they say, is pity.

#### A Dreadful Test

Six weeks have slipped by since Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's adviser on national security affairs, announced that "peace is at hand" and that a final agreement on a cease-fire and political arrangement in South Vietnam could be reached in one more negotiating session with the North Vietnamese. But Saigon's refusal to approve the projected accord, and the subsequent haggling over efforts to modify the agreement, have put the families of the P.O.W.'s through a dreadful test.

Jo Ann Flora was reached by telephone a few days ago, a fortnight after a five-hour face-to-face interview. Her voice sounded dead.

"This peace thing is no closer than it ever was as far as I can tell," she said. "It's very depressing, and it's running true for the children, too. It's the final blow and it's not helping any of us. I don't know if I can take it another year."

She added: "I hope we've done what's expected of us by waiting this long."