

# Hardest Christmas

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## MIA Family's Hopes Are Dashed

By Donald P. Baker  
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"It will be our hardest Christmas," Helene Knapp said yesterday.

Two months ago, along with the wives of hundreds of other missing or captured American servicemen, she had thought this might be the best holiday ever.

Instead, she and her children, Robert Douglas, 8, and Cynthia Jane, 7, will spend the day alone for the sixth straight year, this time in an incompletely furnished townhouse in Annandale, thousands of miles from friends and relatives.

They moved here last month in hopes that Mrs. Knapp, the newly elected national coordinator for the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, could help organize a homecoming for the nation's 556 POWs and some of its 1,153 MIAs, including her husband, Air Force Col. Herman L. Knapp.

The breakoff in negotiations, resumption of heavy bombing and a mounting toll of captured fliers have instead threatened the self-imposed nonpolitical posture of Mrs. Knapp's organization.

In a statement last week, Mrs. Knapp said, "We trust that our country's spokesmen will refrain in the future from raising hopes of the nation until a peace treaty has been firmly agreed upon."

Mr. Knapp personally will not talk about her views, saying "I cannot sound anti-administration."

Her co-equal officer in the nation's largest organization

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of families of POWs and MIAs is Phyllis Galanti of Richmond, chairman of the 15-member board of directors. Her silence, too, is shakily kept.

"Many of our people are demanding action," she said yesterday. "We all are distressed . . . 40 more men lost this week."

Mrs. Galanti's husband, Lt. Cdr. Paul Edward Galanti, has been a prisoner in North Vietnam since June 17, 1966.

"Everybody's so depressed," Mrs. Galanti said. She had talked earlier yesterday with the wife of another Navy prisoner, the mother of seven children. "They thought this may have been the Christmas their daddy would be home. The children are absolutely crushed."

The league's board has asked for a meeting "as soon as possible" with Kissinger, Mrs. Galanti said.

Kissinger's "peace is at hand" statement on Oct. 26 was greeted with a response by the league, which said, "We are overjoyed by the prospect of an honorable peace."

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The tone has changed since then. Mrs. Knapp's statement last Monday said "now we know that we must face another Christmas with no immediate peace in sight. It is a bitter prospect, and the disappointments and frustrations are severe."

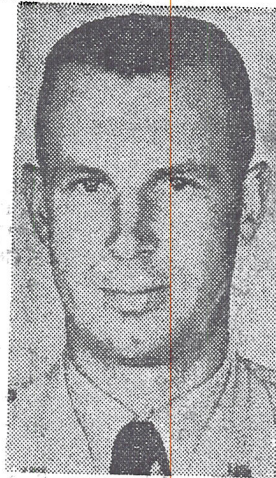
The families "had harbored desperate hopes that a peace treaty could be signed before Christmas." There was hope that some families might be reunited before the end of the year and that "all other prisoners might be home by March."

As late as the first week of this month, Mrs. Knapp and Mrs. Galanti were expecting "the release of some POWs almost immediately. It was just a matter of hearing about the signatures," Mrs. Galanti said yesterday.

The two women called on "seven key officials" in the State and Defense Departments early in December and "all were very hopeful," Mrs. Knapp said. Additionally, on a train to Philadelphia, to see the Army-Navy football game, Mrs. Knapp talked with Gen. Alexander Haig, who reinforced her optimism.

"That's the way I was living until last Saturday, when Dr. Kissinger announced the agreement had been terminated," Mrs. Knapp said.

Helene and Hermann Knapp were married June 21, 1952, upon their graduation from college, he from Rutgers University and she from its women's division, Douglass. They had been



COL. HERMAN KNAPP  
... missing since 1967

sweethearts since high school days in Roselle, N.J.

Knapp majored in civil engineering, but had a military obligation because of ROTC.

"He quickly fell in love with flying," Mrs. Knapp recalled. "At the end of his three-year tour, we both decided we like the travel and life in the military. He said he just couldn't picture himself behind a desk in some engineering firm."

So the Knapps traveled, and wherever they went — Okinawa, Florida, Kansas, California, Colorado — he flew airplanes and she taught school.

In June, 1963, he was assigned to the Air Defense Command in Colorado Springs, which has since become the place they think of as home.

The Air Defense Command post was not a flying job, but "he is a very aggressive pilot, so Herm got permission to stay current in the F-106 by going away on weekends to fly."

In a short time he had flown everything but the F-4, a tactical aircraft. So he applied for a transfer, got it, took six months training in Tampa, and was off to Ubon, Thailand, in September, 1966, as an F-4 fighter pilot.

"He had his accident," as Mrs. Knapp calls it, on April 24, 1967. "They were bombing a MIG base in North Vietnam, and after he had dropped his armament, ground fire hit his aircraft," a member of her husband's wing reported. "There was too much activity for anyone to see a chute," she said.

"When the men came to tell me that night, Robbie got out of his room and came and sat with me," Mrs. Knapp said. "He has a vivid memory of those men. They were not well prepared to tell me, but he could feel it was bad news."

Robbie, who now is 8, listened to his mother describe the events of that night to a reporter last week. He asked if he could say what he thought of at the time. She said yes.

"I asked Mommy if the men came to shoot us" he said.

"When did you tell me?" Cindy asked her mother during the interview. "Robbie told you right away," Mrs. Knapp said.

"I had to be honest with the children," Mrs. Knapp said. "We don't know—we keep hoping he is alive. They have dealt with it beautifully."

A few days after the news that his plane had been shot down, Robbie received a package his father had sent him for his third birthday.

"It was a copy of the poem 'High Flight' on a bronze plaque," Mrs. Knapp said. "It pretty well describes his ideals. He signed it, 'Fly high, fly true, fly proud, love Dad.' You know the poem. It ends, 'Put out my hand and touched the face of God.'"

In those early years of the war, the U.S. government asked relatives of prisoners and missing men to bear their grief alone.

"We weren't supposed to talk to anyone," Mrs. Knapp said. "That was a mistake. It was six months before I knew anyone else was missing."

She learned the names of two other wives of missing pilots from the postmaster in Colorado Springs.

"It was Christmas, 1967, and we were told we could



send a package, and the postmaster personally would see that it was properly addressed. So I asked him if anyone else had sent a similar package, and he gave me two names."

"There were three of us in Colorado Springs that Christmas. This year there are 24," Mrs. Knapp noted.

Every Christmas since 1967, she and the children have had a new photograph taken, selected a gift, maximum weight seven pounds, and taken it to the postmaster.

Two years ago the weight limit was increased to 11 pounds. This Christmas, for the first time, Mrs. Knapp didn't select the gift. The picture was taken, but she asked the Red Cross to forward it along with a standard gift.

"We've never heard a word," she said.

The children sat with their mother in their Annandale townhouse, listening to the story.

"Did Daddy get the present?" Cindy asked.

"They never tell us," her mother responded.

"If he doesn't get it, what do they do with it?" inquired Robbie.

Mrs. Knapp, fighting hard to keep her chin up, said, "We hope they give it to someone who needs it."

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