

Kin of Those Still Missing Still Wait

NYTimes FEB—1 1973

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

Special to The New York Times

SANTA CLARA, Calif., Jan. 31—For Bernice Smith, the waiting continues.

Mrs. Smith is the wife of Col. Harding E. Smith Sr., who was shot down over Laos on June 3, 1966. He is one of 311 men still listed as missing in that country—six others are considered prisoners—and nothing has yet been learned about their fate.

In her anger and disappointment, Mrs. Smith called a news conference this week to denounce the list of 555 prisoners and 55 known dead released by North and South Vietnam last weekend.

"The list is unacceptable and incomplete," she declared in a strained voice. "How much longer must these families live the anguish of uncertainty?"

'Absolutely Preposterous'

The anguish also goes on for another group, the families of 56 men who are carried on American lists as prisoners but were not mentioned in the weekend accounting. Probably the best-known case is that of Lieut. Comdr. Ronald Dodge, who was shot down in 1967 and was apparently photographed while being held captive by North Vietnamese troops.

Hanoi says it has never heard of Commander Dodge, but his wife, Janis, wants to know more. "That's absolutely preposterous," she said by telephone from her home in San Diego. "There's evidence that Ron and the others were there, whether they're alive now or not."

Most wives feel there is no reason for the Communists to withhold names deliberately, and Mrs. Dodge "won't go around fooling" herself that her husband is likely to come home. But she will not rest easy until the returning prisoners are debriefed and American teams are allowed to check camps and gravesites in Communist-held territory.

"I'll just have to wait," she said, and sighed. "I've waited this long."

Laos List 'Expected'

The families of men lost in Laos do not know what to expect. In his briefing last week, Henry A. Kissinger, the President's national security adviser, said prisoners from Laos would be released, and Pentagon spokesmen say a list is "expected shortly."

But Mrs. Smith, a former high school librarian now in her fifties, said in an interview that she was "convinced now that it was only an assumption, and maybe wishful thinking, that a Laotian list would be in with the other lists."

Uncertainty is not a new feeling for these 317 families. The "secret war" in Laos has always been marked by mystery and confusion, and Mrs. Smith is not even sure what her husband was doing that night six and a half years



The New York Times/Stephanie Maze

Mrs. Bernice Smith at her home in Santa Clara, Calif. Behind her is a portrait of her husband, Col. Harding E. Smith Sr., who was shot down in 1966.

ago when his C-47 gunship crashed in the dense jungle.

"It's been hard," she said, sitting in the living room of her small apartment here. "There's never been any word out of Laos of any kind all these years. No letters, no lists."

The confusion continued through last weekend. Mrs. Smith spent Saturday night with her only child, Harding E. Smith Jr., a 25-year-old graduate student in astronomy at the

University of California in nearby Berkeley.

First a call came for her son, saying his father was not on the list of confirmed prisoners, a report that meant Colonel Smith was probably dead. Half an hour later a call came for Mrs. Smith, with the news that no list had been released for Laos.

With the second call, Mrs. Smith broke down and cried. "As my son put it, it's so comfortable to be back in limbo rather than in hell," she said.

Mrs. Smith is plagued by the question of whether she can "trust the Communists" to turn over all the men and information they have. And like many wives, she knows many horror stories from past wars—Americans never accounted for by the Koreans, Germans held captive by the Russians, Japanese released 15 years late by the Chinese.

Bernice Smith has had "ups and downs" during the last six and a half years, but she has "built a little dream world" of hope and confidence that her husband will return. How can she keep her faith, after all this time?

"I don't have very much choice," she answered. "Do I?"