

Wives Waiting for P.O.W.'s With Hope and Anxiety

NYTimes — FEB 5 1973

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

Special to The New York Times

SAN DIEGO, Feb. 4—Sybil Stockdale bought a new Persian rug last year on her 25th wedding anniversary, but she has not put it down yet. She is waiting for her husband, Capt. James Bond Stockdale, who has been a prisoner in North Vietnam for almost eight years.

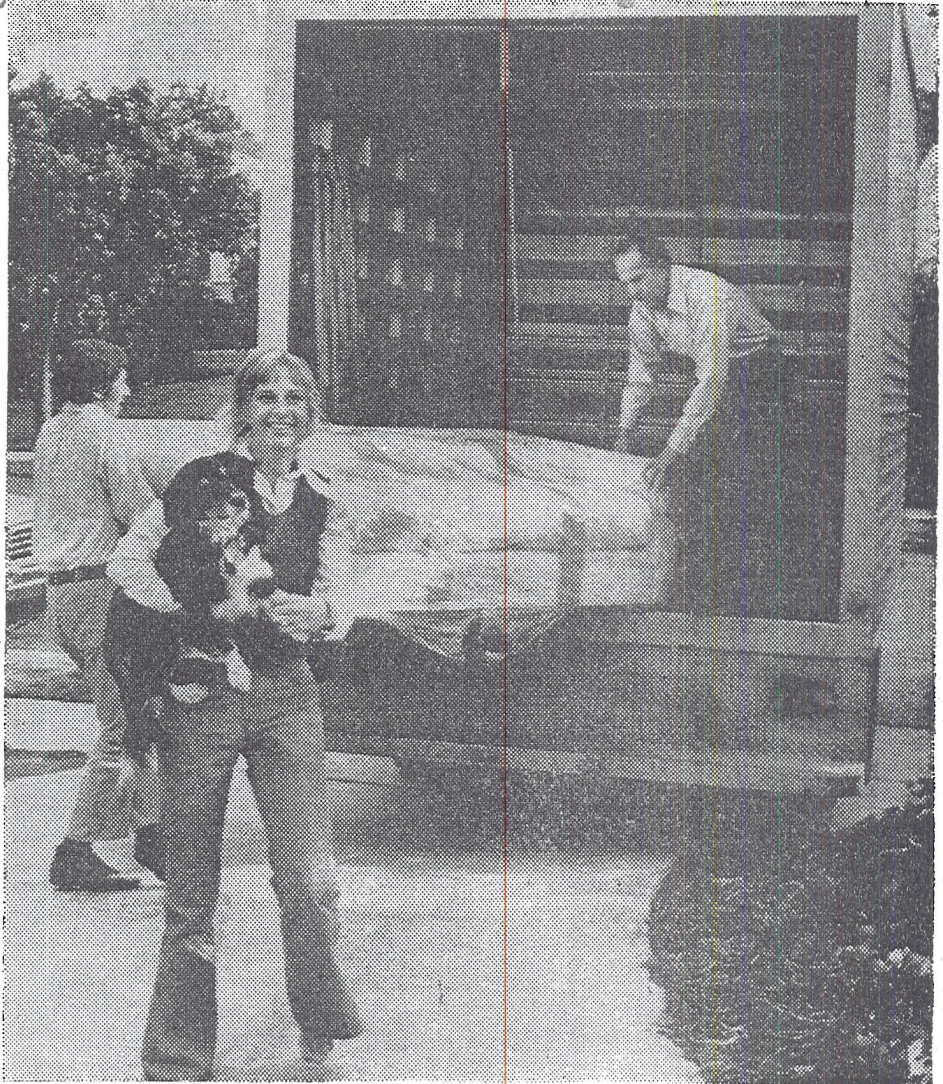
"I want the living room to look the same; I know he's pictured it that way," Mrs. Stockdale said the other day as she sat in her sunny kitchen. "I've been trying to keep the old rug alive, and I still have some more mending to do."

Across the country, the families of 562 men now confirmed as prisoners of war are preparing for their release, which could begin this week. It is a joyous time. Many of them have waited five years and more, often with very little information, never with certainty about when the ordeal would end.

They want things, like Sybil Stockdale's rug, to be the same. But they know they cannot be. And they wonder, and fear, what their men will be like, and what changes and adjustments will have to be made.

As the brother-in-law of Alice Cronin of San Diego,

Continued on Page 13, Column 1



The New York Times/D. Gorton

Alice Cronin outside her San Diego home. Delivery men bring in new couch she bought in preparation for the return of her husband, a Navy pilot held by Hanoi for six years.

Continued From Page 1, Col. 5

another P.O.W. wife, put it: "Alice, it will be the blindest blind date you've ever had in your life."

"I'm trying to reconstruct in my own mind how much has changed so he can be prepared for the changes he'll have to absorb," said Mrs. Stockdale, a lively mother of four in an embroidered wool dress. "The children are older, of course, and there's my own aging process, which would have taken place even if he were here."

Mrs. Stockdale laughed at that and continued her musing: "His hair was pepper and salt when he left, and I'm wondering how gray it is, or even if he might be white. I think he has a stiff leg, and if he does, I wonder if they'll try to repair it."

"We liked to play tennis very much. Will he be able to play? I've had the kitchen remodeled—where we're sitting used to be a pantry—and I had a bathroom put on the main floor in case he has trouble with the stairs."

"I would be very reluctant to admit I've changed," added Mrs. Stockdale, who is now 48 years old. "He liked me the way I was before."

Aware She's Changed

But she has changed. Several years ago she helped organize the National League of Families when she decided that Washington's policy of keeping the P.O.W. issue quiet was wrong. And as she put it: "I'm less reluctant to express anger and hostility now. As a conservative New Englander I always thought self-control was a virtue, but I no longer consider it a virtue."

Like many women, Sybil Stockdale worries about the marks left by a few extra pounds and many years of emotional strain. Her four sons ranged in age from 2 to 14 when her husband left, and the years have not been easy.

Divided Loyalties

The oldest son went through college during his father's absence and, as his mother put it: "He had to walk a very fine line between loyalty to his father and to his peer group. Demonstrations were going on all the time, and everybody would be going, but Jim would know very well that his father would not approve."

Outside the family there have been other changes. "Vocabulary has changed considerably," noted Mrs. Stockdale. "When Jim left, a demonstrator was a new car you drove around the block. I don't think he knows what a zip code is, or panty hose."

Sybil Stockdale knows there will be problems, but she says: "There's nothing to be depressed about. I think it's going to be great. He'll come home, we'll be together. A lot of things that once seemed important don't seem important now."

James Stockdale is coming back to a family and a home he has known for many years. Lieut. Comdr. Michael Cronin had been married only five months when he was shot down more than six years ago.

His wife, Alice, is now 30. The folk-rock music of Cat Stevens echoed from a tape deck as Mrs. Cronin, dressed in faded jeans and without shoes, told a visitor about her life since her husband's capture: a degree from the University of California, a job as a counselor to runaway girls, a leading role in a group of wives that opposed the war.

"I've grown up a great deal," said the slim, bouncy woman. "I don't have too many illusions left about life. There are two groups of wives—those who are alienated and iconoclastic and those who are pretty traditional. I'm definitely in the second group. I've lived so close to the ups and downs and deceptions of the Administration. I've never been able to believe in the war and it really did something to me. I went into the blackest depressions, I felt I couldn't cope with it any more."

Readjustment Problem

"The hardest thing was living all those years and never knowing when it would be over," she went on. "Mike's readjustment and mine will be very difficult, but I'm so happy and relieved to have the burden off my shoulders. I have a sense of renewed energy. I'm on top of the world."

Alice Cronin feels that she will need that energy to make her marriage work.

"Mike married a very traditional wife," she explained, puffing on a series of cigarettes. "I worked for a while but I didn't really like it. Now my ideas and values have changed. I've never really been married; I don't know what to expect in that state, but I do know that I have to do it in my own way. I can't sit home and cook and clean house. I'm very career oriented, and I just hope he goes along and agrees with that."

"Mike was pretty straight when we were married and I was, too," Mrs. Cronin went on. "He's missed out on a lot—living a more casual lifestyle, being nonmaterialistic. Then there are shifting

sexual mores, the whole thing about relationships not necessarily being wrong outside of marriage. I know myself really well sexually, and he's missed out on a good deal of that."

Mrs. Cronin realizes that for six years her husband has focused most of his attention on her, and the thought is a bit frightening.

"Other men can think about their kids, but in this case it's just me," she said. "All his hopes rest on what happens between him and me."

In the midst of her uncertainty and frustration, she

sometimes wished that he had died at the time of his capture.

But now, Alice Cronin is ready to try. As she talked, moving men brought in a new couch, a large white couch with comfortable cushions. This week, a team of 37 Navy volunteers is coming to paint the whole house. She feels almost like a bride again. But this time she is marrying a stranger.

When Capt. Harry T. Jenkins last saw his family, he had a 13-year-old son. Today he still has one. But that boy, Kirk, was five years old in 1965 when his father's plane

exploded in a ball of flame. And Chris, who was 13 at the time, is now 21.

In fact, Chris was supposed to get married yesterday, but at the last minute, the bride postponed the ceremony.

"It was a great effort to do that," said Marjorie Jenkins, the bridegroom's mother. "It was supposed to be a big white wedding, six rooms, bridesmaids, groomsmen. I didn't feel it was up to me. I have no idea what physical or mental shape my husband is in, and I thought it was best to go ahead. But the children said, no, they wanted to wait for Harry to come back."

Like Sybil Stockdale, Marjorie Jenkins has been buoyed up by a long and stable marriage. Her three children—the middle one is a 15-year-old girl—have helped anchor her life, but they have also presented their own problems.

"My daughter has never really known any masculine image at all to follow," said Mrs. Jenkins, now 42. "I wonder how it will affect her choice of a man later in life; this is a very bad thing. She hasn't brought around any scrounge yet, but I'm very curious to see. There are so many types around these days."

When a reporter suggested that Captain Jenkins might not even recognize some of those "types," his wife laughed.

"He'd have them all court-martialed," she chortled. "He hasn't even seen long hair yet. He'll think we've all gone mad."

"He won't believe the clothing on the kids, either," she went on. "To him, you only wore jeans out in the fields, to dig. He'll think the whole younger generation looks like young pigs. He probably thinks of his delicate little girl in dresses, but she hasn't worn a dress since we've moved down here."

The family has received only five letters in all this time, and they have caused some consternation.

As Mrs. Jenkins put it:

"I'm sure he idealizes us a great deal. In his last letter there was one sentence that was very revealing. He said, 'I must be an exceptionally unusual man to have such beautiful memories.' He was reminiscing about decorating the Christmas tree. But I was a sad wreck this Christmas and it didn't strike me as beautiful at all. He only remembers the good things, which is a terrific attitude to take, but it could be a huge problem."

"In another letter he said he had a beautiful picture of us sitting around and arranging flowers. It struck us as so funny because Karen is definitely not the flower-arranging type. When we got the letter, I suggested to her that it might be a good idea to take home ec, and she said, 'We'll have to accept Daddy no matter what shape he's in, and he'll have to accept us no matter what shape we're in. I don't like to sew.'"

"She had a much more adult attitude than I did. I was ready to turn myself inside out to please him. There will have to be a lot of accepting on both sides."