

Md. Parents Await POW Call But Don't Know What to Say

By John Saar

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If the POW release plans go as scheduled, the phone will ring in a Maryland home sometime today and Ted Bell will receive a call from the Phillipines, from his son Jim, just freed after seven years of captivity in North Vietnam.

Waiting "restlessly and impatiently" with his wife Miriam at their home near Cumberland, Md., the elder Bell said yesterday: "I've thought about it, but I'm doggoned if I know what I'm going to say."

When his wife interrupted to say she would ask, "How are you?", Bell added: "Yes, that is our main concern. We can't get over wondering what his physical and mental condition is and how his morale is."

A 1954 Annapolis graduate, Cdr. James F. Bell, 41, was downed over North Vietnam on Oct. 16, 1965, while flying a reconnaissance mission from the carrier Independence.

He was posted missing in action and his family went through the now familiar agonies of apprehension.

"Six or so months after he was posted missing they changed his classification to prisoner of war, but for four years we heard nothing

from him," said the father, a 69-year-old retired businessman.

Then in December, 1969, the family received a six-line letter.

"We just about tore the house down over that one," he recalled.

Through the four years when nothing was heard of their son, the Bells kept faith that he was alive. They felt the chances were very good because his navigator had written home and was an acknowledged prisoner. "We did everything we could to remember him and hope he was alive. He was on our minds constantly," said the elder Bell.

Although the letter dispelled any fears that he might not have survived, another fear grew.

"None of those who've come back have seen him and we've never been able to identify him from any pictures and I've looked a lot. We wonder why this is, and you can't help but wonder if anything's wrong—but I don't think so," the elder Bell said.

He added that when his son left to fly a combat tour in Vietnam in the spring of 1965 he absolutely believed in what he was doing. "I think he's going to be pretty disgusted with me and others to let this happen (the antiwar movement) in his absence. It's a shame we permitted it to happen."

They have many questions for their son, Bell said, but just as they intended to handle his homecoming, they will respond to his wishes first. "I'm sure he's going to want to know about his three children," he said. "The two youngest don't remember him at all, they are 9 and 7."

"When he left, his daughter Anne was 2 weeks old. Now she's taking dancing lessons."

Waiting for word of that first phone call is one of Cdr. Bell's two sisters, Mary Kick, 8521 Thame Street, Springfield, Va.

"Right now I am the luckiest person in the world," she said yesterday.

While promising "woe" to anyone who tried to keep her away from her brother, she said that plans for his homecoming would have to wait until they had talked to him and found out his condition. "There'd be no use me making nutty cookies to find he'd lost his beautiful teeth."

Nan Burer, the wife of another returning prisoner, was monitoring newscasts of the release operation at her home in Rockville and waiting for a call. Her husband, Air Force Maj. Arthur W. Burer has been a prisoner in North Vietnam for almost seven years. "After I get that call I'll talk to anyone," she said yesterday. "Right now I'd rather not say anything."