

The Big Changes in

By Leroy F. Aarows
Washington Post Service

Nearly nine years ago, Everett Alvarez Jr. drove with his bride of three months, Tangee, and his sister, Delia, then 22, to San Diego to board the aircraft carrier Constellation bound for Vietnam.

It was a good time, still an optimistic time. Ev — "Junior" they call him at home — was a young, gung ho Navy lieutenant (j.g.), 26, who had set out to be an engineer and instead decided he wanted to fly jets. Flying excited him ever since he used to fashion model planes in the 1950s in Salinas.

Junior Alvarez came home to Santa Clara Friday, nine years older, his hair graying; home to a world that had turned topsy-turvy while he lived suspended, as in a time capsule, for eight years and five months in a North Vietnam prison camp.

'GREAT'

"The United States is a great country," he said. "People don't realize what they have until they don't have it."

His wife Tangee divorced him last year, has remarried and borne a child, leaving behind a legal tangle over allotment payments. Sister Delia, nine years ago a shy, young college girl, has become a militant, vocal activist in the anti-war and Chicano movements.

His mother, Soledad, 53, then a conventional housewife in the Mexican tradition, has made public statements against the war, studied the history of Southeast Asia, received a driver's license for the first time, and gone back to school to get her high school degree.

Youngest sister Madeleine, a child of 12 when Everett left, will be married this June.

CHANGE

Outside the immediate family, the landmarks of Everett Alvarez's existence will be almost unrecognizable. His college, the University of Santa Clara, then a small, elitist all-male Jesuit school, has tripled in size, gone coed—even in the dormitories—and has had its share of disruption.

a POW's World

And, in his home town of Salinas, those very lettuce fields where he and his buddies did their drinking have become the battleground of an ethnic and social struggle the dimensions of which he could not have tried to imagine in 1964.

There was no Chicano movement then; no women's liberation, no student rebellion. For those who have watched the POW homecomings the nagging question remains: How would these men react to the turmoil and anguish of a society that telescopes a half-century of change into a single decade?

SISTER

His sister Delia, now 31, pondered those questions a few days ago — Delia, who called the war racist, who told the press she would try to convince her brother that "Chicanos are the Vietnamese of this country."

"I remember his cruise on the Connie (the Constellation). In those days everything was so different. I was so excited then, because he got to travel. We were very close. We always wrote.

"Now? Now, I don't know. Sure, I'm apprehensive. I'm not going to pressure him. Politically we might be far apart. We probably are. But there's too much in our

background for him to come and say, 'My loudmouth sister'."

Family ties had always been the mortice of Alvarez' life. He was brought up in Salinas, where his parents lived in a modest house in the "white" section of town.

The Alvarez family lived a middle-class existence by the standards in those days. Everett Senior held a series of jobs as a plumber and metal worker. The family associated mostly with the small, tight circle of brothers, sisters and cousins.

"Growing up was different

for us," Delia recalls. "In those days, if you were a Mexican, you were a wet-back. My brother and I, we had to be 'white' in order to make it. It was like growing up between two cultures. We were afraid to get too brown."

Alvarez was quiet, a loner, extremely studious, and fascinated by athletics. His prowess in track and football brought him into a circle of Anglo friends.

If Alvarez was conscious of racial or social differences he never gave any indication of it to his closest

friends.

"I don't think I ever heard Ev speak Spanish," recalled Phil LaForce, who ran track with him and has remained a lifelong friend.

Alex Zermeno, a cousin who was in Alvarez's class, and who went on to be a leader in the Mexican-American movement, remembers:

"Everett was All-American. He was always the quieter, shy guy, me-



LT. CMDR. EVERETT ALVAREZ JR. AT TRAVIS LAST WEEK
He stepped off the plane into an almost unrecognizable society

Family Portraits



SOLEDAD ALVAREZ
The mother



EVERETT ALVAREZ SR.
The father



ALVAREZ' SISTERS, MADELEINE AND DELIA
'In those days everything was so different'

thodical, controlled. He never questioned society or the institutions. He just went right through them and survived them."

Alvarez will now find a different Salinas (where much of his family lives, although his parents moved to Santa Clara in 1958). Their old family house is there, and the grocery store across the street.

But, next to the Sherwood Elementary School which he attended, is a new presence — the headquarters of the United Farm Workers of America with its bright red and black Huelga flags.

RESULTS

And, were he to revisit Salinas High School, where he won letters in track and football in 1955, he would see — in addition to wildly coiffured males and micro-skirted females — the overt results of the new ethnic consciousness among Mexican-Americans.

Young Chicanos gather in clusters in the hallways, rarely mixing with the Anglos. A Mexican-American youth club exists, and a separate Chicano newspaper. New federal programs provide bilingual education and self-realization courses for children of Mexican migrant workers and resident Mexican-Americans.

For some, there is a sadness to the changing order. Art Gallegos, chairman of the English department, who taught Ev Alvarez 17 years ago, and who is one of only two or three Mexican-American teachers in the school, remarked, "When Everett was here, there were never any racial problems. I don't mind the militancy, but I don't care for the separation. You look around the campus, they're divided. You have Mexican-American segregated here, others here. I just don't like it . . ."

But the efforts to make those of Mexican descent aware of their heritage is hailed by others, like Mike McGraw, an Anglo who supervises English language programs for migrant youth.

REVERSED

"The attitude toward the Mexican national and the Mexican-American has completely reversed.

"There are kids here from the very neighborhood Everett Alvarez grew up on, who would treat him like dirt. To them, he sold out. He was very successful, and boy, they just can't cope with people like that.

"But, more and more, they are learning they can make it, too. This community, largely because of the forcefulness of the militant families, has moved toward providing opportunities that never existed before."

In his day, Everett Alvarez and a few of his contemporaries were the exceptions. They made it. For his higher education, he chose University of Santa Clara, a tiny school of 1000 men which began as a Spanish mission in the 18th Century.

ADVERTISEMENT

Secluded, cloistered, Santa Clara afforded a rarefied ivory tower atmosphere where Alvarez could pursue his ambitions toward an engineering degree. He studied hard, dated little. His pals were older, more settled classmates.

Everett was graduated in 1960 and went away immediately to flight school at Pensacola, Fla. Today, the sight of his old university probably would shock him. There are a dozen new buildings (including a new engineering complex). Enrollment has tripled. Women students roam the campus and share dormitories with men.

"Coming back to this campus would be a tremendous difference," said admissions director James Schweichardt. "We are becoming more reflective of society at large, slowly breaking down the real shelter the university used to be."

Are there any shelters left? Everett Alvarez might wonder.

He married Tangee in

March, 1964. It was a big family affair and all of Alvarez's closest friends were there.

Tangee was young, beautiful and dependent and, friends and relatives say, they were very much in love. Two months later Alvarez left for Vietnam and three months after that his Navy A-4E Skyhawk plane was shot down during a retaliation raid ordered by President Johnson during the Gulf of Tonkin affair.

LETTERS

Five long years later, with just a handful of letters to sustain her, Tangee told a reporter, ". . . almost a whole lifetime. These should have been the best years — especially for him . . . It never crossed my mind that something like this could happen. If only I had thought of it before, maybe we could have said something to each other, talked it over . . ."

The following year, Tangee filed for divorce. She

had met someone else and wanted to remarry. Word came from Alvarez that he hoped whoever it was would "love her as much as I do." But it was not to be without ugliness. Alvarez's family claims that Tangee continued to receive allotment checks after her divorce and remarriage. A lawyer has been hired.

For Ev Alvarez, a return of joy mixed with anguish and ferment. A time of decision.

"The bitter part is the wife," said Andy Zermeno. "He might get into a depressed state for a while."

If there was bitterness or doubt in Lieutenant Commander Everett Alvarez' mind when he stepped off the C-141 Starlifter at Travis Air Force Base Friday to take up his life where he left off, it was not evident.

If there was to be questioning, if there was to be a reckoning, it would come later. For now, he would tell us, "Mr. and Mrs. America, you did not forget us."