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P.O.W. Wives Who Chose New

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LOS ANGELES, March 5—Comdr. Raymond A. Vohden had been a prisoner of war for more than six years when he wrote to his wife, Bonnye, and urged her to "make a new life."

Last year, Mrs. Vohden filed for divorce and explained, "The children and I had no life, because we were in prison, too."

Other wives of P.O.W.'s faced similar decisions. Many waited, sharing their husbands' isolation; but some chose to "make a new life." And now that their husbands are coming home, these wives are faced with a wrenching choice between that new life and their old one.

"I'm sure there will be a lot of divorces," said the wife of one returning Navy officer. "Some wives are no longer in love with their husbands; they're in love with the men they met later."

Soon after Mrs. Vohden filed for divorce, the peace talks resumed. Then came the cease-fire, and the word that her husband would be among the first prisoners released.

'We'll Work It Out'

When he reached Clark Air Base in the Philippines, Commander Vohden called his wife; he was deeply upset, and she agreed to drop the divorce proceedings.

"I don't know what things will be two months from now," she said at the time from her home in Memphis. "We'll work it out day by day. He's so excited and happy that I'm feeling that way, too."

Then last week Commander Vohden told a news conference that he was going to take a trip, "just to kind of enjoy life."

But he was going alone.

As Mrs. Vohden put it:

"After the exhilaration of coming home, he's been depressed. Unfortunately, he didn't find things the way he left them eight years ago and it's hard. I think the best thing would be for him to be alone and to work out some of these things."

Commander Vohden acknowledged that things were not the way he left them.

"Most shocking to me is the sexual revolution, and I'm not a prude," he said.

Perhaps a dozen P.O.W.'s were divorced while they were in captivity. Many more are coming home to women who have a lot of new ideas, and not just about the "sexual revolution." After so many years of forced independence, few wives remain subservient homebodies.

Capt. Galand Kramer of Tulsa found out he was divorced when he was released two weeks ago. His former wife, Mary, explained that she was no longer the "neat and docile" person he had left.

"We've grown apart," said Mrs. Kramer, who now works for Representative James R. Jones, Democrat of Oklahoma. "I felt it would be difficult for us to be together. I could either exist or live. Life has too many facets to dwell on one."

Relationships Developed

It has been a rather open secret in most military communities that some P.O.W. wives entered relationships with other men. These wives point out that they often went years without knowing whether their husbands were dead or alive. Even after the men did show up on prisoner lists, there was never any guarantee that they would survive, nor any definite date for their release.

As one P.O.W. wife explained her feelings: "My husband is with the living dead and I'm with the living living. I don't want to live as if I were dead."

"A lot decided to stay faithful," said one wife who did so, "until they met a man who was attractive."

"I successfully fulfilled my own needs, I did what was best for me," said another wife, who lived with a man for several years. If the cease-fire had not been signed, she would have gotten a divorce.

"I'd given enough," said the young woman, whose husband was a prisoner for more than six years. "I did my share. I couldn't continue that way."

The prisoners discussed

the possibility of infidelity and divorce in the camps, but there was no consensus of opinion. As Col. Raymond Merritt, the father of six, put it at a press conference last Friday.

"We knew life did have to go on. In many cases our families didn't know if we were ever coming back. People need love, they need care, and seven or eight years is an awful long time. We did recognize the possibility was there, but we didn't know how we would react till we got back."

Some Women Torn

The decisions are particularly painful for wives who feel torn between two men. One P.O.W. wife described a friend, whose husband is still being held, this way:

"She has a serious relationship now. This guy is very much in love with her and she is with him. But she was very happily married before her husband was captured and she's very concerned about her children. A divorce is less likely because of the children, but it's very hard for both of them. They knew intellectually that it was going to be over some-

Life Face Dilemma

time, but until they actually confronted it, they didn't know it would be such an emotional trauma."

Another wife broke off a lengthy affair several years ago, partly out of feelings of guilt, but she is not sure she did the right thing.

"One of the most painful things in this whole business," she confessed, "was to lose that really important relationship. I could have been married to him for four years now instead of being alone all that time."

Some wives intend to tell their husbands everything,

others will pretend nothing happened. But as one wife put it, "Some of them have little kids, and I wonder if one of them will slip some day and say, 'Remember when Tom or Dick or Harry was here.'"

Some marriages will not survive, but many others will. Take Lieut. Comdr. William Shankel of Jackson, Calif., who was "kind of engaged" to a girl before he was shot down on Dec. 23, 1965. A week after he returned in the first group of prisoners, they were married.