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Jersey Airman Enjoys Easter at Home After 5 in Hanoi

By LAURIE JOHNSTON

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ALLOWAY, N. J., April 22—Major Joseph S. Abbott Jr., who spent the last five Easters in the "Hanoi Hilton," decorated eggs with his wife and seven children this weekend and sat down with them today to a baked ham and a bunny-cake with "ears" lined with pink coconut.

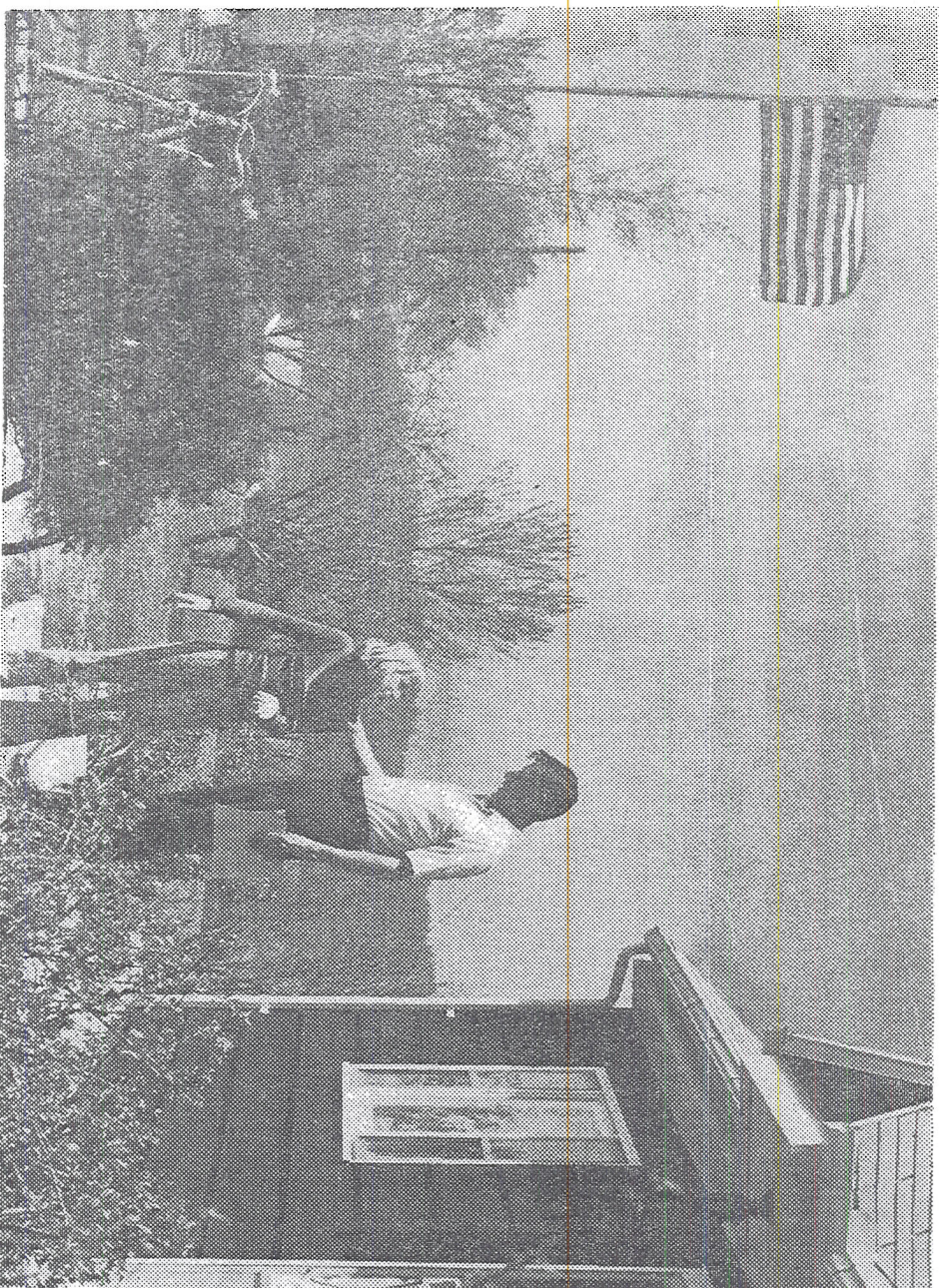
The ham came from last fall's butchering at his sister-in-law's place nearby in this dairy and farming countryside in Salem County, south of Camden, where the 38-year-old Air Force officer and his wife, Joan, met in grammar school.

"We've saved a whole ham every Year saying: 'If father gets home for Easter...'" Mrs. Abbott said. "It's been a little hard to swallow, other Easters, even with potato salad. But today it will really taste good."

First, however, the Abbotts said a mealtime prayer they have used since Major Abbott's F-105 was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967 but revised when he came home March 3.

It used to begin: "God, please

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Maj. Joseph S. Abbott, former prisoner of war, with a daughter, Elizabeth, outside their home in Alloway, N.J.

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take care of our daddy and bring him home real soon."

Now it has a happy beginning to go with a happy ending: "God, thank you for taking care of our daddy and bringing him home safe. Thank you for the fruits and vegetables from our garden and for all our family and friends."

Mrs. Abbott, working on an electric-freezerful of pineapple ice cream, squeezed the tears back from her brown eyes as she described the two versions.

Matthew, the youngest child, who will be 7 in August, was one week old when Major Abbott left his family in the house they had just bought. Joanie the oldest, is now 16 and Dotty is 15. Joe Jr., 14 in May, is as tall as his 6-foot-one father. Danny is 13 and the twins, Elizabeth and Charles, are 10. And Major Abbott confessed that he did sometimes feel a bit like a stranger.

"You know how it is with a household—the wife and kiddies set up their own routine," he said with a touch of sadness but an understanding smile. "But they're all good kiddies. It just takes a while to get to know them again and to get involved."

"One of the biggest shocks,"

he added, "is the aging process that has taken place in all of us, including Joan and myself. It's quite a period of time for people of our age."

Feted so continuously with parades and public appearances that "I just pass through here every now and then," Major Abbott had to compete at home with the frogs visiting the small swimming pool and the perch in a pond on the family's five acres. With a good deal of sweet-talking and touching, he dealt with children asking permission to go fishing or off to other urgent business.

"They can't just sit around here and not live their lives," he said. Smiling happily as yet another door banged somewhere, he said, "That's not noise. That thing over there is noise," he added, pointing to the television set. "It's driving me up the wall. All the shootin' and the bangin' and the carryin' on. Yech!"

A two-foot chocolate rabbit labeled "Papa Bunny" was a gift to the returned prisoner-of-war from student nurses at the Philadelphia General Hospital, where Mrs. Abbott had resumed her nurses training until his return.

"It's hard to find time to talk to him—the big ones go to bed late and the little ones

get up early—but I'm not going to send him back," said Mrs. Abbott, laughing across at her husband. "And I don't care where they send him next," we're all going together." Major Abbott will be reassigned when his convalescent leave ends in May.

Danny, with a freckled face and a small cowlick, pondered the question of how he liked having two parents instead of one. "How much time have we got?" he said with a grin.

Reddish-haired Matt, in a gentle tussel with his father, said: "It's funner."