

# How One POW Lost a Marriage

Associated Press

Memphis, Tenn.

For the nearly eight years he was held captive in the Hanoi Hilton prisoner-of-war camp, U.S. Navy Commander Raymond A. Vohden prayed for the moment when he would finally be reunited with his wife and two children.

This week he will file for divorce.

Vohden — the fourth American pilot shot down over North Vietnam — says he wants to tell the story of his descent from happy family man to bitter divorce seeker because it may help other former POWs adjust to the realities of coming home.

"I've been through an emotional wringer since I got back," he said in his



AP Wirephoto

RAYMOND A. VOHDEN  
He prayed for reunion

lawyer's office in Memphis as he put the final touches to the divorce petition. "I hope this will clear the air at last."

## 'EVIDENCE'

On the table were letters to his wife from other man, bar bills, canceled checks, and other paraphernalia to back his request to the circuit court in Memphis to end his 13-year-old marriage with Bonnye Jean Vohden.

His wife said in a telephone interview, "I won't contest the divorce. He was away for so long I made the best of life without him. I could not live in a vacuum. When he came home, I found it impossible to turn back to what I was before he left."

Both of the Vohdens have been in the public eye. Bonnye Jean was active in campaigns to bring the POWs home and once made a publicized trip to Europe to pressure North Vietnamese embassies.

Commander Vohden, 42,

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# POW's LOST MARRIAGE

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was the first American POW to pass into American hands in the initial release ceremony in Hanoi on February 12. Pictures of him on crutches leaving the first hospital plane at Clark Air Base were on the front pages of many American newspapers.

Vohden gave a press conference later in Memphis but remained silent about his marriage problems.

As he told the story of his collapsing marriage to this reporter, the gaunt-faced pilot was sometimes near tears. He said apologetically, "In prison I could take the physical pain. I lived eight years on crutches because I broke my right lower leg in two places when I bailed out . . . But the emotional test of the past few weeks has been hard to pass. You build up a lot of love in eight years of dreams from a prison cell. Then comes the reality," Vohden said.

Many other POWs are having to face up to the same emotional realities, Vohden declared. "Four of my close friends I shared cells with are facing major difficulties," he said.

Vohden said the wives "seem to have similar behavioral patterns. They admit to relationships with other men that we regard as misconduct but which they see as the inevitable consequence of a long separation.

"And they blame us for getting captured and staying away so long; that we chose the military over them," he said.

Vohden said he didn't even know he had a marriage problem until one morning last November when a buddy came into his cell in the Hanoi Hilton and said, "Ray, I've got some bad news for you."

The bad news was a clipping from the U.S. military newspaper, Stars and Stripes, tacked up on the bulletin board by the guards.

"The headline read 'POW's Wife Seeks Divorce.' It was my wife, and she had filed in Arkansas where more than three years of separation constitutes desertion."

Vohden had then been seven years in a prison camp.

Vohden said the average of four letters he had received each year never mentioned marital trouble. "Over there, family love was something tangible you could grasp at, to fantasize upon. I decided that the clipping was a propaganda ploy.

"My ankle was crippled and I couldn't kneel but each night I lay on my straw mat under my mosquito net and told God that if my wife was waiting for me when I got out I would worship Him thankfully every Sunday that I was alive," Vohden said.

The Vohdens had married at Memphis when he was a 29-year-old Navy flyer based at the Memphis Naval Air Station. Bonnye Jean was a secretary eight years younger.

They had two children, Raymond Jr., 11, and a daughter Connye, 10.

Vohden said that during the last few months in prison he became "totally preoccupied" with the fate of his marriage. Eventually the prisoner releases began.

At Clark Air Base hospital in the Philippines, Vohden met his escort officer, who gave him an official Navy letter quoting a message from his wife that she had withdrawn the divorce petition. "But I was not happy," Vohden said. "Where was the love letter? Where were the pictures of the kids? But

at least she was not divorced — and hope springs eternal."

Later that evening, Vohden phoned his wife and demanded to know the truth. "She finally told me there was another man, but to come home and talk about it. And from then on in I did everything in my power to be on the first plane home out of Clark."

Bonnye Jean said in a telephone interview that she had met another man, but that at the time of her husband's return she thought it might still be possible to return to him as a wife.

Commander Vohden said he arrived back at Memphis late on a cold night.

"My wife and two children were waiting in a limousine. Bonnye Jean was in the back seat with my son. I gave her a hug and a kiss, but her reaction was cool. It was not like she was there waiting for me."

But Vohden said his moment of reunion was not lost. "My daughter Connye popped up from the front seat and said 'Daddy' and embraced me. I cried with joy and whenever I recall that moment I still cry," said Vohden.

Vohden and Bonnye sat on the edge of their bed till daylight talking. "She told me about the other man and I said I could forgive and forget," Vohden recalled. "She said there was nothing to forgive and I asked her: Is this what the sexual revolution means. Has the world changed that much since I have been away?"

After five nights of sleeping in separate rooms, Vohden moved out. Then came the series of emotionally wringing scenes that led him to realize it would be better to let his wife go. He even decided to seek the divorce himself.