

After Seven Years, a P.O.W. Tries to Adjust to a Changed World

By DOUGLAS E. KNEELAND

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DAYTON, Pa.—Wendell Alcorn has been gone a long time.

But kneeling in the dusty straw on the barn floor, his fingers, remembering things his mind should have long forgotten, are firm and sure as he tinkers with the rusting motor of the old grain augur.

Some things don't change. Lieut. (j.g.) Wendell R. Alcorn was a 26-year-old Navy pilot when his A-4 Skyhawk, roaring in over Halphong at 100 feet, was shot down Dec. 22, 1965, just 20 days and 28 missions after his first combat flight off the carrier Enterprise. For more than seven years, until last Feb. 12, he was locked up in a series of nine different North Vietnamese prison camps.

Now a 33-year-old lieutenant commander, his youthful face and smile still much like the younger pictures that adorn the spotless white farmhouse, he is back home like all the other war prisoners, trying to weave into the present those threads of absent years.

In some ways, for Wendell Alcorn, those missing years might never have been. He looks more country boy than naval officer as he puts around in denims and scuffed boots in the red barn, remembering.

Glanconr up at the cob-



The New York Times/Bill Winigell

Wendell A. Alcorn, former Navy pilot and prisoner of war, on a tractor on the family farm near Dayton, Pa. He was getting things in shape for sale at an auction.

webbed elevator that over the years has sent thousands of bales of hay tumbling onto the loft above, he pointed at the chain and gears near the top.

"My dad cut his finger off in that thing—in that chain up there," he said, his eyes clouding at the memory.

But some things do change. His father, John Alcorn, committed suicide in 1968, apparently overwhelmed by the ceaseless work of the 116-acre dairy farm that has been in the family for generations and perhaps by thoughts of the son who had already languished three years in the prison camps. Picking at the rotting roof of a small shed beside the barn, that son, returned, says sadly:

"If someone isn't here to fix things every day, it just all falls apart."

With his father dead and his brother, Donald, and sister, Neida, both married and living out of the state, his mother, Mrs. Ruth Alcorn, has lived alone on the once-prosperous farm at the end of a winding dirt road about seven miles west of Dayton.

A neighbor, Ray White, has rented the land to raise barley, corn and oats for his own livestock, but there has been no one to tend to the daily hammer-and-nails upkeep that it takes to stay ahead of the wind and weather.

Small Changes at Home

And for Ray Alcorn (Ray is a Navy nickname that has clung inconspicuously since everyone misguessed his middle name, Reed, in a game back in preflight days) the changes he has noticed most after being shut off from his world for seven years have been in small things, close to home.

Politics, philosophies, national goals, styles and sexual mores may have shifted drastically across the nation, but most things come slowly to Dayton, a drowsy village of about 700 persons, set amid the disappearing farms and played-out coal mines in the greening hills of western Pennsylvania, some 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

Standing in the milking shed and gazing at the empty stalls where 30 cows once stood, Ray Alcorn shook his head.

"It was quite a shock," he said, "the first time I walked down here and there were no animals around."

A Pennsylvania State University graduate in forestry, he joined the Navy in the fall of 1961 when he was unable to find a job in his chosen field. He had worked on the farm all his life, including summers while he was going to college, and had no desire to stay with it.

"You know, the first thing I noticed when I got back was that there were no fences around here," he said, appreciatively, looking off into the distance across the wooded hills and valleys. Then, he added, "I've thought about it sometimes, but I don't suppose I'll ever come back here."

So he is checking out all the equipment that has lain idle since his father's death, trying to get it into shape for sale at an auction soon.

He plans to stay in the Navy when his convalescent leave is up in July unless he can get a job as an airline pilot. Either way, his mother will once again be alone on the farm.

Climbing on the old orange Allis-Chalmers tractor to give the working parts of a hay rake a test run up across a field above the house, he mused:

"You know, even the lay of the land somehow seems different to me. This hill up here used to seem a lot steeper. But I walked up there the other day and it seemed to have flattened out."

Stopping at the top of the hill, near a row of fruit trees, he waved his arm across the landscape.

"No one's hardly farming

around here any more," he said. "There used to be an old guy over there and he's dead and the people over there and up the road are gone."

It's not that Ray Alcorn hasn't noticed other changes, besides the homely ones, since he returned to the United States. He has.

Sitting over a root beer milk shake and a cheeseburger in Dinger's restaurant, which used to be in a green shingled frame building on Dayton's unpretentious Main Street and has since moved to one next door with pink shingles, he pondered some of them.

"I suppose one of the biggest changes I've seen is the long hair on men," he said. "When I went away it was pretty well accepted that any man with long hair was a hippie type. Since I've gotten back, I've found that it doesn't mean anything — that guys with long hair are just like anybody else.

Language and Movies

"Then there are a few new expressions. The one that struck me most was 'up tight.' I'd never heard that before — and this expression 'doing your own thing.'

"I've really noticed the change in movies. I've only seen three, I guess, 'Deliverance,' 'The Godfather,' and 'Godspell,' but I wasn't very much impressed. The use of foul language, the extreme amount of violence I just never imaged they would have on the screen—those mainly were the things that turned me off."

As for the nudity in some of the popular magazines, he said that it "amazed me that they had that type of thing right out in the open."

But the change that surprised him most, as a young bachelor who has been dat-

ing heroically in an attempt to make up for seven lost years, is "all these young girls who tell they're on the pill."

Not that Dayton has been much less shocked by many of the latest trends than Ray Alcorn. In these conservative hills he has found few signs of attitudinal changes, even toward the war in Vietnam.

A strong supporter of President Nixon's Vietnam policies, like many fellow prisoners he has encountered nothing but reassurance in his reception by the home folks.

No Dissent on War

"I certainly haven't seen any dissent or apathy toward the war," he said. "As far as I can tell, everyone's been 100 per cent behind the Government."

There have, of course, been some changes in Dayton since Ray Alcorn's been gone. He had never seen the new, modern one-story elementary school that replaced the aging two-story brick one, which is now being used for storage by one of the town's two grocers. Some new buildings and black-top roads have been built at the fairgrounds where each August the Dayton Fair, the village's biggest annual event, is held.

Along Main Street, the Keystone National Bank has put up a compact brick building, knocking down the sprawling old one and leaving space for the town's first parking lot. Clark's Variety has taken over where the Faust Drug Store used to be. Reed Hoffman's Ford agency, the only car dealership in Dayton, is gone. And Preston Bittinger, the barber, was forced to move when the bank building was razed. Now, he's across the street in what was once the town's hotel, but he's getting on in years

and is only open three days a week.

Still, not everything is different. Frank Bly's Funeral Home is still there. Raymond Barrett's lumber yard remains probably the biggest business in town. And Bill Hallman

and his son, Jerry, are still operating the Dayton Feed Mill in a weathered store that's almost 100 years old. The Grange has torn down its sagging hall, but unlike the Odd Fellows, who have given up the ghost, they're still meeting — now in the headquarters of Dayton Memorial Post 995 of the American Legion.

Chatting over coffee at Dinger's, Mayor Clifton J. King, who had been Ray Alcorn's high school agriculture teacher, but who retired a couple of years ago after a series of heart attacks, thought for a bit about what shifts had taken place in the attitudes of Dayton residents in the last six or seven years.

"I would say probably there's been some progressing," he said. "I would say most of it's been for the good. I'd say more of them realize that communities have to get together, that what's good for Kittanning (20 miles to the southwest] is good for us and what's good for us is good for Kittanning.

"Oh, there's been some streets that's been paved that weren't paved. And we've got ourselves a borough garage — and we went down to Butler and bought a used grader I think will do us some good. And we bought a new truck to keep our street superintendent from getting killed and a new tanker for the fire department.

"We have done away with the old Board of Trade and we do have a new Chamber of Commerce. Now, if we could just get a small industry in, it would do so much."

Pausing again, he concluded:

"I can't think of anything else. We don't do anything very earth-shaking, I guess."

At the high school, "Welcome Wendell" was spelled out in large letters in the front windows of one wing, a reminder of Dayton's recent Wendell Alcorn Day. In his office, Leonard L. Holt, the principal, who had been there in the days when the former prisoner of war was on the school's basketball team and played the saxophone in the band and orchestra, also stopped to consider the question of change.

"Change comes a little bit slower in a rural area such as this," said Mr. Holt dapper in a gold jacket, gold shirt, striped tie and brown pants. "However, we have noticed some changes taking place. The high school student is becoming a little more sophisticated and a little more free in his thinking and his action.

"But we have no more problems than we did when Wendell was going to school. Wendell and the group he went to school with were not bad. They were lively, and they kept me hopping sometimes."

Then as his former student smiled, he asked:

"Do you remember, Wendell, the day you dropped your trousers when you went off the stage on Senior Day and exposed your polka-dot shorts?"

Seven years is a long time, but Wendell Alcorn is home, where the folks all greet him happily, where nobody calls him Ray — and where nothing changes a whole lot.