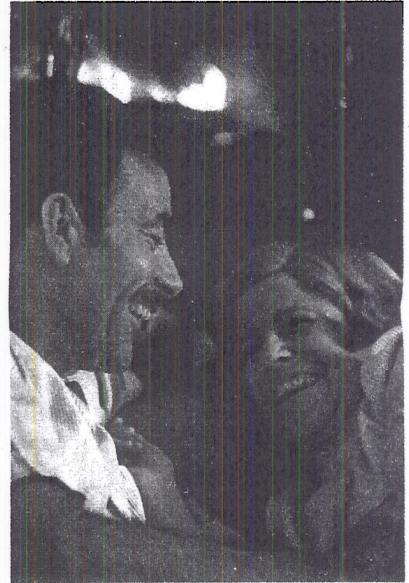
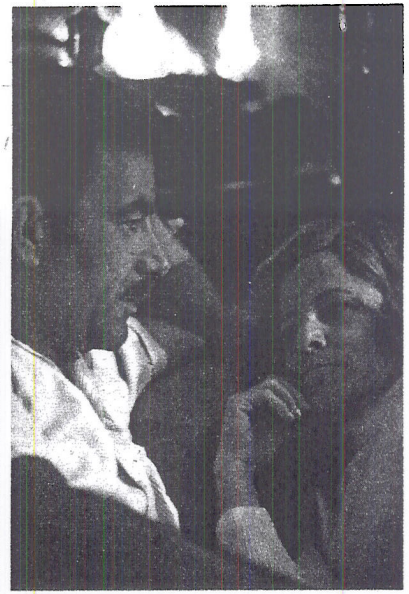


JUN 3 1973
JUN 8 1973

After the Homecoming

A P.O.W. Returns to His Family After Seven Years in Captivity

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It is the Romantic Dream, hymned in a thousand movies and songs—to lie in front of a fire with someone you love and let the rest of the world spin away. A prisoner can live for months, haunted by that kind of vision. When Maj. Art Burer returned after seven years of captivity in North Vietnam, he and wife Nan spent evening after evening sitting by the fire, trying to funnel vast emotions into short hours, recalling old moments, seen now in a strange new light, explaining and explaining to each other all the lost years.

After the Homecoming

By Donald P. Baker
Photographs by Linda Bartlett

Often at 2 a.m., Art Burer will be awake. He realizes that the front door of his split-level deep in the heart of Rockville, Md., good old U. S. of A., is unlocked. He smiles.

"My wife wonders why I get up to watch the sunrise. Sometimes I wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning, go outside in my pajamas and take a little walk, just to remind me that I'm a free man.

"For seven years, I never saw the sun rise. I never saw a horizon."

The Mission

Air Force Capt. Arthur W. Burer had done it 39 times before: taken off from Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand in his fast, sleek Voodoo fighter plane to photograph military activities in North Vietnam.

The RF-101, a circa 1955 twin-jet, single-seat reconnaissance aircraft that travels at Mach 1.5 (about 900 miles per hour), was equipped with seven precision cameras, and no weapons.

Burer was based at Misawa Air Force Base, in northern Japan, where his wife, Nan, and their four children were living, but he had been doing a series of 15-day stints of TDY (temporary duty) at Udorn.

On the morning of March 21, 1966, Burer ate two eggs, toast and coffee at the Officers Club at Udorn, paid for it with a \$10 bill, and then grabbed a roast beef sandwich and glass of milk before meeting fellow pilot Tony Bledsoe on the flight line about 2:30 p.m.

Donald P. Baker is a writer on the Metropolitan staff of The Washington Post

What happened on that 40th mission over North Vietnam "lasted only 55 seconds, but I could talk about it for an hour," Burer says.

The Approach

The mission was to photograph military installations, check on Communist infiltration and monitor movement of men and materiel about 130 miles north of the Demilitarized Zone.

Moments before Burer, on schedule as always, arrived at time-over-target, he pushed the various buttons that sent the seven cameras into action: focusing and adjusting the apertures to account for the speed (600 knots), height (2,500 feet) and weather conditions (overcast). The first task was BDA (bomb damage assessment).

The Shoot Down

"They are throwing up exploding shells, timed to go off either on contact or at a predetermined altitude. If one hits in the aircraft, it goes off on contact, which is I believe what happened to me.

"It hit the aircraft and drove right up into the belly. When I took that first hit, I knew immediately it was pretty bad.

"But I elected to stay with it in an attempt to get out to sea. I was only 10 miles from the coast, and I was running at a speed that would put me over the water in one minute, and the chances of being rescued over the water were much greater.

"But I only lasted 55 seconds."

During those 55 seconds—just five short of a possible rescue—Burer used all of his 2,500 hours of flying experience to keep the aircraft hurtling toward the Gulf of Tonkin. "I knew it was pretty marginal, but I decided to take the chance, knowing full well it was going to explode.

"Just as I approached the coast, it started to catch fire, pitched and rolled into a great big ball of fire, and at that particular point I realized the aircraft was through flying."

Burer was "taking a lot of G-forces and the cockpit was getting very hot so I just reached down and pulled the handle."

That action set in motion an ejection

procedure that Burer had been told about during training at Stead Air Force Base, but "it's not something you practice."

Burer and his seat shot into the sky over North Vietnam, and as they did, the seat belts fell off and a device kicked the pilot in one direction and the seat in another. Next the parachute deployed automatically.

"The rest of it is just a case of riding down and trying to land without harming yourself," Burer said.

The night of March 21, in Misawa, Japan, Nan (for Nancy) Burer had gone to a movie with some of the other pilots' wives. When she got home, her oldest son, Bill, who was 10, said she had had visitors.

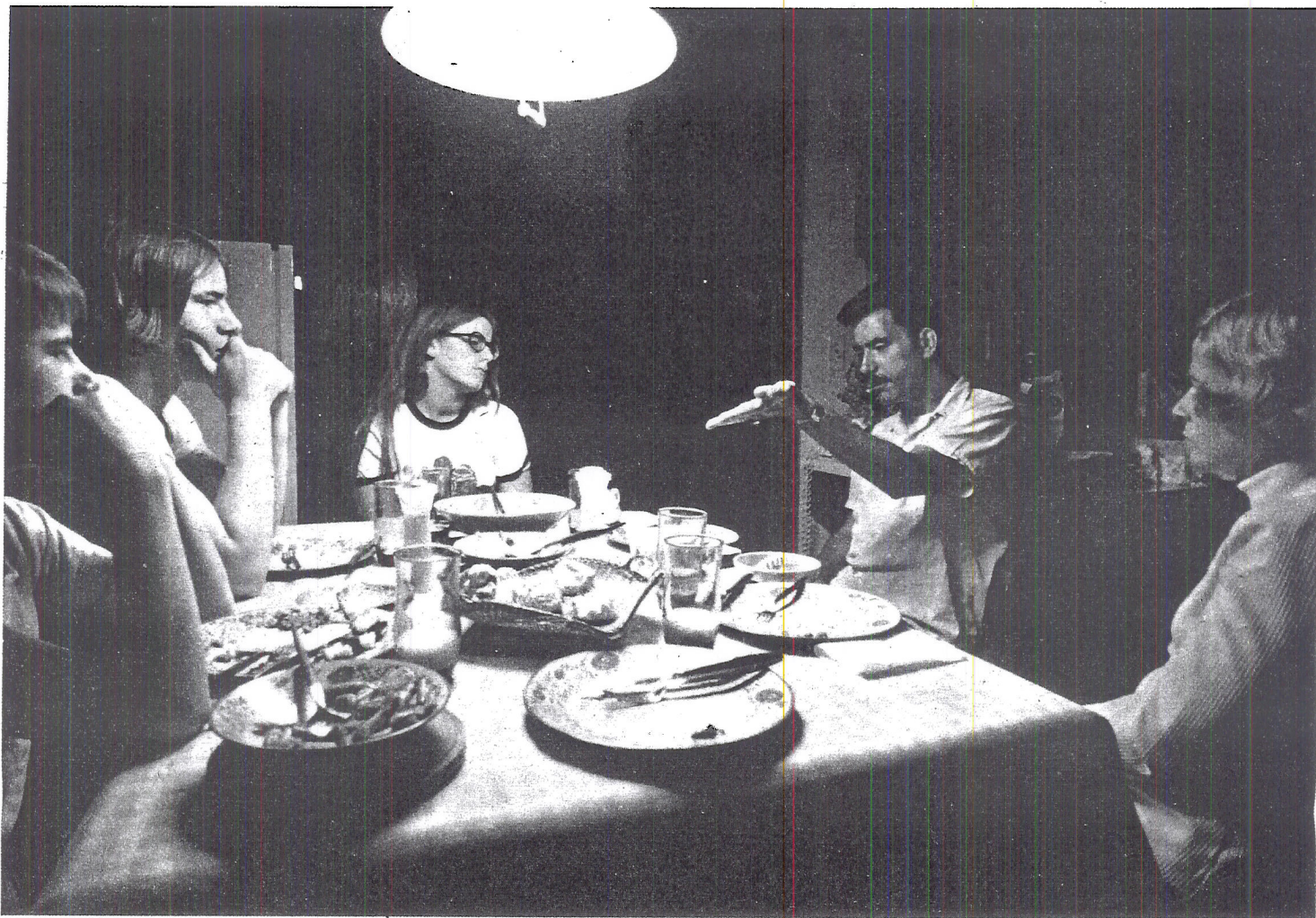
"The way he described them (the squadron commander, his wife and a chaplain), I was prepared for the worst," Mrs. Burer recalled.

"They returned and told me Art had been shot down, but that the lead pilot had seen a parachute and heard the beeper. They felt sure Art was alive."

Nan Burer awoke the other children—Norma Jean (Willie), who was 12; Winnie, 8, and Bob, 5—and told them.

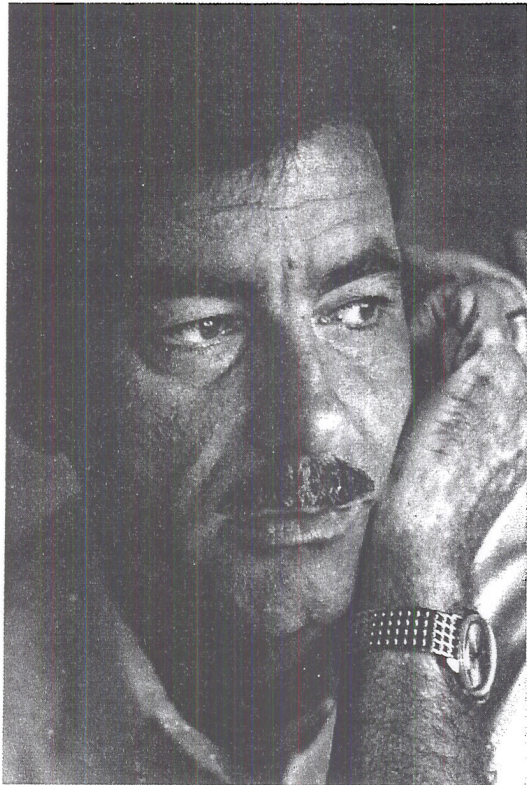
By Easter weekend, Nan and the children were back in the States, stopping in Devine, Texas, to visit with Art's parents, before coming on to the Washington area.

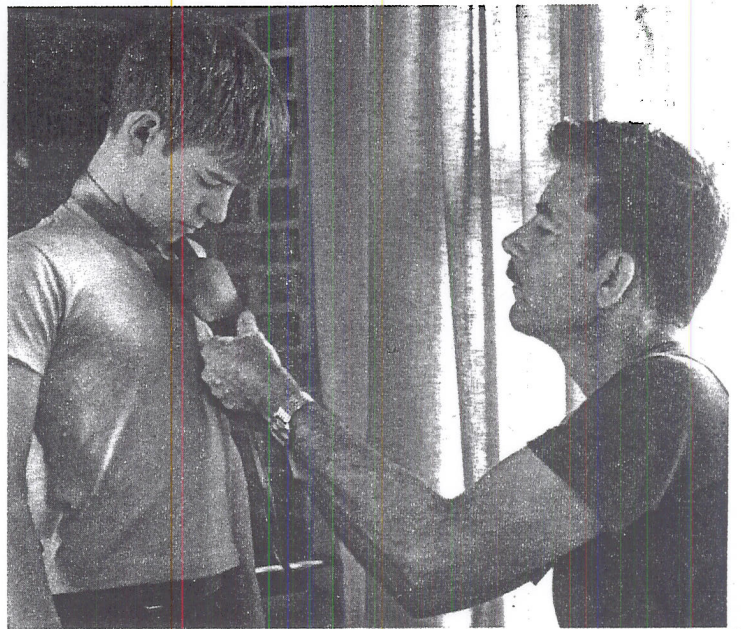
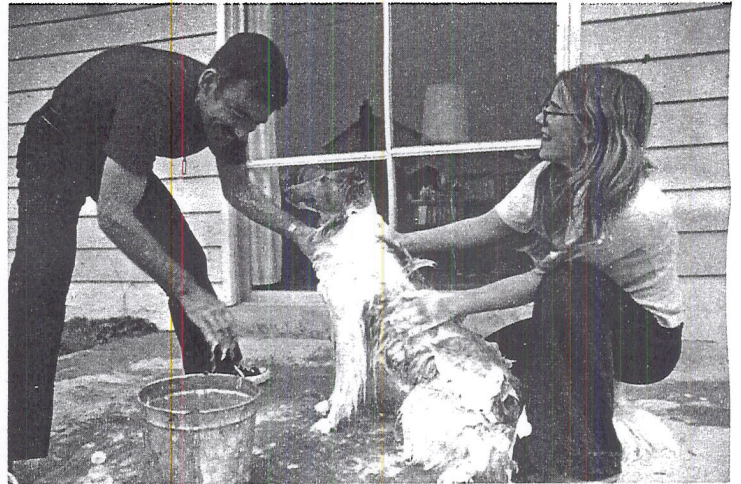
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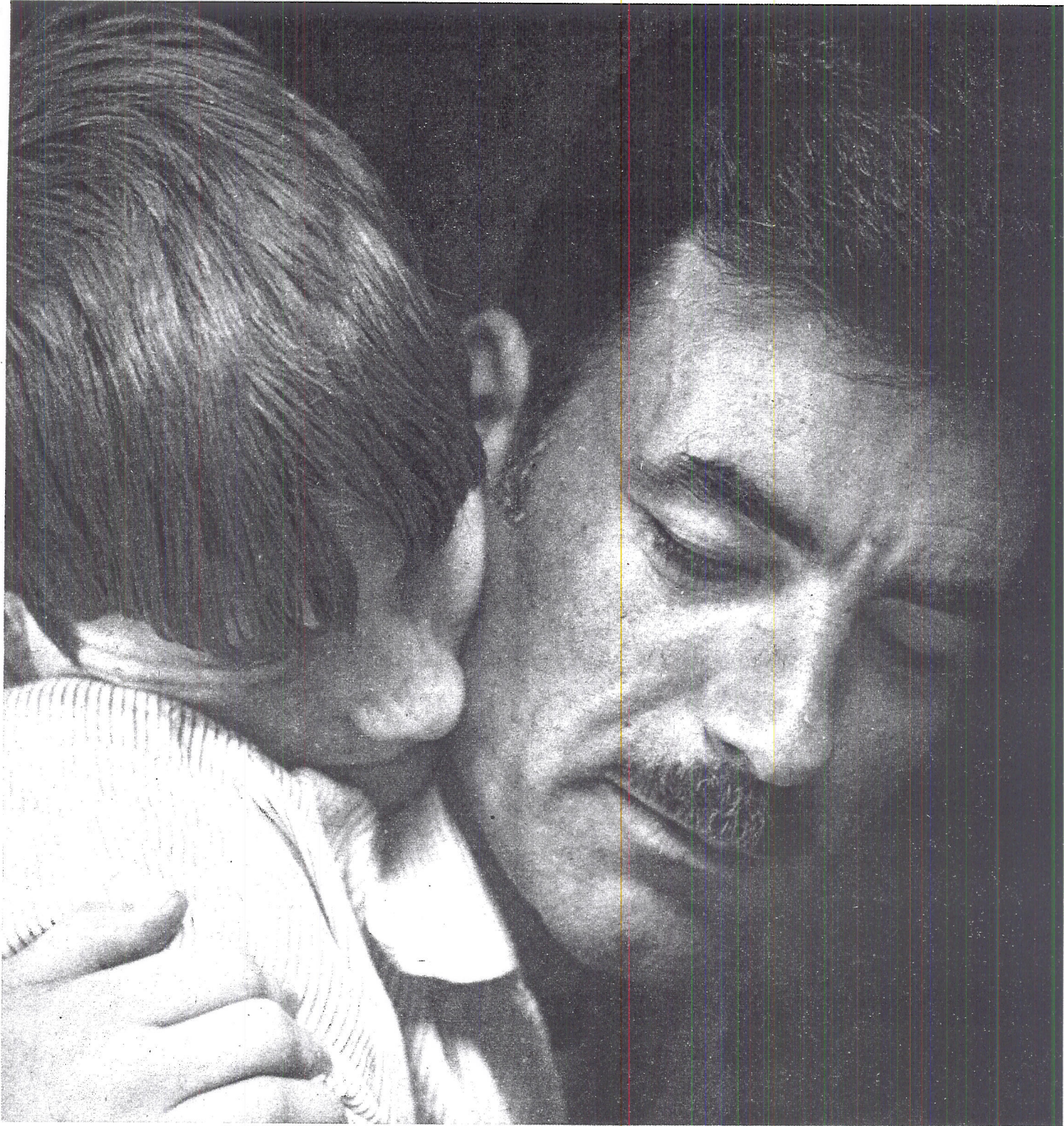
Above: Warrior's Tale: Gathered around the dinner table, the family listens to Burer describe the near-fatal moments when he was shot down. From left: sons Bobby (12) and Bill (17), daughter Winnie (15), Burer and wife. Oldest daughter, "Willie" (19) is at college in Oregon. Of the shootdown Burer recalls that after the rocket hit he tried to reach the sea to ditch his plane but "the flames were spreading and based on my experience I realized the aircraft was through flying, so I just reached down and pulled the handle." Seven years later the tale is still vivid as Burer gestures to show the plane's descent.

Left: Burer's hands still bear the scars of the burns from the shootdown. He was tortured soon after capture: They wanted basic military information, and I would not give it to them just for the asking. So they worked on me for three days, deprived me of food and water and medical care and they began a series of beatings. With their fists. They didn't hit me so much in the face because of my burned condition."





Above: To some it would appear the most prosaic of scenes, something out of Norman Rockwell's simpler vision of America: a boy chasing the family collie around a well-kept suburban yard, surrounded by brick houses that mirror each other. But for those whose last several years were spent in Hanoi prison camps, a mix of relief and pleasure overlays such scenes, such simple tasks as washing the dog with a daughter and teaching a son how to tie a proper knot, these small triumphs of normalcy.



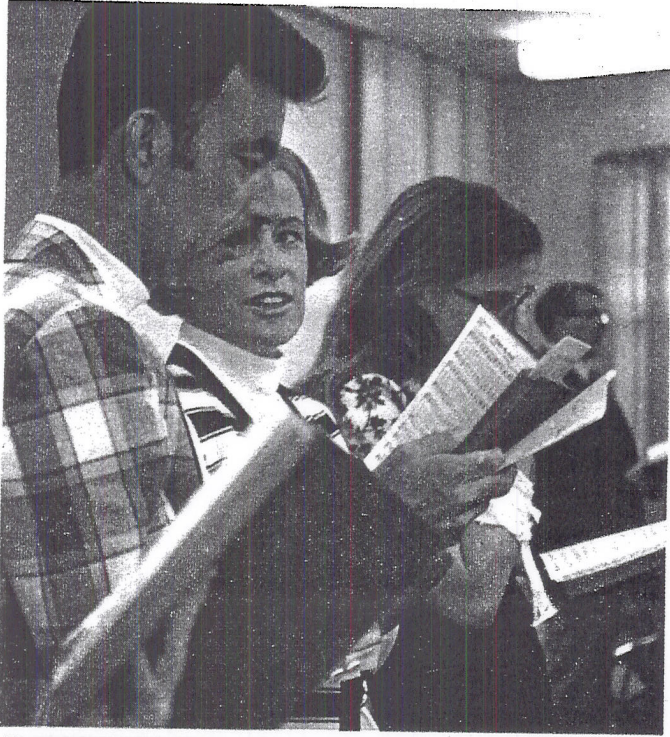
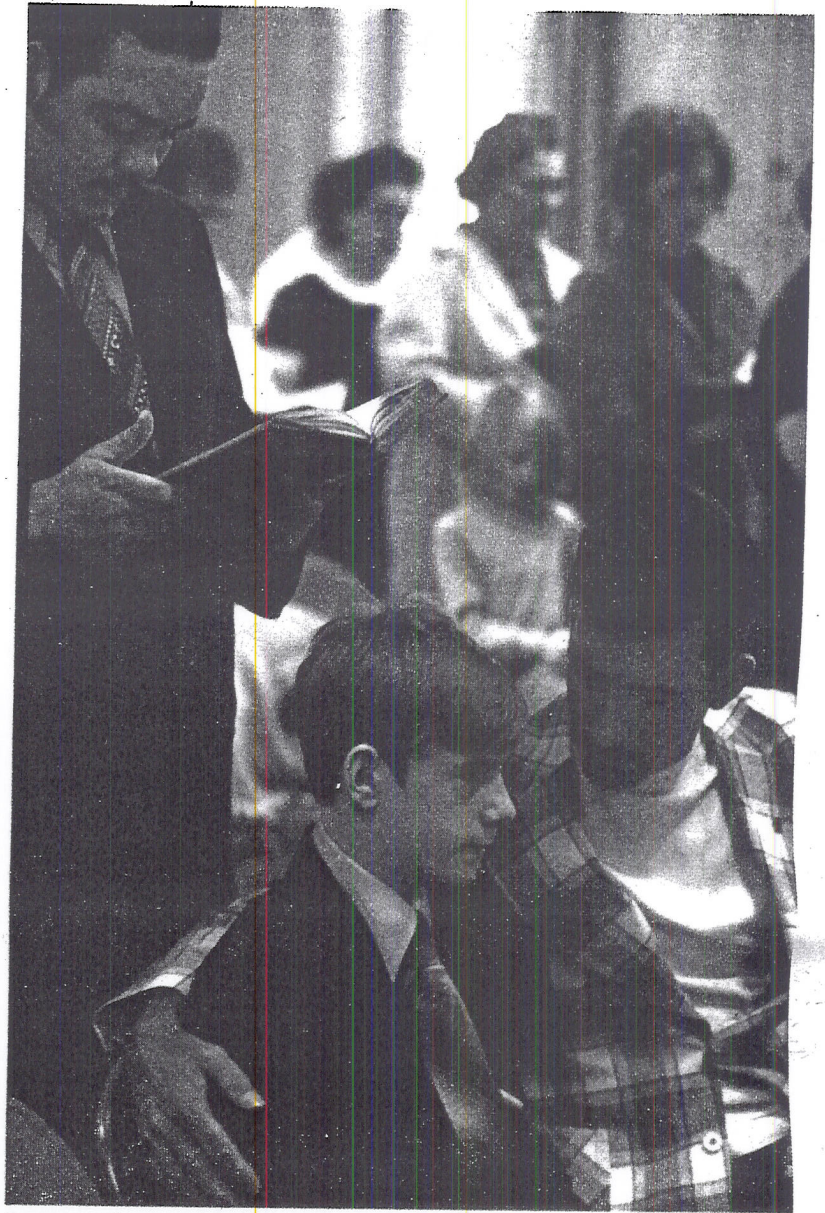
Above: Son Bobby nuzzles his father. When he left for his last mission in Vietnam, Burer recalls Bobby "was just a baby." Now he is "the easiest to get to know" of the pilot's four children and the father spends a great deal of time with his youngest child, now on the brink of adolescence. "The older two were quite far apart from me," says Burer, "I just flat out didn't know them. . . But we're all trying to get to know each other."

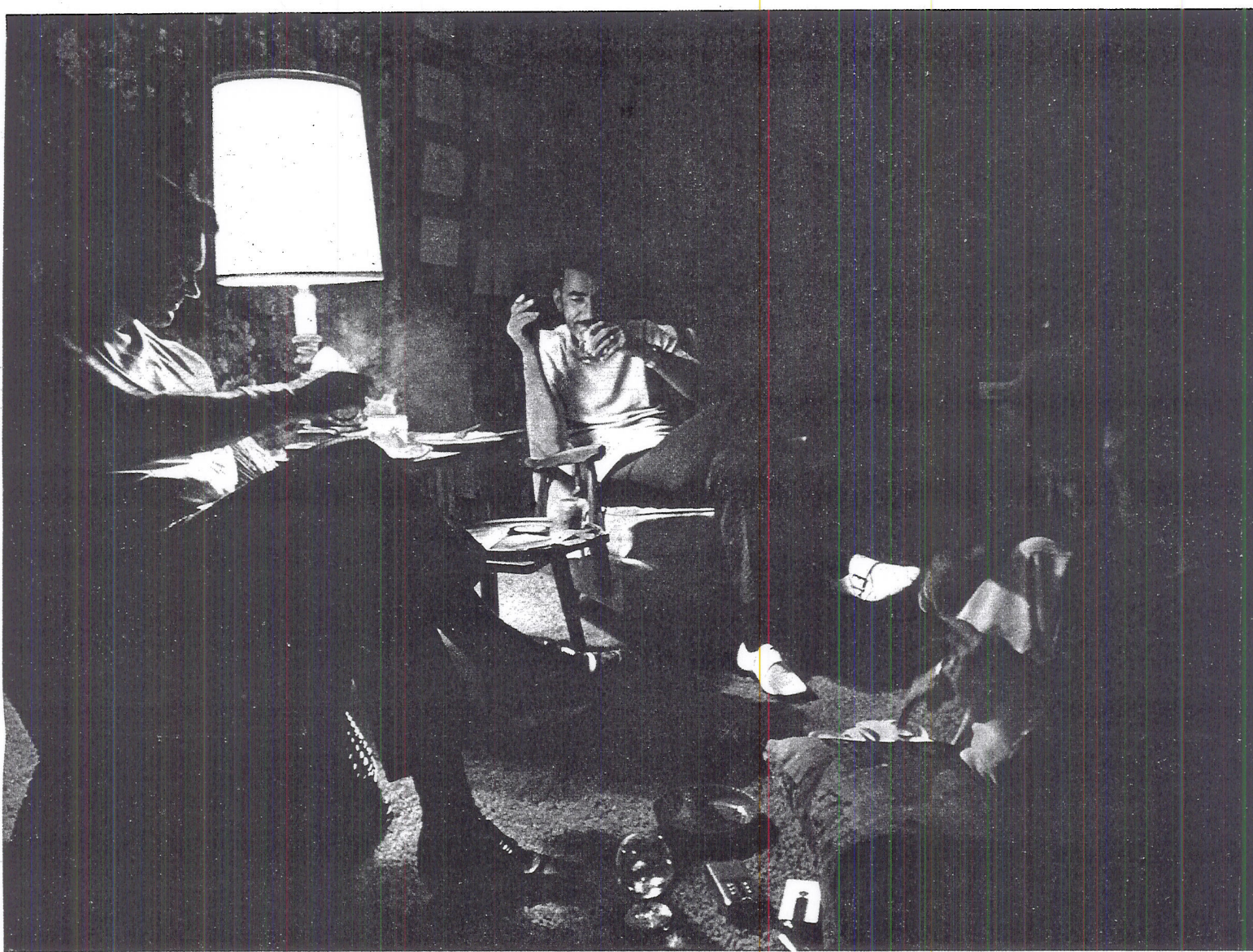
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The Washington Post/Potomac/June 3, 1973

Right: Father and son on a special day: Bobby is going to declare his "testimony of faith" prior to baptism and joining the Baptist Church, an act that signifies his passing into young manhood. Before his public declaration, father and son speak quietly. Then they stand, below left, before the congregation of the Norbeck Baptist Church while the Rev. J. Ward Holland questions Bobby about his faith. Afterwards one member of the congregation, below right, congratulates Bobby on his stand with an all-embracing bear hug.

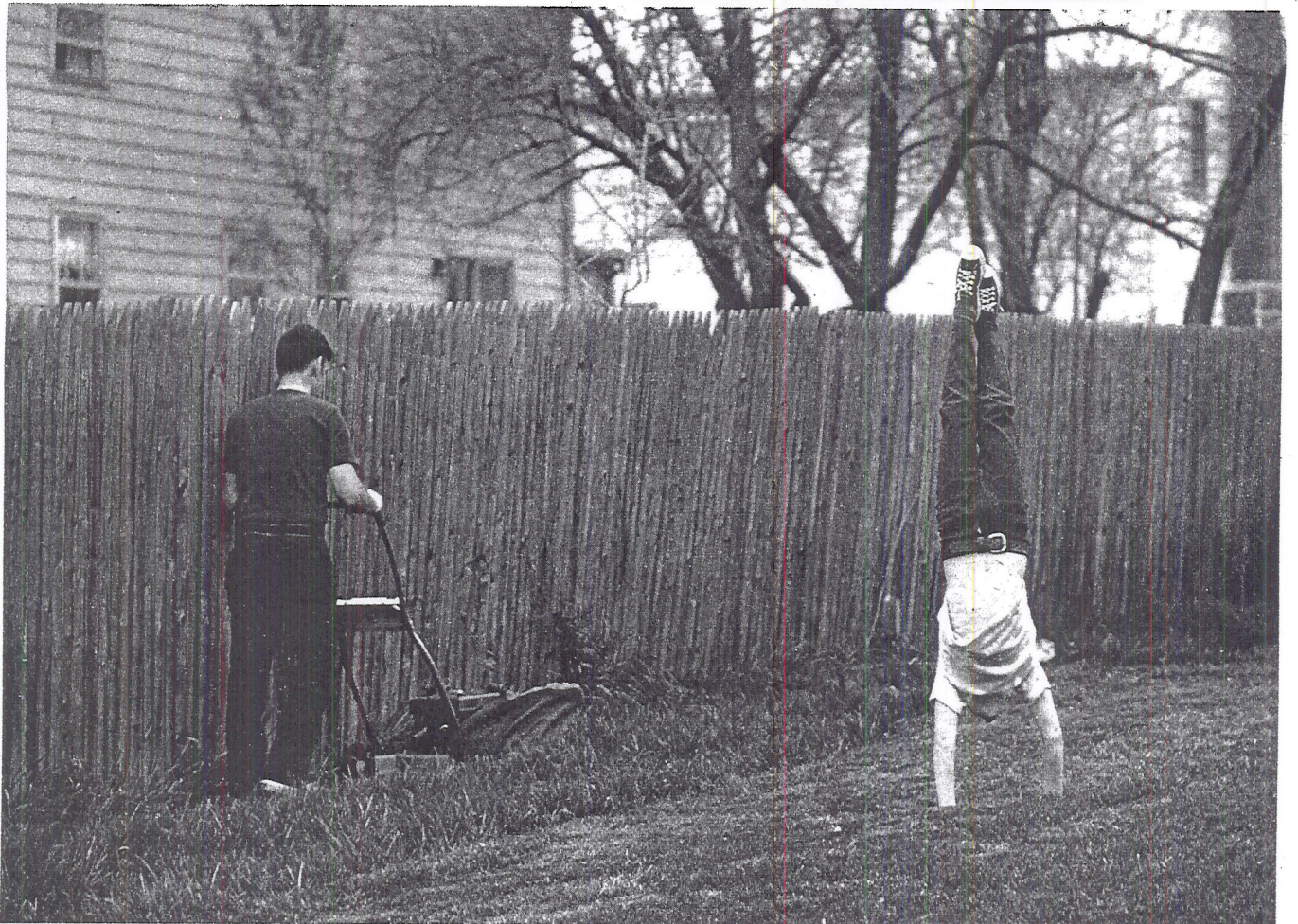
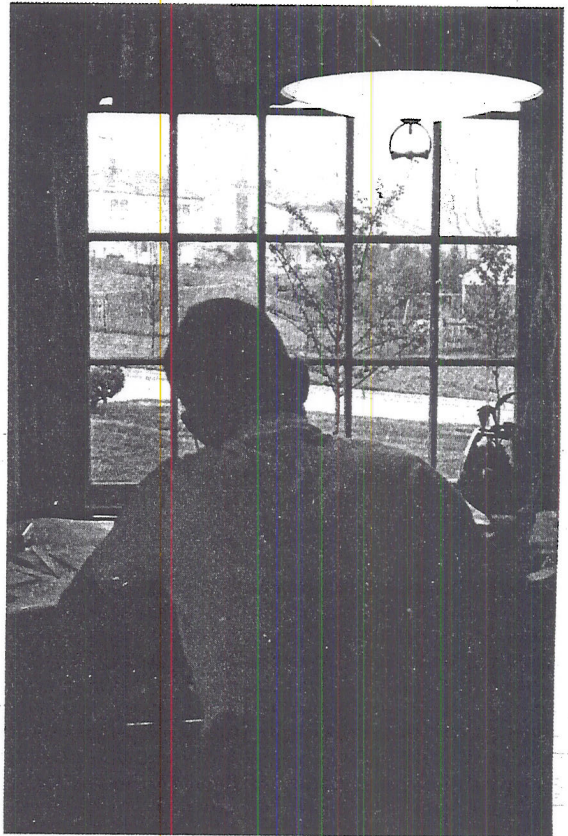




Above: A social evening: Burer and wife have Navy pilot Jim Burer's roommate in prison, over for dinner. Bell is recuperating from an arm operation and other injuries at a military hospital here so they got him a date for the evening. While in prison, Burer recalls, "We were convinced our wives would be faithful. When his didn't we figured she was dead or had cancer. Finally, last November he told his mother and said he was strong enough to take whatever she was. So she wrote and said his wife had lost hope. She had found one else."

Left: Burer shakes hands with Baltimore Orioles player at game. The game commenced with three former P. O. W.s—including Burer and Jim Bell, at right—throwing out baseballs and receiving cheers.

Right: Burer at work: "I'm trying to answer all the letters. If folks were kind enough to take the trouble to write to me, they deserve a reply. Of course, I have a mountain of mail." One more task for Burer— taking back over the bill-paying duties. "Nan handled everything for so long. She doesn't mind doing it if she has to, but she was very ready to give it up and I was very ready to accept it." And a final chore Burer was quite ready to accept, below, was mowing the green, green grass of home, far from Hanoi.



Bell, Burg from an the Burers
"We both write, we wrote to the news and some-

me which and friends.

POW

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The Landing

The chute had opened at about 2,500 feet, in a cloud bank. "The first thing I saw when I came out of the bottom (of the clouds) was water. So I prepared for a water landing."

Burer deployed the inflatable dinghy, slipped his arms out of the shoulder harness so that he could swim, and took another look.

"The waves now were strange looking. They were breaking, and I knew it was the shore." He looked west over his shoulder and "saw a mountain that I recognized immediately. I knew exactly where I was (about 10 miles north of the city of Vinh, equidistant between the DMZ and Hanoi, on the coast).

"It was a four- or five-minute ride down, although it seemed like hours. I thought about where I was going to

land, I thought of my wife and the problems she was going to have, and I also was injured, and knew there were going to be some problems associated with that."

The 15-year Air Force veteran permitted himself a moment of reverie "then the next things that ran through my mind were those things that I had been trained to do and expect."

Pilots who customarily fly over enemy territory wear no identifying marks on their flight gear and generally carry only a copy of the Geneva Convention rules in their pockets.

This day, Burer also had the change from the \$10 bill, a Masonic ring and a watch. He dumped the latter two, as much to relieve the pain from his burned skin as to prevent identification.

"When I got on the ground and was captured, the soldiers were fighting over the \$7. I'm sure they knew its cash value, that it was good old U.S. greenbacks."

As he floated toward earth, Burer heard the engine of

Tony Bledsoe's plane and "I knew it was not hurt." Burer was depending on Bledsoe to see his chute, or hear his beeper, and pass this information on to his family.

"We didn't hear anything until the next Jan. 17," Nan Burer said. By then she and the children had found their own apartment, after having first crowded into her parents' two-bedroom apartment in Wheaton.

But there would be no word from Art for four years.

"I looked down through my legs and saw smoke coming from aircraft, which had crashed. There were six North Vietnamese soldiers on the ground, aiming directly at me, and shooting. I could see the fire from the muzzle of their guns, but they didn't hit me.

"It appeared they were not going to allow me to surren-

der, even if I wanted to, so I figured the best thing to do when I hit was to get rid of my chute, grab my dinghy and head for the water, which I did.

"I landed standing up, a very easy landing. I looked around at the one behind me to see what his action was going to be. They had rifles. I tried to get my pistol out, a survival pistol which had only five rounds of tracer ammunition. It's not intended to be used as a weapon, but it could kill someone if you were close enough.

"I couldn't get it out, and this guy knelt on one knee and pointed the rifle right at me. And pulled the trigger. I was looking right at him when it went off. Fire shot out of the end of it that looked two feet long. And I cannot understand to this day how he missed me, but he did.

"I'm thinking so fast and trying to get going that it didn't scare me that badly; guess your fears kind of slow down after a while—yes, I had just been

Continued on page 26

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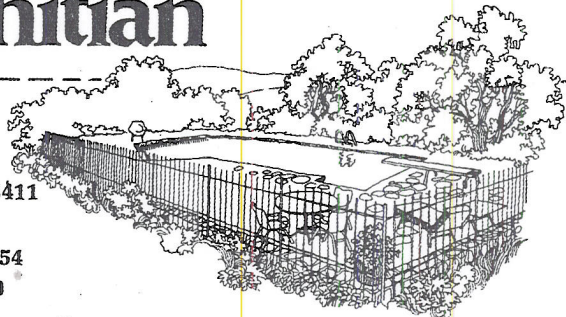
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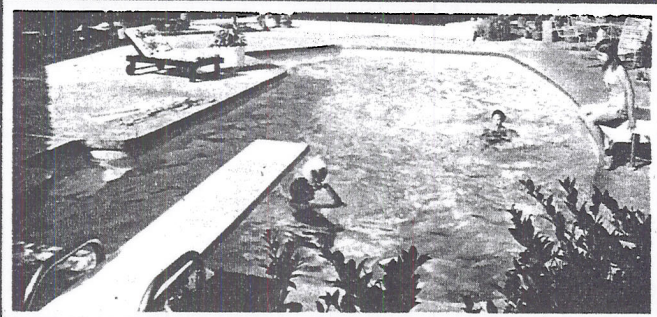
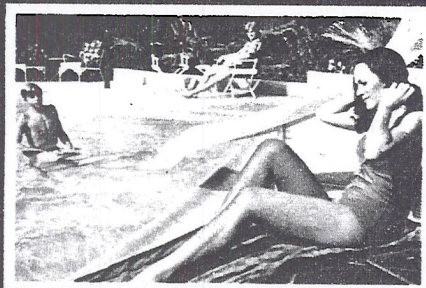
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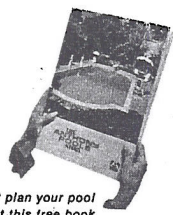
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POW

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through a series of events. I figured I wasn't going to stand there and let him try again, so I grabbed my dinghy and started out into the water.

"They are yelling like mad; all six of them are chasing me. The further you run into the water, the slower you get. And they were barefooted. I had my boots on and smoke flares in my pocket, so they were going through the water faster than I was.

"About 30 or 40 yards out, they caught me."

When Art Burer graduated from Anacostia High School in June of 1950, he took a job working as a messenger, and then a paying-receiving teller, at American Security and Trust Co. He met a girl from Arlington, right out of Washington Lee High School, "and even though we were just teenagers, we were married."

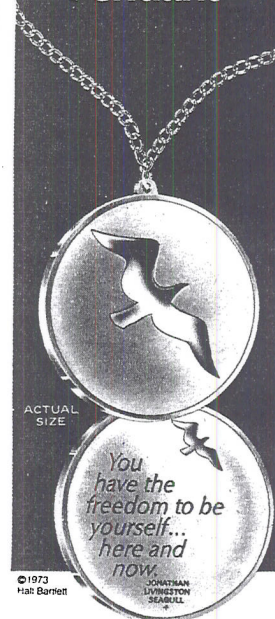
He joined the Air Force the next year for three different reasons: patriotic, "It was the height of the Korean War"; practical, "I was subject to the draft," and the influence of his family; his father is a retired Air Force master sergeant and two brothers are career officers, the younger having graduated from West Point in 1967 and served two tours in Vietnam.

He stayed on after the original four years because "I got a taste of it and the opportunities were promising." He began working for a commission, taking night classes at George Washington University (he was stationed at Bolling Air Force Base here for six years) and "finally in 1964 I graduated from the University of Omaha under Operation Bootstrap."

"Before I was shot down, it took almost everything we made to live comfortably," Burer said, "while maintaining a percentage of savings. I assumed Nan would continue this, and she did.

"She lived exactly as I wanted her to. She bought herself and the kids what they needed, they live in a respectable house, and she did save, al-

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The Washington Post/Potomac/June 3, 1973

though she had to buy three different cars while I was away. All of their wardrobes have changed, all the furniture we had is gone except for two or three pieces. I didn't expect my wife to live in austere conditions just to save money. She made a good investment in this home (bought new in 1969) and furnished it nicely."

During a 10-day walk and ride to Hanoi, Burer says he underwent repeated humiliation from village peasants.

At one stop, "They brought out all the villagers: women, children, dogs. The kids hit me, then the women hit me and everybody was spitting on me.

"Some of the people wanted to shoot me. You have to expect this. These people had just been bombed—at least

military targets had been hit. You have to put yourself in their position. If Russian pilots were bombing us, and you'd seen one floating down in a chute, you're not going to be too friendly to him."

North of Vinh, after he had been run through the streets barefooted, Burer was informed by an English-speaking soldier that he had been badly injured "and that they did not have medical supplies for me, or even for their own soldiers who were badly injured.

"He said nearly all the captured pilots were shot somewhere along the road to Hanoi," Burer recalled. "Then he read something to the crowd, supposedly a record of my war crimes, made me kneel down, hands tied behind the back, blindfold in place, put a pistol to my head and pulled the trigger.

"I heard the hammer slam down, and I thought I was dead." Then with a nervous laugh, Burer explained, "It was empty. It's quite a shock, really. The crowd, which had roared when he told them he was going to shoot me, was dumfounded, about like I was.

"The soldier then told the crowd that the time was not right, that I would be executed later."

Burer underwent a total of five fake executions, two more en route to Hanoi, and two during interrogations at Heartbreak Hotel, the suite at the Hilton where new arrivals were questioned.

He survived the threats and torture but, "It's not something you get used to." On those occasions when he believed he might not make it, "I prayed for my family and myself. I'm

a devout Baptist—not a Holy Roller, but a Christian."

"Burer, Arthur W., Capt., AO 3087646. 3 Sept. '32.

"Burer, Arthur W., Capt., AO 3087646. 3 Sept. '32," he repeated. "That's all I'm required to tell you under rules of the Geneva Convention," Burer said repeatedly, only to be told, "You're not a prisoner of war, you're a criminal and you will talk."

"Then they'd lean on you. When you'd taken as much as you can—and you must remember everybody has a different threshold of pain, but everybody has a breaking point, and they'll find it—then you tell them something more."

Burer rated his breaking point as "about average"—he

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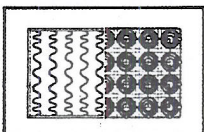


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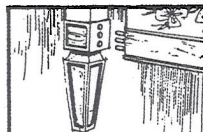
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spent 14 months in solitary confinement for failure to talk. Most of the later years were spent at jails in suburban Hanoi—the Zoo and the Brian Patch—although all of the POWs were moved back to central Hanoi as the end neared.

"Our first reaction" to newspaper articles and film clips of anti-war demonstrations, shown to the POWs by their captors, "was that what they were photographing—at Berkeley in 1966 and later around the Washington Monument—was staged, although we later came to realize there was a movement back there."

The protests "hurt us, caused us to stay longer," Burer believes, "because the North Vietnamese are unable to realize how you can have a government and have people criticizing it. They looked to the marches as an indication of weakness, and that our government would soon topple."

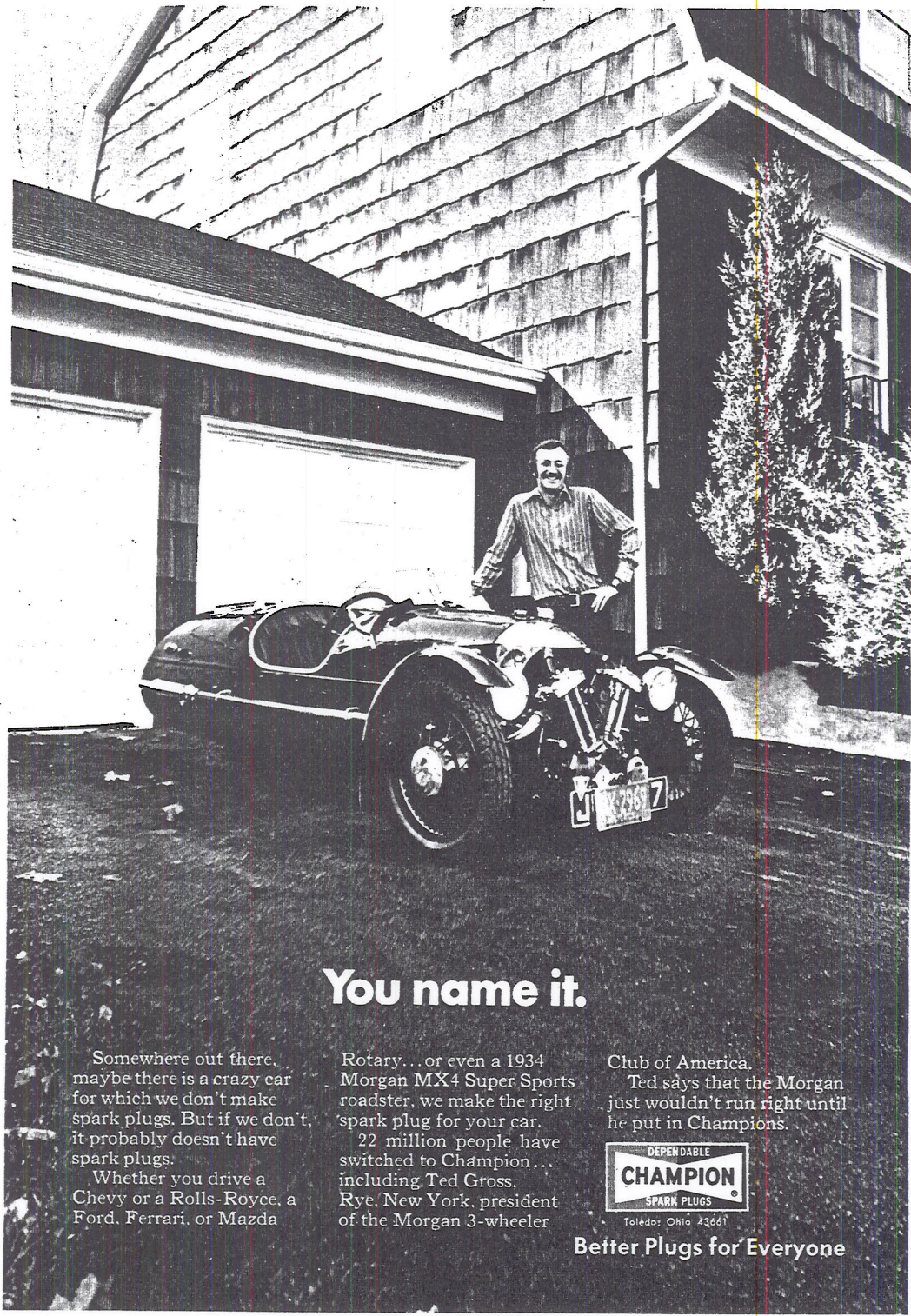
Burer's own assessment of his nation's involvement: "I believe we met the enemy on their own terms, and I think we won the war." Burer is prepared for the possibility that South Vietnam will be ruled by Communists: "If it is the will of the people, I say let them have it. But if some outsiders come in, supported by other Communist nations, for the purpose of subverting the government, then I think we should get back into it."

It was 3:55 a.m., Washington time, Feb. 15, 1973, when the C-9 hospital jet set down in a drizzle at Andrews Air Force Base. As Art Burer descended the stairs, Nan, followed in hot pursuit by four children, parents and in-laws burst past Air Force Brig. Gen. C. T. Douglas and leaped into her husband's arms. It was their first moment together in six years, 11 months and 18 days.

To celebrate his homecoming, and ease the period of adjustment, Burer and his wife took a second honeymoon. But first they "had the chaplain over and went through our

Continued on page 32

The Washington Post/Potomac/June 3, 1973



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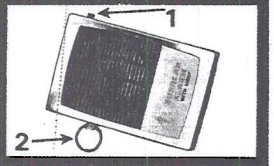
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POW

from page 28

marriage vows before her friends and family.

"It was nothing legal," Burer says, "and our contract was still good, and our marriage was still good. Back in 1951, it had cost several months' salary of my enlisted pay to buy her ring, but it was not a very expensive set. For years I had tried to convince her to buy another set. I finally convinced her this would be the time."

Their second honeymoon began with "three nights in the bridal suite of the Holiday Inn in Bethesda," and then 10 days "at a fancy beach hotel at St. Croix, in the Virgin Islands—good food, swimming, nice music, all alone together."

Financial plans were not the only serious considerations Maj. Burer had before him after homecoming; he also had to assume the role of returned father.

He found he was "able to communicate with the younger two (Winnie is now 15, Bob 12) with no problem at all. They are still within the range of a father talking to them. But the other two (Willie, 19, and Bill, 17) are kind of distant, but this is to be expected."

Willie had moved to Portland, Ore., where she had friends. After coming back for her father's homecoming, she returned to college in Portland where "she's studying to be an auto mechanic," says Burer, with only a trace of a grin. "That was quite a shocker. She's quite a pretty girl, but she is also an independent woman. She has her own thoughts and listens to a lot of this women's liberation stuff."

The Burers plan to see Willie in July when they take a family tour of the U.S. "I plan to go up to Snake River with her. We need a little time to get acquainted," her father says.

"That boy of mine (Bill) went from 10 to 17. He's at an age where he thinks he's a man, but he's not quite ready to act like one. When you start to think you're a man, you hate

Continued on page 36

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POW

from page 32

to take advice from another man," Burer says sympathetically. "It's very difficult, but it's not insurmountable."

Bill's lack of desire to attend college is frustrating his father. "He's got the ability. His grades were all As and Bs in high school. And he's a good football player, scholarship material. But he doesn't want to go.

"He hasn't got an aim yet. By the time I was 17 or 18, I knew where I was going, although I was raised in a little different atmosphere. I attribute his attitude to the times we are in, and my absence and lack of guidance of a father. His mother gave him a lot of good advice. She can be mother, but she can't be a father to him."

Nan Burer interrupts the interview to ask Art for some money. "How much do you need, a dollar?" he jokes, fully aware of what inflation has done to the 1966 dollar he left behind.

"One of the first things we did," he explains after telling Nan to write a check, "was for me to take over the money. She has handled everything for so long, she was ready to give it up, and I was very ready to accept it."

A few weeks later, in another conversation, Nan Burer admits that, "I thought I was anxious to give up the responsibilities. But since he has taken the reins, I have said 'whoa there' a few times. It's an involuntary reaction.

"I feel that I know the children better, maybe not how to handle them better, but I know them. Art is definitely military, and sometimes that overtakes his patience.

"I find myself bristling when he tells the children something. I gained a lot of self-confidence in those seven years.

"As hard as it is to permit Art to take over, I know I couldn't ever have married again and let some other man take over my children."

Nan feels, however, that the conflicts are "out in the open.

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In the years at the Hilton, the Zoo and the Briar Patch—American names for Vietnamese prisons—a man gets to know another man, and to share his hopes and sorrows.

Art Burer's roommate for many months was Navy Cdr. James F. Bell, of La Vale, Md., near Cumberland. The two men "both felt we had good marriages," although because neither got any mail for several years, their belief was based on faith.

Burer got his first letter in March, 1970, and Nan got her first one from Art the same month, on March 21, exactly four years to the day he had been shot down.

"They came to us on Dec. 14, 1969, and said "Everyone will write home for Christmas," after having denied earlier requests.

The Burers began trading letters, about 15 in all. He even got a picture of the family in 1971, so was prepared somewhat for Bill's longish hair.

But Jim Bell got no mail from his wife, although he did hear regularly from his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ted Bell of La Vale.

"We assumed that his wife had been plagued by antiwar activists' groups, and did not write as a result, or possibly had an accident, or had become mentally unbalanced," Burer says.

"But we did not believe that our families had been unfaithful to us, although the Vietnamese preached this to us all the time."

Burer says Bell "finally wrote to his mother and said, 'I have not heard from my wife for so long, and I am strong enough right now, mentally and physically, to accept most anything.'"

"He was assuming she had passed away," Burer says.

"So his mother wrote and said that his wife had lost hope, and eventually found someone else. It was quite a blow."

Since their return, Bell has visited his children, who live with his ex-wife in El Paso, Texas, and he also took the children on a vacation to Or-

lando, Fla., with the Burer family.

Burer believes the presence of his "good and faithful wife" has aided his physical recovery, as well as eased his emotional concern. Military physicians are "all amazed at the speed with which I move, return to normalcy. I attribute a lot of that to my wife.

"By the time I was shot down, we had been married 14 years. We knew each other pretty well. Our love has never wavered. She's a seven-year-old woman, much more mature. She was 33 and I come home and she's 40. I am too, of course. We're both stronger, and that's what it takes."

Despite "many good offers in civilian life," including an offer from Eastern Air Lines to be a co-pilot, Burer will stay in the Air Force.

He already has more than enough time (22 years) for retirement, but "I'm dedicated to the military, feel I can do my country more good there, and myself more good."

The seven years' imprisonment will give him neither a

handicap nor advantage toward promotion, Burer has been told. But he already has been nominated for lieutenant colonel, and believes he may get a general's star by 1976, "if I portray those qualities that general officers are made of."

When he does retire, Burer may want to teach at the high school level. He has spoken to Winnie's class at Magruder High School and found that "those kids are so easy to impress. I think I could do a lot toward influencing the coming generation. They listened to me, they think I'm a hero."

Nan and Art realize that, as he puts it, "some things cannot be recaptured, for which there is no proper compensation."

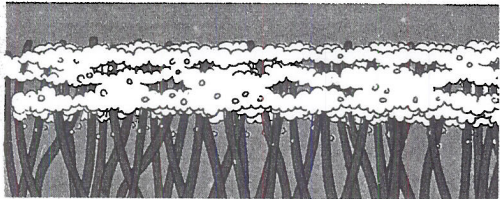
He cannot put a price on missing two of his children graduate from high school, or the baptisms of the two middle ones.

And there were times when Nan "needed a man to make the decisions. I would try to ask 'what would Art do?'"

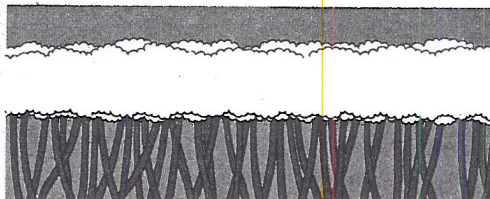
"We missed some good years," Burer says, but "that was part of the price of freedom."

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