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# MIA Families Accuse U.S. Of Inactivity

By Donald P. Baker  
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"Am I being stupid?" Earlyne Thomas asked rhetorically as she clutched her 2-year-old daughter Carmen and glanced at a locket that contained a picture of her husband.

Mrs. Thomas, 25, has come to Washington to ask her government to "give me some proof. If I am widow, I want to know, so I can start grieving all over again."

Her husband, Air Force Lt. Robert J. Thomas, has been listed as missing in action since Dec. 18, 1972, when the B-52 in which he was a copilot was shot down over North Vietnam.

Today, on the first anniversary of the signing of the Vietnam peace treaty, Mrs. Thomas and 150 other relatives of MIAs have come here to ask the U.S. government "to force the Communists to live up to their part of the agreement."

Mrs. Thomas was among 53 persons who made a pilgrimage to Southeast Asia last October in hopes of getting further information on relatives missing in action.

She was tracking down a report that she had heard "via the grapevine" that her husband had called out, "Everybody's out, I'm going now," before the crash.

Other relatives were in search of similar clues, that permit them, as one mother put it, "to continue to hope, despite all odds."

For Mrs. Thomas, the trip heightened her doubt that the U.S. is doing everything possible to get a full accounting of the status of missing men.

"They think if they can't get a man out, it is better to pretend that he doesn't exist, especially so long as their efforts are nothing more than cosmetic," she said.

"If a man should show up someday, they can always say that they had been 'secretly negotiating' for his release," she said.

Lt. Thomas is the lone member of the six-man crew of Charcoal One whose status is uncertain. Three crewmen survived, and were released with the prisoners of war last spring, and the other two were listed as killed in action.

When the last contingent of POWs came home in April, Mrs. Thomas contacted the three men who had been on her husband's plane, Maj. Richard E. Johnson, Capt. Richard T. Simpson and Capt. Robert G. Certain.

Certain, the navigator, told Mrs. Thomas that

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By Ken Feil—The Washington Post

Earlyne Thomas with her daughter, Carmen: "Give me some proof."



## MIA, From B1

he heard her husband report on the radio that "they got the pilot." The others said they had no word of her husband.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Certain, now an Episcopal seminarian at Sewanee University in Tennessee, said he never heard Thomas' name mentioned during his four months in a North Vietnamese prison.

Certain, a graduate of Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School and Emory University, is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Glenn N. Certain of

Silver Spring. He plans to become an Air Force chaplain.

Certain and the other men could not have heard Thomas' report that "everybody's out," Mrs. Thomas reasoned, but if the report were true, "my husband was alive in the cockpit" and therefore could have bailed out.

The casualty assistance officer at Randolph (Tex.) Air Force Base assigned to her denied that such a report existed.

But when she visited the Joint Casualty Resolution

Center at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand last fall, "I saw it on a computer print out. It said a message had been received from Charcoal One that said, 'Getting out, going down.'"

Mrs. Thomas believes that "the Air Force doesn't want the truth to be told. I was cornered by someone, in a radio intelligence room in Guam on the way home and asked, 'Who told you this?'"

Virginia M. West, Baltimore, whose son John disappeared Jan. 2, 1970, while flying a routine mission

over the Ho Chi Minh trail in an F-4 Phantom, also made the pilgrimage to Laos.

Mrs. West said she was shocked to discover that U.S. intelligence officers had not questioned native refugees about missing Americans. She, too, said the relatives found "a lot of discrepancies in the files" at the resolution center.

Although the 53 relatives found little to buoy their hopes, they returned convinced that more could be done to resolve the status of their kin, Mrs. West said.

The relatives are holding two events today to attract attention to their cause. At 10:30 a.m., they will hold a press conference in Lafayette Park, and at 7 p.m. they plan a candlelight vigil at the same location, across the street from the White House.

Between those events, several families plan to drive vehicles—one is an electric car in deference to the energy crisis—around the White House "until the President agrees to discuss the issue," Mrs. West said.

Ann Hart and her six children, who range in age

from 2 to 11, plan to spend this week circling the White House in a campervan.

"I don't like to see men who pledged their loyalty and lives abandoned," said Mrs. Hart.

Her husband, Air Force Maj. Thomas T. Hart III, 33, was the navigator on a converted C-130 that was shot down over Laos on Dec. 21, 1972, with 16 men aboard. Two of the men were picked up immediately by an American rescue squad, but were unable to say what had happened to the others.

Mrs. Hart said she "at least" wants President

Nixon to "stop saying all the POWs are home."

Mrs. Hart said it is "the negative attitude" of the Defense Department that "concerns us the most." Instead of accepting a lack of information that a man is alive, "we should require proof they are dead" before changing his status, she said.

Several of the relatives are suing the Defense Department, seeking to bar what they feel is an arbitrary reclassifications of men from missing to dead.

The number of men carried as MIA has been reduced gradually. The Pentagon said that "changes in category are the results of Service Department board determinations, based upon the totality of information gained from survivors, returnee debriefings, intelligence and other sources."

When the peace treaty was signed a year ago today, the Pentagon listed 555 POWs, 55 others who died in captivity and 1,315 as MIA.

As of Friday, the Defense Department listed 1,138 men unaccounted for, including 984 carried as missing in action, 96 missing not as the result of hostile action (plane crashes, truck accidents, etc.) and 58 previously reported as captured, but not released with the other POWs.

"I'm a pretty realistic person," said Mrs. Hart, of Live Oak, Fla., "but the difference between believing and knowing is quite a bit."

Mrs. Thomas, who lives in

St. Louis, has "moved in on college friends" in Oxon Hill "for the duration" of her campaign. She hopes to be able to tell her concern to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee which will discuss the MIA situation on Monday.

Chairman J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) called the session, agreeing with the relatives that "the North Vietnamese and their allies have refused to cooperate" with Allied efforts to account for the missing and explain discrepancies.

Rep. Benjamin A. Gilman (R-N.Y.), a freshman member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, returned from Laos last week offering new hope to the relatives. He quoted Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, commander of the Laotian field headquarters at Long Thien, as saying that Pao had "reliable information that nine American pilots are now being held by the North Vietnamese (in the hope they could provide) any technical information they might possess."

Mrs. West said their group also talked to Pao, but the relatives regarded Pao's talk as "speculation."

She returned "strengthened in my belief that a total effort is not being expended on the MIAs, that they had been sacrificed at the expense of getting home the 577 POWs we settled for."

She said the relatives left Vientiane feeling that "having lost the war, we might never receive the answers."