

POW Wives Shown in Severe Stress

Psychiatrists Find Guilt and Anger in Study of 11 Women

By Al Rossiter Jr.

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A study of 11 prisoner of war wives who sought psychiatric help showed they felt ostracized by both the military and civilian communities.

Drs. Richard C. W. Hall and William C. Simmons said their research indicated that the POW family was often in need of psychiatric help but that it was only reluctantly offered by their physician and seemed to have a significant stigma attached to it.

The two psychiatrists, then attached to a naval hospital and writing in a recent issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry, said the 11 women studied experienced increasing psychic disturbances as the Vietnam war began to wind down.

Their major concern, the report said, was their ambi-

valence concerning their husband's return and the subsequent guilt that this feeling caused. Their conflicts were highlighted by their inability to express, even to one another, the anger they felt.

"Any expression of negative feeling toward their husbands was treated by families, neighbors and the military community as signs of unfaithfulness or cruelty," Hall and Simmons said. They said the suppressed anger and resultant guilt were channeled into various medical complaints that increased their sense of inadequacy and hopelessness.

The report said a wife's opposing feelings about her husband were compounded by the uncertainty of what he would be like when he returned home. She wondered if he would still find her desirable and she him,

would he support the major decisions she had made in his absence, and should she have gotten a divorce?

All of the POW wives studied faced severe problems of sexual role adjustment, Hall and Simmons said. They said the women were not viewed as individuals but as stereotypes.

"The military community was most likely to regard them as vamps," the report said. "Fellow military wives viewed them with suspicion and in many cases overt distrust. All of the wives in this study reported that after an initial period of 'social mourning,' which lasted about six months, they were politely dropped from the military's informal social rolls.

"They differed from the war widow since male companions could not be invited to parties as their dates.

Men who chatted with them in more than a cursory manner were considered by the rest of the group to be out of line. Other wives considered them 'on the prowl.'

"The civilian community tended to regard the POW wife as an asexual super-woman, virtuous to a fault, honest, trustworthy, frigid, and unaffected by loneliness in the case of honor. This image persisted, however, only so long as the POW wife refused all male acquaintanceship."

Hall and Simmons said the wives sought treatment as a group and set strong taboos against members seeking individual treatment. One group sought help when one wife attempted suicide and the other sought treatment when one woman was hospitalized when she no longer was able to cope with her problems.