

Public concern is our only weapon, say the wives of Vietnam prisoners. It has helped a little so far—and it can do even more

How you can help our P.O.W.'s

by Paul Stanley



How about meeting me in Hawaii?"

Those were the words Mary Jane had waited three months to hear. At Christmas, she and Kevin had agreed to be married as soon as his leave came through. At the time it was impossible to say when that would be—Kevin was in the Air Force, stationed in Vietnam.

His Rest and Rehab leave gave the newlyweds five days together. A short, but loving, Hawaiian honeymoon.

That was in 1967. Though Kevin is still alive, Mary Jane hasn't seen him since.

Two days before their three-month anniversary, she received word that her young husband was missing in action. In 15 more days, he would have been back in the States for good. During the next eight months, Mary Jane McManus suffered the kind of torment that only other wives of men missing in action can fully understand. One describes it as "an abscess that never heals until something is resolved."

For Mary Jane, there has been a resolution of sorts, but no end to the agony. In February, 1968, the North Vietnamese released three prisoners of war. One of these men returned with a list of other captives. Among the names on that list: Captain Kevin McManus.

This is one POW story; 1,600 others could be told. The details might differ, but in each case there is an American citizen missing or imprisoned in Southeast Asia. Our country's prisoners of war have now been held in enemy camps longer than in any other war in our history, some for more than six years. For every one of these men, a wife or family waits at home. Personal politics aside, all these people have one common goal: to bring their men home

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as soon as possible. They're depending on you to help.

Kevin McManus' release can come any day—or any year. Until it does come, his wife is serving as secretary - treasurer of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. She is one of three women who work on a full-time, no-salary basis at the League's office in Washington, D.C. For the last year they have engaged in "consciousness raising" about the POW and MIA (Missing in Action) problem, and have been organizing massive letter - writing campaigns directed to North Vietnam, Paris, and Laos. Although there are many organizations devoted to this cause, the nonprofit League is the only one comprised solely of relatives of prisoners and missing. More than 2,500 family members operate 50 state affiliate offices, "some of them kitchens," as Mrs. McManus explains.

In an interview with CORONET, the 28-year-old brunette spelled out the hopes and accomplishments of the people whose family lives have been wrenched by war. And, along with Mrs. Joan Vinson, League president, she spoke frankly about what it is like to be the wife of a man who is missing or jailed 8,000 miles from home.

"We want to inform the people of this country and throughout the world about the plight of the men," said Mrs. Vinson. "We feel if people are educated, they will be concerned."

What can "concern" do when nations are at war?

"It's our only weapon. Right now we can only use world opinion to force Hanoi to live up to the standards of the Geneva Convention.

"The number one thing is that the North Vietnamese refuse to identify fully the men they hold. They did give a figure and a list, but it can't be accepted." At this writing, League sources list 378 known prisoners in North Vietnam, 403 missing. The North Vietnamese admit holding 339. In the South, the League counts 79 POW's and 465 MIA's. Admitted prisoners: none. In Laos, POW's, 3; MIA's, 229. Admitted prisoners: none. This means a total 1,218 men unaccounted for.

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"Every plane that's shot down has a crew member," said Mrs. Vinson, whose husband Bob, an Air Force colonel, has been missing for three years. "Because of the modern aircraft we have, the ejection systems are terrific. What became of these men? I don't think it can be accepted that they are dead, until there has been a complete inspection of the prison camps."

"That's another infraction of the Convention," explained Mrs. McManus. "They have not allowed any international body to inspect the camps in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. And they have not adhered to the provision that says you will not maltreat prisoners." She pointed to one of the large posters that line the office walls. It was the kind of poster one's eyes tend to avoid. "As you can see, that prisoner was being marched through the streets, barefoot and blindfolded, though he's wounded."

Mrs. McManus' eyes grew fiery as she spoke about one area of Convention neglect that affects every POW wife directly. "Adequate mail facilities! They're supposed to be sending 250-word letters twice a month and one postcard. This is in no way like what we're getting."

"I didn't get one letter from Kevin in three years. Since late 1969, after the issue became public, things opened up somewhat. Because more people are concerned about POW's now, more mail has come out, to prove, according to Hanoi, that they are not all that inhumane. I've received 11 letters, all told."

Though it still falls short of Convention requirements, mail from prisoners is now ten times that of previous years—tangible results of public pressure—but, as with every League accomplishment, there is still terrible frustration. Among them: censorship.

"Till this past Christmas, the letters came on a six-line form. Very clearly on the top it says, 'Write only of health, home, family.' I just got one letter that is a bit longer. It said he hopes I'll buy a Corvette. There's nothing in it that a husband would really write to his wife, not one bit of feeling."

Public awareness has produced other results that keep these women going. A joint session of Congress was held, in September, 1970, to bring the matter to the attention of

Since the public outcry, POWs have been allowed to send more letters—and nine men have actually been freed

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every legislator. This was no small feat. Only two other such joint sessions have been held in the last quarter-century.

"We're in no way a lobby," said Mrs. Vinson. "It is only because of the concern we've generated across the country that something like this was able to come about. Since that session, bills have been presented on behalf of the prisoners and their dependents. One, that passed, allows dependents of POW's to receive the same benefits under the G.I. Bill that their husbands would receive as veterans.

"We hope—we're not sure—that treatment of prisoners has improved. At least the propaganda has changed radically. Instead of the horror photos, we're now getting films like the Canadian interview at the Hanoi Hilton prison camp last Christmas."

To most Americans, that televised interview was a news story with more-than-average human interest. To a POW wife like Mrs. McManus, it was a good deal more. "I remember thinking that I was glad Kevin wasn't one of those two men who spoke. I wondered what had happened to them before they made those statements."

As sad as these thoughts are, an MIA wife is in an even more painful position. Mrs. Vinson has four children. "All of us live pretty much from day to day. I try to keep as much joy there as I can, without dwelling on the tragedy in our life. It's very hard to describe the anxiety you suffer. Normally, anxiety passes. In our case, it just goes on and on. There's no way of getting over the hurt until there's an answer."

No one is pretending that continued public support will bring the answer, to Mrs. Vinson, Mrs. McManus, or to thousands of others in their position. Lt. Col. Norris M. Overly, who was tortured in a North Vietnamese prison camp before his return to the States, reflects their feelings: "The best answer we can come up with as to why nine Americans have been released, is that we believe Hanoi is very sensitive about their world image."

Nine men are hardly 1,600, but they are more than none. Here is exactly what you can do to help increase that number:

WRITE Send letters of appeal to Hanoi, Paris, and Laos. A typical message might read: "Your Excellency: I am disturbed about the American prisoners of war. I ask you, in the name of humanity, to show evidence of their humane treatment by listing names, permitting inspection of prisons, repatriation of the sick and wounded, and allowing them to write their families." Send letters or postcards to: *Madame Nguyen Thi Binh*, National Libera-

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tion Front of Vietnam, 49 Avenue Cambaceres, Verrieres-Le Buisson, 91, Essone, France. Or, *Sot Petraski*, Representative of the Laos Patriotic Front, Vientienne, Laos. Or, *Bureau of Information of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam*, 39 Avenue Georges Mandel, Paris 16, France.

ORGANIZE Urge your church, school, or social group to begin a county- or city-wide letter campaign, addressing messages to the 127 countries that signed the Geneva Convention. Tell them to bring pressure on North Vietnam to adhere to Convention principals. For an excellent booklet on how to organize this kind of campaign, write: United We Stand, P.O. Box 45142, Dallas, Texas 75235.

EDUCATE Children can be needlessly cruel to children of POW's and MIA's. Mrs. Vinson says: "I've had my children come home after another child has said to them, 'You know your father's dead. If he isn't, and he loves you, why doesn't he come home?'" Inform your children about the POW-MIA problem on whatever level you feel will be most meaningful.

CONSIDER There may be something you, as an adult, can do for children of POW or MIA families. The League reports that Washington Big Brothers may provide companionship and a "male image" to such youngsters. Is this something in which you can become involved? To find out, contact a local POW-MIA chapter. If you have trouble finding them call the League at 202-544-8008.

PUBLICIZE Request that your priest, minister, or rabbi make his congregation continuously aware of the issue, through prayer and in church bulletins. Urge local industries to include with their billings information as to what their customers can do. Contact the League office, at 1 Constitution Avenue, Washington, D.C., and ask for a supply of bumper stickers to distribute. Write letters to the editors of local, national, and foreign news media, urging them to take editorial positions on the problem. Contact local radio stations and ask them how to prepare broadcast spots as a public service.

CONTACT your senators and representatives in Congress and urge them to make the release of the POW's a high priority item.

Mrs. Vinson summed up: "So far the best minds in our country haven't been able to break this thing, but nobody should underestimate the power of any one individual. We do all we can."