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The desperate fight to recover the MIAs

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Many of those once avant-garde POW bracelets have been discarded in favor of WIN buttons. Bumper stickers asking the government to bring the boys home are weathered beyond legibility.

As America sputters toward its bicentennial celebration the Vietnam war has given way to the War on Recession. After painful years of grim news accounts of casualties, prisoners and atrocities, much of the nation has grown tired of reports from Vietnam.

BUT FOR THE FAMILIES and friends of the more than 2,000 American military personnel who didn't return, either alive or dead, and for whom there has never been a satisfactory accounting, the war drags on.

Occasionally there are moments of high expectations. That was the spirit of more than 500 representatives of peace, religious, labor and social action groups gathered in Washington, D.C., during the weekend for a three-day "Assembly to Save the Peace Agreement."

They were hoping President Ford would agree to their request for appointment of a presidential task force — a commission devoted solely to a full accounting for the dead and missing from Vietnam.

"What we got came as a bitter disappointment and just added to that feeling of frustration we have in trying to reach the government," said E. C. (Bus) Mills, executive director of the National League of Families, after meetings with military and White

House spokesmen.

ON SATURDAY, Mr. Ford signed a proclamation declaring Monday — the two-year anniversary of the signing of the Paris peace agreement — National MIA Awareness Day. It was a step that impressed Mills as being more cosmetic than constructive.

"We welcome anything that will draw attention to our cause," he said, "but signing proclamations has been done before and, frankly, it doesn't accomplish anything. We're up to our ears in proclamations and resolutions.

"When our White House liaison officer, (Air Force) Brig. Gen. Richard L. Lawson explained the President's decision, the families were very disappointed. He said we would know within six weeks if a commission would be appointed.

"To us that means that he (Mr. Ford) isn't ready to do what we've asked him to do. It doesn't mean he won't, but it means he wasn't ready today," Mills said Saturday.

In addition to the proclamation, the families learned Saturday of another shift in POW-MIA terminology. It came in the form of a memo from the President to all department heads, explained Sgt. Robby Frank, chairman of the POW-MIA Committee at Scott Air Force Base.

"I'M SURE you remember how Mr. Nixon never gave a speech after the peace agreement without referring to all the prisoners being home," Frank said. "Mr. Ford's memo instructs anyone speaking about



Bernard Plassmeyer Jr. was born about two weeks after his MIA father disappeared 4½ years ago.

—Globe-Democrat Photo

POWs or MIAs not to use that phrase or indicate that all the prisoners are home."

Despite limited gains made thus far during the national meeting in Washington, Mills hopes for greater progress Monday afternoon. He said the sponsors of the meeting (the league and VIVA — Voices in Vital America) have invited Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to meet with them Monday

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afternoon before a scheduled press conference at the Capitol.

Because Kissinger has not responded, Mills said, the groups have placed an advertisement in Monday's Washington Post publicly repeating the invitation. If Kissinger declines to meet with the families, a protest at the State Department offices is planned, Mills said.

Many POW and MIA families realized two years ago, when the cease-fire was signed, that the majority of the American public would begin to lose interest in their cause, Frank said. They did not expect the government to lose interest as well, he added.

"I THINK OUR biggest enemy is the apathy of the American public," Frank said.

He maintains the once-massive public attention accorded to POWs and MIAs has steadily dwindled since the cease-fire.

"But the public is apathetic because it is ill-informed or noninformed by the government," he added.

As a result, few citizens are aware that the United States still lists almost 1,000 men as missing in action in Southeast Asia and another 1,400 as having been killed in action there but whose bodies haven't been recovered, he points out.

What many citizens recall about the peace agreement is that it contained a provision concerning the release of all POWs and a full accounting for all MIAs.

IN EXPLAINING the then-pending agreement at an Oct. 26, 1972, White House press conference, then-Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Kissinger said:

"The agreement provides that all captured military personnel and foreign civilians be repatriated within the same time period as the withdrawal; that is to say, there will be a return of all American prisoners, military or civilian, within 60 days after the agreement comes into force (Jan. 27, 1973)."

Kissinger's statement was direct, comforting — and erroneous — according to Frank and others interested in the fate of the 2,400 Americans still unaccounted for.

Although the government maintains there is no reason to suppose any of these men still be alive, the families are not satisfied. They want proof — a grave, a body, a crash site or an eyewitness account.

THE FAMILIES consider it plausible that the Communists would hold some war prisoners as hostages against future American intervention in Southeast Asia. They also believe the enemy might want to take advantage of advanced technological know-how possessed by highly trained American officers.

The families also are aware of various discrepancies in the accounting process and, mainly because of these discrepancies, Frank said, "We are 100 per cent convinced that there are many prisoners still being held."

Sr. Sgt. Don Sparks wrote to his parents on April 11, 1970. He said he had been a prisoner for 10 months, and although he was held in solitary confinement and had not seen another American since his imprisonment, he assured them not to worry for he was in good health. He is one of the 37 men listed as a POW by the U.S. government who were known to be captured and have neither been returned nor listed as dead by the Communists.

In May, 1967, a Navy pilot, Lt. Ron

Dodge, was shot down over North Vietnam. From the ground he talked to the wingman on his radio. As he was being surrounded by North Vietnamese, he said, "I am breaking up my radio." A photo of Dodge being escorted by North Vietnamese troops was taken by a Dutch free-lance photographer in Hanoi and appeared Sept. 9, 1967, in Paris Match. He has not been accounted for.

It is because of such discrepancies that POW-MIA families—like Mr. and Mrs. Frank Prevedel of Florissant, whose son, Army Sgt. Charles F. Prevedel, disappeared in April, 1969, during a reconnaissance patrol; and Mrs. Carol Plassmeyer of Belleville, Ill., whose husband, Marine Capt. Bernard Plassmeyer, disappeared more than four years ago—remain in a strange state of limbo.

A PAINFUL paradox exists for these families. To hope that a loved one is alive in Southeast Asia is also to believe that he is a captive and possibly undergoing torture.

"That's the feeling you have to have," Frank said, "because if you have any glimmer of hope that he's alive, then you have to face the strong possibility that he's in endless torture."

Both the Prevedels and Mrs. Plassmeyer admitted proof of death would be a relief.

"We're prepared to take it either way," Prevedel said. "If they say he's dead and they have proof, then so be it."

Mrs. Plassmeyer can measure her husband's days as an MIA by the age of her son, Bernard Jr., who was born about two weeks after his father disappeared 4½ years ago.

Because of the additional strain of rearing a child and trying to maintain some kind of social life, Mrs. Plassmeyer's situation may be even more difficult than the Prevedels'.

"It's hard to have a social life," she said, "because if you go out with married people you're always the third wheel, and if you go out with single people, then you have to act single and that makes me feel guilty because, for me, that's dishonest. I've decided that I'd rather stay at home and live with the loneliness instead of the guilt."

"YOU SEE," Prevedel interjected, "everybody in the world wants peace. And all we've been hearing about is peace in the world. Well, we'd like to have a little bit more. We'd like to have peace of mind."

The POW-MIA Committee at Scott is a nonprofit group supported by small donations and the sale of POW bracelets. Frank and other members of the group welcome opportunities to speak before schools or organizations.

Frank's plea during these presentations has four directives:

—Wear a POW bracelet as a visible display of concern.

—Send for free literature and information from the committee, P.O. Box 555, Scott Air Force Base, Ill., 62225.

—Write to elected officials to urge an accurate accounting.

—Contact merchants, clubs, businesses and organizations urging support for their cause.

"The missing in action have become a liability to the United States government," Frank said. "Rather than be a liability to the United States, I think the MIAs should become an embarrassment to Hanoi. And that's what we're vying for. That's why we exist."