THE POWER OF ONE: BONNIE SINGLETON AND AMERICAN
PRISONERS OF WAR IN VIETNAM

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

By

Dave L. Garrett, B.S., M.Ed.
Denton, Texas
August 1999
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Bonnie Singleton, wife of United States Air Force helicopter rescue pilot Jerry Singleton, saw her world turned upside down when her husband was shot down while making a rescue in North Vietnam in 1965. At first, the United States government advised her to say very little publicly concerning her husband, and she complied.

Later Mrs. Singleton changed her opinion and worked with other Dallas–area families of POW/MIAs in local grass-roots organizations to notify people around the world about the plight of American POWs. They enlisted the aid of influential congressmen, such as Olin “Tiger” Teague of College Station, Texas; President Richard M. Nixon and his administration; millionaire Dallas businessman Ross Perot; WFAA television in Dallas; and other news media outlets worldwide.

In time, Bonnie Singleton, other family members, and the focus groups they helped start encouraged North Vietnam to release the names of prisoners, allow mail and packages to be sent to the POWs, and afford better treatment for prisoners of war.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks go to Bonnie and Jerry Singleton for their assistance in making this thesis possible.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the Vietnam conflict, American officials tried repeatedly to obtain information concerning American prisoners-of-war (POWs) and servicemen missing-in-action (MIAs) with little success. North Vietnam not only refused to release the names of these men, but also brutally mistreated some American POWs. The Communists demanded that the United States withdraw all forces and combat support and cease all aid to South Vietnam; they viewed the American prisoners as bargaining chips to meet their demands. By December 1970, the United States Defense Department estimated that approximately 1,600 American service personnel were missing in Southeast Asia.\(^1\) Seven hundred sixty-five men came home from POW camps at the end of the conflict.\(^2\)

In dealing with the families of POWs and MIAs, the United States government, at the start of the conflict, insisted upon secrecy and minimized the problem in its communication with the American public. Conventional diplomacy gave way to

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\(^{2}\) POW Home Page available from http://www.eos.net/rrva/nampows.html; Internet.
unorthodox initiatives. Citizen diplomacy and political action emerged as important unofficial tools in gaining national and international attention for the POW-MIA issue.

Bonnie Singleton, the wife of POW Jerry Singleton, worked with grass-roots organizations to shape public opinion, influence American policy makers, and sway other nations’ actions to bring better treatment for American POWs. To comprehend the situation faced by Bonnie and Jerry Singleton, one must examine the roots of conflict in Vietnam and how Jerry Singleton became involved.

After World War II, America found itself in an ambivalent position regarding French Indo-China. The U.S. opposed French imperialism and the reestablishment of French colonies in Southeast Asia but needed France as an ally in the cold war against the Soviet bloc. After the 1949 Communist takeover of China, America challenged the spread of Communism which seemed to threaten Southeast Asia, particularly after the People’s Republic of China recognized Ho Chi Minh as the leader of all Vietnam in January 1950. The United States recognized the former emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai, as the leader of the Republic of Vietnam, a part of the French Indo-China empire. After the start of the Korean War in 1950, the United States government began military involvement in Vietnam with $10 million worth of equipment.³

At Dien Bien Phu, the Vietnamese Communists, known as the Viet Minh, defeated French troops on 7 May 1954. Later that same year, the Geneva Accords divided the nation and formally ended the French and Viet Minh conflict. The “Big Four”

powers, the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France, met in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss the mounting problems of the cold war. In July, the powers ended French control over Indo-China and temporarily partitioned Vietnam, with the Communists controlling the North and an American-backed government, led by President Ngo Dinh Diem, controlling the South.\textsuperscript{4} Laos, ruled by a neutral coalition of competing factions, intended to limit foreign military intervention within its borders.\textsuperscript{5}

The United States refused to sign the Geneva accords but offered an ambiguous acceptance of them. Except for the cease-fire accords signed by the French and Vietminh high commands, nobody signed anything at all at Geneva.\textsuperscript{6} Nonetheless, the United States delegate, General Walter Bedell Smith, stated that his government would not use force to disturb the agreements.

The United States Senate finally ratified the Geneva Convention in 1956. By the early 1960s, in an era marked by fear and loathing of anything Communist, the Democratic party could ill afford the reputation of “losing” Vietnam to the Communists. In the late 1940s, during the presidency of Democrat Harry S. Truman, Communists gained political power in China, causing the Republicans to blame the Democrats for the fall of the “friendly” government of Chiang Kai Shek. The triumph of Mao Tse Tung led many in America to fear the spread of Communism throughout Asia. Republican Senator Joseph

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 48.


McCarthy used the failure of the United States to keep China a "free" nation to his political advantage. Even congressman and future Democratic president John F. Kennedy voted to fund the House Un-American Activities Committee and criticized fellow Democrat Harry Truman for the "loss" of China. Kennedy refused to join in the censure of his old friend Joe McCarthy.⁷

The presidential election of 1960 saw John F. Kennedy facing off against noted anti-Communist Richard Nixon. Nixon, then a congressman from California, had run several tough campaigns accusing his Democratic opponents of being soft on Communism and had won appointment to the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Congressman Richard Nixon had taken part in the 1947–48 Alger Hiss hearings, in which Nixon and others sided with Joe McCarthy in declaring that the United States government, led by the Democrats, was riddled with Communists and spies for the Soviet Union. In the 1950's, Nixon, as Eisenhower's vice-president, had engaged Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in the noted "kitchen debates" over which system of government, democratic or communist, would come to lead the world. Both presidential candidates in the 1960 election talked tough on the question of standing up to the Communists and preventing the Soviet Union from spreading into other areas of world domination.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy promised in his inaugural address that "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure

the survival and the success of liberty," articulating the popular sentiment of the times.⁸

After the embarrassment in Cuba and the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy followed President Dwight D. Eisenhower's lead in viewing the Vietnam conflict as part of the larger, worldwide cold war struggle.⁹

The U.S. did not begin sending military units in significant numbers until the Kennedy administration ordered them there on 20 April 1961. Escalating Communist attacks and assassinations brought further American involvement. While the Diem regime struggled to hold the Communist forces at bay, Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor and adviser Walter Rostow to the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, on 18 October 1961, to assess the situation. Taylor advised that American troops be sent covertly to South Vietnam to support Diem, on the pretense of providing flood relief.

From 1961 through 1964, both the United States and North Vietnam continued to escalate their presence in South Vietnam. In 1962, American helicopters were first used to airlift South Vietnamese (ARVN) troops to Communist strongholds, changing the nature of the war, as they enabled the South Vietnamese forces to achieve some battlefield success.¹⁰

In Laos, the American presence decreased following the signing of the Protocol to the Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos on 23 July 1962. North Vietnam and the

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A Buddhist uprising against the ruling Catholic minority in South Vietnam in 1963 created negative public opinion in the United States. Officers of the South Vietnamese armed forces overthrew and killed Diem in the fall of 1963. After President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson inherited a difficult situation as North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh increased support for the Communist insurgent armed forces in South Vietnam. On 7 February 1964, the Viet Cong attacked an American air base at Pleiku and a helicopter base four miles away at Camp Holloway, resulting in nine U.S. servicemen dead and one hundred thirty seven wounded. Following widespread media reports of the attacks, both Congress and the American people wanted action.

In August 1964, the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred, in which the American destroyer, \textit{U.S.S. Maddox}, in support of South Vietnamese commando activity, allegedly faced an attack from three North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The United States launched several air strikes from aircraft carriers against North Vietnamese targets. During these air strikes, on 5 August 1964, United States Navy aviator Lieutenant Everett Alvarez became the first U.S. pilot known to be taken prisoner in
North Vietnam. On 10 August 1964 Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolutions, which gave President Johnson expanded power to wage war against Communist forces in Southeast Asia.

Lyndon Johnson was in a difficult position in regard to Vietnam. He could not afford to look soft on Communism and suffer the slings and arrows of Republicans, reminding the American people of the fall of China, the Alger Hiss case, and other related issues. He did not want the Chinese or Russians to become overtly involved, as they had in the Korean conflict. Johnson particularly wanted to avoid a nuclear war. The dire circumstances under which Johnson came into office and an impending reelection bid against noted anti-Communist Republican hard-liner Barry Goldwater provided Johnson with further impetus for continuing the war in Vietnam. Undoubtedly his personal pride had a great deal to do with his actions in Vietnam since he did not want to be the president associated with losing Vietnam, as Democrat Harry Truman before him was called the man who lost China.

To contain what he and his advisers considered the spread of Communism and yet avoid a nuclear catastrophe, Johnson attempted to conduct a limited war by gradually escalating bombing attacks in North Vietnam. The series of air attacks was first named FLAMING DART, later code-named ROLLING THUNDER. It was during the

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13 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 322.

ROLLING THUNDER campaign that Jerry Singleton was shot down. This air campaign lasted for three and a half years.\textsuperscript{15} By 31 August 1967, U.S. State Department documents indicated there were more than 650 servicemen listed as prisoners of war or missing in action in Vietnam. About 200 were known to be in Communist hands.\textsuperscript{16} The Air Force did not originally approach Vietnam as a long-range conflict. Employing World War II tactics, they believed air power could easily win the war. However, early aircraft deployed to meet the Communist threat were obsolete models such as T-28s and B-26s.\textsuperscript{17}

Johnson’s administration did try early in the war to gain information about and improve the welfare of POWs. They convinced the International Committee of the Red Cross to encourage Hanoi to honor its commitments under the Geneva Convention, releasing the names of all prisoners, allowing the exchange of mail, and permitting representatives of the Red Cross to visit prisoners. In August 1965, the International Red Cross notified North Vietnam and the United States that the fighting in Southeast Asia had come to a point where there could be no doubt it constituted an armed conflict to which the regulations of humanitarian law as a whole should apply.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the Red Cross prompted both sides to honor their obligations under the 1949 Geneva Convention

\textsuperscript{15} Davidson, \textit{Vietnam at War}, 333-336.


Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The United States and South Vietnam accepted, while the Vietcong and North Vietnam rejected the appeal.19

American POWs and their families suffered from the refusal of the North Vietnamese to release any information about the prisoners or to conform to international standards in their treatment of captured men. Hanoi held that the 1949 Geneva Convention on prisoners of war did not apply to American pilots captured in North Vietnam. North Vietnam regarded the prisoners as “war criminals” as stipulated by the post World War II Nuremberg Tribunal. Following North Vietnam’s 1966 public humiliation of American POWs being paraded through the streets of Hanoi and the announcement that North Vietnam would try downed flyers as war criminals, the U.S. offered to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. President Johnson appealed to the Pope for his assistance in the matter. None of these tactics worked.20

North Vietnam backed down from these threats only after worldwide protest. Increasing public awareness of the plight of the prisoners was one of the few weapons that the Johnson administration felt it could wield on behalf of the POWs, and it may well have had the effect of inducing Hanoi to stop cruder forms of pressure and mistreatment.21

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Under President Lyndon Johnson, the United States government wanted to do everything reasonably possible to bring back the prisoners, but American leaders feared North Vietnam might use their efforts as propaganda ploys. The Johnson administration worried that North Vietnam might use the POW issue to pressure Washington to recognize the Viet Cong as an equal to the Hanoi government. The American embassy in Vietnam warned Secretary of State Dean Rusk of problems with a possible exchange of prisoners between the Viet Cong and the U.S. “The unusual procedure proposed by the enemy may be intended to lead us into some kind of ceremony, such as salute to the PLAF flag, [or] signature of documents, which might or might not be couched in humiliating terms, photographs, or other arrangements designed to enhance their status at a time when the Paris talks are deadlocked because of us.”

The governments of both the United States and North Vietnam continued to use POWs as pawns in an extended negotiation going into the Nixon administration. Hanoi blamed the United States for the continued captivity of American POWs because Washington refused to bargain on the basis of the Liberation Front’s ten-point program. After the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator William Fulbright, made an appeal to the North Vietnamese for the release of names of American POWs held in North Vietnam, North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh asserted that the question (regarding return of American POWs) would be solved at the same time as the whole ten-

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point solution. He stated that it would not be taken up as a separate issue, and the Nixon administration must bear full responsibility for any delay in the settlement.\footnote{U.S. embassy, Vietnam, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secret message, 19 December 1968, National Security File, Lyndon Baines Johnson Archives and Library, Austin, Texas; country file (Vietnam), box 81, no. 69.}

North Vietnam's refusal to release even the most basic information about prisoners of war, while not made known to the American public, caused much anguish to prisoners' families. United States policy early in the war required secrecy and limited action from the families of MIAs and POWs. American government officials expressed concern that publicizing the names of POWs might jeopardize any men who had evaded capture and could expose families of POWs to undue pressure from anti-war groups. The continued inability of the U.S. government to monitor the conditions or obtain release of the prisoners inspired Jerry Singleton's wife, Bonnie Singleton, and others to use the power of public opinion. Mrs. Singleton's efforts aided in getting names of prisoners in North Vietnam released, mail exchanged, and better treatment for prisoners. Her actions influenced Ross Perot, a powerful private citizen, Richard Nixon, President of the United States; Congressman Olin "Tiger" Teague; and thousands of ordinary citizens.
CHAPTER 2

SEARCH AND RESCUE IN VIETNAM

The Communist Pathet Lao, with North Vietnamese backing, attacked the Plain of Jars, considered the "rice basket" of Laos, on 16 March 1964. As the war progressed, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese regulars operated along the Ho Chi Minh trail as a supply line through Laos to the South Vietnamese Communists, the Viet Cong. American anxiety about these developments placed increasing pressure on President Lyndon Johnson to expand American military power into the region. Johnson, as Kennedy and Eisenhower before him, subscribed to the domino theory, fearing all of Southeast Asia might fall to the Communists. The decision to begin bombing North Vietnam brought the approval of many top politicians, both inside and outside of government. Robert Kennedy wrote to Johnson shortly after Congress convened in 1966 to tell him how impressed he was with the most recent efforts to find a solution to Vietnam. He felt that the administration's position within the United States and around the world had improved immeasurably due to the aggressive actions taken in the previous year.  

From 1965 through 1968 the United States Air Force executed the longest bombing campaign ever conducted, supported by covert operations out of Laos.  

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States Central Intelligence Agency and its covert surrogate, Air America, conducted operations in Laos, gathering information and attempting to incite and aid local opposition to the Communist efforts. Nicknamed “Waterpump,” the original mission was to train Laotian and Thai pilots and maintenance personnel. With limited air operations then underway throughout Southeast Asia, on 5 March 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert S. MacNamara approved deployment for Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. On 26 August 1964, President Lyndon Johnson authorized the use of U.S. pilots in T-28s, training aircraft modified for combat operations in Laos. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that the Vietnamese could not withstand more than six months of more intensive bombing. Operation Rolling Thunder began on 2 March 1965.

Additional U.S. Air Force units in Vietnam and Thailand increased demands upon the air rescue service. United States Air Force Detachment 1 (Provisional), established at Bien Hoa, Vietnam, and Detachment 2 (Provisional) at Da Nang, Vietnam, conducted crash courses for rescue crews, getting them ready for jungle rescues under enemy fire. The 2nd Air Division assumed primary search and rescue missions, using HH-43 Huskies flying out of Nakon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base. Stocks of aviation fuel, placed in the Laotian panhandle, increased the limited range of the HH-43s.

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3 Jack Teague, son of Congressman Olin Teague and veteran of war in Laos, interview by author, tape recording and transcript with oral permission to copy, College Station, TX, 12 July 1996, in possession of author.

4 Earl H. Tilford, Jr., Crosswinds: the Airforce's Setup in Vietnam (College Station, TX, Texas A & M University Press, 1993), 69.

5 Jacob Van Staaveren, The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia; Interdiction
Base in Thailand became Air Support Rescue Center of Operations. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued directives for more search and rescue operations in Southeast Asia in 1964, elements of the 33rd Air Rescue Squadron left Naha Air Station, Okinawa, for Nakon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base.  

American military personnel were aware that all American activity in Laos was covert. As Jerry Singleton stated, "Officially, we were not there." The American military command required crews to use removable insignia panels so the craft could not be identified as American while on the ground in Laos or if shot down over enemy territory. Helicopter aircrews operating in Laos taped over their flight suit U.S. insignia before flights into Laos. Families were notified only that the crews had been deployed into Southeast Asia on rescue missions, with no specific details given. Conditions for search and rescue operations out of Thailand and Laos were primitive. Military air operations into the panhandle of Northern Laos, named BARREL ROLL and STEEL TIGER, were limited in nature, hindered by political control. In 1964, "the rescue mission in Southeast Asia suffered from inadequate forces, nonexistent doctrine, and ill-suited aircraft."

Search and rescue efforts required several different types of planes. The propeller-driven Douglas A-1 "Skyraider," nicknamed "Sandy" for rescue operations, proved to be

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7 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, tape recording and transcript with oral permission to copy, Coppell, TX, 5-6 June 1996, 7, in possession of the author.

a workhorse in the early days of the Vietnam conflict. Armed with a 7,000-pound bomb load, four 20-mm cannons, and heavy armor plating, the slow-speed craft provided excellent “loiter” capabilities, meeting the needs of a rescue escort better than any other aircraft. Jet fighters kept dangerous enemy MIGs away from the slow-moving A-1s.

Capable of speeds up to 115 miles per hour, the Sikorsky CH-3C turbine-driven helicopters, converted from cargo duty and nicknamed “Jolly Green Giants” because of brown and green camouflage, proved better suited for aircrew retrieval than other helicopters of the era. The cargo version used for rescues weighed more than eleven tons and could carry a 5,000-pound load or twenty-five combat-ready troops. The rescue ship had a crew of four. Later improvements to the “Jolly Green” included two mini-machine guns, armor plating, and self-sealing fuel tanks, features that were not available for Jerry Singleton and his crew. Their helicopters were the only ones in the Air Force inventory then capable of long-range rescues. One of the two “Jolly Greens” that arrived in Southeast Asia in August 1965 was copiloted by Jerry Singleton.

Lieutenant Jerry Singleton, stationed at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, worked with the only inventory of CH-3s in the Air Force. Beginning in May 1964, his unit worked to develop techniques for use in long-range helicopter rescues. “We were stretching the envelope on the helicopters. We were flying just to see how much we could do with them. When the Air Force decided we needed a long-range rescue in Southeast

\[9\] Ibid., 69.
Asia, we were certainly the best qualified to move in and do that job. That’s why I ended up there.  

When Singleton arrived in Southeast Asia in October 1965, temporary duty crews (“TDC’s”) in northeastern Thailand provided air rescues using H-43’s “Huskies” (call sign “Pedro”). “We referred to it (H-43) as the ‘intermeshing, counter-smashing helicopter’ because it had the unique system of a twin overhead rotor, two blades each, and they each passed through the other’s plane as they rotated.” The craft was designed to rescue pilots downed in open areas. The H-43 twin rotor design provided a fire suppressant as wind generated from the helicopter blade draft deprived a downed burning aircraft of oxygen. Since the jungle canopy prevented air from flowing downward, this design made the “Pedro” ill-suited for rescue in the jungle. In addition, due to limited fuel capacity, the H-43 was not well suited to long-range rescue operations. To extend range, crews took fifty-five-gallon drums of fuel in a cargo compartment and used a hand pump to refuel. Crews in H-43s attempted to provide rescue capability for Air America crews operating in Laos and for early Air Force strikes against North Vietnam. Air America brought fuel to remote staging areas in fifty-five-gallon drums. Because much of the fuel was

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10 Jerry Singleton, interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, sponsored by members of Association of Graduates of the United States Air Force Academy Class of 1965 as part of United States Air Force Prisoner of War Oral History, transcript, October 30, 1992, Douglas Pike Collection, Texas Tech University Library Special Collections, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, 21. (Hereafter cited as USAF Academy Interview)

11 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 9.

12 Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, 20.
contaminated with water by as much as one-third when it arrived, crews had to stand drums upright for a day to let fuel and water separate before use.\textsuperscript{13}

Because of the H-43’s limitations, the Air Force rushed delivery of the CH-3s into Southeast Asia, thus bringing Jerry Singleton into harm’s way. Singleton’s unit brought two CH-3s, “Jolly Greens,” with enough parts to keep only one helicopter flying. “The single ‘Jolly’ really had the long-range rescue mission deep into North Vietnam. It was really a Class-B (i.e. poorly equipped) operation, and that’s too generous.”\textsuperscript{14} The Air Force did not yet arm rescue helicopters with fixed gun emplacements, and the helicopters had little armor plating.

With staging taking place at remote areas known as “Lima Sites,” rescue crews at Udorn got up at 3:30 am. After breakfast at the officers’ or noncommissioned officers’ clubs, crews rode in vans to the flight line. They picked up maps, helmets, survival gear, flak vests, parachutes, pistols and M-16 rifles. Pilots received briefings on weather, operations, and intelligence for the day. After a pre-flight helicopter check, the “choppers” went up at dawn, headed north to either Long Tieng or Na Khang (Lima 36). Lima Site 36 was a more primitive location than Long Tieng. Laotian troops defended the sites against possible Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese attacks. After landing at the forward sites, crews passed time sleeping, reading, or joking with native troops. If they did not receive a call for help before the strike aircraft reached their targets in North Vietnam, their morning passed quietly. During the periods of heaviest air strikes, crews

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 18.
flew the “Jolly Green Giants” to an altitude of 10,000 feet above the North Vietnam-Laos border, where they circled until needed. Until airborne refueling began in June 1967, all helicopters had to return to Na Khang for fuel. Lieutenant Jerry Singleton took part in this routine until he was shot down on a rescue mission into North Vietnam.

When downed airmen required rescue, a complex system of air traffic control was set up to coordinate efforts. After an American plane went down, rescue crews received a “scramble” call and were airborne in a matter of minutes. Rescue teams homed in on an electronic signal from the downed airman’s emergency locator beacon. A-1 “Sandys” worked under air traffic controllers in specially equipped aircraft, code-named “Crown.” The control planes patrolled crash areas looking for anti-aircraft positions while they pinpointed the downed airmen’s exact location. Normally, four A-1s in flights of two were used in a rescue escort. The flights, called “Sandy High” and “Sandy Low,” hoped to contact the downed flyer via his survival radio and authenticate his identity. Enemy troops tried to pull rescue crews into “flak traps” by using radio beacons.

“Sandys” flew in flights individually or with the helicopters. A pilot in the “Sandy Low” flight acted as the on-scene commander. Unless “Crown” specifically decided otherwise, it was “Sandy Low” who cleared the helicopter to make the final pickup.

Search and air rescue teams into North Vietnam wrote their mission plans as they carried

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17 Tilford, *Search and Rescue*, 94.
them out, dictated by the necessity of each individual rescue. They did not know in advance where they were going or what they were going to face. Helicopter pilots knew only how much fuel range they had, which dictated how far they could go on their missions. American search and rescue policies and practices in the jungles of North Vietnam ultimately placed Jerry Singleton, and consequently, his wife, Bonnie Singleton, in the middle of the maelstrom of war and world opinion.
Jerry A. Singleton was born in Weatherford, Oklahoma, 20 March 1940, the eldest of three children. Raised in the Oklahoma City area, he entered the United States Air Force Academy, majored in engineering sciences, and graduated in June 1962. Singleton’s undergraduate pilot training took place at Webb Air Force Base, Big Spring, Texas. Lieutenant Singleton chose to go into helicopter training because he wanted to avoid a career in the Strategic Air Command and the long hours of standing on alert. He hoped to transfer into fighters later.  

He graduated from helicopter training at Stead Air Force Base, Reno, Nevada, in 1963, and was assigned to a composite test wing at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. At Eglin, Singleton’s wing conducted joint exercises with the army and provided information to aid the Department of Defense in deciding which branch of service would provide helicopter support. The United States Army wanted to establish its own air power wing to support ground troops while the Air Force believed it could do a better job with helicopters than the army. The debate ended when the Defense Department decided the Air Force would use helicopters mainly in air rescue, and the army would use helicopters for troop deployment and air support. Singleton’s squadron

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1 Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, ii.
tested the first CH-3C helicopters produced for the Air Force. This training made Jerry Singleton and his unit prime candidates for the search and rescue assignment in Vietnam.²

After Eglin, in the fall of 1965, the Air Force assigned Singleton to Stead Air Force Base to practice mountain flying. While at Stead, he went through Air Force Survival School. It was because of this survival training that Singleton could accurately predict the actions of his North Vietnamese captors during his first year as a prisoner.³ All of his training and Air Force experience gave Singleton a feeling of being prepared for anything. "I thought I had the world by the tail on a downhill tow."⁴ Lieutenant Singleton received assignment to Southeast Asia in October 1965. The deployment from Stead took three cargo plane (C-130) loads of men and equipment from the Eglin squadrons from staging bases in California to Southeast Asia.⁵

Using the forward sites in northern Laos enabled the search and rescue teams to mount rescue operations into North Vietnam more quickly than rescues from locations in South Vietnam. While troubled by a lack of equipment, Singleton's first combat assignment brought him a feeling of eagerness to accomplish the mission for which his training had prepared him. "I wanted to clean up those dirty Communists and make the world safe for Coca-Cola."⁶

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² Ibid., 18.
³ Ibid., 15.
⁴ Ibid., 19.
⁵ Ibid., 1.
⁶ Ibid., 22
Air rescue control launched Singleton on two rescue missions before he was shot down. One involved an Air America T-28 shot down in northern Laos over the Plaine de Jarres (Plain of Jars). Singleton's helicopter, a model CH-3E, tail number 63-09685, took off in a thunderstorm, but could not reach the downed pilot because of the severe weather. Without navigation aids, pilot Warren R. "Bob" Lilly struggled to return the craft to base. Only with the help of a passing Air America observer airplane did the pilot safely return the rescue helicopter.

Singleton's first successful mission began during his off time. He and his crew were at their home station at Nakon Phanom (NKP) in northern Thailand. A Navy A-4 plane had been downed. A klaxon sounded, "scrambling" an H-43 for a search and rescue mission. Singleton and two of his friends went to the radio shack to try to listen in on the rescue attempt. The rescue helicopters ran out of gas before rescuing the downed pilot, and the mission was aborted. The rescue control center in Saigon requested a second attempt from NKP. Pilot Warren R. Lilly asked Jerry Singleton if he was willing to attempt a rescue in a CH-3, although some of the helicopter's parts were missing. Singleton agreed and gathered his maps as other crewmembers prepared to fly.

Control aircraft coordinated their effort. A-1 "Sandies" attempted to find the downed pilot. Singleton's helicopter followed the route established by the A-1s toward

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7 "First CH-3E Shot Down in War", 1, available from http://www.jollygreen.org; Internet.

8 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 7.

9 Robert W. Elliott, Colonel, USAF Director of Administrative Services, Special order G-14, 21 January 1966, Bonnie Singleton papers, in possession of the author, Coppell, TX.
the general location of the crash. Upon reaching the site, the rescue helicopter circled near the location until the A-1s could suppress enemy fire and find the pilot. When the A-1s found the wreckage of the burning plane, Singleton’s helicopter circled the area. The crew heard weak and garbled messages on the emergency radio from the downed pilot. Singleton barely saw a small pen gun signal flare break over the jungle canopy. The rescue crew established radio contact with the pilot and hovered until the crew chief spotted the badly injured man under trees on the side of a hill, a location which made pickup difficult. Later search and rescue helicopters used apparatuses known as jungle penetrators, spring-operated devices that could separate layers of jungle to get to a downed pilot. Singleton’s helicopter had no forest penetrators, which made rescue difficult in the jungle and forced the crew to rely upon Navy-designed “horse collars.” These tools, developed for pickup at sea, were lowered by winch into the jungle for attempted rescues. In this instance, the wounded pilot could not manage to hold onto the collar. The rescue team paramedic went down in the collar. He found the wounded pilot and dragged him to a clearing pick-up point. Using a second collar, the crew raised both men into the helicopter. The rescue team got the injured pilot back safely to NKP, where a C-54 cargo plane took him directly to a medical facility in Bangkok, Thailand. The pilot, Bill Wheat, later became a leader of the Navy’s Blue Angels acrobatic flying team.10 The team’s actions won the rescue crewmembers decorations for bravery, including a Silver Star for Jerry Singleton. Singleton was not to receive his medal until after his release from captivity in Vietnam.

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10 Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, 35.
On 5 November 1965, United States planes attacked anti-aircraft, surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites near Thanh Hoa, North Vietnam. The seventh raid on the Soviet-built system, which took place over four days, destroyed two sites and damaged five others. As a result of North Vietnamese defensive fire, five American attack planes and two rescue helicopters were shot down, and seven American airmen, including Jerry Singleton, were listed as missing in action in North Vietnam.  

As one of the attacking American F-105 "Thunderchief" fighter-bombers, code-named Oak 01, returned from the mission sixty miles east of Hanoi, it flew into a cloud and disappeared over North Vietnam. The missing pilot's wingman reported the last known position. He had noted neither anti-aircraft fire nor surface to air missiles. Deteriorating weather and darkness made a rescue attempt difficult. At dawn the next day, 6 November, "Sandy 11" and "Sandy 12", flew over North Vietnam in an effort to find the missing plane. Anti-aircraft fire shot down "Sandy 12" and the pilot ejected. "Sandy 11" circled, and spotted the downed pilot. Staging out of Lima 36 in Northern Laos, "Jolly Green 85," a CH-3C commanded by Captain Warren R. Lilly, co-piloted by Jerry Singleton, went to the rescue. "We went in not knowing where we were going." Their effort took them as far into North Vietnam as any search and rescue (SAR)

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11 "U.S. Hits Viet Missile Site For 7th Time In Four Days," Washington Post, sec. A, p. 1, reprinted in Douglas Pike Collection, Texas Tech University Library Special Collections, Unit Two, Lubbock, Texas.

12 Tilford, Search and Rescue, 71.

13 Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, 36.
helicopter had flown at that time. Two more A-1s from Udorn scrambled to help the
downed pilots and escort the rescue helicopter.

Lilly and Singleton followed roads as visual navigation aids, placing themselves in
danger of enemy fire as they flew over North Vietnamese airspace toward the downed
pilot. “The ‘Sandies’ would wake everybody up. We come [sic] along, and they were
waiting for us.”14 Flying at 1,000 to 1,500 feet, Singleton’s helicopter could not keep up
with the “Sandies,” even though the “Sandies” were flying weaving routes to allow the
helicopter to keep up. A thirty-seven-millimeter shell hit a 400-hundred-pound “jerry-
rigged” auxiliary fuel tank in the cargo compartment in the “Jolly Green,” passing through
the floor and rupturing the main tank. Instantly, fire spread throughout the helicopter.
“We were just an instant torch.”15 Lilly pulled the damaged helicopter up, trying to gain
altitude and allow bailout. Crew member Art Cormier, seeing the ball of flame, bailed out
immediately. Singleton made a radio call for help. Pilot Lilly issued the command to bail
out.16 Singleton and Lilly rolled out through the windows of the cockpit. They cleared
the helicopter before opening their canopies. The men came down some thirty-five to
forty miles southwest of Hanoi, near the village of Hoa Bing.

Singleton watched as the flaming helicopter crashed. “There was not a whole lot left
by the time it hit the ground.”17 He saw some other parachutes and heard small arms fired

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14 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 25.
15 Ibid., 26.
16 Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, 37.
17 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 27.
in his direction. Singleton let his parachute drift with the wind, trying to get away from
the enemy fire. He landed in a tree, which he had been trained to do to prevent injury.
The rescue support “Sandies” circled the area where their pilots saw four open parachutes
in the air. They established directional radio beeper contact with the downed crew. With
no immediate helicopter backup because of mechanical problems, the four crewmembers
became separated in heavy jungle.

Unknown to the downed crewmembers, the Navy had scrambled a Sikorsky SH-3
Sea Knight helicopter, code-named Nimble 62, from the carrier U.S.S. Independence to
rescue the downed men. Two A-1Es, “Sandies” 13 and 14 flew to intercept and support
Nimble 62. “Sandy 14” was shot down and disappeared into heavy jungle. After
refueling, the remaining search crews returned to the area, searching for “Sandy 14.” At
dusk, near the end of the search, Nimble 62 monitored a radio beeper and went down to
treetop level. The copilot saw a small light, which proved to be the flame from a Ronson
lighter, sparked by Singleton’s crew chief. Nimble 62 rescued the crew chief and took him
to the Independence.¹⁸

The next morning Nimble 62 flew back to survey the wreckage of the downed “Jolly
Green.” Raked with small arms fire from fishing boats, Nimble 62 took evasive action but
was forced to crash land in North Vietnam. Support A-1 pilots engaged in a shootout
with nearby NVA antiaircraft fire and took several hits. A second Sea Knight rescued the
crew from Nimble 62.

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¹⁸ Tilford, Search and Rescue, 72.
The search for the downed "Jolly Green" continued on 7 November as an Air Force pilot passing over the area picked up rescue signals. Continued rescue attempts resulted in further anti-aircraft fire, which damaged other planes. Rescue command assumed, correctly, that NVA had probably captured the downed flyers by that time, and they called off the search.

Lieutenant Singleton suffered third degree burns on his wrist, knee, and on the back of his neck. Singleton went into shock from his injuries, and his legs felt as if they consisted of rubber; he had difficulty breathing. "It was the most helpless physical feeling I can recall having, other than being locked up in leg irons." Unable to spot other crew members, Singleton tried to get away from his chute, which had lodged in a tree. He worked to move over a rocky-edged karst ridge, when suddenly he heard dogs barking as North Vietnamese soldiers tracked him. Trying to hide, Singleton put on a camouflage head net and gloves and covered himself up with leaves. Singleton had several close calls as the enemy searched all around him, but he was able to evade capture for five days.

Singleton could see the American rescue efforts as the SAR homed in on his locator radio. "A Navy Angel (helicopter) was over my head, making an effort on us." All United States rescue efforts drew small arms fire from the enemy. With no voice communication possible due to a faulty radio, Singleton attempted to send a signal with his homing beacon, using Morse code to flash his initials, but with no success.

Halfway down a large karst ridge, with the enemy troops camped on the other side of a nearby ravine approximately thirty to forty yards away, Singleton reported, "They hadn't

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19 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 34.
found me just because they didn’t step on me.” He tried unsuccessfully to use an emergency strobe light to communicate, but feared the NVA would spot him. Enemy troops mounted a ridge above Singleton and rolled large rocks down trying to dislodge him from his hiding place. At night, the downed pilot tried to move away from the enemy camp. Singleton went five days without water, having lost his canteen during bailout. Dehydrated, Singleton struggled to remain conscious. Finally, in a desperate attempt to contact his fellow downed flyers, Singleton fired his .38 millimeter pistol in the air. North Vietnamese regulars quickly descended upon him. They took off his survival vest and gave him some water.\(^{20}\)

Seven North Vietnamese troops tied Singleton up, his hands behind his back, feet together. The NVA troops transported Singleton to a road. Because he could not walk, they strung the pilot to a bamboo pole and carried him. At one point, an NVA soldier carried Singleton “piggy back” while crossing extremely rough terrain. It was dark by the time they got into camp. After placing Singleton in a shed made out of leaves and branches, the captors gave him some food and water. They then attempted to interrogate him.\(^{21}\)

The North Vietnamese government had signed the Geneva Convention regarding the Treatment of Prisoners of War in 1957, but refused to recognize captured American military personnel as prisoners of war. The North Vietnamese had insisted upon three “reservations” in signing the treaty. One such reservation stated “prisoners of war

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\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 38.
prosecuted and convicted for war crimes or for crimes against humanity, in accordance with the principles laid down by the Nuremberg Court of Justice, shall not benefit from the present convention." The Communist government of North Vietnam insisted upon treating captured American military personnel as war pirates, guilty of crimes against humanity. The Hanoi regime asserted the United States had invaded North Vietnam without a formal declaration of war and that "the captured pilots were caught bloody-handed while committing war crimes of the gravest nature against the people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." North Vietnam refused to admit it had troops in South Vietnam. Eight thousand captured North Vietnamese troops were considered "patriots," illegally detained. Thus, Hanoi refused a prisoner-of-war exchange. They refused to release a list of prisoners, refused to admit Red Cross inspection teams into the camps, and refused to release wounded or sick prisoners. They allowed only one hundred prisoner letters to pass to the United States before 1969.

American military forces are bound to the American Fighting Man's Code of Conduct, established by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1955. According to the code, American fighting persons are bound to resist the enemy while in confinement. The United States military code requires that POWs attempt to escape or help others do so. It requires the senior ranking officer in captivity to take command and all subordinates to

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follow his orders. Giving one’s name as well as rank, service number, and date of birth is mandatory. American POWs must try to avoid answering other questions to the best of their ability. Most men followed the code.

After capture, Singleton was allowed four days rest to regain his strength. While in transit to a prisoner-of-war camp, his captors stopped at a local village. They made Singleton the focus of a gathering of villagers as a local political cadre showed off the captured pilot. Handcuffed in front of a crowd and publicly interrogated, Singleton knew, from his training, that his captors would probably either kill him at that point or take him into a prisoner-of-war camp. He also believed that whatever he said in this initial interrogation would not affect his fate. Lieutenant Singleton refused to answer the questions. Interrogators held a Browning ninety-millimeter pistol to Singleton’s head, threatening him with death if he refused to answer. Feigning ignorance of French, Singleton held firm and refused to respond.

The next day Singleton’s captors put him on a bus for transport to Hanoi. The bus made periodic stops in villages for “show and tells,” with Singleton placed on exhibit for the villagers. “The local cadre would come out. They would put me on display, rant and rave, and make a speech.” At that point in the war, the sight of an American was a novelty, and villagers regarded Singleton with awe, crowding around to observe him. Later in the war other American flyers faced hostile crowds and had to be protected by the

25 Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, 16.

26 Ibid.

27 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 39.
NVA troops. As Singleton stated, "We were political capital to North Vietnam. We were the only thing they had. That was the only reason they kept us alive. We were valuable to them."

Singleton spent three days in a cellblock at a prison camp near the town of Hoa Bing, where guards dressed his wounds. Then the Vietnamese sent Singleton by truck, along with fellow crew members Bob Lilly and Art Cormier, to Hanoi. The blindfolded prisoners met with physical abuse when they attempted to communicate.

Once in Hanoi, the North Vietnamese transported the prisoners to a cellblock, called by American POWs "Heartbreak Hotel." The "Heartbreak Hotel" had eight cells, with two bunks in each cell. Each cell contained leg irons that could be opened and shut from outside the cell. Singleton was placed alone in a cell and forbidden to communicate with prisoners in surrounding cells. After the guards left, Singleton heard the sound of coughing and then American voices. The first person he spoke with was James Stockdale, who later became Ross Perot's vice-presidential candidate. As Stockdale gave him a brief introduction to the POW camp, Singleton and Stockdale's communication was almost detected.

He later learned to communicate by tapping a simple code on the wall.

Singleton stayed at the "Heartbreak Hotel" for about two weeks while the North Vietnamese treated his wounds. The Communists interrogated him several times, with little physical torture. After two weeks, they removed him to a camp called by the

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28 Ibid., 40.

29 Ibid., 41-42.

30 North Vietnamese "Nurse's Assistant Report of Treatment", Summarized case report on Jerry Singleton when examined in infirmary, record 81, 12 February 1968, signed by chief of clinic (location of clinic unavailable), copy in possession of author.
Americans “The Zoo”, also known as “Camp America.” “The Zoo” was a former French film studio. Singleton’s “tapping” became his main form of communication when guards placed him alone in a cell for six months. About the only eye contact Singleton had with his fellow prisoners occurred when the latrine buckets were emptied in the mornings. Searching for sight angles through his cell walls, Singleton struggled to see other Americans. An American who picked up Singleton’s so-called “honey bucket” was Everett Alvarez, the first American shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese.

Singleton’s cell was situated next to a communal shower, which they allowed inmates to use once a week. Singleton occasionally spoke briefly with other prisoners.

In the early days of his captivity, Singleton faced little physical torture. The Vietnamese senior officer, nicknamed “Frenchy” by the Americans, seemed to believe the North Vietnamese propaganda. “Frenchy” thought the Americans could learn to see the error of their ways through verbal communication, conducted in broken English or Vietnamese. “They weren’t twisting arms, beating you over the head, or pulling limbs out of joints. I could take a lot of that, just talking.”

After six months, Singleton was placed in a cell with Navy Lieutenant Skip Brunhaver, an A-4 pilot. The men talked for almost three days straight. “It was like an answered prayer. He learned everything about my life. I learned everything about his life.”

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31 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 46.

32 Ibid.
Shortly after Singleton was placed with Brunhaver, the North Vietnamese began a camp-wide effort to obtain confessions related to war crimes. The Vietnamese captors most frequently used torture when prisoners attempted to communicate or when captors wished to obtain war crime confessions. The order of punishment for communication usually consisted of lecturing, slapping, then placing prisoners in handcuffs or leg irons for extended periods, all directed toward getting the prisoner to write an apology to the camp commander. The North Vietnamese used the apologies or confessions as propaganda, published in news releases. Occasionally, captors forced the captured men to submit to filming of their confessions. Torture escalated until the prisoner cooperated. Besides being physically abused and manacled for extended periods, prisoners were also subjected to food and sleep deprivation. “Unless I was willing to sell my whole soul, they were going to torture me, and they were going to eventually extort some information from me. My responsibility was to give them nothing, or at least as little as possible in the process.”[33] Singleton made up a story about himself to appease his captors without releasing any vital information. His false biography stated he had neither family nor friends. Singleton followed the American Fighting Man’s Code of Conduct, which he had memorized as a cadet at the Air Force Academy.

At times, the North Vietnamese captors conducted mass torture, making their way from cell to cell in search of war crimes confessions. Since Singleton was a helicopter rescue copilot, a junior officer with little experience or technical knowledge, he experienced less physical torture than other prisoners, such as Sam Johnson, currently a

[33] Jerry Singleton, USAF Academy Interview, 16.
member of congress from Texas. Designed to leave few physical marks, most torture involved guards tightly handcuffing prisoners, cinching the cuffs down to the bone, and leaving the man in this condition for days or weeks. The handcuffs, which wore through the flesh, caused permanent damage to some prisoners. The North Vietnamese captors hung other men from the ceiling with ropes draped over meat hooks, with the ropes attached to the prisoners’ arms behind their backs, dislocating their shoulders. While suspending the prisoners in this fashion, guards beat the men with rubber hoses. Most often, captors tortured men by tying them up with their extremities pulled tightly together and left them lying on hard concrete for hours at a time. “There were also some incidences, where it was readily apparent to us, where they took and tortured people to death, simply to see what they could get in the process.” Singleton believes the NVA hoped to create a data bank on how much torture a POW could take before death.34

Major George E. Day, the only POW to escape from a prison camp in North Vietnam, only to be recaptured by the Viet Cong in the South, suffered severe treatment before and after his escape. During ejection from his F-100 on 26 August 1967, Day broke his right arm in three places. After two days of continual interrogation and torture, an NVA medic set his broken arm. During Day’s successful escape on 1 September, guards inflicted shrapnel wounds to his right leg. A badly injured Day wandered for twelve days and barely missed rescue. The NVA then recaptured Day, shooting him in the left hand and thigh. By the time of his recapture Day had lost sixty pounds. The North Vietnamese beat the wounded and emaciated soldier, at one point binding a rope under his

34 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 51.
armpits and suspending him from a ceiling beam for two hours. As part of his torture, the interrogating officers twisted Day's damaged arm, breaking his wrist. Other prisoners reported similar experiences.

Singleton described the unfortunate aftermath of a failed escape by fellow prisoners from the "Zoo." The NVA captured John Dramesi and Ed Atterbury after one day of freedom. The NVA reasoned that the other prisoners knew of the escape attempt. They took the eight men who shared a cell complex and tortured them to varying degrees. According to Jerry Singleton, Ed Atterbury died because of torture at the hands of the North Vietnamese.

Singleton reported that most prison camp meals (before 1969) consisted of pumpkin soup with pig fat, "sewer greens" (green plants growing from sewer drainage ditches, thrown into boiling water), limited amounts of rice, and a bread similar to French bread. Most POWs lost a great deal of weight and suffered from malnutrition. At one point, Singleton was at the brink of starvation. During his first six months of imprisonment, Singleton lost more than thirty pounds. One of his favorite sayings is "Did you know a man can live on nothing but boiled water with some cabbage in it for forty-two days? I know because I did it."

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36 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 52.

37 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, tape recording and transcript, 15 May 1992, Coppell, TX, in possession of author.

38 Ibid.
As of September of 1970, the Defense Department had no way of knowing the exact number of POWs, but issued the estimated figure of 1,576 American servicemen missing or captured in Southeast Asia. Most American prisoners received similar treatment and worse at the hands of the North Vietnamese. Others got better treatment as part of propaganda efforts by the Communists.

Antiwar activist and actress Jane Fonda visited North Vietnam in August 1972. Those pilots who cooperated with the NVA got to speak with the actress. She spoke over the prison intercom to POWs at Camp Unity, delighting the camp guards and commander. At another camp known as “The Plantation,” some Americans willingly cooperated with the enemy. The guards gave them better treatment than other POWs, including better food, the opportunity for more physical activity, and the privilege of exchanging mail with their families. American visitors Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark met with this group. Although aware of these events, Singleton refused to deviate from the American Fighting Man’s Code of Conduct, and was thus unable to receive mail or packages at this time.

The United States assumed the government of North Vietnam would eventually agree to a prisoner exchange after using the POW issue for propaganda. Three and a half years had been the maximum any Americans had been held captive. Most Americans assumed the North Vietnamese would return the POWs within a few years. United States

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39 Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, tape recording and transcript with oral permission to copy, 12 November 1994, 8, Coppell TX, in possession of author.

40 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A& M University Press, 1992), 264.
officials kept quiet about the issue, fearing the enemy might take revenge on American POWs for the bombing raids on North Vietnam. However, government silence began to change with the summer of 1966, as the North Vietnamese paraded captured American aircrews through the streets of Hanoi and as North Vietnamese leaders discussed the possibility of trials. They told prisoners "Your government has no authority over you. The people of Vietnam will try you for your crimes. We can do whatever we like with you."\(^{41}\) The Pope and the United Nations called for reason. Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Richard B. Russell, threatened that if executions of Americans took place, the United States response would be "the application of power that will make a desert of their country."\(^{42}\)

The NVA hoped to show their proficiency in war by shooting down American planes and displaying to the world any fear shown by downed flyers. Refusing to recognize captured American military personnel as prisoners of war as prescribed in the 1949 Geneva Agreements, NVA officials frequently denied medical treatment to the sick and injured prisoners until they agreed to sign propaganda statements. Some personnel died of lack of medical treatment because they refused to acquiesce to such coercion.

The North Vietnamese dealt months and years of solitary confinement as punishment to prisoners who attempted to communicate with fellow prisoners and establish a military chain of command or to encourage others to remain loyal.\(^{43}\) Until 1970 many prisoners

\(^{41}\) Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 5-6 June 1996, 55.

\(^{42}\) Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 82.

were kept in cells for twenty-three hours a day. Most cells were small, unsanitary, hot in summer due to minimal ventilation, and cold in the winter. The North Vietnamese allowed no mail to most prisoners until 1970. "The [blocking of] mail to and from our families, I think for many of us, was one of the cruelest things they could have done—not only us being aware of the fact that our family didn't know if we were alive or dead, but by the same token, us not knowing the condition of our families." Eventually, Jerry and Bonnie Singleton did correspond.

After suffering six years of imprisonment, Medal of Honor winner Lieutenant Colonel Leo Thorsness described his experiences.

... prison taught me there are other things that test a man more than combat. At no time in an airplane did I ever fear. There's a certain security in the cockpit. In prison you are by yourself, and it continues day after day. It is unfortunate that Medals of Honor are not presented under the most trying test of a man's courage, bravery, and capabilities.

Most prisoners languished in the prison camps until 18 December 1972. President Richard Nixon, angry about the North Vietnamese failure to negotiate in good faith, ordered B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers to attack Hanoi for the first time in the war. Nicknamed LINEBACKER II, partially out of Nixon's love of football, the United States Air Force called the series of air attacks the "Christmas bombings." The B-52s were

44 Jerry Singleton, interview by author, 15 May 1992, 12.
45 Major Donald K. Schneider, Air Force Heroes in Vietnam, 56.
launched from Guam, flying up to eighteen hours at a time. These missions established a United States Air Force record for time and distance, representing "the longest sustained strategic bombardment flights ever attempted." On 26 December, bomb blasts rocked the "Hanoi Hilton," cheering the prisoners and bringing consternation to the guards. Whenever an attack took place, prisoners attempted to look out windows and watch. One POW described seeing a guard drop his weapon and urinate in his pants. Colonel Robinson Risner, a POW for more than seven years, related his experience during the raids.

On the 18th of December there was never such joy seen in our camp before. There were people jumping up and down and putting their arms around each other and there were tears running down our faces. We knew they were B-52s and that President Nixon was keeping his word and that the Communists were getting the message. We saw reaction in the Vietnamese that we had never seen under attacks from fighters. They at last knew that we had some weapons they had not felt, and that President Nixon was willing to use those weapons in order to get us out of Vietnam.

47 Ibid., 5.

Bonnie Singleton had a typical 1950's American upbringing. The daughter of Henry and Bernice Streidl, Bonnie was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1942. Her family moved to Texas, where her father worked as a successful independent oilman. She graduated from Hillcrest High School in Dallas in 1960 and from Texas Tech University in Lubbock in 1964. In Lubbock she met Jerry Singleton on a blind date while Jerry was in pilot training at Webb Air Force Base. Bonnie and Jerry married in January 1964. They moved to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and lived in base housing. While in Florida, Mrs. Singleton taught public school while Jerry tested the new CH-3C helicopter.

The Singletons had been married for a year and a half when Jerry's helicopter went down; he knew at the time of Bonnie's pregnancy with their first child.¹ Bonnie was not to learn if Jerry was alive or dead for five years. The United States government advised Bonnie, because of the possibility Jerry had been taken captive, that it would be best, for his welfare, to reply to sources outside her immediate family by giving only Jerry's name, rank, service number and date of birth.² Major R.S. North (USAF, Chief, Missing Persons Branch, Casualty Division, Directorate of Personnel Services) warned families of

¹ Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 12 November 1994, 14.
² G.B. Greene, Jr., assistant deputy chief of staff, U.S. Air Force, telegram to Bonnie Singleton, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX.
missing men of an organization calling itself the Viet Cong Sympathizers Arms Fund
which had started a project of harassment in order to obtain information from families of
American service personnel in Vietnam. Bonnie was advised to be cautious about what
she said publicly about her husband. "They told us not to tell anyone outside the
immediate family that we even had a family member who was missing."

Some wives preferred not to burden others with their particular problem. Adelyn
Wilson stated,

For the longest time, I wouldn't tell anyone my husband was a prisoner. Occasionally, I'd be asked about my husband, and I would say he was missing in action. Then I would have to explain, which would make the other people feel awful for even asking, and everybody would be terribly embarrassed.

Wives of men shot down suffered a life in limbo. They had difficulty in planning for
the future, unsure if they were wives or widows. The government policy was predicated
upon World War II strategy for dealing with POW/MIA issues, presuming that the conflict
would be resolved within a reasonable amount of time. Few government officials
anticipated the war would continue for more than three or four years. After the wives had

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3 R.S. North to Bonnie Singleton, “Procedures for delivery of mail to Americans
missing or detained during the Viet Nam conflict,” 24 November 1965, Bonnie Singleton
papers, Coppell, TX.

4 Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, tape recording and transcript, 31 December
1997, 3, Coppell, TX, in possession of author.

5 Daniel St. Albin Greene, “POW Wives’ New Tactics Show Signs of Success:
Enemy’s Tone Changes, Mail Comes Through After Families Abandon Silent Agony,
Record-Senate (22 September 1970), S16148.
dealt with the uncertainty for an extended time, the American government, having no precedent, was at a loss to establish a satisfactory policy of any kind.

Mrs. Singleton's son, Richard, was born six months after her husband was shot down. Because she had been directed not to divulge her husband's circumstances, admissions at Baylor Hospital in Dallas listed Jerry as being unavailable for contact. Consequently, some of the hospital staff presumed she was an unwed mother.

On 17 January 1967, Mrs. Singleton received a letter from Lt. Col. Luther, Chief, Casualty Division, informing her that, as of July 1966, Jerry Singleton had been taken prisoner in North Vietnam. The Air Force again reminded her not to release information about her husband to anyone outside her immediate family.6 She was not told at the time the reason for Jerry's change in status. Bonnie found out years after the war from a former roommate and classmate of Jerry's, General Mike Butchko, that he had personally seen a satellite photograph of Jerry standing in the doorway of a North Vietnamese POW camp. That information caused the military to change Jerry's status from MIA to POW.

In time, Mrs. Singleton met the wives of other POWs/MIAs and began an informal network in the Dallas area. The women shared information and formed a support group.7 They wrote letters to government officials, asking what the government was doing to find out if the missing servicemen were alive or dead. "We were being told to be quiet, that

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7 Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 12 November 1994, 8.
the government was working behind the scenes. After numerous years, we believed they (the US government) were being quiet because they really were not doing very much." 

In the early years after her husband Jerry had been shot down, Bonnie followed government procedure and kept quiet. Her attitude changed after North Korea captured the American spy ship, the USS *Pueblo*, in 1968. The *Pueblo* commander's wife, Rose Bucher, refused to follow the United States government directives concerning secrecy. Rose held press conferences designed to raise awareness about the plight of the men of the *Pueblo*. Mrs. Bucher criticized government inaction on the matter. The government told her the same things they were telling the wives of POW/MIAs: "Sit tight, lady, stay at home and knit, and stay out of our hair." Government officials told the women that Asian people supposedly did not respond well to public criticism, and negotiations could best be carried out in private. To Bonnie Singleton and other POW/MIA families, Rose Bucher's public outspoken demand for knowledge seemed to meet with success. By making public statements in the newspapers and at press conferences, Rose Bucher brought attention to her husband's plight on a worldwide scale.

Inspired by Bucher's accomplishment, Bonnie Singleton and a group of wives of POWs/MIAs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area organized to find out more about their husbands' condition and to bring them aid and comfort. Bonnie believed that the *Pueblo* incident had opened the eyes of the American public about the need for more public awareness and that public pressure could accomplish what the wives' silence had not.

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8 Ibid.

9 Lloyd M. Bucher, USN, Captain USS Pueblo, with Mark Rascovich, *Bucher: My*
Mrs. Singleton began to speak to local civic organizations, particularly veterans' groups. The wives targeted members of their own state legislatures and Congress and asked local newspapers and television stations for help in trying to get the North Vietnamese to adhere to the Geneva Convention. They asked for private meetings with government officials and asked them specifically what they were doing to assist in the POW/MIA issue.\(^\text{10}\)

After receiving correspondence from Mrs. Singleton and her local organization, Congressman Olin "Tiger" Teague (Democrat, College Station, Texas) showed interest in their cause. Teague, a decorated combat veteran of World War II and chairman of the House Committee of Veterans Affairs, met with Mrs. Singleton and her group of POW-MIA wives. With the help of Teague, Mrs. Singleton and three other wives received an audience with the publisher of the \textit{Dallas Times Herald}, Felix McKnight. On 28 May 1969, McKnight published the first of many newspaper responses to the group's efforts in an editorial entitled "Three Young Women Deserve an Answer." McKnight wrote,

"Perhaps, they said, public sentiment could build a mighty demand for release of a prisoner list. World opinion has been known to sway the heartless. You have a right to know. And American people... free people everywhere... should arise as they have in the past and help you."\(^\text{11}\)


\(^{10}\) Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 12 November 1994, 10.

\(^{11}\) Felix McKnight, "Three Young Women Deserve an Answer," \textit{Dallas Times Herald}, 28 May 1969, sec. A.
Probably in response to the rising tide of awareness, in June 1969, the United States government had regional meetings around the country with family members of men missing in action.

In July 1969, Bonnie Singleton, accompanied by Dallas-area POW/MIA wives Sandy McElhanon, Joy Jeffrey, and Paula Hartness, through the efforts of Olin E. Teague, attended the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Convention in Philadelphia. While at the convention, the four women met with Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird who pledged to continue efforts to work in behalf of the prisoners of war.\(^\text{12}\) They received a donation for the National League of Families of American Prisoners of War, which they represented as the Dallas chapter. One of the VFW leaders, Cooper Holt in Washington, D.C., requested that they keep the donated money in Dallas to be used when necessary to continue their efforts. The donation from the VFW later helped the women make a trip to Paris to meet with government officials of North Vietnam (NVA).\(^\text{13}\)

In a private meeting with Teague and the VFW leadership, the women were asked what the VFW might do for them. The women stated they wanted to go to Hanoi and meet personally with the leaders of North Vietnam to try to find out what had happened to


\(^\text{13}\) Mrs. Gregg (Paula) Hartness, to Dallas C. Weasel, Senior Vice Commander Veterans of Foreign Wars, Leavenworth, Kansas, 2 October 1969, Prisoner of War file, Congressman Olin Teague Papers, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.
their husbands. Some of the VFW officials feared this endeavor might be too dangerous. After dinner the women retired to their hotel room and prepared for bed. Congressman Teague phoned their room, insisting the women come to his hotel room immediately to discuss their request. In his room, smoking cigarettes non-stop, were the leaders of the VFW. Teague first castigated the women for making such an outlandish request. He and the VFW were concerned; they had publicly promised to help the group, but the request seemed too much. Finally, after much deliberation, the VFW compromised and agreed to fly the women to Paris to meet with the North Vietnamese representatives at the Paris Peace Conference. The women accepted the proposal.¹⁴

Another development helped to further the wives' plan to meet with Vietnamese representatives in Paris. Following a program aired by WFAA television (a Dallas affiliate of the American Broadcasting System) titled "The New Left," the mother of a prisoner of war called and suggested the TV station do a documentary on the status of prisoners of war. Former ABC news anchor Murphy Martin, director of special projects for WFAA, contacted Congressman Teague who provided the names of the wives who had gone to Philadelphia. Martin interviewed Congressman Teague, Joy Jeffrey, Bonnie Singleton, Sandy McElhanon, Paula Hartness, and Mrs. Charles Powell on the Sunday evening public affairs program "Face to Face" hosted by Martin on 3 August 1969.¹⁵ They discussed

¹⁴ Bonnie Singleton, interview with author, 12 November 1994, Coppell, TX, in possession of author.

¹⁵ Murphy Martin, "Face to Face With Murphy Martin," WFAA-TV, Dallas, TX interview with wives of POWs, 3 August 1969, transcript in possession of author.
their efforts to obtain information about their husbands and their desire to travel to Paris to meet North Vietnamese representatives.

After the program, Martin recognized the potential for a good news story. The former ABC national news anchor went to his supervisors at WFAA, suggesting that the station pay for the trip in return for exclusive coverage. Mike Shapiro, then manager of WFAA, agreed. With Martin’s coordination, the station financed most of the trip. Murphy Martin, his wife Joyce, and Mal Couch, a researcher for the station, accompanied the women. 16 WFAA paid for the tickets, took care of the passports, and did much of the advance planning. Martin used his contacts with ABC to ensure success for the trip. The station sent a telegram to the North Vietnamese embassy, informing them that the wives were en route to Paris and requesting an appointment to discuss their husbands’ condition.

Murphy Martin prepared the women for the trip, advising them about how to answer difficult questions, what to expect from the media, what the weather would be like, and what to wear. He appointed Mrs. Singleton to be the spokesperson for the group. Martin and the wives hoped the publicity generated from their efforts would mobilize the American people to write their government representatives and the North Vietnamese negotiator in Paris, Xuan Thuy. They also hoped the negative publicity generated against the North Vietnamese would force them to release the names of all American prisoners and allow the International Red Cross into the country to supervise the camps. 17 Murphy

16 WFAA news release on Murphy Martin and wives’ plan to meet representatives of N. Vietnam in Paris, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX, clipping in possession of author.

17 Murphy Martin, “Face to Face With Murphy Martin,” WFAA-TV, Dallas, TX,
Martin arranged press conferences in Dallas, New York, and Paris. The group held a news conference at Dallas Love Field before they flew to New York. Teague continued his support on the eve of the Paris trip, attending the press conference in Dallas.

Bonnie Singleton and Joy Jeffrey met with United Nations Ambassador Charles Yost at the United States Mission to the United Nations on 20 August 1969. The women requested that the U.N. continue its efforts to win release of American POWs. Yost assured the ladies the American government was doing everything possible, but warned them he could not be “confident of early and favorable results.”

Representatives from the U.S. State Department and the Department of Defense met with the wives’ group before they left New York for Paris. The State and Defense Department representatives cautioned the women that they must make it clear to the North Vietnamese that they were not part of a government effort and could not be considered aligned in any way with United States policy. Representatives of the Defense Department expressed sympathy; State Department representatives tried to dissuade the women from making the trip.

Bonnie Singleton made the trip to Paris with apprehension. She did not like being separated from her young son, Richard, who was being cared for by her parents. Mrs. Singleton did not know if the North Vietnamese would meet with them. She felt some

televised interview with wives of POWs, 3 August 1969, transcript in possession of author.

19 Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 12 November 1994, 5.
fear that the North Vietnamese might take her captive, or possibly kill her, leaving her son an orphan. However, she went because she felt the possibility of gaining information was worth the risk. The wealth of attention and publicity given to their trip would focus world opinion upon Hanoi and the mistreatment of POWs. The wives, the first nongovernmental group to visit the North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris, hoped to put pressure on North Vietnam to comply with the Geneva Convention or at least release a list of prisoners "so we would know if we were wives or widows."\(^{20}\)

The four Dallas women arrived in Paris on Sunday, 14 September 1969. Murphy Martin served as chaperone and master of ceremonies at each press conference. Mrs. Singleton recalled the press being very curious and eager to get a good story. Reporters for the major wire services, television, and radio stations followed them everywhere.\(^{21}\)

In Paris, the group generated tremendous media interest.\(^{22}\) Because of the international press involvement, the North Vietnamese were well aware of the group's presence in Paris. Martin and the wives tried to call the North Vietnamese embassy to set up an appointment for a meeting there. Several times, North Vietnamese officials responded by telling them there was no one at the compound with whom they could speak concerning the issue. One night, Martin and his camera team from WFAA made an unannounced visit to the North Vietnamese embassy, located in an old royal hunting lodge in Choisy le Roi.

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\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Marvin Scott, Mutual Broadcasting System, to Bonnie Singleton, Paris, telegram marked "urgent presse", (undated), Bonnie Singleton papers, in possession of the author, Coppell, TX.
Martin knocked on the door, and a surprised guard appeared. The reporter kept telling the guard he wanted to make an appointment so the wives could see a representative. Finally, he was admitted inside the concrete-walled courtyard of the compound. Martin observed Vietnamese individuals hiding in trees, watching them. Martin's persistent efforts to request a meeting through lower level officials finally resulted in the leaders of the NVA agreeing to meet with the group the next day.

Apparently, the North Vietnamese finally agreed to meet with the women because they feared that to do otherwise would damage their government's public image. News analysts asserted that the initiative of the Dallas women in visiting Paris was a brilliant move. Many felt that in the climate of sympathy the wives had aroused, the North Vietnamese would be universally blamed if subsequent reports did not offer good news.\(^{23}\)

The next day, Tuesday, 16 September, as the group of wives prepared to meet with the Vietnamese, Bonnie felt extremely nervous. She was suffering from diarrhea, and her head was spinning. She kept thinking about her son and his future. As the women were riding through the streets on their way there, they were delayed by a massive transportation strike. It was with a great deal of trepidation that the four wives finally arrived at the gates. The group explained to the NVA representatives who met them at the gate that they were not associated with the United States government and were not

there to discuss military, political, governmental issues. They simply wished to find out if they were wives or widows.24

The ladies were kept waiting thirty minutes before they could meet with the NVA delegation spokesman, Colonel Ha Van Lau, inside the gates of the North Vietnamese compound. Lau refused to receive the women formally, asserting they had no appointment. Xuan Thuy, head of the North Vietnamese delegation, supposedly had not returned to Paris since the death and funeral of Ho Chi Minh.25 The North Vietnamese representatives told the women they thought the American wives were pawns of the United States government, sent there to destroy the NVA’s credibility. If the women wanted to find out if their husbands were dead or alive, why didn’t they contact the United States government? Mrs. Singleton responded that her group had met with the United States government, and the government did not know about their husbands because the North Vietnamese had not released the information.

The North Vietnamese officials led the women into a room where they sat down together. The chief North Vietnamese negotiator, Xuan Thuy, unexpectedly made an appearance. His interpreter stated Thuy could not understand English and that he insisted upon speaking through an interpreter. During the course of the discussion, Bonnie Singleton noticed Xuan Thuy made facial expressions as they spoke, indicating to her that he was capable of understanding at least some English.

24 Ibid.

25 Camille Keith, “Was It Red Tea and Promises?” Spotlight, (a publication of WFAA television), Dallas, TX, October-November 1969, 5-8.
The North Vietnamese representatives began in an almost conciliatory tone, asking the women why they had come and questioning why the women did not speak with the United States government about the issue. Mrs. Singleton responded that the U.S. government did not have the answers, but the North Vietnamese did. The North Vietnamese countered that the women's husbands were air pirates and war criminals, undeserving of fair treatment. American pilots had invaded North Vietnamese air space illegally; the pilots deserved to be shot down and receive any treatment they got. Mrs. Singleton told them her husband was a rescue pilot, flying an unarmed training helicopter, and posed no threat.

After hearing the American wives' request, the North Vietnamese commenced discussion of the American political and military involvement in Vietnam. In a two-and-a-half-hour meeting, they showed the American wives photographs of bombed villages, injured and dead people, and other scenes of destruction in North Vietnam, supposedly the work of American flyers, as an example of war crimes. The wives repeated they were not there to discuss those issues, but were there strictly in a humanitarian cause. North Vietnamese officials told the women they could not provide the information they sought, but promised to make an inquiry and respond to the ladies' request soon. The North Vietnamese requested the women write short letters to their husbands and supply photographs and other information to aid in making identification and to send a request to Hanoi. They would try to send the women an answer about their husbands. The North Vietnamese suggested the wives join the peace movement if they really wanted to have their husbands returned.
Members of the peace movement in the United States had started an organization named the Committee of Liaison with American Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. Co-chaired by David Dellinger and Cora Weiss, the Committee of Liaison served as a link between the North Vietnamese and the peace movement within the United States. An NVA representative gave Mrs. Singleton the phone number of Rennard Davis, one of the most vocal leaders of the peace movement, a member of the "Chicago Seven," and leader of the New Mobilization Committee. The New Mobilization Committee suggested the United States government was withholding mail from POWs.

In a communique published after the wives' visit, the North Vietnamese delegation asserted that the real purpose of the Texas women's trip was American propaganda, but they agreed to ask Hanoi about the fate of the missing airmen. "Official representative Xuan Oanh claimed to have unmasked what he called the odious maneuver of the Nixon administration which used the so-called question of prisoners." The communique alleged that the United States was waging a war of hostility and that American pilots were accountable for horrible crimes. It added that Vietnamese representatives had told the ladies of the humanitarian conduct of North Vietnam toward captured pilots in spite of

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26 Congress, House, Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in Hanoi Vietnam, American Prisoners of War In Southeast Asia, 1971: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 23, 24, 30, 31 March; 1 April 1971, exhibit no. 9., 532.


their obvious atrocities against the populace. They claimed the Hanoi government would send the four women letters at their Texas homes with news of the fate of their spouses. The North Vietnamese refused any other comment.

Delayed once again by the Paris transportation strike and big traffic jams, the four Texas women finally held a press conference at 9:15 p.m. on the day of their meeting with the NVA. Singleton announced "The North Vietnamese have very much disappointed us. Our hopes had been raised when they agreed to meet us, but we leave Paris knowing no more than when we arrived." Mrs. Singleton reported that the Communists could not understand the furor created by the women's visit and that they had accused the United States government of confiscating mail from prisoners to their friends and families.29

While few reporters were present due to the difficulty of transportation and the late hour, French and British radio and television played up the story. The NVA responded with a press conference, claiming the women's visit served as American propaganda.30

On Thursday, an American spokesman for the United States delegation to the thirty-fourth session of the Paris peace talks announced that the leader of the U.S. delegation, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Ambassador Sargent Shriver were sympathetic to the plight of the four women. Lodge raised questions to the NVA at the peace talks about the condition of American POWs.31

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31 Ibid.
After meeting with the press, the Dallas group of POW-MIA wives returned home to await further word from the North Vietnamese. Congressman Olin Teague greeted the women at Dallas Love Field upon their return. Teague told those gathered that he believed the Paris trip would have an unbelievable impact on world opinion. WFAA televised a live one-hour special on the Friday return of the four women. The situation of the four wives had aroused immediate human sympathy during their European trip. WFAA aired a documentary entitled "Red Tea and Promises" about the wives' efforts. One wife, Paula Hartness, believed the trip and subsequent public attention "put a crack in the door that had been closed to Americans for years." Bonnie Singleton and her group's actions met with approval from many people, most notably, Dallas billionaire H. Ross Perot who had met Bonnie just prior to the Paris trip to offer his assistance.

Two months after their return from Paris, Murphy Martin called Mrs. Singleton and told her they had waited for a North Vietnamese response long enough. The North Vietnamese had failed to send the agreed-upon letter informing the women of the status and well-being of their husbands. Ross Perot offered to fund a second trip to Paris to find out about the condition of the POWs and why the North Vietnamese had not responded as they had promised to do. Accompanied by Murphy Martin during the first week of

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34 Paula (Hartness) Wetherell, news release (undated), Paula (Hartness) Wetherell papers, clipping in possession of author.
December 1969, Bonnie Singleton and Paula Hartness made a second trip to Paris to meet with the North Vietnamese.

After their arrival in Paris, American officials strongly encouraged a covert meeting between themselves and the wives. The two American women were asked to go through secret underground tunnels in order to meet privately with the U.S. statesmen. Bonnie Singleton refused to meet with the American representatives in this way, as she believed to do so would violate her previous public statements about not representing the American government.\(^{35}\)

During the second meeting with the NVA in Paris, the Communists used a harder line. They were very angry about the public outcry that had resulted from the wives’ visit in September. Once again they told Mrs. Singleton to contact Rennard Davis. They stated that they did not consider American pilots deserving of humane treatment as afforded by the Geneva Convention because the men were war pirates and criminals. The representatives seemed to offer some hope that the women would receive news of their husbands, but only if the women returned home and joined the peace movement.

They told us we must understand that our husbands are not important, that it’s the issues that are important. I think that they respond to public opinion, and I think that the outcry of the world in protest to the inhumane treatment of prisoners of war can help to alleviate our anxieties and concerns. But I’m convinced that it will take that in order for us to obtain the information.\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, tape recording and transcript, 31 January 1997, 14.

The wives' second visit to Paris marked a turning point in public awareness of the POW-MIA's plight. Paula Hartness stated, "They (the postal service) were dumping trainloads of letters into the North Vietnamese embassy. They could not get out the embassy door for days at a time because of the stacks of mail piled in front of their door. The petition drives, special broadcast, the whole thing reached a fever pitch."37

After leaving Paris, the two women flew to Sweden to meet with Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme. Palme sided with the North Vietnamese against the United States. He had marched in protests in Stockholm against American bombing of Hanoi. Palme informed the women he saw the North Vietnamese as underdogs, fighting against the mightiest nation in the world. Singleton and Hartness explained their position and asked Palme to consider at least intervening on their behalf to get a list of prisoners from the North Vietnamese. Aware of the publicity generated from their trip, the Swedish Prime Minister promised to see what he could do.38

In March 1970, Palme sent Mrs. Singleton a telegram, stating that her husband Jerry was alive and a prisoner in North Vietnam.39 Largely because of Mrs. Hartness and Mrs. Singleton's trip, the Swedish Foreign Ministry divulged the names of fourteen American prisoners, delivered to Swedish Ambassador Jarring by the North Vietnamese ambassador in Moscow. The official said the Swedes felt it important to portray the Stockholm-Hanoi

37 Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 12 November 1994, 7.
38 Ibid.
39 Olaf Palme telegram to Bonnie Singleton, Dallas, TX, 6 March 1970, Bonnie Singleton papers.
exchange as a humanitarian action by Sweden in response to requests from relatives of U.S. prisoners.\textsuperscript{40}

After departing Stockholm, the wives then journeyed to Rome in hopes of meeting with Pope Paul VI. Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Hartness publicly stated they decided to ask the Vatican for assistance because of its reputation in tracing refugees and missing persons through its own sources of information.\textsuperscript{41} The wives also hoped that because a large number of Vietnamese belonged to the Catholic religion the Pope might intervene in their behalf. They attended the general blessing offered to tourists by the Pope but were unable to gain a private audience. Singleton and Hartness implored the Canadian prelate, the Right Reverend Monsignor William Carew, a papal aide, to relay their request for assistance to the Pope.\textsuperscript{42} Emissaries of the Pope gave them a cross blessed by him, promises of good will and prayer, but no plans to become involved.\textsuperscript{43} After two weeks of travel Bonnie Singleton and Paula Hartness returned to Dallas. Mrs. Singleton remarked, "To tell the truth, we're getting lonesome for our children."\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{43} Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 31 January 1997, 18.

More and more POW and MIA family members followed the Dallas group’s trek to Paris, applying pressure to North Vietnamese representatives. On 2 October 1969, in a memorandum to President Nixon, Henry Kissinger wrote that the North Vietnamese were becoming more defensive about the negative publicity they were receiving. “Hanoi is now apparently encouraging the wives to write concerning their husbands, rather than to come to Paris. This may be Hanoi’s way of getting around our pressure for a list of the prisoners they hold.”

Later that month, Kissinger reported the North Vietnamese told two visiting wives that they would release no prisoners until all United States troops were withdrawn and the war ended. The North Vietnamese advised the women to join antiwar demonstrations if they hoped to see their husbands again.

An attorney for the Chicago Seven (anti-war protesters place on trial for conspiring to disrupt the Democratic National Convention held in Chicago in 1968), William Kunstler, visited the North Vietnamese diplomats in Paris, representing antiwar leaders Rennard (Rennie) Davis and David Dellinger. Davis and Dellinger, on trial with other defendants on conspiracy charges related to anti-war demonstrations that took place at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, were not permitted by the court to go to Paris.

It appears that in response to the worldwide publicity initiated by Bonnie Singleton and the wives from Dallas, Davis and Dellinger released the names of fifty-nine American


prisoners of war held in North Vietnam. Bellinger said the list was released through Xuan Oanh, who promised to supply more names in the future.\textsuperscript{47}

Another development that brought national attention to the wives' groups and, ultimately, to the POW issue was the 1969 campaign appearance of Richard Nixon in Dallas. A family friend, Taffy Goldsmith, who was active in the local Republican party, telephoned Mrs. Singleton's family and suggested Mrs. Singleton come to the Dallas Convention Center where a Republican fundraising event would be held, with the hope of meeting Nixon to tell him her story and find out his position on the POW issue. At this event Goldsmith introduced Mrs. Singleton to Julie Nixon, the daughter of Richard Nixon. On hearing Bonnie's story Julie Nixon was moved to tears and asked, "Does my dad know about this? If he really knew about this, he would be wanting to do something." She called to the president as he was being whisked out of the convention center, hoping to introduce Bonnie to her father. Separated from Miss Nixon by the crowd and unable to meet the president, Mrs. Singleton went home disappointed, but she believes that Richard Nixon later did hear her story from his daughter and was touched by it. Immediately after his trip to Dallas, Nixon came out with a statement about the POWs and how he would address the issue as president. He believed it was unacceptable for the families not to know the location and condition of their men and that the North Vietnamese must follow the Geneva Convention in regard to treatment of POWs.\textsuperscript{48} On 5 December 1969, Mrs.

\textsuperscript{47} Henry Kissinger, memorandum to Richard Nixon, 27 November 1969, White House National Security Council Files, POW/MIA President's Daily Briefs November 1969, SA 99 A-41, Box 1, National Archives II.

\textsuperscript{48} Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 31 January 1997, 10.
Singleton received a telegram from President Richard M. Nixon. "Mrs. Nixon and I
would be very pleased if you would come to see us at the White House at 10:00 a.m. next
Friday, December 29th, 1969, to discuss the distressing situation of our captured and
missing American servicemen." Nixon met with twenty-six mothers and wives of men
whom the government listed as prisoners of war or missing in action. Nixon used this
meeting to make his first public pronouncement on the issue of POW/MIA's. He called
Hanoi's actions "one of the most unconscionable in the history of warfare." Nixon
affirmed that any settlement of the war must take into account the prisoner issue if efforts
to consider it apart were not successful.

Other efforts were made in the Dallas area to bring U.S. public pressure on North
Vietnam. A local Dallas salesman named Chuck Foster headed the Prisoners of War-
Missing in Action Committee. At a meeting in Dallas on 14 December 1969, he
encouraged Americans, as they mailed their Christmas cards, to consider writing to Hanoi
in protest over treatment of POWs. In a speech to the Dallas Junior Chamber of
Commerce, Foster claimed only six hundred letters had been mailed to the North
Vietnamese. Bonnie Singleton spoke at the rally and encouraged more Americans to
participate in a letter writing campaign. She stated her belief that the "standards of
humanitarianism around the world will drop if North Vietnam is permitted to black out all

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49 Richard M. Nixon, telegram to Bonnie Singleton, 5 December 1969, Bonnie
Singleton papers, Coppell, TX.

50 Fulton Lewis III, "The Prisoner of War Issue," The Top of the News with Fulton
information on POWs and men missing in action.”51 This effort, in unison with efforts by United We Stand and the National League of Families, opened the flood gate of mail pouring into the North Vietnamese Paris compound, encouraging the NVA to release the names of prisoners and to allow the exchange of mail.

The success of the Paris trips in generating public awareness, as well as the steady efforts of national, state, local organizations, and individuals such as Bonnie Singleton, energized public opinion. On 3 February 1970, Hanoi agreed to allow packages to be mailed to American POWs. Henry Kissinger notified the president that “the Soviets have told us that their postal authorities received confirmation from Hanoi of North Vietnam’s willingness to accept packages for U.S. prisoners every other month.”52 The American ambassador to the Paris peace negotiations, Phillip Habib, goaded the North Vietnamese to extend broader mail privileges for prisoners. In late February, 1970, Nixon responded to Kissinger’s memo declaring that the Vietnamese had refused to respond to questions about the POWs or to clarify their own position on the issue, with “K, I have changed my mind. From now on until further directions from me, Habib is to talk only about prisoners.”53 By 7 October 1970, the Defense Department listed 458 Americans as


POWs, and the American government felt the need to do something in order to prove to the nation that it was using every method to improve the condition of prisoners.

In November 1970, the United States conducted a raid at the North Vietnamese POW camp, Son Tay. At 2:00 a.m., Green Berets helicoptered into the camp, only to find no prisoners present. They killed approximately twenty-five North Vietnamese during the assault. 54 The commander of the raid, Colonel Arthur D. Simmons, then fifty-two, received the Distinguished Service Cross from President Richard Nixon. Although the raid failed to release a single prisoner, Bonnie Singleton hoped it might force the NVA to exchange or release American POWs. "There is absolutely no question that the men must be liberated. The reports say over twenty have died while in the hands of the North Vietnamese. I think something must be done because I think time is running out for all American war prisoners." 55

North Vietnam relented and allowed, for the first time, a list of names of prisoners of war to be released to the American pacifist group Committee of Liaison, based in New York City. On 9 April 1970, leader of the Committee of Liaison, Cora Weiss, gave the United States government an additional list of eighty names of U.S. prisoners of war and notified the families that the committee would serve as the conduit for mail between the prisoners and their families. 56


56 Henry Kissinger, memorandum to Richard Nixon, 9 April 1970, White House National Security Council Files, POW/MIA President’s Daily Bulletin, Box 1, SA 99 A-
Mrs. Singleton received her husband’s first letter through the Committee of the Liaison on 27 April 1970. Singleton wrote that his health was good (a statement he was required to make due to NVA censorship of prisoners’ letters), though his handwriting appeared weak. Mrs. Singleton commented on the method of delivery. “I am angry because the letter was forwarded to me by the Committee of Liaison. The Vietnamese are coercing us to beg and plead through this group.”

Upon receiving Jerry’s first letter, Bonnie Singleton forwarded a copy of it, as requested, to the Department of the Air Force for interpretation. They responded that their experts believed Jerry Singleton had written this letter. Their analysis revealed that he appeared somewhat weaker and shakier than before capture, and that although he seemed to have grown “uncertain and rigid”, he was “trying hard to retain his self control.”

Bonnie Singleton continued to correspond with Congressman Olin Teague, questioning whether American policy would facilitate release of POWs. She wanted to know if total withdrawal by American forces would guarantee their return. “I’m sorry you didn’t find me in a better humor yesterday, Congressman. It was my birthday . . . the sixth one I have spent alone since Jerry was captured. How many more birthdays until Jerry

52, National Archives II.


59 Ibid.
Teague continued to write letters and use his office in support of Bonnie and other families in his constituency whose family members were POW/MIAs.

Locally, family members of POW/MIAs did what they could to continue urging public support for their cause. The Dallas League of Families operated booths at the State Fair of Texas, held each fall in Dallas at the fair grounds. Shirley Johnson, wife of POW Sam Johnson, reported that in October 1970, 15,000 people signed petitions demanding the release of American POWs.\(^6\)

While waiting for answers and hoping for the prisoners' release, Bonnie and her family organized Youth Cares and Dallas Cares, organizations designed to maintain a high profile awareness campaign for the prisoners' cause. Continuing a trend, they hoped to gather signatures on petitions to send to the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union on behalf of the POWs/MIAs. Bonnie's father, Henry Streidi, served as president of Dallas Cares.\(^6\) Both Dallas Cares and Youth Cares raised funds with the popular POW/MIA bracelets and "I Care" pins, bringing the POW issue before the public in such places as fairs, air shows, and other public events in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

\(^{60}\) Bonnie Singleton, letter to Olin Teague, 22 May 1971, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX.


\(^{62}\) Dallas/Youth Cares news release, 31 August 1972, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX.
CHAPTER 5

CONGRESS

Members of Congress frequently attempted to resolve prisoner of war issues for reasons at first associated with their formal positions on the war itself, and later, tied to plans for negotiating its end. As pressure from political action groups dedicated to POWs/MIAs increased, so did the general public’s demands for action. This pressure, coupled with genuine feelings of patriotism and concern for the POWs, saw senators and representatives put forth increasingly numerous bills and resolutions to help the prisoners and their families during the latter part of the war.¹

On 5 November 1969, less than two months after Mrs. Singleton and her group returned from their first meeting with the Vietnamese in Paris, Congress passed a bill declaring 9 November a national day of prayer for American prisoners of war in Southeast Asia. The House Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments of the Committee on Foreign Affairs sponsored hearings that aired criticism of North Vietnam for cruelty toward prisoners. In


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December 1969 a resolution passed Congress by a vote of 405-0, demanding the release of American POWs.

The flood of publicity Mrs. Singleton and other POW/MIA families brought to the issue in late 1969 and early 1970 increased congressional interest in action on POW issues. On 8 June 1970, the House of Representatives established a select committee to study issues generated by the Vietnam War. The U.S. House of Representatives authorized the speaker of the house to send a bipartisan committee to Southeast Asia to study recent developments. G.V. Montgomery (Democrat-Mississippi) served as chairman; eleven other members of Congress accompanied him. One of the committee’s primary concerns related to the condition of American POWs. Montgomery’s public statements on the work of the committee indicated his deep concern for the missing servicemen and their families. “The members felt it imperative to take every possible step in hopes of bringing us closer to a solution to this most pressing problem. We must never cease working on behalf of these Americans and their families.” “Of primary concern to the committee and all Americans is the plight of U.S. servicemen held as prisoners of war or listed as missing in action.”2 The committee sent messages to the North Vietnamese representatives in Paris, requesting permission to visit Hanoi and inspect the prisoner of war camps. Their messages elicited no response. Members

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2 House Select Committee on United States Involvement in Southeast Asia, United States Involvement in Southeast Asia, report together with supplemental views prepared by G.V. Montgomery, (D. Mississippi), 91st Cong., 2d sess., Congressional Record (8 June 1970) 91-1276, pt. 14: 16-17.
of the committee met with a secretary of the North Vietnamese embassy in Vientiane, Laos. They requested the International Red Cross be allowed to investigate the conditions of American POWs. According to the congressional report, the North Vietnamese secretary denied North Vietnam held any prisoners of war, only war criminals, and refused to discuss their situation. The congressional committee did, however, stir up public sentiment for better treatment of prisoners being held by South Vietnam at the notorious prison at Con Son Island.

The United States government provided financially for most dependents of POWs. An Air Force captain’s salary, housing allotment, flight and combat pay totaled nearly $1,100 per month, much of which was non-taxable. The Extended War Claims Act of 1948 provided American POWs cash benefits. Because he believed families of POW/MIA needed financial assistance, Congressman Olin Teague, chairman of the Committee of Veterans’ Affairs, proposed GI benefits for families of servicemen missing, captured or interned. The bill would have authorized money for college and home loans for families of those servicemen who were prisoners of war or missing in action. The House reported the bill out of committee on 14 October 1970. The bill passed the Senate on 25 October and later that day the bill became Public Law 91-584, the Dependents’ Education Assistance Law.

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3 Ibid., 17.

4 U.S. Congress, Senate, Public law 91-672, Congressional Record 44642.

5 Dependents’ Education Assistance Law, Statutes at Large.
Assistance Law, which provided money to POW/MIA wives or children for education expenses.

Some members of Congress questioned why we were still in the war in Vietnam. They believed that only negotiation of a settlement of the conflict could achieve freedom for the POWs. Senators J. William Fulbright of Arkansas and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts frequently spoke out against war actions directed at the Communists in Southeast Asia. After the Son Tay raid, Fulbright commented that "None of this is consistent with the purpose of a negotiated settlement." Kennedy said "The quickest way to get the prisoners out is to announce that we're getting out of Vietnam lock, stock, and barrel."  

As the war went on, Congress continued to question and learn how to deal more effectively with the North Vietnamese on the issue of POWs/MIAs. As more direct evidence became available, through the results achieved by the trips of wives and families to the North Vietnamese embassy in Paris and the ensuing letter writing campaigns, it became clear that the North Vietnamese government would respond to media pressure in ways favorable to the interests of the captured men and their families. In a question-and-answer session on 23 March 1971, members of Congress questioned recently released Colonel Norris Overly, United States Air Force, about his capture and imprisonment in the North Vietnamese POW camp, the "Hanoi Hilton." In response to Chairman Clement Zablocki's question about why he was released, the colonel answered he believed it was to

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"offset a world image they [the Vietnamese] received as being inhumane." In commenting about how mail service improved to prisoners, Overly stated he believed treatment in the camps had improved because of "the groundswell of public opinion that we have produced in this country."\(^7\)

Congress conducted joint meetings devoted to prisoners and missing servicemen. A "National Week of Concern" resolution passed both houses without a dissenting vote. Public attention, such as that produced by the Missouri State Teachers' Association, generated thousands of letters and signatures on petitions to Congress and to Xuan Thuy, the North Vietnamese ambassador to the peace talks, and Nguyen Tuan Lieu, delegate general to the peace talks for North Vietnam.\(^8\)

In September 1971, Congress passed House Resolution 6531, which extended the Selective Service Act. Although in approval of provisions for an increase of military pay and the authorization for the United States government to assign military action duty to U.S. forces worldwide, some congressmen refused to support the bill unless a withdrawal date from Vietnam, contingent upon the


release of American prisoners of war in North Vietnam, was established by
President Richard Nixon.\(^9\)

Probably one of the most active and vocal congressional spokesman for the
POWs was Congressman Olin "Tiger" Teague of College Station, Texas. Teague,
the most decorated member of Congress and the father of two sons who served in
the American military in Southeast Asia, showed a consistent and aggressive
commitment to securing the humane treatment and eventual release of prisoners of
war. Teague, a veteran of "D-Day", was wounded during a scouting patrol on the
Siegfried Line when a German shell tore away much of his ankle. During Teague's
two-year hospitalization doctors fused his foot and leg, leaving one leg shorter
than the other. Teague wore an orthopedic shoe to enable him to walk. During
his convalescence, he decided to run for Congress. Teague won his first election
while still in uniform in August 1946, capturing the Texas Sixth District seat.\(^{10}\)
Part of his district included southwest Dallas County. The only man on three
committees in Congress, "Tiger" Teague served as the chairperson of the powerful
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and was active in the national Veterans of
Foreign Wars organization. An old friend of President Nixon, having been in the

\(^9\) U.S. Congress, House, Congressman Paul ("Pete") N. McClosky of California
September 1971, calling for an amendment to HR 6531. HR 6531 signed into law, 28
September 1971, as Public Law, 92-129. Congressional Record-House, 117, part 25 (23
D.C. 1971.

\(^{10}\) Ray Zauber, "The Gentleman From Texas: 1969 Oak Cliff Man Of the Year," Oak
same "freshman" class of Congress, Teague, worked effectively with both Democrats and Republicans. William B. Macomber, Jr., assistant secretary for congressional relations, Department of State, advised Congressman Teague that the North Vietnamese government appeared, to some extent, to be influenced by international public opinion. He noted particularly how Hanoi retreated from its threats to try downed American pilots as war criminals after worldwide negative publicity.\textsuperscript{11}

Teague played an active role both personally and within Congress in helping prisoners of war and their families. Teague first expressed concern about prisoners of war in a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in September of 1967.\textsuperscript{12} He cared deeply about the POW/MIAs and their families, and he searched for a person or group who might use Macomber's idea to exploit a possible weakness in the North Vietnamese position. Congressman Teague took an early interest in the plight of Bonnie Singleton and her group from Dallas. After meeting with a group of family members of POWs/MIAs that included Bonnie Singleton, Teague contacted Felix McKnight of the \textit{Dallas Times Herald} and successfully encouraged him to write an editorial about the plight of the POW/MIAs.\textsuperscript{13} This editorial was the first in the Dallas area to draw attention to the issue,

\textsuperscript{11} William B. Macomber, Jr., assistant secretary for congressional relations, to Olin Teague 2 October 1967. Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.

\textsuperscript{12} Olin Teague, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, 5 September 1967, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, Texas.

\textsuperscript{13} Luther Holcomb, assistant to Olin Teague, to Felix McKnight, \textit{Dallas Times Herald}, 16 June 1969, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.
and encouraged Bonnie Singleton and the others in their grass roots effort to reach out to
the public for understanding and help.

After Nixon’s election, Teague used his friendship with Nixon to ask for help in the
POW matter.\textsuperscript{14} Presidential adviser William E. Timmons encouraged White House staff
and members of the cabinet to be receptive to Congressman Teague’s correspondence.
Timmons wrote in a memo “Teague is a good supporter and a personal friend of the
president.” Teague encouraged Nixon to meet with wives of prisoners of war in North
Vietnam, as he believed such a meeting would focus world opinion on the inhumane
attitude of the North Vietnamese and their violation of the Geneva guidelines on treatment
of prisoners of war. “It would re-emphasize the President’s own great personal concern
for the welfare of these brave men, and give needed assurance to their families from the
very highest level.”\textsuperscript{15} He did not believe the United States government was doing as much
as it could toward securing their release, or at least, obtaining information concerning their
fate. He told Nixon in his letters that he intended to continue to press for more action by
our government.\textsuperscript{16}

Teague encouraged the president to provide information concerning the fate of Jerry
Singleton and of other Dallas women’s husbands. In response to one of Teague’s letters,

\textsuperscript{14} William E. Timmons, to unknown recipient recommending telephone call to Rep.
Olin Teague, 21 December 1973, CF PR 7-2, FG 233, Nixon Presidential Materials
Project, WHSF, WHCF, confidential files 1969-74, National Archives II.

\textsuperscript{15} Olin Teague to President Richard Nixon, 20 June 1969, Olin Teague Papers,
Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, Texas.

\textsuperscript{16} Olin E. Teague, to President Richard Nixon, 7 August 1969, Olin Teague Papers,
Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.
Bryce Harlow at the White House indicated that although information was quite limited, there was evidence that both Jerry Singleton and Robert Jeffrey were alive when captured and were, in fact, prisoners of war. Information concerning the two men was then forwarded through the Air Force Personnel Casualty Office at Randolph Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas, to Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Jeffrey.17

In August of 1969, Teague arranged for Bonnie Singleton, Sandy McElhanon, Joy Jeffrey and Paula Hartness to be guests of the Veterans of Foreign Wars annual convention in Philadelphia. Teague also arranged for the women to appear on a local television show, Panorama, on 8 August, and then attend, as honored guests, a banquet at which Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird was the speaker. The following day, Teague introduced the Dallas women to the VFW convention.18 Teague’s presence insured a crowd of newpersons. Congressman Teague introduced the wives of the captured and missing men and told the convention that Ho Chi Minh was “the most inhuman human we have living on this earth.” Later, at a news conference, the women said they planned to seek State Department permission to visit Hanoi and Paris to promote the release of American prisoners, especially the sick and wounded.19

17 Bryce Harlow, Washington, to Olin Teague, 25 August 1969, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoners of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.

18 Diane Moore, secretary to Olin Teague, to Hope Ridings Miller, 11 August 1969, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.

19 UPI--116 news release, 19 August 1969, DP710P, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.
Throughout the war, Teague continued to remind President Nixon and the cabinet through correspondence of the need for the United States government to do all it could to help the POWs and their families. In one memorandum to Nixon, Teague stated, "I hope that in your speech to the United Nations you will make an appeal to all nations there that they urge the North Vietnamese to comply with the Geneva Agreements as they pertain to our prisoners of war."  

Responding to a letter from Teague, on 22 May 1969, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge commented at the Paris talks on the subject of prisoners of war. He protested the North Vietnamese refusal to provide a list of prisoners or to repatriate sick and wounded prisoners. "You should know that the attitude you have expressed with regard to these basic humanitarian requirements cannot have a favorable effect on our negotiations here."  

He castigated them for their refusal to permit mail exchanges. "To express myself in human terms, instead of the language of diplomacy, what is involved here is the prisoner's wife who does not know whether her husband is alive or whether he is dead."  

Writing in response to Congressman Olin Teague's 4 June 1969 letter to the State Department, Secretary of State William Rogers replied that the United States government had tried to compel Hanoi to discuss the POW-MIA issue at the Paris talks and through outside channels. Hanoi showed no interest in negotiations. Their chief negotiator, Xuan

20 Olin Teague, memorandum to President Richard Nixon, Prisoner of War file, Olin Teague Papers, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, Texas.

21 Henry Cabot Lodge, transcript of statement to N. Vietnamese, to Olin Teague, 22 May 1969, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.

22 Ibid.
Thuy, showed the NVA's unwillingness to allow any exchange of prisoners, stating that his government would never release a list of captured pilots as long as the war continued.  

Teague also played a supportive role when Bonnie Singleton met with the Nixons at the White House in December 1969. Mrs. Singleton stayed in telephone communication with Congressman Teague while in Washington. Singleton commented that "His efforts can be considered directly related to the fact that we have had the opportunities that we've had in Europe and elsewhere."  

23 William B. Macomber, Jr. assistant secretary for congressional relations, Department of State, to Olin Teague, 12 June 1969, Olin Teague Papers, Texas A&M University Library, College Station, TX.  

CHAPTER 6

PRESIDENTS JOHNSON AND NIXON

Although President Nixon's efforts to secure release of American POWs drew public attention to the plight of the POWs and became part of negotiations for ending the war, he was not the first president to work for the welfare of the prisoners. Johnson also attempted to act on the behalf of the prisoners by negotiating (unsuccessfully) with the North Vietnamese through irregular channels to end the war or, at least, gain better treatment for POWs through the International Red Cross. One example was the Ronning Mission. In early 1966, Canada tried to intervene in hopes of obtaining peace in the Vietnamese war. Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson sent a personal emissary, Chester Ronning, to North Vietnam in hopes of effecting a settlement. Ronning, a retired Canadian diplomat, had experience in the Far East. Born to Lutheran missionary parents, he had spent a great deal of time in China as an educator in the 1920s and as an official of the Canadian embassy from 1945 to 1951. Ronning spent five days in Hanoi in March 1966.¹ In May 1966, President Johnson approved a secret request for Ronning to explore the prospect of exchanging prisoners of war with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) or furnishing them with International Red Cross protection (ICRC). Hanoi's reply

was that POWs were criminals under DRV law and no ICRC role would be considered. Ronning received no detailed information about the prisoners themselves. Nonetheless, for political or personal reasons, Johnson continued his efforts to aid POWs.

In July 1967, he encouraged the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong to allow neutral inspection of all POW camps. He offered to negotiate prisoner exchanges, especially for those sick or wounded "at any time or anyway, using intermediaries or directly, by public means or private." North Vietnam remained unwilling to accept the exchange of prisoners until the United States agreed to leave Vietnam and to stop supporting the government of South Vietnam. Johnson tried other methods to gain information and to provide ICRC aid to POWs. North Vietnam remained intransigent in their stance, even when approached by neutral governments.

As part of Norwegian-North Vietnamese contacts from June 1967 through February 1968, Ambassador Ole Algard, the Norwegian ambassador to Beijing, met with the North Vietnamese ambassador to Beijing, Ngo Loan. Algard expressed concern about North Vietnamese treatment of U.S. prisoners. Loan replied that official acknowledgment of these men as anything but "war criminals" would "legalize American participation in the war," and he reiterated his government's refusal to allow Red Cross aid for the prisoners.

Throughout the Johnson administration, the government publicly expressed concern for prisoners of war and repeatedly called upon the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to

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2 Ibid., 167.


permit impartial inspection through the International Red Cross and to repatriate sick and wounded prisoners. The secretary of defense established a committee under Assistant Secretary Paul Warnke to administer the Defense Department’s attempts to aid prisoners of war. Nonetheless, Johnson’s efforts ended in futility, as most of the prisoners remained unidentified, with almost no exchange of mail between prisoners and their families. North Vietnam continued to torture, isolate, and extort confessions of war crimes from badly weakened and mistreated prisoners.

The campaign and election of Richard Nixon in 1968 signaled the beginning of change for POWs and their next of kin. President Richard Nixon used the prisoner-of-war issue to aid himself politically, but he also appeared to care genuinely about the prisoners and their families. His concerns and efforts on behalf of the captured men intensified after Bonnie Singleton and other family members traveled to meet with the North Vietnamese representatives in Paris and after he and Mrs. Nixon met personally with wives of prisoners of war.

Nixon refused to consider ending the Vietnam war by trading prisoners for peace. He insisted upon continuing assistance to South Vietnam. He believed the American people did not want to trade the POWs for the South Vietnamese. In a top-secret memorandum, Henry Kissinger reported to Nixon that the North Vietnamese were not cooperative on negotiating release of prisoners. “On the question of POW’s, Thuy took a very tough stance, clearly indicating once again that Hanoi plans to hold the bulk of them

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hostage until at least preliminary agreements on the major political and military issues of
the war are settled.\(^6\) A group of Republican members of Congress, including Gerald
Ford and Texas Senator John Tower, recommended Nixon counter opposition to the war
in Vietnam by meeting with the prisoners' wives. They also suggested that the parents of
deceased Vietnam veterans seek a mass injunction against the reading of their sons' names
in peace demonstrations. Nixon responded to the written suggestions by underlining the
idea of meeting with the wives and included the note "good follow up get after Nov 3
\(^{sic}\)"\(^7\).

In September and October 1969, three delegations of wives and parents of missing
men flew to Paris to meet with Communist representatives at the peace talks. In a
memorandum from Henry Kissinger to President Nixon, Kissinger noted

Ambassador Lodge comments that although it may be irregular for the
U.S. Government to permit relatives of POW's to deal directly with the
enemy, he can see no satisfactory alternative. We cannot prohibit relatives
from going to Paris, particularly when they can obtain information on the
welfare of the prisoners that we cannot. The Ambassador adds that the
DRV will suffer from the massive human-interest publicity, which should
accompany such an event.\(^8\)

\(^6\) Henry Kissinger, memorandum to President Richard Nixon, 21 May 1969, WH
NSC Files POW/MIA Presidential Daily Briefs May 15-31, 1969, Box 1 (4) SA99 A-29,
National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

\(^7\) Republican Members of Congress, to President Richard Nixon, (with Nixon's
response in margin) Nixon Presidential Materials, President Office Files, October 16
through 31, 1969, Box 3, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

\(^8\) Henry Kissinger, memorandum to President Richard Nixon, 20 September 1969,
White House National Security Council Files POW/MIA, President Daily Briefs,
September 1-22, 1969, Box 1 (7), SA 99 A-34, National Archives II, College Park,
Maryland.
Henry Kissinger reported to Nixon on 11 October 1969 that the North Vietnamese had used a press conference to announce that American wives of POWs in North Vietnam would be more likely to get information on the status of their husbands when they joined and supported the 'peace movement' in the U.S. He believed the North Vietnamese were unhappy that more POW families had not supported the antiwar movement, and the North Vietnamese hoped to put pressure on the families to join. Kissinger added he was “going to ask State [Department] to consider whether, in our own presentations at Paris, we can effectively exploit this blatant blackmail by the North Vietnamese so as to further point out their fundamental lack of concern with the basic human rights of our prisoners.” Nixon responded by writing “good” in the margin of Kissinger’s memorandum.9

On Friday, 12 December 1969, Nixon met with POW wives. H.R. Haldeman observed that the wives had greatly impressed Nixon. “He now has a great interest—amazing what a little personal exposure will do. He now wants all sorts of action.”10 Bonnie Singleton remarked after personally meeting with the Nixons, “I think they showed a very deep and grave concern for the prisoners of war and those listed as missing in action as well as their families.” She was impressed by Nixon’s promise to do everything possible to get the release of prisoners and try to get proper treatment for those currently held. The president acknowledged Singleton and the Dallas area wives’ trip to Paris and


hoped the United States government could provide more assistance in the future. Nixon claimed the POW issue had been a topic of discussion at all of the Paris peace talks, and that United States negotiators would continue to press on the POW issue and attempt to negotiate it as a separate issue apart from settlement of the war. Mrs. Singleton concluded the president had done all he could.\footnote{Merikaye Presley, “Nixons Meet With Wives; President Vows to Press for Release of Captive Gls,” \textit{Dallas Morning News}, 13 December 1969, sec. A, p. 1.}

The meetings with wives and families reflected Nixon’s concern for them and resulted in his desire to create small White House groups, which focused on relieving the plight of American prisoners in Southeast Asia. He requested Henry Kissinger’s staff to organize the effort that Nixon envisaged as an action-oriented team assigned to concentrate full-time on all possible ways to “bring to bear on the Hanoi government pressure sufficient to revert its view of American captives as an asset to one in which they are considered a liability.” The president wanted the group to obtain inspections of prisoner of war facilities, free exchanges of mail and packages, release of captives’ names, and release of sick and wounded prisoners.\footnote{Alexander P. Butterfield, to Henry Kissinger, memorandum labeled Administratively Confidential for Dr. Kissinger, Nixon Presidential Material Project, 3 February 1970, [CF] ND 18-3/165 FF 999, FG 6-11-1/ Kissinger, H. FGG-11-1/ Butterfield, Alexander, White House Special Files, Central Files, Subject Files,} The Nixon administration hoped to spin the POW/MIA issue as a political bonus.

In his October 1970 speech, “New Peace Initiative for all Indochina,” Nixon proposed that all prisoners of war be released. “The immediate release of all prisoners of war would be a simple act of humanity. But it could be even more. It could serve to
establish good faith, the intent to make progress, and thus improve the prospects for negotiation."\(^{13}\)

The Nixon administration made many efforts to politicize the POW issue. In an undated memorandum from Robert C. Odle, Jr., a member of Nixon’s public relations team, to Nixon advisers H.R. Haldeman and Herb Klein, Odle reported suggestions generated from an informal group of Nixon advisors known as the Saturday Plan Committee. “The group thinks it would be wise for the President to see a delegation of POW wives briefly before the election. Perhaps Congressman Wold could be present at the meeting. It would help his Senate race.”\(^{14}\)

After the top-secret raid by American forces on 21 November 1970 against a suspected prisoner of war camp at Son Tay, the White House polled the POW wives about their feelings on the assault. In a memorandum from Mort Allin, Nixon media aide, to H.R. Haldeman concerning “How to counter theme that the President is ‘heartless’ and ‘coldly calculating’”, Allin expressed confidence that the families would view this raid favorably. “It is my understanding Colson’s office will be mailing out the POW wives’

Confidential Files 1969-74, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.


poll. It has not received much coverage, although the favorable reactions of the relatives following the raid were the subject of a good number of positive stories.  

Members of the executive branch offered in various ways to assist and comfort Mrs. Singleton. After the raid at Son Tay, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird met with Bonnie at a Dallas Cowboy football game and tried to reassure her that the government was doing all it could to get the prisoners released. He pledged privately in a letter "to you again that we shall spare no effort until all the prisoners are returned safely to their families and there has been a full accounting for the missing." Publicly, Laird stated "We shall continue to make every effort to free our prisoners. This mission . . . does show our dedication to these men and we will do everything that we can in our power to accomplish their early release."  

Nixon also continued to express concern for prisoners of war to Congressman Olin "Tiger" Teague. In a letter to Teague dated 9 July 1971, Nixon stated:

The plight of these brave men and their families is of the deepest concern to me, as it is to all Americans. Throughout our negotiations with the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, this issue has played a prominent part. Beyond our formal negotiations, we have also endeavored to enlist the assistance of many other nations throughout the world to intercede on behalf of these men on compassionate grounds. I am most hopeful that through these intensive efforts,

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15 Mort Allin to H.R. Haldeman, summary notations, agenda plans committee meeting, 10 December 1970, and 12 December 1970, 162 EOB, [CF] WH7 Staff Meetings 1969-70, Subject Files, Confidential Files, IX, "How to counter theme that President is 'heartless' and 'coldly calculating,'" National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

16 Melvin Laird to Bonnie Singleton, 25 November 1970, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX, in possession of author.

we can soon achieve not only an honorable peace, but also the welcomed release of these valiant men and a true accounting of all those still missing. I am proud and inspired by the courage and faith shown by the families of these men. Despite the anguish of separation and uncertainty, they have remained steadfast in purpose and have worked unceasingly to awaken the humanitarian concern of men of all nations. Their dedication has been a source of great spiritual strength to me and the country can indeed be proud of them. I would like to assure you, as I have assured the families publicly, that our men will not be abandoned. My administration shall persevere in this cause, sparing no effort to obtain the release of the prisoners and a strict accounting of those who are missing at the earliest possible time.\(^{18}\)

Nixon appeared unexpectedly at the National League of Families’ dinner on 28 September 1971. Nixon told the gathering that he wanted each and every one of you to know, however, that from the time in the White House Library, at Christmas time, 1969, I met a group of wives and one mother of some POW’s and missing in action, . . . I have considered the problem of obtaining the release of our POW’s and missing in action as being one that has Presidential priority.

Nixon assured the families that every negotiating channel, including private ones not disclosed, had been pursued. He described the awesome burden of command and difficulties surrounding his presidency as severe, but no more difficult than the burdens of the POW/MIA families.

Any day that I sometimes feel that it has been a rather hard day and that I have had to make some real tough decisions, and I haven’t had very much support, and any time I begin to feel a bit sorry for myself, I think back to that day just before Christmas in 1969 and then I realize my job isn’t all that hard. I am just so proud of how great you have been and I am not going to let you down.\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) Richard Nixon, “Remarks of the President at the Annual Meeting of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing In Southeast Asia,” Statler-Hilton Hotel, Washington DC, 28 September 1971, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, SN3-57, Box 13 J, Staff White House Central Files, Subject Categories Speeches, EX Sp 3-57, National League of Families of American POW/MIA, National Archives II, College Park,
After the meeting, Nixon received a memorandum from a staff member reflecting on his efforts for POW-MIA families. "The general feeling throughout the families is that you have now stated publicly and personally to them that you do care and you will not abandon the men. This assurance is vital to those who have waited so long for the return of their man or with the uncertainty of his fate." With his private and public announcements Nixon continued to demonstrate the duality of his feelings about the POW/MIA issue. He had a personal desire to help, but also the feeling that these issues could be exploited politically.

In May 1972, the United States Department of State speculated upon the release of the prisoners. They feared a phased release would risk the North Vietnamese continuing to hold some Americans hostages and making it difficult for the U.S to assure that all prisoners were accounted for and released. In a memorandum from William Sullivan, U.S. ambassador to France, to Frank Sieverts concerning prisoner release and repatriation, Sullivan suggested that "the United States should try to secure the release of all US/FW (i.e. Free World) prisoners at once."
The Paris Peace accords were announced on 23 January 1973. In a live address delivered on 23 January 1973, President Nixon announced an agreement ending the war had been initialed by Kissinger on behalf of the United States and by Le Duc Tho for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The cease-fire took effect 27 January 1973, with details remaining to be worked out concerning return of all prisoners of war in North Vietnam. In his address to the press, Nixon stated

>In particular, I would like to say a word to some of the bravest people I have ever met—the wives, the children, the families of our prisoners of war and the missing in action. When others called us to settle on any terms, you had the courage to stand for the right kind of peace so that those who died and those who suffered would not have died and suffered in vain, and so that where this generation knew war, the next generation would know peace. Nothing means more to me at this moment than the fact that your long vigil is coming to an end.

During the Watergate crisis in 1973, President Richard Nixon welcomed news of the return of the POWs. When the prisoners returned as part of Operation Homecoming, the White House provided corsages to the wives, a detail that seemed to impress the press. At the same time the nation was mourning the passing of Lyndon Johnson. After speaking to Lady Bird Johnson and receiving her acceptance, Nixon ordered American flags to be raised to full staff to celebrate the POWs’ return.

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23 Ibid.
Nixon rejoiced at the prospect of getting the prisoners home. On 14 February 1973 the president expressed a desire for the White House staff to notify Ross Perot, because of his interest in the POWs, that the prisoners were being returned. Nixon wanted a presidential citation, a ribbon with a star for each year of captivity, awarded to the returning prisoners. Along with his exuberance at the return, the president also expressed concern that stories about torture to POWs might damage efforts in Congress to fund aid to North Vietnam, as prescribed in the peace plan.24

In March 1973, Haldeman noted “The POW problem was solved today, as the Communists folded and agreed to release them within the next 48 hours, so the P’s hanging tight on that paid off. Now we’ll go back to the Paris conferences.”25

The POWs were sent home. They stopped in route at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for rest and emergency medical attention. On 12 March 1973, Haldeman commented in his diary

The P had a call this morning while he was in his morning series of meetings from one of the POW officers who arrived in the Philippines last night, expressing his support of the P and his desire on the part of him and all the other men to meet the P and thank him personally. The P is very much moved by the whole POW situation. They did a superb job last night getting off the plane as it was covered on TV, and then this call this morning was further evidence. As a follow up to that, he said he wants to send orchids to all the wives as soon as the men arrive back, and wants to have a thing at the White House as soon as they’re all back here so that he can meet all of them, and then have a dinner for them and their wives in the evening.26


25 Ibid., 583.

26 Ibid., 578.
The president wanted to talk to returned prisoners Robby Reisner and Jeremiah Denton off the record concerning their captivity. On 8 March 1973, Haldeman called Reisner and Denton to discuss having a POW event at the White House. Haldeman believed the gathering should be sooner than June 14, since Ross Perot and others were suggesting reunion celebrations of various kinds. The White House wanted to have its gathering first; it recognized the necessity of using this success to bolster public perception of an administration tarnished by the continuing Watergate scandal. On 12 March 1973 Haldeman noted, ironically, “news all bad except for POWs, which we had no control over. That was the one good thing.”

The president announced a May 24 dinner at the White House for POWs and their families. At this dinner the POWs and their families, including Jerry and Bonnie Singleton, were given gifts: cufflinks for the men, pins for their wives, bow pins for daughters, and tie clips for sons. Other gifts included ashtrays and framed unit citations for each POW. Bob Hope, Sammie Davis Jr., John Wayne, and a host of celebrities came to the party in order to honor the returnees. Several of the returned POWs expressed their thanks to Nixon for his efforts at freeing them. They especially approved the B-52 “Christmas bombings” of Hanoi. Jerry Singleton recalled the event as overwhelming and exciting, and was pleased to have an opportunity to express the appreciation he felt for the president who had achieved his release. President Nixon seemed to relish their feelings of gratitude.

27 Ibid., 587.

28 Ibid., 588.
The return of the prisoners of war signified to the American people that the war in Vietnam was over. It was as if a great burden had been lifted from the nation. Operation Homecoming clearly was Nixon's last triumph in the White House. Perhaps he hoped it would deflect from Watergate and relieve some of the pressure he was experiencing from the press and from Capitol Hill, making it easier to avoid impeachment proceedings.
CHAPTER 7

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF FAMILIES

Families who had lost men to POW/MIA status in Vietnam went through many different emotions. Some wives gave up waiting for their husbands to return, sought divorces and remarried. Others claimed they were widows on marriage applications.¹ Bonnie Singleton refused to consider that she might be a widow. She sought, instead, to bring her husband and the other prisoners home. She and the National League of Families sought to relieve the anxieties of families by continuing to wage a public opinion war against the North Vietnamese. Sybil Stockdale, wife of POW James Stockdale (United States Navy and ranking naval officer imprisoned in North Vietnam), began a national campaign to bring public attention to the plight of the POWs and their families in 1967. In a speech before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in May 1970, Mrs. Stockdale spoke of her experience with government policy earlier in the war.

After I learned my husband was being held a prisoner in North Vietnam, I tried to determine what his rights were as the captive of a foreign government. I was counseled by the U.S. government that it was in my husband’s best interest for me to remain quiet about the fact he was a prisoner. I have never been able to determine the rationale for this policy.²


² Ibid.
Richard G. Capen, deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, and other officials from the Defense and State Departments went to forty-five sites to carry on unpublish ed meetings with families of POWs/MIAs. In a meeting organized by Sybil Stockdale in San Diego on 26 March 1969, representatives met with wives from San Diego and Los Angeles. The group encouraged family members to take a more active role in engaging public opinion against the North Vietnamese treatment of POWs. In June of that year, Mrs. Stockdale formed a national organization to focus worldwide awareness on the situation. She was chosen chairperson of the board, and Iris Powers, a woman active in POW efforts, became the national coordinator. The league grew to approximately 3,000 members and opened an office in Washington, D.C., across the street from the Capitol in 1970. They distributed information about POWs, maintained a communication network through newsletters with members around the country, and applied political pressure on local, state, and national lawmakers. Many Americans from all walks of life contributed to the league. Vice-President Spiro Agnew donated $12,500 from revenue he received as royalties from companies displaying his likeness on T-shirts and watches.3

Local groups around the nation began letter-writing campaigns, sent telegrams and petitions to North Vietnamese officials, spoke before local civic organizations, and lobbied elected officials to take action. In June 1969, the National League of Families formed a Texas chapter at Carswell Air Force Base; it selected Bonnie Singleton as area

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3 Ibid.
coordinator. In July, Mrs. Stockdale and several other family members of POWs-MIAs met with Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and in December met with President Nixon. These meetings with the presidential administration, noted by the press, allowed families to express their frustrations concerning the POWs/MIAs and encouraged public sympathy. The entire scenario was an effort, staged by the White House, to do something to help the families and generate public support for the president’s decision to keep the United States fighting in Southeast Asia.

Mrs. James Stockdale planned to visit the North Vietnamese in Paris. Before she and others of the National League of Families could visit, Bonnie and her group scheduled a trip to Paris to meet with the NVA. Mrs. Stockdale was upset about this and wrote a letter to Congressman Teague expressing her concern. She felt it would be better if the national organization and leadership went to Paris before a local group.4 Congressman Teague suggested closer communication between Stockdale and the Dallas group. Teague and others in the United States government believed the North Vietnamese would never meet face to face with wives of men they held prisoner. He emphasized the importance of public opinion in trying to obtain information and suggested that the more groups who went to Paris, the better, in terms of establishing negative public opinion against the North Vietnamese.5

4 Sybil Stockdale, to Olin Teague, 28 August 1969, Olin Teague Papers, Prisoner of War file, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX.

Efforts to encourage public support for the POWs/MIAAs escalated. The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia organized a four-day meeting in Washington, D.C. The gathering brought together former prisoners and families of POWs/MIAAs. Ross Perot spoke to the group at a dinner. Colonel Frank Borman gave a report to the organization on his efforts to contact world leaders concerning the POWs. Department of Defense and other agencies offered private briefings. On 5 October, the League of Families planned a march on Congress. They gathered on the steps of the United States Capitol for a press conference and then engaged members of Congress in a massive lobbying effort on behalf of the prisoners.  

The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia proved to be a national voice organizing public opinion against poor treatment of POWs. Petitions, moments of prayer, and city and state “days” set aside encouraged public awareness. Preston Smith, governor of Texas, declared Good Friday, 9 April 1971, as a day to say “Let Our People Go.” Companies, such as Mountain Bell, encouraged customers to write letters to North Vietnam regarding POWs.

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7 City of San Angelo, TX, Proclamation calling for sixty seconds of prayer for prisoners of war, signed by Mayor Wylie O. Webb, Bonnie Singleton papers, in possession of author.

8 Preston Smith, Governor of Texas, official memorandum, 1 March 1971, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX, copy in possession of author.

In response to the National League of Families, anti-war groups led by David Dellinger and Cora Weiss created the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam. On 6 January 1971, the Committee of Liaison wrote a letter to POW family members. The letter stated:

The release of the men which we all seek can be achieved only when the administration sets a date for the total withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. This also includes the release of men held by the NLF in the South. The Vietnamese have consented to freeing the Americans even before the troops have withdrawn as long as the date of total withdrawal has been set.  

The committee had access to some POW camps and had observed between forty-five and fifty prisoners. In testimony before the House of Representatives, Mrs. Weiss described the camps visited as being “immaculately clean, adequate for the basic needs of people.” Weiss and the committee encouraged the United States to end the war if the American people wished to get the prisoners returned.

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11 Ibid., (Cora Weiss testimony) 358.
CHAPTER 8

ROSS PEROT

Beginning in 1968, Dallas multimillionaire Ross Perot, founder of Electronic Data Systems (EDS), got involved in aiding the prisoners of war in Southeast Asia and their families. He joined the POW/MIA cause because he cared about the prisoners and their families, but he also hoped to help the political cause of Richard Nixon. He obtained information about national movements that he used later in his efforts to establish a third national political party.

Ross Perot, son of a Texarkana cotton broker and virtually unknown in Dallas circles ten years earlier, traveled the nation in 1968, making speeches and encouraging Americans to become involved. Approximately one month before the Republican National Convention, John Erlichman flew to Dallas to ask the thirty-nine-year-old Ross Perot for help. Perot aided Nixon by supplying money and support personnel, including a “hand picked cadre of young former military officers who had been recruited and trained at Perot headquarters to help run Electronic Data Systems.” Perot, claiming he wanted his men to gain experience, furnished ten of his best men and paid their salaries and expenses through the campaign. Erlichman later claimed “Perot gave us super people.”¹ Vernon Olson in particular proved extremely helpful throughout the campaign. Thomas Meurer helped

with rally activities and became a successful advance man. Perot also lent two researchers
to help plan an orderly transition of administrations between Presidents Johnson and
Nixon.²

During Nixon's White House years, Ross Perot was a frequent visitor. He was
included at state dinners and businessmen's conferences; from time to time he called to
warn Erlichman of problems he thought the administration might not be aware of.³ On 16
May 1969, Nixon met Perot in the White House. Perot discussed ideas for a student
conference in the summer to "find positive answers" and to ameliorate anti-war sentiment.
Perot suggested buying $50 million in television time to present Nixon's story in prime
time, in a town meeting/telethon format similar to what Perot would use in the future as a
presidential candidate. Nixon, fearful of protest, was reluctant to approve a student
conference but approved the other ideas.⁴

Some observers, particularly the anti-war press, believe Perot helped Nixon take the
American people's anxieties about fighting an unpopular war and reshape them into a
crusade to free the POWs. Others disagree, believing Perot did honestly care about the
POWs and their families. According to author Ken Follett, who wrote On the Wings of
Eagles, Ross Perot became involved with the POW issue because a few of his Naval
Academy classmates had been killed or captured in the Vietnam conflict. However,

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ H.R. Haldeman, The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House (New
according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Perot was inspired to assist POW/MIAs and their families after he met Bonnie Singleton’s four-year-old son, Richard.\(^5\) “One day in 1969, he (Ross Perot) had met Billy [sic] Singleton, a boy who did not know whether he had a father or not.”\(^6\) Perot had seen Bonnie Singleton when she appeared on the WFAA program “Face to Face” and had contacted the station in order to let her know he wished to help her cause. Bonnie was at this time interested in having bumper stickers printed saying “Hanoi, release the POWs”. She asked the station to express her wish to Perot, who produced the stickers by the following day. Perot then contacted Bonnie to ask if he could have his photographer take her son’s photograph as he knelt with her in prayer beside his bed for use in the advertisements he would soon place in 350 papers around the country. Bonnie agreed to this; the photo session the following morning was her first meeting with Ross Perot.\(^7\)

Perot called the White House on 11 November 1969 in order to discuss advertisements and a proposed television show. The Nixon White House was not impressed with Perot’s plan. H.R. Haldeman commented, “He is *really* determined and will get some results. Problem is his *total* lack of sophistication. But that doesn’t stop him, our real need is to find a way to channel the energy and money productively. It’s an


\(^7\) Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 31 January 1997, 13.
amazing resource." On 14 November 1969, Haldeman told President Nixon he had talked with Frank Borman who might be able to channel Ross Perot’s enthusiasm and money into more appropriate venues. Haldeman reported Borman “is all set to go the Perot-route, to build a pro-Administration external organization to utilize Perot’s money and steam for productive purpose. Frank is also really hot on this.”

Apparently Perot accepted Borman’s participation. On 4 December 1969, Haldeman commented on Perot’s ideas about outside support operations.

While he wants to remain independent, and has a lot of project ideas, especially for TV, he’s fully willing to support our need of a highly professional PR operation, and agreed to fund it. Went through his other ideas and P generally agreed, so we will have Borman go ahead and set it all up with Perot. Can be productive if it gets on track.

Perot met with then chief foreign policy advisor, Henry Kissinger in December 1969. According to Follett, Kissinger suggested to Perot a plan to embarrass the North Vietnamese government into better treatment for the POWs. Kissinger advised him that the campaign would need to be privately financed and should seem to be entirely unconnected with the government, even though in reality, a team of White House and State Department people would monitor it.

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9 Ibid., 108.

10 Ibid., 112-113.


Perot started United We Stand in late 1969, an organization advertised as "a non-profit, non-aligned organization, dedicated toward providing a better America in which to live." After meeting with Bonnie Singleton and other members of the Dallas Cares organization, as well as consulting with members of the Nixon staff, Perot and EDS employees began to call newspaper editors across the nation and place self-written advertisements, calling upon individual Americans to join in trying to aid POWs. The advertisements contained two coupons which allowed United We Stand to collect a database of names and addresses of concerned citizens and to forward their concerns (via the coupon) to their congressmen. According to a *Dallas Times Herald* article published in 1969, Perot spent an estimated one million dollars through his United We Stand organization for the full-page advertisements, which also urged public support for President Richard Nixon's Vietnam war policy. Some saw Perot as a publicity-grabber whose primary purpose was to further his own political aspirations. Some suggested the 39-year-old executive had his eye on a spot in the national political arena; it was clear he was keenly aware of the value of good publicity on the national level. The Dallas millionaire claimed he received three and a half million responses from his newspaper advertising campaign before he quit counting. He estimated the final figure to be five million.

Perot committed United We Stand to aid and comfort American POWs and their families. In November 1969 Perot sent Bonnie Singleton, Paula Hartness, Mr. and Mrs.

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13 United We Stand press release, undated, Bonnie Singleton papers.

14 Bill McAda, "Hanoi or Bust; Reds Fail To Chill Perot Mission," *Dallas Times*
Murphy Martin, and a WFAA television crew back to Paris to request a response to the questions posed on the wives’ first Paris trip. Bonnie Singleton remembers that the trip was arranged on the spur of the moment. The trip was proposed and the wives were asked to be ready to leave the following day. According to Bonnie Singleton, this was typical of Ross Perot’s way of operating.

Perot made a secret offer to North Vietnamese embassy officials in Vientiane, Laos, while he tried to arrange an airlift of Christmas gifts and supplies to the prisoners during Christmas of 1969. Perot offered to pay for rebuilding North Vietnamese hospitals and schools damaged by American bombing in return for the release of American prisoners of war. Despite the North Vietnamese rejection of his offer, Perot leased two Braniff jets and filled them with twenty-six tons of food, mail, medicine, clothing, and personal packages and messages from POW families. The first Braniff DC-8, bore the inscription “Peace on Earth” and a red decal resembling a Christmas ribbon. A small crowd cheered as the plane took off. Bonnie Singleton held up her three and a half-year-old son Richard and remarked “If he [Jerry] can just get pictures of the boy, I’d be happy.”

The first flight stopped in Los Angeles, Honolulu, Wake Island, and Hong Kong before arriving in Bangkok, Thailand. A second plane, a Boeing 707 marked with the


15 Paula (Hartness) Wetherell, interview by author, 9 June 1997, 2, Weatherford, TX, tape recording and transcript, in possession of author.


slogan "Good Will Toward Men," left Dallas Love Field the next day. United We Stand
members, clergymen, relief workers and reporters accompanied Perot on the trip.\textsuperscript{18}

Thailand was the first stop on the aid mission, followed by a trip to the Laotian
capital Vientiane on Christmas Eve. Although an aviation guidebook said the Laotian
airfield was unsuitable for landing larger planes, the Boeing 707 came in safely. Upon
arrival, Perot sought the Pathet Lao second in command, Colonel Soth Petrase. A tense
moment occurred outside Petrase's headquarters, as a guard seemed ready to fire at Perot.
Flight attendant and interpreter Karen Freytag patted the guard on the cheek and tweaked
his nose, breaking the tension and allowing Perot the opportunity to get an audience.
Colonel Petrase released to him a list of American flyers shot down by Pathet Lao forces.
The list was merely a duplicate of one released earlier. Vu Tien, the charge d'affaires for
the North Vietnamese embassy in Vientiane joined the discussion and spoke cordially to
Perot, but steadfastly refused to allow Perot and his party to visit Hanoi.\textsuperscript{19}

In an effort to pave the way into North Vietnam by showing interest in the welfare of
NVA prisoners, Perot visited a prisoner of war camp in Laos. He spoke with two North
Vietnamese POWs. He went to the prison camp in the early afternoon and tried to speak
with a North Vietnamese army captain who ignored him. Nonetheless, an enlisted man
spoke freely to him.\textsuperscript{20} Perot's visit to the camp publicly demonstrated that North
Vietnamese regulars were in Laos.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{20} Tom Johnson, "Perot Tours Laos Prison; Executive Prepares for Flight to
Haldeman recounted the White House’s reaction to Perot’s efforts on 31 December 1969. Perot apparently made frequent phone calls to Kissinger, Erlichman and Al Haig, Nixon’s chief of staff, throughout the night asking for various kinds of assistance. Nixon and Haldeman hoped to use Perot’s efforts to mobilize American public sympathy against the North Vietnamese.

North Vietnam refused to grant clearance for shipment of Christmas gifts for the POWs and also refused Perot’s counter offer to give the food onboard to North Vietnamese orphans. Kissinger believed Hanoi refused to accept the gifts because they saw Perot’s efforts as unorthodox. The entire affair seemed designed to embarrass the North Vietnamese and cause them negative worldwide publicity. The North Vietnamese told Perot that the gifts might be delivered by mail if Perot would fly the Christmas presents to Moscow by midnight, 31 December. Perot made plans to fly to Moscow, joking “It may be the largest postal bill in Russian history.”

After leaving Southeast Asia, Perot stopped in Anchorage, Alaska. While there, two hundred fifty volunteers from the city and Elemendorf Air Force Base repackaged the goods from bulk into three kilogram containers, as the North Vietnamese officials had specified for mailing from Moscow. “This is the most fantastic thing I’ve ever seen” said

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Ralph Shannon of the Dallas Red Cross as he watched a disparate group of volunteers labor to meet the deadline. The plane then flew to Copenhagen, Denmark, as Perot waited to receive clearance to enter Moscow. Perot hoped to fly his twenty-six tons of mail, food, and medicine into Moscow, to be forwarded to the Americans held in North Vietnam.

The Soviet Union refused the Americans permission to enter their airspace unless the American embassy accepted responsibility for Perot’s flight. The American embassy accepted the plan. After meeting with officials in the Soviet embassy in Denmark, the Dallas business executive offered to lease a smaller airplane for the flight into Moscow. He also sent a cablegram to Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin requesting permission for clearance. Kosygin refused to accept what he probably considered to be a propaganda attempt to connect the Soviet Union and the Communist regime in North Vietnam. The Soviets denied permission for the flight.

Perot’s overt mission ended in failure. Nonetheless, he believed that his efforts had given the Communists a negative world image as cold-hearted villains who refused gifts for prisoners at Christmas, an image that could be used to answer American anti-war critics. “We focused the eyes of the world on the true nature of the Communists, and the plight of men held captive everywhere.”

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enormous international awareness of the problem. He spent two million dollars, but received publicity he himself felt would have cost him sixty million to buy.26

Perot probably hoped that, even as this door remained closed, perhaps another would open to obtain the names of POWs and eventually achieve an exchange of mail. The gifts from POWs families were returned, while the medicine and other supplies were donated to charitable organizations. Perot continued to involve himself on a personal level with the families of POW/MIA's. In a letter to Bonnie Singleton, he wrote, "I am counting on you to call on me at any time that I can assist you, either in trying to secure the release of your husbands, or on personal matters."27

Perot searched for other ways to embarrass the North Vietnamese, keep the attention of Americans focused on the problem of prisoners in Vietnam, and continue the flow of public pressure on North Vietnam. He claimed to have ransom money in a Hong Kong bank that he could access on two hours notice, and was willing to use, if the North Vietnamese would release the prisoners.28 In January 1970, he again offered the North Vietnamese a trade of one hundred million dollars in food, clothing, medicine, and other civilian supplies for the release of the American POWs. Perot stated he did not obtain permission from the Nixon administration before making this offer. "I think we can

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26 Follett, On Wings of Eagles, 38.

27 H. Ross Perot, to Bonnie Singleton, 21 October 1969, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX.

structure this thing so it will be acceptable to everyone. There has been no objection from the government. I wouldn’t do anything that would be damaging to my country.”

Perot also used his connections with the POW wives and families to sway the Vietnamese and gain publicity. During his visit to Southeast Asia, the Communists had encouraged Perot to show interest in North Vietnamese and Viet Cong prisoners in South Vietnam. Perot responded by gathering information about the Communist prisoners, which he then used to augment the publicity afforded Mrs. Singleton, as she once again approached the Vietnamese embassy in Paris. Perot attempted to pass the information along. The North Vietnamese representatives in Paris refused to accept information about their own POWs. They called police in an effort to keep the Dallas businessman and some seventy-five newsmen outside the North Vietnamese embassy. Perot referred to the effort as “massive overreaction” and said he was “appalled that 50 policemen are needed to protect the North Vietnamese from the press.”

In April 1970, Ross Perot and family members of MIA’s, Sandy McElhanon and Paula Hartness from the Dallas-area wives of POWs group, went to Southeast Asia to obtain information concerning missing Americans. They stopped first in South Vietnam and toured prisoner-of-war camps. Perot hoped to set up a mail exchange between the Communist prisoners and their families in return for the American POWs being able to


exchange mail with their families. This was a risky trip for all the women. Paula Hartness reported hearing bombs explode as the women slept in their hotel rooms. The entourage of Perot, the women, and a press corps brought along by Perot to cover his movements flew into Vientiane, Laos, which was a very unstable region at this time. Hartness and other women helped Perot try to make deals with the North Vietnamese to accept money for war reparations to their country in return for exchange of prisoners. Although the Communists refused to cooperate in releasing any information, Perot was successful in generating more public opinion against the North Vietnamese.

One of the enduring legacies in the attempt to remember the POWs/MIAs started in the spring of 1970. An organization named VIVA (Victory in Vietnam) designed and manufactured bracelets engraved with POW’s/MIA’s names. In a Salute to the Armed Forces Ball on 9 May 1970, H. Ross Perot was named “Man of the Year,” and his wife received the first bracelet. The bracelets caught on nationwide; prominent celebrities, ordinary people, and thousands of schoolchildren wore them.

Hoping to arouse public opinion during the summer of 1970, Perot designed and financed an exhibit of a mock Vietnamese prisoner of war cell in the rotunda of the Capitol. The exhibit was copied and displayed in state capitols, fairs, and other public gatherings throughout the United States.

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31 Paula (Hartness) Wetherell, Dallas, TX, to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, Laos, 11 June 1974, Paula Wetherell papers, in possession of author.

32 Paula (Hartness) Wetherell interview with author, 9 June 1997, 4, Weatherford, TX, tape recording and transcript, Coppell, TX, in possession of author.
Frank Borman joined the Perot organization in July of 1970. The forty-one year old Borman resigned from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to aid Perot in developing national town hall meetings. Perot hoped to use mass media to create public forums for discussion of national concerns. Borman's fame was also a drawing card for publicity to the POW cause. During one mission for United We Stand, Borman attempted to meet with the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris in August 1970. The DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) refused to see Borman. A Hanoi newspaper compared Borman with Ross Perot and said their missions were "wicked moves" regarding POW's.

By August 1970 Perot and United We Stand president Murphy Martin began to use United We Stand to promote the idea that public opinion against the Communists in Southeast Asia was the best way to win better treatment and possible release for the POWs. People throughout the United States volunteered their time to encourage others to write to the North Vietnamese representatives in Paris, expressing concern about the fate of American POWs. The efforts by United We Stand generated volumes of letters and telegrams. In response to the worldwide publicity and letter writing campaign, the

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35 Murphy Martin, to MIA/POW relatives, circulated by United We Stand, 1 August 1970, Bonnie Singleton papers, Coppell, TX.

North Vietnamese released the names of 334 prisoners of war through the Committee of
Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam. The list contained the
name of Jerry Singleton of Greeley, Colorado.\textsuperscript{37}

Following the Son Tay raid in November 1970, Ross Perot called Alexander
Butterfield in the White House to complain about his lack of access to the president.

He [Perot] was hopping mad. His ire was intensified in that he had
conceived (or at least believed that he had conceived) the idea of
sending a red-hot combat task force into the North to free some
American POWs. Yesterday's news of the military's failure to
achieve success in an endeavor similar to the one he had in mind set
him off—but good. His exact words to me: "If I had been in charge of
this operation, you can bet your bottom dollar that the President, at
this very moment, would be shaking hands with freed prisoners. We
wouldn't have hit just one camp, we would have hit several."\textsuperscript{38}

Perot demanded a meeting with the president, apparently to discuss the POW
situation. On 3 December 1970, Al Haig approved, from a foreign policy standpoint,
Perot's meeting with Nixon\textsuperscript{39} However, the next day Haldeman blocked it.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} "Names of 334 Captives on List Accepted by Hanoi," \textit{New York Times}, 26 June
1970.

\textsuperscript{38} Alexander P. Butterfield, to Dwight Chapin, 25 November 1970, Nixon
Presidential Materials Project, WHSF WHCF Subject Files, [CF] ND 18-3/CO#, Prisoners
[1969-70], National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

\textsuperscript{39} Alexander Haig, to Hugh Sloan, 3 December 1970, Nixon Presidential Materials
Project, WHSF WHCF Subject Files, [CF] ND 18-3/CO#, Prisoners [1969-70], National
Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

\textsuperscript{40} Hugh Sloan, via Dwight Chapin, to President Richard Nixon, 4 December 1970,
ND18-3/CO165 PR 7, "File- C told Tom Meurer no on apt. report" 12/4 C, Nixon
Presidential Materials Project, WHSF WHCF Subject Files, [CF] ND 18-3/CO#, Prisoners
[1969-70], National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.
By 7 January 1972, the Nixon-Perot relationship had deteriorated. Perot called Haldeman complaining about not having personal access to Nixon and wanting to be more of an insider, playing an active role. Haldeman's private papers indicate this breach in the Nixon/Perot relationship had resulted from the Nixon administration's disappointment that Perot had not followed through on some of his promised projects. "Perot, of course, has reneged on almost everything he's promised to do for us but I told him I'd see what we could work out."

John Connally, former Democratic governor of Texas who had gone over to the Republican Party, joined the Nixon cabinet as secretary of treasury. Perot attempted to communicate through Connally to presidential aide H.R. Haldeman in an effort to get President Nixon's attention for a new scheme. Perot had agents in Hanoi saying there might be a breakthrough on some type of monetary exchange for sick and wounded prisoners. Perot would not go through White House staff to discuss it; he insisted on speaking directly to Richard Nixon. Haldeman knew the president would not see Perot in person about such a matter and referred the matter through memorandum to Nixon. President Nixon suggested Perot deal with Dick Walters because Walters handled all the top-secret things in the bureaucracy.

Perot proposed a deal with North Vietnam that would release thirty sick and wounded prisoners in return for a million dollars from the United States. Secretary of State Kissinger heard of the plan and hoped that a way could be worked out in handling

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41 H.R. Haldeman, handwritten journal, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, 393, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.
the ransom so that Nixon's administration would get credit for it rather than Perot. The proposed exchange never took place.

While the secret campaign to aid prisoners apparently failed, the public efforts of Perot's national associations, grass roots organizations, and people like Bonnie Singleton helped in getting the names of the POWs released and in forwarding mail and packages to the prisoners. Ross Perot also aided himself as a businessman and politician. His high-profile campaign on behalf of POWs gave him publicity that could be translated into financial and political power. He wanted to ensure he would be remembered in the corridors of power--especially in the Pentagon-- and it appears that he succeeded in this. He later used those ties to aid his efforts to rescue EDS workers from Iran and in his own political campaign for the presidency. His political party is known by the name United We Stand, reminding the public of his efforts to bring aid to the POWs.

42 Ibid., 432-433.

43 Follett, On Wings of Eagles, 38.
CHAPTER 9

RETURN

By 1972, the situation improved for Bonnie and Jerry Singleton. In the fall of 1972, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird informed Bonnie during halftime of a Dallas Cowboy football game honoring the POWs-MIAs, that the end of the war was coming soon and Jerry would be coming home.¹

During the 1972 Christmas season after Richard Nixon’s reelection, the United States, tired of the stalemate in Paris, sought to force the North Vietnamese into peace negotiations by bombing Hanoi with B-52’s. The so-called “Christmas bombing” attacks made a big impression on both prisoners and guards. As prisoner Sam Johnson put it, “I was half asleep, cold and uncomfortable under my thin blanket, when I heard sounds in the distance. That’s not thunder. Aircraft! B-52’s. At first prisoners could not believe B-52’s would be used in the North.”² Using a tapping method of communication and infrequent face-to-face contacts long-term POWs contacted newly downed B-52 crewmembers to gain information about the situation.³ Prisoners could hear NVA SAM missiles being fired. They surmised the North Vietnamese had exhausted their supply of more advanced

¹ Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, transcript, 23 November 1972, 1, Coppell, TX, in possession of author.

² Johnson, Captive Warriors, 267.

³ Ibid., 271.
anti-aircraft missiles and that they were firing older, outdated missiles, which made a
distinctive noise. Prisoners learned that much of Hanoi had been destroyed, giving the
captives hope.\(^4\) Perhaps the worldwide condemnation of the Christmas bombings, coupled
with North Vietnamese willingness to negotiate, led both sides back to the conference
table. In December 1972, Bonnie Singleton received a call from Henry Kissinger. Peace
negotiations had reached a point where there would be an imminent settlement. Bonnie
believes the United States Christmas bombing campaign of Hanoi caused the North
Vietnamese to seek a settlement.

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced the plan for returning prisoners of war,
nicknamed “Project Homecoming,” on 26 January 1973. The North Vietnamese released
names of the men who were to be released under terms of a negotiated cease-fire on 27
January. The list of men missing in action in Laos and Cambodia remained incomplete.
Notice to relatives of the men living, dead and missing in action was carried out by
casualty-assistance officers of the Defense Department within twenty-four hours after the
prisoner list was received from the NVA representatives in Paris. On 27 January 1973,
Secretary of State Kissinger telephoned Bonnie Singleton once again to announce a
settlement with the North Vietnamese. Jerry was to be released in the first group of
returning POWs. Bonnie could tell her son Richard that his father was coming home on
12 February 1973.\(^5\) Bonnie and six-year-old son Richard contemplated their new life upon
the return of their husband and father. Richard told his mother he looked forward to

\(^4\) Ibid., 271.

\(^5\) Bonnie Singleton, interview by author, 31 January 1997, 11.
meeting his father for the first time. "It will really be great to have Dad home. I'm looking forward to meeting him. You know, it will be kinda [sic] like being born again." 

On 16 January 1973, the NVA informed prisoners in the camps they would be going home. The daily routine became a blur of excitement and anticipation. They slept little and smoked a great deal. Feelings of claustrophobia began to set in as the POWs realized their release was imminent.

On 12 February 1973, at 4:00 a.m., a guard came into each cell with clean clothes, including pants, shirt, and a windbreaker. The prisoners hurriedly prepared, packing their meager possessions. At 6:00 a.m., the POWs were yet to be released. They began to fear their release might be delayed. The men prayed for the nightmare to be over and for buses to come and take them to the airport. After what seemed to be an eternity, the prisoners boarded American planes and flew to the Philippines. They arrived at 10:00 p.m. to a celebratory welcome. Banners hung by school children saying "We Love You" lined the streets. Ex-prisoners and those cheering them cried openly. All returning prisoners of war received telegrams, letters, and cards welcoming them back. Camera crews crowded around as they deplaned and boarded buses, allowing Americans at home to see their family and friends safely returned.


7 Johnson, *Captive Warriors*, 276.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 281.
One hundred forty-three men were released on 12 February 1973, via Clark Air
Force Base in the Philippines. A total of 590 had been repatriated as of 3 April 1973. As
part of Project Homecoming, thirty-eight ex-POWs were processed through Sheppard Air
Force Base, Wichita Falls, Texas, in February 1973; among these was Jerry Singleton.

Upon receiving notice from the Air Force about Jerry’s return, Bonnie drove to
Wichita Falls in the afternoon with her son. She and Richard stayed in the visiting officers
quarters on base. Jerry arrived in the early evening of the same day. Jerry and the other
ex-POWs got off the airplane to a jubilant gathering. As he deplaned Jerry smiled,
saluted, and then spoke a few words to the crowd gathered to welcome him home. He
said he was glad to be home, and there was somebody special he hadn’t seen in a time and
asked to be excused. Jerry approached Bonnie on the tarmac and was able to greet and
embrace her briefly while Richard stood on the sidelines with a nurse. He and the other
POWs were then rushed to the base hospital where they underwent physicals and received
medical treatment. Bonnie and Jerry received very little privacy. After a two-day rest, the
ex-POWs underwent extensive intelligence debriefing. The debriefing officer was Col.
Francis W. Bernier, Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, 7602d Air Intelligence Group
HQ USAF. The returning men were asked to list the names of all the POWs they had
known in the camps and to give any other information they had collected. A psychiatrist
attempted to counsel Jerry Singleton, but he refused treatment.\(^\text{10}\) During Jerry’s week in
the hospital, people continually barged into and out of his room, ignoring his and Bonnie’s

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 300.
desire to be alone. News media were not permitted to report progress of the ex-POWs’
treatment or invade family privacy.\(^{11}\)

After a couple of days, the hospital allowed Jerry to see his son Richard in a
downstairs room. Richard played with a puzzle under a chair as the father he had never
seen entered the room. Jerry and Richard spent an awkward moment until Bonnie told
Richard to speak. “Hello, Daddy,” Richard replied.\(^{12}\)

Eventually, the Singletons returned to Dallas. Jerry continued to spend considerable
time in debriefing and continued to receive a doctor’s care for a case of intestinal worms.\(^{13}\)
Mrs. Singleton remembers that Jerry would frequently lick his plate clean as he had
learned in POW camp when food was scarce. On 6 December 1973, the Singletons
celebrated the birth of their second son John Allen, and that year the family enjoyed their
first Christmas together since Jerry’s return. “That was undoubtedly the most wonderful
Christmas we’ve ever had.”\(^{14}\)

The Dallas Sertoma Club, a local civic organization, honored Bonnie Singleton at the
Dallas Athletic Club as the recipient of the Dr. Tom Shipp Service to Mankind Award.
One of the officers of the club stated “The principal speaker, the honoree’s husband, will

\(^{11}\) Joseph A. Ford, Center Historian Air Training Command United States Air Force,
“Southeast Asia Support,” in History of Shepard Technical Training Center, Fiscal Year
July 1972-July 73, Volume I. (Wichita Falls, Texas: Sheppard Air Force Base Historical
Center)

\(^{12}\) Bonnie Singleton, interview with author, 31 January 1997, 12.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) VFW Auxiliary 1974, (national magazine of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of
Foreign War), March, vol. 35, no. 1, 21.
also acknowledge and express the debt of gratitude that all released former prisoners of war owe to the leadership of Bonnie Singleton in striving to effect the release of the prisoners.\footnote{\textit{POW Wife Will be Honored}, Bonnie Singleton papers, clipping in possession of author.}

Other POW wives had experiences different from that of Bonnie Singleton. When the North Vietnamese released a list of all prisoners who would be returned, Air Force Major Greg Hartness of Fort Worth, shot down in Laos, was not on the list. Paula Hartness and other MIA wives struggled with the government to obtain information concerning their missing husbands and to prevent efforts by the government to change their status. The government stated Greg Hartness had probably been shot when his parachute had landed in enemy territory and decided to designate him as killed in action (KIA).\footnote{Paula (Hartness) Wetherell, statement concerning meeting with government officials over change of status from MIA to KIA for her husband, 2 August 1973, Paula (Hartness) Wetherell papers, copy in possession of author.} Few pilots shot down in Laos were taken captive.

\footnote{15 \textit{POW Wife Will be Honored}, Bonnie Singleton papers, clipping in possession of author.}

\footnote{16 Paula (Hartness) Wetherell, statement concerning meeting with government officials over change of status from MIA to KIA for her husband, 2 August 1973, Paula (Hartness) Wetherell papers, copy in possession of author.}
CHAPTER 10

CLOSURE

Bonnie Singleton made a difference by turning public awareness into a weapon against North Vietnamese treatment of POWs. Until 1970, prisoners were kept in small, hot, unsanitary cells for twenty-three hours a day, with little opportunity to communicate with other prisoners. The North Vietnamese did not allow mail between families and POWs until 1970. At approximately the same time that Bonnie Singleton and her group flew to Paris to meet with the North Vietnamese representatives, treatment improved for the prisoners. According to returned POW Colonel Kenneth North, United States Air Force, the turning point in treatment of the prisoners came in October of 1969.¹ North asserted that wives of prisoners of war brought successful pressure to bear upon the North Vietnamese government through the court of public opinion.

Not all Americans agreed, then or now, about whether the POW/MIA issue was handled correctly. Anti-war critics charged President Nixon with using the issue as “an indispensable device for continuing the war.”² According to these critics, Nixon used the


POW issue as a publicity scheme to generate support for the war. Seymour Hersh, a noted critic of the Vietnam War, asserted that "The Pentagon's attitude toward wives and mothers can be described as a dual one: both extremely considerate and extremely purposeful."³ In the view of many critics, the POW/MIA issue remained a political issue for Nixon and other pro-war advocates to exploit in their efforts to defeat the Communists in Southeast Asia. Cora Weiss, others in the anti-war movement, and the government of North Vietnam agreed with Hersh's opinion. They believed the POW/MIA issue should have been resolved by ending the war.

H. Bruce Franklin, in his *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, calls the efforts for the POWs/MIAs by American politicians a myth designed to manipulate the American public. He claims H. Ross Perot served as one of Richard Nixon's most substantial backers, receiving valuable government contracts for his company Electronic Data Systems in return. Franklin shows documentation that Perot operated United We Stand primarily as an effort to influence American attitudes toward sustaining the war in Vietnam.⁴

While the wives' efforts helped influence North Vietnamese treatment of prisoners, it seems unclear how much influence they had with the United States government or public opinion. It is difficult to separate, by the early 1970's, the public's concern for POW/MIAs


and its desire for the war to end. Nonetheless, Bonnie Singleton and the groups dedicated to aiding American prisoners of war did make some difference. There seems little doubt that Murphy Martin and WFAA-TV assisted the POW wives in an effort to obtain higher viewer ratings. Ross Perot did support Richard Nixon and found in the POW issue something that could focus American public opinion on other things besides the moral dilemma of war. It appears Nixon and other politicians used the POW issue to improve their image. Nixon hoped the American public's perception of him as a champion of the POWs and their families would deflect political damage generated by the Watergate crisis.

Despite these issues, Nixon, Perot, Martin and others did have an abiding concern about the prisoners and their families. They made efforts to obtain better treatment for the POWs, and they were successful in obtaining an accounting of the prisoners of war in North Vietnam, getting them better food and medical care and opportunities to send and receive mail. The sending of mail, with packages of food and medicine, as well as the opportunity to communicate with friends and loved ones probably made a life-or-death difference for some prisoners. The efforts of one person or small group can make a difference, not only in American policy, but, as in this case, in how North Vietnam treated its prisoners of war.

Today Jerry Singleton is retired from the United States Air Force and works as a certified public accountant, and Bonnie Singleton teaches special-needs children in Coppell, Texas, where they both live. They have divorced. Both of their sons are grown. Jerry and Bonnie occasionally speak at local gatherings of groups, sharing their story about how politicians can be swayed by public opinion and how Bonnie galvanized that
public awareness. The power of one person, working through grass-roots organizations, can affect American sentiment, public policy, and foreign policy.
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