

Pentagon Princesses and Wayward Sisters

Vietnam POW Wives in American Literature

In the late-summer 1997 movie thriller, *Conspiracy Theory*, Jerry Fletcher, the apparently crazed taxi driver played by Mel Gibson, festoons his armored apartment with newspaper clippings, photos, and assorted evidence of various widely-accepted conspiracies. Among Jerry's more conspicuously-displayed artifacts of late-twentieth-century paranoia are several bumper stickers (one prominently affixed to the refrigerator) admonishing us to "remember the POW/MIA." Jerry's eerie remonstrations about government plots are echoed more innocently in the still-current 32¢ US postage stamp (originally issued in May 1995) that superimposes over a rippling American flag two dog-tags stamped with the words "POW & MIA—NEVER FORGOTTEN."

And probably never to be forgotten, if America persists in its unwavering fascination with virtually every aspect of the Vietnam War, a war now more than twenty years in the past. It is now commonly accepted that our collective disappointment and shame over America's first military defeat left us as a nation uninterested in the Vietnam experience (and most of its participants) in its immediate aftermath; but, as Susan Jeffords and others have demonstrated, the early 1980s brought us Ronald Reagan and John Rambo—and a "remasculinized" USA now eager to revisit and reclaim what turned out to be one of the defining experiences of twen-

tieth-century America. The continual stream of novels, memoirs, and revisionist interpretations of the war; the still-popular films, television shows, and video games; the haunting power of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, which is now the most-visited monument in our nation's capital (Niebuhr), all attest to our culture's lingering absorption with its experience in Vietnam.

And of all the complex, intriguing issues that continually remind us of the persistent relevance of that lost war in our present lives—PTSD, homeless veterans, distrust of government, US economic relations with Viet Nam, Vietnamese refugees, and on and on—perhaps none has, for now thirty years, loomed so large in the American psyche as the POW/MIA phenomenon.

As Elliott Gruner writes about the POWs held in Vietnam until 1973,

... their plight proved to be one of the few issues that might solidify American sentiment about the Vietnam War. . . . Their plight had a metonymic quality: their suffering stood for the suffering of a nation through an uncertain war guided by unreliable and frustrating forces Americans did not understand. In contrast, the POW problem was simple: get them back! (13-14)

Because during the Vietnam War the Pentagon began to conflate counts for prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action, exact numbers are difficult to determine; but by anyone's count actual numbers of prisoners in America's longest war was small: 591 prisoners released as part of Operation Homecoming in 1973; some 2200-2500 men unaccounted for—dead or left behind. This compares to some 400,000 POWs in the Civil War;

4500 in World War I; approximately 100,000 in the Second World War; and 7000 in the Korean War.¹ Similarly, the comparatively low numbers of still-controversial MIAs is interesting: fewer than 2500 MIA's from the Vietnam War, compared to 3350 from World War I; 79,000 from World War Two; and 8200 from the Korean War (Doyle 4). How and why this relatively small number of men (and a few forgotten women) collectively (and sometimes individually) achieved and retain such mythic status is a highly politicized story told over and over from varying perspectives.

We Came Home, Captain and Mrs. Frederic A. Wyatt's 1977 "yearbook" of photographs and brief biographies of the POWs released in 1973, features an introduction by entertainer Bob Hope, who praises the POWs for their patriotism and bravery; and by then-California governor Ronald Reagan, who salutes the heroes returning to a country with a long tradition of war-invoked heroism. This exuberant welcome for the only acknowledged heroes of the Vietnam War echoed "Operation Homecoming," the official national celebration mounted for the 591 returning POWs in February, 1973. Feted by the White House, the Pentagon, and the popular media, many of these men went on to enjoy distinguished military, business, and political careers; and an astonishing number of them have written memoirs of their captivity in North Vietnam—memoirs that invariably testify, as Elliott Gruner has demonstrated, to their authors' resilience and patriotism, and to the fact that they emerged from their harrowing experience better men than when they were captured.

Recent critical studies like Gruner's 1993 *Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW*; H. Bruce Franklin's *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* (1992); and Craig Howes' *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (1993) examine the phenomenon of our fasci-

nation with the prisoners of the Vietnam War, the numerous personal testimonies offered by the POWs, and the irrepressible belief of many Americans that a corrupt North Vietnamese government and a duplicitous American government abandoned thousands of American POWs, who remain languishing in Southeast Asia today—thereby inspiring Jerry Fletcher’s bumper sticker and the US Postal Service’s pledge never to forget the men who didn’t come home. Indeed, to a significant extent the POW/MIA issue remains popular because of the belief—despite repeated congressional investigations that have proved otherwise—that today there are American men still being held captive in Vietnam. In the years since the end of the Vietnam War, the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia (the organization of POW wives that was instrumental in effecting the negotiated release of the prisoners in 1973); Ronald Reagan and Ross Perot; reported POW sightings by Vietnamese refugees; mercenary adventurers like Bo Gritz; and Hollywood macho adventure movies like *Rambo* and *Uncommon Valor* have fueled the prevalent conviction that America’s leaders cavalierly abandoned US soldiers in Vietnam.² Indeed, as H. Bruce Franklin and others have argued, the widespread belief that POWs from the Vietnam War remain captive in Southeast Asia today has become so ingrained in our national consciousness that it has become a national myth; the insistence that our government abandoned American soldiers in Vietnam “could be regarded,” Franklin asserts somewhat hyperbolically, “as the closest thing we have to a national religion” (7). The enduring viability of the belief that American POWs remain in Southeast Asia is an inextricable component of the power of the entire POW phenomenon and therefore of America’s lingering interest in our experience in Vietnam—what veteran /scholar Walter A. McDougall (re-interpreting David

Halberstam's 1970 coinage) calls "the Vietnamization of America." But my interest here is in the POWs held in Viet Nam until 1973 and in the lives of the families that they left behind, and sometimes returned to.

My attention to the POW phenomenon—and specifically to memoirs and novels about the Vietnam prisoner of war experience—ensues from my interest in gender and women in the Vietnam War. Coinciding, as it did, with domestic social revolutions in civil rights for blacks and women (and, indeed, a general redefinition of American social attitudes toward authority), the Vietnam War occurred during a period of fundamental and lasting change in American society. How the experience of Vietnam and its veterans affected the lives of women of the era, and how the diversification of women's lives affected returning veterans and America's response to the Vietnam War, is my larger topic. And the texts that illuminate the ways in which the POW/MIA experience complicates and expounds upon gender issues in mid-century America are a particularly illustrative aspect of this theme.

The handful of memoirs written by POW wives (occasionally in collaboration with the returned POW husband) and the quartet of novels written by (and obviously for) women about the POW experience, which have been published throughout the last twenty-five years, arise from and comment upon the tenacious POW myth in American society. Joan Silver's and Linda Gottlieb's 1972 novel (and subsequent film) *Limbo* immediately follows the League of Families' (an organization of POW wives founded by Sybil Stockdale in late 1968) successful efforts to publicize the fate of the POWs and precedes the Paris Peace Accords and Operation Homecoming. Early autobiographical accounts by women include Australian journalist Kate Webb's, whose 1972 *On the Other Side: 23 Days with the Viet Cong* recounts her

brief and relatively uneventful captivity in Cambodia; and Phyllis Rutledge's story (which, interestingly, is only a quarter as long as the accompanying narrative by her POW husband Howard) in their collaboration, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies 1965-1973: A Prisoner of War*, published in 1973. And, in the same year, Monika Schwinn's *We Came to Help*, co-written by her fellow prisoner Bernhard Diehl. Held captive for four years, Schwinn and Diehl were the only survivors in their group of captured German hospital nurses. Schwinn's and Webb's stories are among the few memoirs by female POWs, for, as Elliott Gruner argues, women (like the Vietnamese) are not part of the collective narrative of the American POW experience.

After these early texts, POW memoirs—most written by (or ghost-written for) the former prisoners—appeared throughout the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Throughout these years, women's voices sound an important counterpoint to the dominant male narrative of bravery, patriotism, and self-definition.³ From the 1980s, Sybil and James Stockdale's *In Love and War* and Barbara Mullen Keenan's *Every Effort* offer personal testimony of the daily lives of the women left behind by husbands incarcerated for many years, while novels like Jonellen Heckler's *Safekeeping* and Laura Taylor's *Honorbound* provide interesting variant fictional presentations of life for the POW wife. Fern Michaels' 1994 *To Have and To Hold* revisits the themes explored by the 1980s romance novels. More recent memoirs like Dorothy McDaniel's *After the Hero's Welcome* (1991) and Ben and Anne Purcell's 1992 *Love and Duty* testify to the lasting interest in these women's stories and to the lingering significance to the authors of their experience as POW wives long after their husbands' return home. More importantly, as a group, these texts give us profound insights into the intersection

of the war and changing roles for women in late-twentieth-century America.

In Western literary tradition's many narratives of war and its aftermath, women are generally depicted as Penelopes, waiting patiently for their men to come home. But every day the Vietnam War came home to all of us. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s grainy news footage of the most horrific fighting flickered across our television sets each evening. Casualty counts were updated weekly on the same network news shows. Veterans returning from their twelve-month rotation brought personal testimonies of the heat, and death, and apparent futility of the entire undertaking. By the late 1960s, the visible and vocal antiwar movement provided many increasingly concerned Americans with a means to actively engage the controversy about what we were doing in Vietnam. And the dynamic women's movement sanctioned the notion that women had a right to their own opinions and their own voices—on this issue, as on others. Though the concept that war happens only to the men who fight on the front has always been shortsighted, the Vietnam War demonstrated in a new way both the accuracy and the narrowness of the old adage, "they also serve who stand and wait." The experience and testimony of the wives of the men who were captured and incarcerated in prisons by the North Vietnamese are a synecdoche for the roles and responses of countless American women throughout our long imbroglio in Southeast Asia.

The nearly 600 men who became POWs in the Vietnam War were usually pilot-officers in the Navy, Marine Corps, or Air Force. The women most of them left behind were military wives: young or middle-aged, usually mothers of young children, white, educated, and committed to a peripatetic life devoted to the career of their own gung-ho military officer.⁴ They were company

women who voted Republican, doted on their husband and children, and believed in the US government, the US military, and the Vietnam War. Their stories of their five-, six-, seven-year vigil offer intriguing commentary about the homefront during the Vietnam experience—and in its aftermath.

In mid-1965, just before her husband, Navy Commander and fighter pilot James Stockdale, becomes a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, Sybil Stockdale, a middle-aged Navy wife with four young sons, listens to another naval commander at a wives' meeting inform the women "how to conduct yourself if your husband was shot down and taken prisoner in Vietnam." The family is instructed to tell no one—including the news media and anyone outside the immediate family—that their military man has been captured; nor are they to "intercede on behalf of the prisoner in any way," lest civilian interference jeopardize "State Department negotiations" or compromise the captors' treatment of the prisoner (76). Sybil Stockdale is in 1965, and essentially remains, a loyal, unquestioning military wife. From the time of her marriage in 1947, her job, she tells us, is to be "a Navy wife" and therefore "to make the best of my situation. I didn't want to fail [Jim] in any way" (46). When the young officer's career requires frequent moves, Sybil stoically relocates. When her husband is off on deployment with his fighter squadron when she gives birth, Sybil gamely handles the arrangements herself. When her second pregnancy ends in a miscarriage, she cries disconsolately and guiltily, until her absent husband returns and "reassured me over and over again that he did not consider me a failure in any way" (48).

So Sybil Stockdale, perfect Navy wife, when she becomes a POW wife, calmly accedes to the Navy's "keep quiet" policy for POW families: "I was impressed that the government seemed so well informed and so

well prepared" (77). And so do the other POW wives, at least for awhile, accept (as another Navy officer tells Dorothy McDaniel) that their husbands "would want you to be quiet, to stay home and take care of the kids. That's your role and that's what [your husband] expects you to do. For God's sake, do what the Navy says!" (50). These women—real and fictional—remained isolated from each other and ignored by the military for years, until—slowly, gradually—recognizing that their silence was not helping their husbands, in the late 1960s they began to come together and speak out. Mary Kaye Bell, one of the three Air-Force-wife-protagonists of *Limbo*, the 1972 novel first serialized in *McCall's* magazine and clearly written to serve as a primer on the POW situation, welcomes her liberation from enforced silence:

Though this was only the third meeting of the Tampa group, Mary Kaye felt its formation marked the beginning of the end of the POW wives' long adolescence under the government's paternal hand. For five years, since the first flier was downed in 1964, the government had urged POW and MIA next of kin to avoid publicity, keep a low profile, and let Washington handle everything, and for five years the women had played by the government's rules. In return, they had received only a trickle of mail and almost no information about their men. . . . She . . . had been gratified to discover that next-of-kin groups were springing up in other parts of the country. . . . There . . . was even talk of forming a national organization. (46)

This group, Sybil Stockdale's National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia,

was the catalyst that catapulted the long-invisible POW issue to the forefront of public awareness as the new decade began. The wives wrote letters about their husbands to congressmen notably ignorant of the POWs and dubious official efforts to gain their release, and (in the most blatant violation of official policy) gave interviews to the press and appeared on talk shows to spread their message. Increasingly joined by other groups, such as the Victory in Vietnam Association, they sold bumper stickers (the same bumper stickers that Jerry Fletcher and the conspiracists claim today) and the POW bracelets that became chic fashion accessories in the early 1970s; they met with White House and State Department officials; and even, in 1969, flew to Paris to discuss their husband's incarceration directly with the North Vietnamese. Bruce Franklin outlines the stages of and reasons for the increasing visibility of the POW/MIA phenomenon, which became a *cause celebre* for the White House, the antiwar movement, pro-military conservatives, and Hollywood. But originally (and only after considerable hesitation about violating military policy), it was POW wives who told America that there were hundreds of men held captive by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese.

Of course, not all of the POW wives subscribed to the goals of the League of Families. Eden Benedict, though she "chafes at the lack of information" about the POWs, keeps "her personal apprehensions . . . to herself" in the novel *Honorbound* (52). She is aware of the collective efforts of the League of Families but uninclined to go public with her frustrations. Barbara Mullen Keenan and the sister of the longest-held and subsequently famous POW, Everett Alvarez, reject the League of Families loyalists as "Statue of Liberty women . . . who will let the war go on and on as long as they don't have to cross the President." Their more radical splinter group, the Families for Immediate Release, rejected the insistence by the

“Pentagon princesses” of the League of Families that their efforts and the POW issue were not political; these “wayward sisters” are eager to politicize the incarceration of their husbands and brothers as the only way to effect their release (Keenan 140, 158, 170).

Ignored by the military, lied to by the government, and politically antagonistic to the antiwar movement, these POW wives broke their imposed silence and came together to form their own public organizations. But each would deny the feminist implications of her difficult decision to claim her own voice. Their cause, after all, was the survival of their men. And none of them professes lasting independence as a result of her unusual public activism. Dorothy McDaniel dedicates her book to her husband, Red, “my most admired man and the love of my life” (viii). Just before Red returns home, McDaniel burns the materials that testify to her activism in the League of Families, thus marking “the end of Mom’s public life” (87). As Elliott Gruner notes, “she defined her efforts only in terms of what they might mean for her husband” (94). Anne Purcell expresses her enthusiasm for the nascent efforts of the League of Families: “Until this time the government policy had been, ‘Keep quiet’ . . . and this we had done for many years. But when we . . . saw the war continuing and saw very little being done to get our men better treatment or to get them home, we could keep quiet no longer. It was out of this frustration that the National League of Families was born.” But she undercuts the seriousness of the enterprise with her flippant conclusion that “the government should have known that you could keep women quiet for just so long” (115-116).

Perhaps it is not surprising that these texts claim no feminist liberation for their heroines, for not only were these women conservative, military wives; they were as well busy mothers forced by circumstances be-

yond their control to raise their children alone, and women themselves imprisoned by uncertainty (when will he come home?), fear (*will* he come home?), and isolation. Over and over, each of these protagonists and memoirists articulates her recognition that, like her husband, she too is a prisoner of war.

When Anne Purcell learns that her Army Colonel husband Ben has been shot down (and maybe – or maybe not – captured) in North Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive, she is overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a “woman alone” with five children, a house, and a car to tend to (38). And the stresses of her life are reinforced by the uncertainty of her situation: “MIA wife. What a horrible category! It’s like being in limbo – maybe a wife, maybe a widow; nothing definite to put my mind at rest” (40). Phyllis Rutledge acknowledges her dependence on her husband, who throughout their marriage “made almost all the decisions.” When Navy pilot Howard is captured in 1965, she accepts that “now that he couldn’t tell me what to do,” she must maintain the house and family, acting as both mother and father to their four young children. What she cannot bear is the perception that, neither wife nor widow, she is “nothing” (109). Barbara Mullen Keenan knows too that she is “a wife without a husband. . . wait[ing] (like her husband) to be rescued” (60). She recognizes the outcast status of women like her. Waiting to appear on a television show to publicize her husband’s plight, Keenan sits between “a black . . . dancer who described the difficulties faced by black people in the arts” and “an advocate of gay rights.” “Maybe,” she observes, “we have more in common than is immediately apparent” (245). While the memoirs by the male POWs demonstrate that their ability to survive the prison experience increases their sense of dignity and self-worth, the testimony of their wives gives us their

perception—despite the contradictory reality of their lives—that women without their men are “nothing.”

The novelists explore more fully the debilitating stasis and emotional imprisonment endured by POW wives. Sandy Lawton, one of the protagonists of *Limbo*, has been married only two weeks before her young husband goes off to Vietnam. It is two years before Sandy even knows whether Roy is alive, and four years longer before he returns home, a “stranger” to his waiting wife. “Statusless” in military circles, “anonymous” at the college she decides to attend, Sandy belongs nowhere.

The lack of definition is what bothered her most, more even than the loneliness. She was neither wife nor widow; she could not plan her life with Roy, or without him. Her days seemed devoid of the usual markers of grief or hope: there was nothing to look forward to, nor anything to mourn the passing of. And no end to this emotional wasteland was in sight. (44)

Judy Greer, in *Safekeeping*, also rankles under the restraints of her “captive existence”: “she was neither wife nor widow. She was entombed” (1, 36). With the help of her Marine Corp Casualty Assistance Officer, *Honorbound*’s Eden Benedict gradually pulls herself out of her despair when her infant son dies soon after her Marine captain husband is declared missing in action. But, once she eschews the solace of alcohol, Eden feels as though she is in “some kind of permanent emotional traction” (95). While Matt is tortured by the North Vietnamese, Eden is tortured by the death of her baby. When Matt returns home, their eventual happily-ever-after marriage is preceded by a period of difficult adjustment. As the reunited couple (who, like Sandy and Roy

Lawton, had been married only a short time before Matt's departure for Vietnam) struggle through Matt's efforts to reassimilate into American society, Eden reminds him that he was not the only prisoner in the family:

"You don't get it, do you? I was in prison, too. We both were. I grant you mine was prettier, the food better, but it was a jail cell nonetheless. Do you think for one minute I haven't suffered? I buried our son, and that nearly destroyed me. And then I held on to my sanity with my fingernails once I sobered up enough to recognize what was going on around me. After that, I learned how to wait, how to mark the days, one by one, off the calendar without ever knowing the extent of my sentence." (306)

Fern Michaels' 1994 protagonist, Kate, waits an unlikely twenty years, long after the end of America's involvement in Vietnam, for her Air Force pilot husband Patrick to be released from a Russian prison. Patrick is declared neither prisoner nor killed in action, and though after a dozen years, Kate has staged a mock funeral and moved on with her life, she is steadfast and supportive when he inexplicably (and secretly) returns home two decades later. "I have a life too," Kate cries, when she learns that Patrick will return to intrude on her long-awaited, new-found love. "What about me?" (265). Predictably, the Patrick who returns to his wife and now-grown daughters is weak, confused, and dissatisfied that the world has gone on without him. "We're different people now, both of us," a now-strong and independent Kate admonishes him. She and her daughters have "lived in our own hell for a lot of years." (290, 291). Kate and Eden and the fic-

tional POW wives of *Limbo* and *Safekeeping* share their real-life counterparts' frustration with their lives in "limbo," yet their fictional lives are at once complicated and eased by their exploration of their neglected sexuality—an aspect of their suspended lives that Sybil Stockdale, Dorothy McDaniel, Anne Purcell, and the other memoirists cannot even allow themselves to acknowledge.

As they make love just before he departs for Vietnam, to "serve his country, get his ticket punched, and come home a fucking hero," Fern Michaels' Patrick marvels at "the power he had over his wife. . . . Without a word or a look, rarely an explanation, she would do or say whatever he wanted. She was perfect, a shining example of himself." (2). Neither Patrick nor Kate recognizes—and he would surely not care—that their sex life, while satisfying for him, is for Kate a perfunctorily performed marital responsibility. Only after nearly twenty years of fidelity to a husband she must admit is surely long-dead does Kate—slowly, reluctantly, guiltily—begin an affair with Gus, a young *New York Times* reporter more than ten years her junior; and only after all those years does Kate discover fulfilling, satisfying sex. For Kate, sex is inextricable from love. For the other fictional protagonists, it is therapy. *Honorbound*, like *To Have and To Hold*, opens with its protagonists having sex just before he leaves for Vietnam. Sex, we are to understand, is (in standard romance-novel tradition) an important component of Matt's and Eden's relationship. Throughout the novel, which alternates chapters detailing Eden's experiences with chapters that present Matt's life as a POW, both characters happily relive their shared sexual memories. Halfway through the novel, David, Eden's Military Assistance Officer, introduces her to Jim, a fellow Marine whose "wife divorced him while he was overseas," and whose interest in Eden is immediate and obvious (133).

Reluctantly, Eden admits her attraction to the handsome Marine, which she resists only until her supervisor at the naval hospital where Eden works as a volunteer assures her that sexual release will be therapeutic and morally acceptable:

“This is more a human issue than a moral one. You’re a loving, giving woman, a woman with passion and laughter and love that needs to be shared. Those qualities aid you in your work with the patients, but like any asset or skill that’s being used, it must be refurbished and revitalized periodically. You can’t just give, Eden. You’ve got to be on the receiving end once in a while. . . . [H]owever you get through this separation from your husband, the only person you owe an explanation is yourself. No one else, other than God, has the right to make moral judgments about how you conduct your personal life.”
(144, 145)

Eden has her affair, which she enjoys, then ends efficiently, without emotional complications and without guilt. Like childbirth, her job at the naval hospital, and her new house, Eden’s sexual interlude is simply one of the experiences that makes her—not a nothing, like the POW wives who claim to live their lives on hold until their men return—but, by the end of the novel, a sensual, strong, independent woman.

Limbo’s Sandy Lawton drifts into an affair with her hippie-like graduate-student college instructor; but though sex with Alan is better than it was with the boyish Roy, her adulterous relationship arises more out of loneliness than from physical need. Similarly, Sandy’s older friend, fellow POW-wife Mary Kaye, whose hus-

band has been imprisoned for four years, misses companionship more than sex. But it is clear that her extramarital relationship with Alan helps Sandy survive her six-year ordeal in limbo; however bleak the post-imprisonment prospects for Sandy and Roy, she is waiting for him at the end of the novel in part because of the emotional and physical diversion that her relationship with Alan has provided.

In *Safekeeping*, Jonellen Heckler suggests that there is a conscious military plan to keep POW wives from divorcing or abandoning their imprisoned husbands. Early in the novel, a frustrated Judy Greer, after “five years as society’s misfit,” has decided to divorce her POW husband, Ron. Her friend, fellow-Army-wife Susan, knowing that the Army will disapprove of such disloyalty, suggests that Judy instead partake of an “unofficial . . . very private” Army tradition:

“While all the good husbands are away, doing their duty for the entire world, the good husbands whose turn it is to stay home at old Fort Whatever take care of all the wives. . . . They’re all good—all the husbands and the wives. But they get lonely. And, when it’s their turn to be lonely, there’s always someone . . . whose turn it is to be a helper.” (32)

Judy rejects Susan’s quiet tradition as a “crazy rumor” (though soon enough a young, blond major does offer “to do anything to help” her “difficult situation”) and knows that her husband will not forgive her if she is unfaithful (33, 55, 36). But she falls hard for handsome Lt. Joe Campbell, who is good to her son and loving and attentive to her. Like Jim in *Honorbound*, Joe is a good military man whose wife didn’t wait; and, demonstrating his ultimate loyalty to the military and to his imprisoned Army

comrade, he assures Judy that an affair with him will not break up her marriage. Now sexually and emotionally fulfilled, Judy drops her plan to divorce Ron; Joe convinces her to abandon her antiwar activities, helps her son Kevin to come to terms with his own fears and anxieties, and quietly exits the scene when the POWs are released. In the world of the romance novel, good sex is the answer to any problem; and in the world of military wives—obedience?:

Suppose . . . the military [is] . . . the ultimate machine in which all items—from paper to people—were deliberately and completely controlled. . . . What if she *had* been manipulated—but for the good of Ron Greer? And for the convenience of the Army. What if they had placed her in a kind of protective custody in which her life was made happier and her attacks against the government were curtailed?" (272-273)

The fictional POW wives enjoy healthy, emotionally-uncomplicated sexual relationships that help them survive their own imprisonment and happily welcome home their husbands. The real-life POW wives—at least the long-suffering ones who wait around to write the memoirs—are hardly sexual beings at all.

Close to breaking down from the stress of her family responsibilities, her husband's incarceration, and her public activism, Barbara Mullen Keenan in early 1972 seeks help from a psychiatrist. Awkwardly trying to explain her conflicted feelings to the therapist, Keenan talks about her frustration that she is "not allowed to be a woman," and insists that she doesn't really exist (282-3). She hesitantly accepts a few unsuccessful dates before learning that her husband, because he was shot down in

Laos, will not be released during Operation Homecoming, news that essentially ends Keenan's story and her book. Barbara Mullen Keenan's veiled reference to her frustrations at her inability to "be a woman" is the closest any of the women memoirists comes to acknowledging her sexuality. Phyllis Rutledge and Anne Purcell mention nothing about their physical needs or their sexual relationship with their husbands, either before their imprisonment or upon the men's return home. Neither do Sybil Stockdale or Dorothy McDaniel acknowledge any sexual frustrations or temptations during their long years of waiting; when each tells us that she enjoyed sex at her first reunion with her released husband, she does so to contradict the military's warning that the POWs may experience sexual impotence as a result of their long incarceration and to proudly testify to her husband's virility. As Elliott Gruner notes, Sybil Stockdale's sole reference to her sexual life is particularly informative:

In Love and War concludes with Admiral Stockdale's physical absence and figural impotence resolved in the hospital where the POWs are convalescing. Sybil Stockdale is eager to point out "how completely wrong they had been about the sexual impotence." Jim Stockdale echoes Sybil Stockdale's jubilation by replying in a telephone call from a high-ranking naval officer with "yes, sir, everything is just fine here at the hospital and Sybil is right here in bed with me. . . ." Admiral Stockdale reasserts his dominance by speaking for a silent Sybil in a situation serving as emblem for his returned sexual potency and natural male dominance. (95)

The loyal, faithful authors of the women's memoirs, and the more resourceful adulterous but emotionally steadfast fictional POW wives, are contrasted throughout the genre with the real female betrayers of the POWs—women who didn't wait and Jane Fonda-like antiwar activists. Each of the real and fictional protagonists of these texts rejects—or comes to repudiate—the antiwar activists' role in the POW drama. While the North Vietnamese allowed antiwar organizations like the New Mobilization Committee, Women Strike for Peace, and the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam to observe, speak with, and deliver mail to and from the POWs, the wives in these novels and memoirs consistently spurn the efforts of what one of Matt Benedict's cellmates calls the "antiwar pukers" (Taylor 180). Anne Purcell rejects the antiwar movement as un-American and responsible for "prolong[ing] the war by strengthening the will of the enemy not to negotiate" (116). Army wife Judy Greer, the protagonist of *Safekeeping* is, when the novel begins, active in the antiwar movement; encouraged by her activist friend Connie and Connie's confused, antiwar veteran husband—and particularly valuable to the movement because of her POW wife status—Judy believes that activists in the antiwar movement are the only ones trying to help the POWs. But, predictably in this fundamentally conservative novel, Judy is convinced by Army lieutenant-turned-lover Joe Campbell that her antiwar efforts cause her to neglect her adolescent son.

By the end of the novel, when her POW husband returns home to his sexually-refreshed wife, Judy has abandoned her injudicious activism for motherhood and the private role that the military and her husband expect her to play. Barbara Mullen Keenan, whose memoir *Every Effort* recounts her long wait for a husband who never returned from the Vietnam War, begins to question

US involvement in Vietnam and, almost guiltily, works for antiwar Presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy in 1968; but she is as critical of the antiwar movement whose leaders “seemed to believe anything the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong told them,” as she is of the League of Families (117).

Significantly, particular venom is directed toward the antiwar activists who are women. Sybil Stockdale wonders why “the US government [doesn’t] say something about” the “Women’s Strike for Peace crowd” who, she believes, “were giving aid and comfort to the enemy” (203). McCarthy-supporter Barbara Mullen Keenan sees the controversial actor-activist Jane Fonda discussing her visits to North Vietnam on the Dick Cavett Show and notes that “most of the POW families resented Fonda’s willingness to believe the North Vietnamese, and I sometimes wondered if she’d have accepted their word so easily if her brother or husband were hidden behind those barricaded walls” (139). Sharon Dornbeck, the third and most pro-military protagonist of *Limbo*, desperate to determine whether her POW husband is alive, reluctantly turns to a local antiwar group for help. The affluent female director of the group accepts Sharon’s package for her husband, but fairly drips with her disdain for the poor, misguided POW wife:

Another one, Emily Brunner thought, another Bible-belt, bouffant-haired wife expected sympathy while she lived on her husband’s paycheck, with only the dimmest notion of the geography of Vietnam and probably less notion of the war’s politics. (104)

For the POWs and their wives, antiwar activists—especially female antiwar activists—are traitors to the American cause.

In the numerous male POW narratives, a special misogyny is reserved for the POW wives who cheated on or divorced their imprisoned husbands. As Elliott Gruner notes, "Even though"

. . . less than one percent of POW wives were unfaithful [this a Pentagon statistic whose origins are unclear], few movies would do without highlighting a woman's betrayal. Few autobiographies could keep from mentioning the adulterous wife. The adulterous female betrayer would become a stock character in POW films. (97)

In *Charlie and the Children*, Joanna Scott's simplistic 1997 novel about a grunt captured, imprisoned, but later inexplicably released by the Viet Cong, Charlie's squad is decimated after its once skillful point man Lou receives a letter from his mother-in-law informing him that his wife is sleeping around:

She put a knife in his heart and turned it slowly, slowly. A mad lover who fucked and killed. A preying mantis. She killed him, God curse her soul. She killed them all . . . they'd gone through the jungle with a deadly wound at point. A wound that killed them all. (156, 162)

The female novelists and memoirists also reject the wives who didn't wait, but they do so with an apparent understanding of the impulse that undermines the force of their condemnation. Given their own ambiguous fidelity, it is not surprising that the fictional wives do not altogether share their husbands' disdain for their more blatantly unfaithful sisters. In *Limbo*, when Sandy and

Mary Kaye discuss some “juicy” news about “that gal from Milwaukee” who “went to court and said he’s been missing for three years and to the best of her knowledge, he’s dead. . . . She remarried” (136), their reaction to this news is curiosity rather than censure. When Matt Benedict returns to Eden, unaware of her affair during his absence, he expresses his gratitude to her for waiting, and his scorn for the wives who didn’t. But Eden, understandably, defends the impatient wives: “Don’t judge them too harshly. Those who survive all this will be the ones who made a conscious decision to get through it any way they could.” She knew it wasn’t her place to judge the other women” (Taylor 292-293). And yet, as always, their real sympathies are for their men. Jim Clayton in *Honorbound* and Joe Campbell in *Safekeeping* are credentialed as unthreatening sexual surrogates for their imprisoned military brothers because they are cuckolds: decent, brave men betrayed by selfish, adulterous wives.

More interesting is the reaction of the always-faithful memoirists to the defection of some of the weaker wives. A fellow POW wife calls Barbara Mullen Keenan with word of the wife of one of the men shot down with her husband: she “decided she had had it with the whole bit. She divorced her husband for desertion or something and remarried—against the advice of the Navy and everybody else.” Her response to this development?: “It’s like . . . this woman has put it behind her, and . . . I’m the only person who even remembers” (239). Anne Purcell mentions—but does not comment upon—the tragedy of the POW wife who commits suicide a year and a half after her husband’s capture (204).

Maybe the apparent, if unenthusiastic, acceptance of the actions of unfaithful wives—even by the long-suffering real-life POW wives who waited patiently—is the result of the theme that echoes most loudly through-

out these texts. Each of these narrators, however conservative, recognizes and articulates that one of the results of her ordeal is significant personal growth and empowerment—a sense of self-worth often inspired and reinforced by her solidarity with other women like her, and a theme that counterpoints her perception that, neither wife nor widow, she does not exist.

Each, that is, except one. *Safekeeping* is the most conservative of the novels, and Judy's movement is from antiwar activist contemplating divorce to devoted mother, daughter-in-law, and wife. Even her ostensibly risky affair is, it seems, a carefully controlled military plot to keep her in line. Not until the final pages of the novel does she recognize the radicalism of her now-repudiated antiwar activities, as she wonders, belatedly, whether her returning husband will not admire—will, in fact, “condemn . . . the role she had taken against the war” (288). Heckler's failure to create a well-developed and changing protagonist is the most obvious weakness of her simplistic novel. Even the similarly one-dimensional heroines of *Limbo* change as a result of their experiences as POW wives.

Mary Kaye learns early on that “a husband is not indispensable. I bought our house myself,” she proudly asserts. “I furnished it, I finished my degree, I got a job” (Silver and Gottlieb 129). Her degree, her job as a school teacher, and her ability to raise her family alone are not particularly significant in her life or in the novel, but they certainly threaten the male colleague who is her one date before she finds out that her husband has died in captivity: “You don't need a man,” he snarls. “You're so busy being Wonder Woman, mother, father, and breadwinner all in one, that you aren't going to be good for a god-damned thing when your husband comes home” (133). Young, newly-married Sandy grows up while her husband is imprisoned overseas. “A girl who would have

been a traditional wife and mother, except for an accident over the skies of North Vietnam, had become liberated in spite of herself" (*Limbo* 147). She knows that, with her education and her new sexual experience, she cannot follow the military's advice for wives of returning POWs: "Don't spring too many changes on him. . . . Just be yourself, the way you were when he left you. That's what he married, and that's what he's been dreaming of returning to" (177).

Sandy and Mary Kaye, like many of the POW wives, find support for their new independence in each other, and in the other POW wives who come together in the founding days of the League of Families. Women alone, they are members of "the club nobody wants to join" (Silver and Gottlieb 47). Because of frequent moves, they were usually separated from their families. Neither were they assisted by the military, which only reluctantly "handled" the POW families, who were an embarrassment and a distraction. Dorothy McDaniel includes as an appendix to *After the Hero's Welcome* now de-classified 1971 White House memos that discuss plans to keep the POW wives "in line" and "on the reservation" (205, 207). Even pro-government Sybil Stockdale expresses frustration with the red tape and runaround that she received when trying to get assistance or information from the State Department and the Pentagon (119, 141, 215). These women had only each other.

The POW wives of *Limbo* support each other throughout the novel. "It was understood, without any words being exchanged between them, that just as Sandy had helped Mary Kaye through [her husband's] death, Mary Kaye would be with Sandy through Roy's rather more protracted return to life" (176). Mary Kaye recognizes the important fact that led to the League of Families and to the unacknowledged role of the new women's movement in these women's lives: "Just as war bound

together the men under fire . . . it united the women left behind back home" (34).

Eden Benedict is as indifferent to the solace of other POW wives as she is to the public activism to which so many of them eventually turned. In fact, her close relationship with her only female friend, Tracy, is compromised by the many changes that Eden embraces in her new, solitary life. *Honorbound* proclaims no solidarity among women, but its enthusiasm for Eden's evolution as a woman is unadulterated. With Tracy and Casualty Officer David's help, Eden drags herself out of her depression after the death of her child and consciously embraces the development of a new, stronger self. After a move across the country, a new job, a new home, and a brief love affair, Eden proudly—and repeatedly—proclaims that she is "not the frightened rabbit Matthew married four and a half years ago" (220). Unlike Judy Greer, Eden recognizes that, upon his return, neither she nor Matt will be the same people who parted years before. She worries that their reunion will be complicated by her development:

When he left for Vietnam, all she'd wanted was to be his wife and the mother of his children. Now she had a career, professional commitments, people who depended on her. She'd become a decision maker, a leader, a woman who contributed and made a difference in the lives of others. Would one role have to be sacrificed for the other? Or would he understand that she'd changed and grown, that she needed both? (241)

And, as we expected all along, Eden gets both. The immediate aftermath of Matt's return is complicated by his resentment of the new, independent Eden and his own

unresolved conflicts with his American Indian heritage. Eventually, of course, the loving couple move beyond the horrors of their mutual imprisonment and difficult reunion, but Eden will keep her job and her new friends, and motherhood will be on her terms. In this romance novel, the POW husband is lucky—and content—to return to a stronger, more sensual, more independent wife.

For *To Have and to Hold's* Patrick and Kate, the separation is too long. Kate, at the beginning of the novel a contented “little Miss Homemaker, who didn’t have the faintest idea how to be strong and tough,” who knows only how to be a “wife and mother,” is forced by her sudden circumstances to get a job and an education (8). Two-and-a-half years later, Kate nervously welcomes “the new, improved, better version of Kate Starr” who is “making a life for herself, one step at a time” (75, 83). A decade into Patrick’s absence, Kate sadly acknowledges that her husband would not “like the new person I am” (127). Patrick returns to a professionally successful, strong, sexually liberated woman who is the exact opposite of the “shining example of himself” that he’d left a lifetime earlier. Faithful Kate stands by Patrick when he comes home, cares for him, helps him to recover; but eventually they both recognize that they are different people who no longer belong together. “You grew wings, Kate, and you need to fly,” Patrick concedes as they amicably part at the end of the novel. Neither Kate nor the readers question that she is a better woman because of the “extraordinary situation” of her husband’s long captivity (341, 304).

The real-life POWs were not all like the tall, dark, handsome, fictional Matt Benedict or the reluctantly realistic Patrick Starr. As Dorothy McDaniel’s immolation of the relics of her public life indicates, their wives do not loudly and proudly declaim their new independence. But their recognition that they were changed—and

often for the better—by their ordeal and by their unity with other women is nonetheless a theme of their autobiographical texts. Dorothy McDaniel chronicles her frustration at her isolation and at the early lack of information about the POWs; for her, the imperative to come forward and speak publicly about her husband's fate is reinforced by the fact that the POW wives will speak out together. Anne Purcell too finds strength and validation in the communal actions of the League of Families. And Barbara Mullen Keenan is thrilled at her first meeting with another POW wife because "no one else, no one can understand what it's been like—except another woman who's been through it" (43).⁵ Keenan is like the other real POW wives, underplaying the developments in their own lives just as they ignore the vicissitudes of their sexuality. But after she and her sons celebrate her new graduate degree, she feels "more in control and wanting to use my new independence" (134); and, long before she knows that her husband will never return from Laos, she wonders whether he "would . . . like the changed me?" (233).

Elliott Gruner is one of the few critics of the American literature of the Vietnam War to note and discuss any of the myriad voices that offer commentary on the women's perspective of that complex experience. Though he does not engage the novels discussed here, his analysis of the memoirs of Stockdale, McDaniel, and others is often trenchant. "Their narratives," Gruner writes,

are amazing accounts of how women's roles could expand beyond the claustrophobia of tradition and domesticity. Their narratives identify gender boundaries as they describe the struggle for POW repatriation. What is perhaps more remarkable is how these hard-

won, expanded roles snap back into traditional domestic structures once the POWs return. (93)

I submit that—given the pro-military, conservative beliefs of the flesh-and-blood military wives, and the inherent conservatism of American society’s appropriation of the POW phenomenon—what is remarkable is not that these women “snap back into traditional domestic structures” (an assertion in itself undermined by the insertion of the POW-wife novels into the analysis), but that they push gender boundaries even in the tentative, perhaps temporary, ways that they do. As Gruner acknowledges,

the roles were reversing. Imprisonment feminized the POWs by making them silent objects of sentiment, subjects of rescue, and pawns of public attention. The active, masculine role vacated by the POWs was assumed, to a degree, by their families. POW wives inherited traditionally male roles with political and media muscle that politicians had to reckon with. While their husbands languished in . . . North Vietnamese prisons, the POW families struggled with newfound freedoms to activate stagnant political and media powers back in the United States. (89-90)

Edna J. Hunter’s 1978 study of the physical and psychological effects of captivity on the released POWs attests to the relevance of these texts as commentaries on the real-life experience of these husbands and wives. As she notes,

when the men returned, the wives expected much change and found little. The husbands, on the other hand, expected little change in their wives and families, and found much. It is little wonder that a substantial part of the post-repatriation reintegration adjustment was staged within the family arena. (194-195)

Though very different genres, written for quite different audiences, these memoirs and novels share a unique perspective on one of the more sustained and singular experiences of the Vietnam War. The real-life POW wives tell the most powerful tales. At once empowered by the blazing women's movement and defined by their conservative, middle-class, military backgrounds, these women struggled with the vicissitudes of their unusual situations. As Gruner and others have demonstrated, the stories of female POWs and POW wives have been underestimated. With no publishers and readers clamoring to hear their stories, these loyal wives have little reason to speak out except to claim their own voices, and to a degree to which many of the authors are unaware, their texts articulate the tensions within their own lives and a changing society. These books are a valuable commentary on the complicated, gendered negotiations of the Vietnam War. □

Notes

1. See H. Bruce Franklin's *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* for an account of the intermingling of statistics on POWs and MIAs during the Vietnam War.
2. There have been many books that contribute to the popular belief that we left men behind: see Nigel Cawthorne's *The*

Bamboo Cage; Rod Colvin's *First Heroes*; Monika Jenson-Stevenson and William Stevenson's *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*. Susan Katz Keating's *Prisoners of Hope: Exploiting the POW/MIA Myth in America* and Malcolm McConnell's *Inside Hanoi's Secret Archives: Solving the MIA Mystery* offer a refutation of these claims. See too the POW/MIA websites and list serves on the Internet, many of which fuel the ongoing arguments about whether or not American POWs/MIAs remain in Southeast Asia.

3. See Elliott Gruner's analysis of the dominant themes of the male Vietnam POW narratives.

4. In both the novels and the memoirs discussed here, the suddenly solitary POW/MIA wife finds almost no emotional support or tangible assistance from her parents and siblings (though Fern Michaels' Kate relies on two loving friends—a Mexican former maid and her older husband, of whom, significantly, her captive husband would not approve). Does the mobility dictated by the military culture enforce a separation from traditional familial support structures—or do the authors underestimate such relationships in order to dramatize the unnerving isolation that the protagonists feel?

5. Keenan echoes a theme that recurs throughout all of the veteran-authored novels and memoirs about the Vietnam War: you had to be there in order to understand it.

Works Cited

- Cawthorne, Nigel. *The Bamboo Cage: The Full Story of the American Servicemen Still Held Hostage in South-East Asia*. London: Leo Cooper, 1991.
- Colvin, Rod. *First Heroes: The POWs Left Behind in Vietnam*. NY: Irvington Publishers, 1987.
- Doyle, Robert C. "Unresolved Mysteries: The Myth of the Missing Warrior and the Government Deceit Theme in the Popular Captivity Narrative of the Vietnam War." *Journal of American Culture* 15 (Summer 1992): 1-18.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*. Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992.

- Gruner, Elliott. *Prisoners of Culture: Representing the Vietnam POW*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- Halberstam, David. "The Vietnamization of America." *Playboy* December 1970. Rpt. in *The Dissent of the Governed: Readings on the Democratic Process*. Ed. John C. Livingston and Robert G. Thompson. NY: Macmillan Co., 1972. 357-366.
- Heckler, Jonellen. *Safekeeping*. 1984. NY: Fawcett Gold Medal Books, 1984.
- Howes, Craig. *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Hunter, Edna J. "The Vietnam POW Veteran: Immediate and Long-term Effects of Captivity." *Stress Disorders Among Vietnam Veterans*. Ed. Charles R. Figley. New York: Brunner/Mazel, Publishers, 1978. 188-206.
- Jenson-Stevenson, Monika and William Stevenson. *Kiss the Boys Goodbye: How the United States Betrayed Its Own POWs in Vietnam*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990.
- Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Keating, Susan Katz. *Prisoners of Hope: Exploiting the POW/MIA Myth in America*. Random House, 1994.
- Keenan, Barbara Mullen. *Every Effort: A True Story*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1986.
- McConnell, Malcolm. *Inside Hanoi's Secret Archives: Solving the MIA Mystery*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- McDaniel, Dorothy Howard. *After the Hero's Welcome: A POW Wife's Story of the Battle Against a New Enemy*. Chicago: Bonus Books, 1991.
- McDougall, Walter A. "The Vietnamization of America." *Orbis* 39.4 (Fall 1995): 478-490.
- Michaels, Fern. *To Have and To Hold*. New York: Ballentine Books, 1994.
- Niebuhr, Gustav. "More Than Monument: The Spiritual Dimension of These Hallowed Walls." *New York Times* 11 November, 1994: A8.
- Purcell, Ben & Anne. *Love and Duty*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

- Rutledge, Howard and Phyllis (with Mel and Lyla White),
In the Presence of Mine Enemies 1965-1973: A Prisoner of War.
Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1973.
- Schwinn, Monika & Bernhard Diehl, *We Came to Help*. NY:
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.
- Scott, Joanna C. *Charlie and the Children*. Seattle, WA:
Black Heron Press, 1997.
- Silver, Joan, and Linda Gottlieb. *Limbo*. New York:
The Viking Press, 1972.
- Stockdale, Jim & Sybil. *In Love and War: The Story of a Family's
Ordeal and Sacrifice During the Vietnam Years*. 1984. NY:
Bantam Books, 1985.
- Taylor, Laura. *Honorbound*. 1988. NY: Jove Books, 1990.
- Webb, Kate. *On the Other Side: 23 Days with the Viet Cong*.
New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972.
- Wyatt, Capt. and Mrs. Frederic A. *We Came Home*.
Toluca Lake, CA: POW Publications, 1977.