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Children of Military Personnel Missing in Action in Southeast Asia

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. . . women and children—rebuilding their lives and perhaps building houses of cards with the hands they’ve been dealt . . .

DAVE SMITH, *The Los Angeles Times*, 1976

INTRODUCTION

Children of wartime prisoners of war (POWs) and those missing in action (MIAs) experience a *prolonged, ambiguous stressor* that may have long-term effects on their later personal psychosocial adjustment and health—either positively or negatively. What are those effects? Several studies of children of World War II concentration camp survivors suggest there are deleterious second-generational, perhaps even third-generational, residuals of extreme parental trauma (Bergman & Jucovy, 1982; Danieli, 1985, 1988a, 1988b; Rakoff, 1966; Segal, Hunter, & Segal, 1976; Sigal, 1971). To date, no definitive study has been carried out on the long-term effects on Vietnam-era MIA children, although several preliminary efforts have been made to determine what these effects might be (Benson, McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter, 1974; Boss, 1980, 1988, 1990; Hunter, 1980, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1986a, 1986b, 1988). Comparing the Vietnam War MIA situation and the Holocaust tragedy, the reader may also wonder how those two experiences differ in their future effects on surviving family members.

In reviewing the literature on the long-term effects on children caused by wartime parental loss, it quickly becomes apparent that the task is more complex than it appears. First, the impact of loss varies, depending upon whether one looks at children whose fathers were killed and whose bodies were not recovered (BNR), taken POW, or who continue in the MIA status. When the POW father returned, one must also consider whether the family remained

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together after the war ended. Among MIA families, the focus of this chapter, one must consider whether the mother, eventually able to accept the possibility that the MIA husband was indeed dead, perhaps then remarried or became career oriented and began a new life, or whether she and her children continued to wait and hope that the husband or father is still alive and held against his will.

Indeed, some family members whose sons, husbands, or fathers were declared missing during the Vietnam era maintain hope that the men will be found alive, even 25 years after they disappeared into the jungles of Southeast Asia. Families that continue in this state of ambiguous, unresolved grief are figuratively “stuck in time” and unable to go forward. A collage of quotes from the 1988 interviews with the adult children of these men (Hunter-King, 1993) can perhaps best illustrate their inability to resolve the grieving process, their continuing feelings of frustration and helplessness, and the perception of a gap in their lives even today:

One of the most difficult aspects that I've had to deal with is the feeling of frustration and depression of not knowing where my Dad is or if he is alive, and the inability to do anything about it. It's very difficult to have your life revolve around someone who may not even be alive.

The years of pain [have been the most difficult] . . . of not knowing . . . missing a loved one and never being able to put them to rest in death . . . the wondering and the periodic mourning. It's an issue that you don't want to die, but wish it would.

It would be better if my father's body were returned. At least there would be an end. . . . My family is very close (my mother, brother, and myself) but I do miss my father. . . . Around holidays I get very sentimental and am often thinking of my Dad. . . . Every major event growing up included a poignant moment wishing my father could be there. . . . I have difficulty putting it behind me since it's an open issue.

This chapter specifically looks at what we know about the long-term effects on the now “adult” children of American military personnel declared MIA during the Vietnam era. Much of the information is derived from my small pilot survey, carried out in 1988, over 15 years after the Vietnam conflict ended (see Hunter-King, 1993, for a fuller report of that study). For a better understanding of the impact on children of a missing father, it is first necessary to review (1) some background information on the Vietnam War (1964–1973); (2) the tireless efforts, since 1969, of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia; and (3) the research program of the San Diego Center for Prisoner of War Studies (CPWS) from 1971 through 1978.

THE UNITED STATES WAR IN VIETNAM (1964–1973): AN UNPOPULAR WAR

Unlike World War I, World War II, and the recent Gulf War in the Middle East, the war in Southeast Asia, like the war in Korea, was very unpopular with the American public in general. There was much antiwar sentiment, especially among high school and college-age students. Many posed the question: “Why are we there?” Military personnel were sometimes scorned, even spat upon in public. They were called “war criminals” and “baby-killers” by antiwar activists. Until 1969, the government insisted that U.S. military personnel were there merely as “advisors,” not as combatants. Most American civilians were unaware of the thousands of military personnel serving in Southeast Asia in the early years.

The first men were missing or captured in 1964; at that time, the government instructed the families not to mention that their sons, husbands, or fathers were missing or imprisoned.

The government insisted that it was not at war and did not share with these families the fact that many others were experiencing similar losses. Fearful that it would hurt their loved ones if they told anyone of their situations, the families obediently kept quiet. They coped alone; there was no support from the government and little from friends, who knew nothing of their loss. Some mothers did not even share with their own children the fact that their fathers were missing or imprisoned in a foreign land. Imagine how difficult it must have been for these children, growing up during such an unpopular war. Some did not share with their peers the knowledge that their fathers were missing, but it was not for being “obedient” as their mothers may have been. Over the years, the war itself and the entire POW/MIA issue had become thoroughly “politicized.”

These children were very proud of their fathers, yet some felt an underlying, inexplicable shame that they themselves did not understand. Some, who did share their plight with peers, were told, “Your father should not have been fighting a criminal war. He deserved to be captured!” Older children, especially, were puzzled by ambivalent feelings that they were unable to verbalize at the time. One college-aged daughter of an MIA expressed her feelings in a video as follows:

The real conflict for me on campus came when my friends were actively marching and actively participating in the antiwar movement. . . . something I wanted to do, but yet I couldn't perceive the war in simple “black and white” terms that my friends were talking about at that time. . . . I don't think I ever resolved that conflict. . . . It's easy to say I was intimidated by the telegram that threatened if I said anything publicly, something would happen to my father . . . but I don't think it's that simple. . . . I think it has to do with my still clinging onto that blind faith you have in your father. You say to yourself, “Well, there's a reason he's there; there's a reason he chose to do that; he just didn't have time to tell me.” (Smith, 1978).

It was only recently—almost 30 years later—that the young woman just quoted was able to bring closure to her loss. In 1995, she returned to Vietnam, located her father's crash site, and was finally able to say “Good-bye” to him (R. Smith, June 4, 1995, personal communication). Other children of MIAs have yet to bring closure to their grieving.

THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF FAMILIES OF AMERICAN PRISONERS AND MISSING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Vietnam-era POW/MIA families continued their grieving alone and in silence from 1964 until 1969, the year when North Vietnam threatened to execute the POWs they held as “war criminals.” It was then that the families themselves became activists. They banded together, and the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia was created. The nucleus of the League was informally organized in late 1966 in San Diego, California, by two wives of missing men, who tracked down 33 other families in their same circumstance. The League was officially incorporated in the District of Columbia on May 28, 1970. It is composed of the wives, children, parents, and other close relatives of American POWs, MIAs, BNRs, and former Vietnam-era POWs. Its current membership numbers over 3,800, the majority of whom are Air Force families. (It is noteworthy that more Air Force men were held captive than Army and Navy personnel; also, Air Force families were the *only* service families not included in the follow-up research of the Center for POW Studies.) The League is a nonprofit, nonpolitical, tax-exempt organization, financed by contributions

from concerned citizens and the families themselves. The organization's objectives are to obtain the release of all POWs and achieve the fullest possible accounting for the MIAs, including the return of the remains of these Americans who died serving their country during the Vietnam War.

Had it not been for the persistence of the League over the past two decades, the issue of full resolution of the POWs/MIAs would probably have faded from national attention in 1973, when 566 POWs held in Hanoi were released, or in 1975, when the war in Southeast Asia finally came to an end and South Vietnam collapsed in defeat. Despite numerous "live sightings," the White House steadfastly maintained for many years that there were no more men held in Southeast Asia until Ronald Reagan took office as President of the United States. For the first time since 1973, a President suggested that a *possibility* existed that there could still be live American POWs held in Southeast Asia.

It should be noted that after the French defeat by Vietnam in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, 13 live, French POWs were returned unexpectedly over 16 years after the war ended. Since 1954, French authorities and citizens have been literally "buying back" the remains of their dead. Reportedly \$50,000 was paid for one set of bones as late as March 1981 (Hunter, 1982). (We hear little about the French experience in Vietnam because their humiliation was so great that the French government prohibited any publications on the matter for fifty years!)

All these MIA children remember the unexpected release by Hanoi of United States Marine PFC Robert Garwood in 1979, after 14 years in captivity (for an account of Garwood's controversial return, see Hunter, 1983a). They may also remember the return, after 19 years, of Richard Fecteau, when he was unexpectedly released by the Chinese Communists. He had been shot down with Gary Powers in the infamous U-2 incident, and no one back home suspected that he had survived. Finally, there is the more recent escape from North Korea of a South Korean prisoner after 43 long years! *History shows that no Communist nation has ever released all known living POWs at the end of hostilities.* This knowledge gives hope to Vietnam-era MIA and BNR families that perhaps a few American men may yet return after these many years.

After years of denial, when the admission was finally made by top U.S. government officials that some men might indeed be still held captive in Southeast Asia, the hopes and frustrations of MIA family members immediately increased, especially for the children and brothers and sisters, who were now ready to "take the flag" from their mothers and grandparents, and carry the issue toward full resolution.

Many of these MIA "children" had been included in a 7-year longitudinal study of POW/MIA families carried out at the Center for Prisoner of War Studies from 1971 to 1978. At the time of the project's inception, it was not known which of the fathers were actually prisoners and which were missing, since Hanoi had furnished no lists of men held, and some men had not written letters home. Thus, *all* Army, Navy, and Marine Corps POW/MIA families were included in the prehomecoming personal interviews conducted by the Center's professional staff.

THE CENTER FOR PRISONER OF WAR STUDIES

By 1970, it appeared that the war in Vietnam was winding down. Prior to the release, the number of men held captive was thought to be in excess of 600. Over 2,500 were listed as MIA, since there was no evidence that they had been taken captive. Homecoming plans began, and the Naval Health Research Center, San Diego (the Navy's primary research organization

studying stressful environments), was provided funding to set up a Center for Prisoner of War Studies (CPWS; Hunter, 1986b).

Research under the Umbrella of Preventive Medicine

The research studies at the Center for Prisoner of War Studies were set up under the umbrella of preventive medicine. The logic was that if the families were doing well during captivity, and if the men were given good medical attention at the time of Operation Homecoming and counseling was provided for both the men and their families subsequent to that period, perhaps there would be fewer long-term problems for this group of ex-POWs than had been found for former POWs after World War II and Korea. Those former captives had received minimal assistance (Beebe, 1975; Schein, 1957). At the time the Center was set up, it was not known whether the POWs would be released in 2 months, 6 months, a year, or ever. However, subsequent to homecoming, the research plan called for monitoring the physical, psychological, social, and family adjustments of Army, Navy, and Marine Corps returnees for a 5-year period after their return, whenever that event might occur. The MIA families were no longer followed by CPWS after the return of the men in the early spring of 1973; families of returned POWs were followed until 1978.

The Center was disestablished in 1978, although the medical follow-up of the returned Navy POWs has continued at the Navy Aerospace Medical Institute in Pensacola, Florida, since that time. The Center was jointly funded by the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery and the Office of the Army Surgeon General, and included all Army, Navy, and Marine Corps POWs/MIAs. Although the Air Force also examined its returned POWs medically at the time of homecoming, participation was voluntary in subsequent years, and the decision made by Air Force operational planners prior to the men's release was *not* to include families in their research planning.

Planning for Homecoming

Why did the Center include families as part of its planning? The families were viewed as both potential *stress producers* and *stress alleviators* for the returning POWs. The rationale was that if the families were functioning well at the time of release, they were more likely to be stress alleviators, rather than stress producers. In 1972, professional CPWS staff traveled throughout the United States, to Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Europe with the goal of interviewing *all* parents of POW/MIAs who were dependent financially upon their missing/captured sons, the men's wives, and their children. The goal was to discover the extent of family adjustments that might be necessary when homecoming arrived. Over half the families of all married Army, Navy, and Marine Corps POW/MIAs had been interviewed when word came in January 1973, that release was imminent. At that point in time, all interviewing ceased until after the men came home.

As mentioned earlier, at the time of the initial interviews, many families did not know whether their sons—husbands—fathers were dead or held captive. At homecoming, over 2,500 men did not return, and many of those families have yet to resolve their state of prolonged, ambiguous grieving. Today, 2,205 Americans are still missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. Their parents (those few who are still alive), their brothers and sisters, their children, and now their grandchildren (whom they have never seen) still seek resolution. *Resolution* has been defined by the National League of Families as the return of all live prisoners, the fullest possible accounting for those still missing, and repatriation of all recoverable remains (National League of Families, 1995).

RESEARCH ON CHILDREN OF THE MISSING

From a research perspective, the Vietnam War provided a unique opportunity to study the effects of prolonged wartime parental absence upon children, one that could never have been duplicated in a laboratory setting (Hunter, 1986a, 1988; Hunter-King, 1993). Initial studies of the CPWS examined POW/MIA children together as one group. Data collected during the fathers' absence indicated that the impact of wartime father absence on children was determined to a large extent by three major factors, all relating to the mothers' adjustments: (1) the mothers' attitudes toward the separation; (2) the mothers' satisfaction with their marriages prior to the separation; and (3) the mothers' abilities to cope satisfactorily with the separation period (Hunter & Nice, 1978; McCubbin, Hunter, & Metres, 1974). Thus, the mother's role appeared very important in predicting how children would cope at that point in time.

The Center's follow-up data, obtained 5 years after the release (Nice, McDonald, & McMillian, 1981), dealt only with children of returned POWs. Although the study by Nice and colleagues may shed light on what type of military family is best able to cope with *any highly stressful situation*, their conclusions are perhaps misleading if one attempts to use them to delineate long-term effects of MIA parental absence, which has been not only prolonged but also highly ambiguous (Hunter-King, 1993).

LATER ADJUSTMENT OF CHILDREN OF VIETNAM-ERA MIAs

In 1988, the 1988 Survey of Vietnam-Era MIA Children (Hunter-King, 1993) was mailed to all children of MIAs/BNRs who were currently members of the National League of Families. The survey was designed to examine various areas of functioning, such as emotional/psychological adjustment, occupational adjustment, friendships, family relationships, and members' relationships with their own children. Participants in the study were also asked to provide comments on (1) the most difficult aspects of their MIA experience, (2) whether there had been any specific advantages because of their MIA status, (3) what current problems/issues they were dealing with that might be directly related to being the child of an MIA father, and (4) what advice they might give to children who suddenly found themselves in a similar situation. Not all Vietnam-era MIA children are members of the National League. Therefore, results from the survey may not precisely reflect attitudes of the total population of MIA children. Nonetheless, information obtained from the 1988 study provided a better understanding of how these children had coped with the situation than was available heretofore.

MIA Children in 1988

A review of the findings from the 1988 study showed that of those, now adult, children who completed the survey, over half (50.6%) were daughters and half (49.4%) were sons. Almost two-thirds of the participants were married, and over 40% now had children of their own. Almost three-fourths were children of Air Force personnel whose fathers, in most cases, first became listed as missing between the years 1964–1967. At the time of the fathers' casualties, their children ranged in age from less than 1 year to 20 years of age. By 1988, slightly over half (51.2%) the mothers of these children had not remarried. Data also indicated that those children whose mothers had not remarried were less likely themselves to have married.

Although the majority of the mothers had been active in the National League of Families since its founding in 1969, most of the children had only recently become active. Also, if moth-

ers had *never* been active in League activities, their children were *more* likely to rate relationships with their own children as having been more affected by the MIA experience. As for the various areas of personal functioning that these young adults believed were affected by having been children of MIAs, they rated emotional/psychological adjustment as most affected, followed by family relationships, occupational adjustment, and marital relationships. According to their ratings, friendships had been affected least (Hunter-King, 1993). Unfortunately, from the manner in which the questions on the survey were asked, it was impossible to determine whether these effects were in a positive or negative direction.

Long-Term Effects on MIA Children

From the 1988 study, there appeared to be long-term effects on children whose fathers became missing during the war in Southeast Asia. Some effects were perceived as having had a negative impact on their lives, whereas others were viewed as having had a positive influence.

Negative Effects. By far, the most difficult problem, and one with which all participants still struggled, was the prolonged and ambiguous nature of the loss and their inability over many years to achieve any enduring sense of resolution. Examples of the children's feelings were expressed as follows:

My father never came home! I'm always waiting for Daddy. . . . I resent him for leaving me—yet I'm so proud of him. I've gone on with my life, but every day I wonder about him. Every success, every accomplishment makes me realize how much I miss his not being here. No matter how much we know that Dad is gone, we're still waiting for him to come home. (Daughter of an MIA, 1988)

[The most difficult aspect] is the unrequited grief. From time to time I have to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness. [One must] recognize the inevitable roller coaster between despair and frustration and hope. There will always be hope. I wish my Dad could see his grandchildren. (Son of an MIA, 1988).

Several children believed having an MIA father resulted in long-term effects on their own attitudes toward close relationships, including marriage, especially for daughters. It was as if they hesitated to make deep emotional commitments for fear that they would again experience loss or abandonment. Some of these young women reported that they had developed a fierce sense of independence over the years to ward off any possibility of becoming dependent upon a husband who might suddenly disappear. A selection of comments illustrates how these young adults believed the MIA experience had produced long-term effects on close relationships:

I've developed an overfatalistic attitude toward life and sometimes have trouble becoming close to people, perhaps for fear they will disappear and not return.

Each in our own way (my brothers, sisters, and I) have had difficulties in romantic relationships.

I have an irrational fear of my spouse dying at an early age—a fear of ending up a single mother.

I put off having children for 11 years because I wanted to make sure I had a career, should anything happen to my own husband.

[My mother and other relatives] put [my Dad] on a pedestal. By the time you're grown, no mate (or you) can ever compare to the "God" they've become!

Each one of us [four children] had different reactions and have suffered in various ways. My only brother, who was 3 years old at the time my father was shot down, is still struggling with who his father was, what was he like, etc. (MIA daughters' comments, 1988)

Sons of the missing have reported effects that often differed from those reported by daughters. Eldest sons, especially, found the responsibilities heaped upon them when their fathers disappeared overwhelming at times. Lacking a father to whom they could go for advice and counsel, and look to as a role model of husband and father, was particularly problematic. Matriarchal families were also viewed as a very difficult issue for those sons who lacked an extended family that included uncles and grandfathers. Perhaps a few comments from these grown sons can better illustrate their particular concerns:

The most difficult problem was the self-imposed responsibility of being the "man of the family."

There are hardly any males on either side of my family. I'm the only son. The hardest part for me was the lack of older male companionship. Neighbors were always promising fishing trips, hunting trips, ballgames, etc., which never seemed to materialize. Being at the door with fishing pole in hand ready to go and not having them show up really hurt.

I have been raised in a fourth-generation female-run household. I was constantly surrounded by women—sisters, mother, her friends, my sisters' girlfriends, etc.

I have had some problems dealing with the role of father. I think I have idealized my own father to the extent that it has been hard to live up to that image. (MIA sons' comments, 1988).

For a small segment (probably less than 10%) of these adult children of MIAs, over the years, there was a growing mistrust of the government (A. M. Griffiths, April 25, 1995, personal communication). A few reported viewing the Vietnam War as a "farce" and said they are still bitter toward the fathers who "deserted them and never returned." According to some of their comments made in 1988, they were certain that the North Vietnamese lied, their own Government had lied, and they did not even trust the National League of Families, as they believe "its leadership is in bed with the government." As one embittered daughter strongly advised,

Identify these officials who want to kill your father (through indifference). Remember who the real enemy is. In Vietnam, President Carter and Henry Kissinger were as responsible for the deaths of unreturned POW/MIAs as any Vietnamese. Don't trust anyone! (Daughter of MIA, 1988)

Positive Effects. Were there any benefits or advantages perceived by these young adults specifically derived from being children of missing fathers? Many of these young adults reported that there indeed were. The most frequently mentioned advantage was that their MIA family status had afforded them the financial means to obtain a college education. Most added the caveat, however, that such financial aid in no way compensated for the loss of their fathers during their formative years.

A second advantage mentioned by the majority of the adult children surveyed in 1988 was the development of closer relationships with their mothers and siblings than might otherwise have been the case. Also, they felt they had stronger appreciation of the value of life and had developed a more mature outlook on life in general than others who had not been in their situation. Two examples reflect on this family closeness and the mature "worldview" that evolved for many of these children from the MIA experience:

An experience like this really brings a family together. An inseparable bond is formed. [We] learned to depend on each other for strengths—support in ways I have not experienced in other families. Today we are still as close. (Daughter of an MIA, 1988)

[When in this situation] you must try not to feel guilty if you are happy or joyful. . . . Such guilt is inevitable, yet it must be channeled into positive action, not self-inflicted punishment. [Being the child of an MIA] you will develop a sense of eternal hopefulness in all things [and] you will be burdened with a sense of loss at all acts of thoughtlessness and hatred. You will eventually see the joy in living and the meaning of how much freedom costs. . . . Others will look to you for direction and understanding. . . . I have learned from this ordeal that, while I still feel [there is] a certain romance in war and combat, any type of conflict (war, terrorism, etc.) is brutal and unmerciful. (Son of an MIA, 1988)

In other words, the positive results of having coped with the missing father were the greater maturity and greater personal strengths that these children believed they had attained over the years, compared with their peers. Many reported that the experience made them emotionally stronger individuals. They believed they had reached a higher level of maturity earlier in life. Coping with the loss had also resulted in their being more realistic, determined in their actions, and highly independent. They had learned to face problems head-on with the attitude “If I could cope with Dad’s loss, I should be able to handle other difficult situations in life.” Philosophically, one MIA adult “child” commented,

It is ironic that the most painful event in my life has also brought about the most changes of a positive nature. I have learned to value and appreciate relationships and life itself, for it can be so very short. I have pondered the existential questions of life at any early age, and in so doing, it has enriched me with wisdom to help me through life’s ups and downs. I have learned the importance of being honest with myself and others, for my life may be short and I may not have a second chance to make things right. [Nonetheless] it is difficult at times to live with unanswered questions. Some questions may never be answered. (Adult daughter of an MIA serviceman, 1988)

Recognition of the Need for Support Systems

Over the years, these children experienced varying degrees of difficulty as they sought answers that could perhaps bring final resolution to a situation that seemed to have no end. When interviewed in 1988, many of these young adults talked about how important seeking support from others had been. Some found help within their own families or extended families. Others went outside to teachers, friends, or therapists. Many found the strengths they needed to cope with their loss through working with POW/MIA organizations in their attempts to bring public attention to the issue and prompt more effective governmental actions to determine the fate of the missing men. When asked what advice could be given to other children who might find themselves in a similar situation, these young adults offered a variety of suggestions, many of which advocated requesting assistance:

Tell *somebody*—a teacher, a relative, a friend. . . . Don’t “shut down” your emotions to cope with the loss. Get it out or you’ll spend the rest of your life fighting to share feelings, instinctively “swallowing” your feelings. . . . Admit your anger or you’ll never be able to forgive. Don’t withdraw. . . . Stay involved, or you’ll always feel like you’re on the outside looking in.

I feel very strongly that the entire family should get into counseling as soon as possible to be taught how to deal with what sometimes seems like an unbearable, unending situation. If your family won’t do this as a whole, visit a therapist yourself.

Make sure the surviving parent gets counseling of some sort. We were emotionally abused by our mother because she could not cope with the enormity of the situation. She eventually sought help after we all left home.

Don't give up your own childhood to take care of the surviving parent!

The Importance of Mothers in Children's Coping

Throughout the 25 years I have worked with children of MIAs, the role of the mother in the children's coping with the loss of their fathers has appeared to be the most critical factor in determining effective coping. Her importance was evident when POW/MIA families were first interviewed by the staff of CPWS in 1972, prior to the release of POWs (Hunter & Nice, 1978; McCubbin, Dahl, & Hunter 1976; McCubbin *et al.*, 1974), and it was even more apparent in later, follow-up studies (Hunter, 1983b, 1988; Hunter-King, 1993).

While preparing this chapter, I discussed the critical role mothers had played in their children's ability to cope with prolonged and ambiguous grieving with the Executive Director of the National League of Families (she is also the sister of an MIA serviceman), an individual who has probably been more closely involved with the MIA issue than any other person (A. M. Griffiths, April 25, 1995, personal communication). Many of her comments corroborated my own opinions, which are based upon 25 years of research, and added depth to some of those findings. In our discussions, an attempt was made to clarify why a small group of these "children" have grown extremely distrustful over the years—almost to the point of irrationality—in dealing with any attempt to resolve the MIA issue. The majority of the grown children of the missing, although still harboring unanswered questions and repeated frustrations, have become mature, caring adults, who surprisingly perceive that a variety of actual benefits have accrued from their tragedy. One must ask, what makes the difference? Again, it appears to be the mothers whose attitudes and behaviors have set the stage for adequate functioning. Mothers made the difference.

[Of] those mothers who were open and talked with their children about their missing fathers and let them know who their fathers were, [it is their children who] are the more rational ones today. [Of the] mothers who ignored the situation, or asked quickly for a presumptive finding of death (but the kids always thought the father was dead or found out later the father had been declared dead without additional information obtained by the government), their children are those who now have a more unrealistic or less objective approach. (Griffiths, April 25, 1995, personal communication)

In other words, those children with whom their mothers did not share information from the very beginning, children who never knew the father because they were very young, whose mothers themselves perhaps told the child, "Your father should never have been in Vietnam in the first place," those are the young adults who today have adopted an extreme antigovernment stance. In commenting on the importance of mothers in the coping process, one mature MIA son recently stated that he believed that those mothers who were "typical" military wives were more likely to have reared well-adjusted children, since those mothers were more involved and experienced within the military culture, and were affiliated with other military families who understood their problems. He also believed that MIA families "who immediately retreated back into the civilian world had a more difficult time" (M. L. Stephensen, May 30, 1995, personal communication).

Grandparents have also been very important in the coping equation for MIA children. If mothers stayed in touch with the paternal grandparents over the years, the children appeared to

have been raised in a much warmer, more supportive situation (A. M. Griffiths, April 25, 1995, personal communication).

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA IN MIA CHILDREN

As is apparent from the previous discussion, parents, wives, and children of American servicemen declared missing in Southeast Asia experienced personal traumata that have been both prolonged and ambiguous. That war was the longest conflict in U.S. history, extending from 1964 until 1973, when American troops hastily pulled out in defeat. During that 9-year period, wives of MIAs did not know whether they were wives or widows; MIA wives continued to wonder after the war ended. Shortly after the release of the POWs in 1973, one MIA wife related a dream she had. She was going about her job as usual, but in the backseat of her station wagon was the body of her missing husband. She went about her tasks as if there were absolutely nothing unusual about having her husband's body in there, remarking, "That's precisely the way it is. I'm *sure* my husband is dead, and yet I can't bury him. He's always with me wherever I go" (Hunter, 1982). MIA mothers and their children have ridden an emotional roller coaster month after month, year after year, for almost three decades; their husbands and fathers still ride in the backseats.

Transmission of Trauma from Mothers to Children

Because of the U.S. government's secrecy surrounding the war in Vietnam in the early years (prior to 1969), some mothers did not share with their in-laws or their own children the fact that their husbands were missing. After 3 or 4 years in "limbo," some wives did not want to deal any longer with an issue they felt powerless to resolve. They could no longer "mark time in place." Some of the wives formed new relationships and went forward with their lives, despite the fact there was no legal way to file for divorce from a "missing" husband. Some children did not learn until they were older that the man they thought was their father was not. In-laws sometimes found that they could not forgive women who "abandoned their sons" and/or chose not to participate in efforts to resolve the fate of their sons because they could not handle the situation emotionally. Thus, some children lost not only their fathers, but also access to paternal grandparents.

Many children were too young when their fathers became missing to retain any memories of them. In recent years, these children have persistently sought information about the fathers they never knew. Some became active in the National League of Families only recently, adopting the attitude: "I cannot abandon my father as my mother and the government have done." On the other hand, for some children, their mothers were so totally immersed in POW/MIA activities outside the home that it was almost as if they had lost *both* parents. Older children who knew their fathers, but whose mothers did not include them in their efforts to get answers from the government about their fathers' status, also tended to feel abandoned. A similar situation existed for brothers and sisters of MIAs, whose mothers spent every waking moment dealing with issues and activities concerning their missing sons, resulting in perceived neglect by some of these siblings. A teenage son, the brother of an MIA, once emotionally commented during a group session: "I guess I'll have to commit suicide before my mother will pay some attention to me, instead of thinking about my missing brother all the time!"

MIA Children and Children of Holocaust Survivors

It is exceedingly difficult to compare such two very different experiences as the children of World War II Holocaust survivors and the children of military men still missing in action following the Vietnam War. Unlike the Holocaust, mothers of MIA children were not suddenly uprooted from their homes and deprived of their possessions, countries, and cultures. They did not lose parents, siblings, and husbands to programmed incineration. They were not subjected to incarceration, underfed, and abused, as were Holocaust victims. Of course, we do not know what tortures the missing fathers faced, and we may never know.

On the other hand, most children of Holocaust survivors have not waited for over a quarter of a century in a state of ambiguous grieving, wondering whether their parent is dead or alive, as children of MIAs have done. Both groups, however, have perceived the *conspiracy of silence* between survivors and society, and between survivors and their children, categorized by Danieli (1988a, 1988b) as the most pervasive consequence of the Holocaust experience. For children of MIAs, this conspiracy of silence was between the U.S. government and the families in the early war years, and between mothers and children in instances in which the mothers “closed out” the missing men’s role within the family in order to cope with their absence.

In 1973, at the time of homecoming of the POWs released by Hanoi, MIA families were eager to speak with them to see what they knew of the fate of their missing men. Here, again, MIA family members were sometimes met with “silence.” Although some returnees felt they “owed a debt” to these MIA families and tried to help them, others avoided them and were reluctant to talk with them. Analogous to individuals who dealt with Holocaust survivors, for some returned Vietnam-era POWs, there was a degree of *survivor guilt*. They felt that those men who did not return were the real heroes, not them. In more recent times, pressure for silence from these MIA families has come from some individuals, both within government and in the civilian community, who want to put Vietnam behind them and/or to open up full diplomatic recognition of the former “enemy” for economic gain. The continuing politicizing of the MIA issue augments and prolongs the plight of these families.

Is There a “Child-of-Survivor Syndrome”?

For both groups (children of MIAs and children of Holocaust survivors), no single “child-of-survivor syndrome” has been delineated. For Vietnam-era MIA children, research has shown that much was determined by whether children remembered their fathers, their ages at the time of casualty, their sex, whether support was available from an extended family, and, most importantly, by their mothers’ openness with them. I agree with Yael Danieli, who pointed to the *heterogeneity* of responses to the Holocaust legacy, and who suggested that there was a “need to match appropriate intervention to particular forms of reaction if optimal therapeutic or preventive benefits are to be obtained” (Danieli, 1988a, p. 236). As one adult child of a missing Vietnam-era father stated in a 1988 interview,

[I think you will find that] children of MIAs haven’t coped much differently than other children with one deceased parent. They just go on with their lives. They cry over their loss, they feel proud of their dads. They feel bitter about the lies and about the abandonment of the dads. But they go on and live normal lives. The one difference you will find is that no matter how much we know that Dad is gone, we’re still waiting for him to come home.

CONCLUSION

It becomes readily apparent in talking with the children of servicemen who have been missing in Southeast Asia for over a quarter of a century, that, for most of these MIA adult children, *unless they are convinced that the fullest possible accounting has been made, and/or unless the fathers' remains are located, adequately identified, and returned to the family*, their prolonged, ambiguous grieving will continue indefinitely. For some "children," there will never be a final resolution of their loss, and this lack of resolution could result in intergenerational effects on the grandchildren of the missing men. For some families of MIAs, closer marital and family relationships developed, because nuclear relationships became more valued after the loss of the fathers. For other families, there was diminished closeness because the families, immediately after the loss, turned their emotions inward to insulate themselves against further loss and pain.

Research has shown that the response of the wives of the missing men appeared to be the key variable in predicting the degree and direction of intergenerational effects in their children. Research also suggests that immediate support from friends, extended family, and governmental agencies played a critical role in the wives' abilities to cope with the MIA experience. Thus, we must recognize that *adequate support for these families, immediately subsequent to their loss, could play a preventive role in the intergenerational transmission of the effects of prolonged, ambiguous trauma.*

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