LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF PARENTAL WARTIME CAPTIVITY ON CHILDREN: Children of POW and MIA Servicemen

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ABSTRACT: The question asked by this study was: Are there possible second-generational effects, not only for children of prisoners of war and hostages, but also for children of parents who were/are missing in action? This report, reviewing the literature on prolonged parental wartime captivity in relation to long-term effects on children, with a specific focus on the Center for POW Studies of Vietnam era families, illustrates the strong relationship between mothers' and children's abilities to cope with their highly stressful and ambiguous situation.

Vietnam... Nothing ever again in their lives would ever touch them as Vietnam had touched them. The loneliness, the fear, the terrible price it extracted, and triumph, what they had salvaged, would be there always, and in their sons.

(Blakey, 1978)

INTRODUCTION

In reviewing the literature on the long-term effects on children caused by wartime parental loss or absence, 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 in action (KIA), taken prisoner of war (POW), or classified as missing in action (MIA).

Where the POW father returned, one must also consider...
whether the family remained together in the years after the war ended. Among MIA families, one must consider whether or not the mothers were eventually able to accept the possibility the MIA husband was indeed dead, then remarry and go forward with a new life. Or, whether she and her children continue to hope the husband is still alive in Southeast Asia. Some do so, even today—15 to 24 years after the men disappeared into the jungles. Families continuing in such a state of ambiguous unresolved grief are figuratively “stuck in time” and unable to go forward. Each of these various types of father loss or absence could be expected to produce differing long-term effects upon the children.

FATHER ABSENCE: THE IMPACT

Routine Military Absence

To be in the military equates with family separation. Intermittent prolonged father absence is a predictable aspect of the military lifestyle. Research shows it is “normal” for children to show emotional reactions such as anxiety, anger, sadness, resentment, and fear when fathers depart, even where the separation is anticipated by the family (Hillenbrand, 1976; Pierce, 1978; Rosenfeld, Rosenstein, & Raab, 1973).

When father absence occurs and there is already underlying psychopathology or family relationship problems, children's reactions can be self-limiting and counterproductive. For example, the literature indicates children may show aggression, introversion, internalization of affect, helplessness, defensiveness, and impulsivity, all of which create strained relationships with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and other adults (Gabower, 1960; Gonzales, 1970; Hill, 1945; 1949; Kurlander, Leukel, Palevsky, & Kohn, 1961; Spjut & Studer, 1975; Stolz, 1952; 1954).

Age of the child, his or her sex, and the level of individual and family functioning prior to the family disruption also influence the response of the child to fathers' absence. Moreover, the manner in which the mother responds to her husband's absence determines to a great extent how the child responds. Compared to the effects on children resulting from routine military father ab-