

Missionaries Recount Suffering They Experienced in Captivity

By Sandie Chandler

National Courier Correspondent



AUTOGRAPH HAMMOCK—Dr. and Mrs. Richard Phillips look at the hammock that was used by members of her family when they were held captive by the Communist government of South Vietnam. Mrs. Phil-

lips had other prisoners sign it and she plans to embroider each signature. (National Courier Photo by Sandie Chandler)

YUCAIPA, Calif. — The joy of freedom after being held captive in Vietnam for seven and a half months overshadowed the indignities and suffering endured by seven American missionaries. But after the euphoria of being released in Bangkok on Oct. 30 wore off, they began to tell the story of their harrowing experiences.

Earlier statements made by the 14 civilians released had been that conditions in Communist prison camps had been relatively good. But on Nov. 2 Betty Mitchell, wife of Archie Mitchell, missing in Vietnam since 1962, collapsed with a recurrence of malaria. This provoked the telling of experiences momentarily forgotten by the missionaries.

Dr. Louis King, head of the division of overseas ministries for the Christian and Missionary Alliance—the agency sponsoring five of the missionaries—said that the missionaries did not tell about the gruelling suffering earlier because of the apparent excitement of returning home.

Their release came as a presumed gesture of friendship and willingness for dialogue from Hanoi, U.S. authorities said.

Dr. King said that for much of their imprisonment the missionaries were kept "under utterly uncivilized, primitive and bare survival conditions . . . strange and contrary to international law."

Dr. Richard Phillips, 45, and his wife, Lillian, 44, of Bloomington, Minn., were C.M.A. missionaries doing linguistic work with the Mnong tribe in South Vietnam prior to their capture on March 12, 1975.

Dr. King and the Phillipses talked to the National Courier correspondent and other members of the press here at the home of John Amstutz, Mrs. Phillips' brother.

After the nine Americans and five foreigners were captured, the Communists issued them each a purple-striped uniform, one towel, a plastic bowl, a hammock to spread on the ground, and one mosquito net for every two persons. The group lived with South Vietnamese prisoners of war in five different camps, according to

completed by Dr. King.

One journey on foot, at night, required them to pass through "impenetrable darkness through thorn bushes and other jungle growth that tore their clothes and hair," Dr. King said.

Mrs. Phillips told how she screamed, "Help me! Help me!" as large hissing black ants bit the missionaries.

Six-year-old Luanne Miller, who was captured with her parents, John and Carolyn Miller, lost a sandal in the jungle. When it was found it had partially been consumed by the ants.

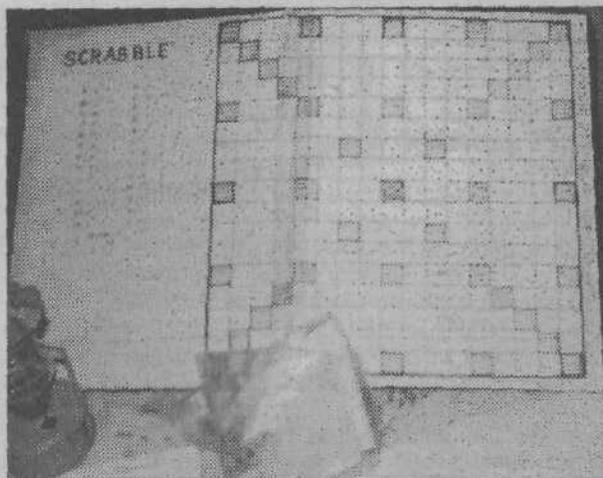
Continual Interrogations

At the first camp, where they were held for 33 days, one latrine with three holes was used by 1,000 prisoners. Later, it was "mercifully enlarged to 18 holes," the missionaries said.

As their confinement progressed from days to months, the captives were faced with continual interrogations relating to why they were there and what they were doing. They were often pressured for the names of other Christians in Vietnam.

"These interrogations were some of the most difficult times," said Mrs. Phillips.

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HOMEMADE SCRABBLE —To help pass the time during their confinement in South Vietnam, the Phillips family constructed a homemade game of scrabble. The fish, drawn into the center of the board, was to help remind them of the persecution early Christians suffered. (National Courier Photo by Sandie Chandler)

Report of Missionaries

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She was torn between loyalty to her fellow Christians (would her revealing names condemn them?) and a fight for her own life and eventual freedom, she related.

After finally giving the names of others—as well as sharing her faith—Mrs. Phillips went to Betty Mitchell with her guilt and fears and was refreshed when Betty quoted I Peter 3:15—“quietly trust yourself to Christ your Lord and if anybody asks why you believe as you do, be ready to tell him, and do it in a gentle and respectful way.”

The women missionaries had no privacy for three months, until they were transferred to Thanh Binh, where they were placed with their own group. Previously they had been made to share unpartitioned quarters with captured South Vietnamese soldiers—all men.

Their health went downhill with a meager diet of rice and salt water twice a day. They later were given a half teaspoon of meat every other day.

When the rains came, the ground on which they slept was continually wet. Eight of the party contracted malaria at least once. At one point, missionary Norman Johnston and the six-year-old girl nearly died.

Mrs. Phillips suffered from three boils, an eye infection and two cases of malaria. Her captors carried her by hammock five miles to a thatched-roof clinic where she received “good food,” 160 injections of penicillin and other drugs during 46 days of confinement.

Sickness Remembered

“I was very afraid,” said Mrs. Phillips, “but I felt God saying, ‘the work I have begun in you I will complete through your captors.’”

The most difficult part of the capture was “the uncertainty of it all and no word about our children, added Mrs. Phillips.

Dr. Phillips declared that “times of sickness were the worst.” He said he felt “there was no way out unless we were to be released. But, we never gave up!” he added.

The missionaries felt the support of God’s Spirit as they endured the months of prison life, they said afterwards.

Mrs. Phillips designed a butterfly net out of the mosquito covering and caught butterflies to bring to their four children staying in Yucaipa. This became therapy for her, and other prisoners—even some prison guards joined her.

She also fashioned a small doll out of yarn for Luanne, the six-year-old, and made a game of Sorry and a game of Scrabble.

Instead of placing a star in the center of the Scrabble board, she drew a fish “as a constant reminder of the life of the early Christians,” she said.

The Phillipses said they were allowed to read their Bibles, although they were periodically taken away for inspection. The missionaries worshipped every Sunday but were often advised to “sing more softly.” They had no hymnbooks, but they fashioned some chorus books containing songs they knew by heart.

Their last move came on Aug. 20, when they were transported by truck to Son Tay Camp, 25 miles west of Hanoi. Canvas flaps were tied down and bus windows covered for the entire ride and they were only allowed out of the vehicles at night. When they walked through villages some who noticed them cried out: “The Americans are back, the Americans are back!”

Upon arrival at Son Tay, they were told they were not prisoners but under “house arrest.” Each couple was given their first private room.

At this camp, the attitude seemed to change, the missionaries noted. They were free to move about, doing little work. Food was good. For the first time, they had real tea, coffee, candy, and cake. They were given three changes of civilian clothes and two sightseeing trips to Hanoi, where they visited curio shops and museums.

Silver Anniversary Observed

A spirit of gaiety surrounded the group at Son Tay when the missionaries told the Communists that Oct. 8 was the Phillipses 25th anniversary.

With advice from the captives, the Communists put on a party, giving Mrs. Phillips a bouquet and serving cookies, candy, and coffee. Mrs. Phillips said that to her the greatest gift was the return of some drawings she had made for her husband as an anniversary gift, but which had been confiscated.

With the exception of intense interrogation at Son Tay, they were treated as guests—but a request to see the largest Protestant church in Hanoi and to meet its pastor was abruptly refused. No reason was given.

Asked what her most fearful moment of capture had been, Mrs. Phillips responded unhesitatingly: “I must admit I feared for my life when we were ordered to come

out with our hands up when we were first captured at Ban Me Thout.”

Within days after their release, all of the missionaries had arranged to be reunited with loved ones.

Mrs. Betty Mitchell had arranged to visit a son in Malaysia after she had sufficiently recovered from malaria in Bangkok.

Norman Johnstons, 45, and his wife, Joan, 44, also C.M.A. missionaries, planned to visit relatives at their homes in Ontario, Can.

The Phillipses were asked about their plans for the future, they said:

“We will rest for awhile and then return to a new assignment.”

Procession For Return Of Millers

By Florence Bulle

National Courier Correspondent

HOUGHTON, N.Y. — The initial reunion with their immediate families had taken place for John and Carolyn Miller when their plane put down at Buffalo, N.Y. The larger Houghton family waited at the runway—off of Genesee Street at Route 19 on the main street of the small town of Houghton in western New York.

They had waited more than an hour when suddenly out of the darkness the long caravan of lights appeared. The Houghton Fire Department pulled the long snorkeled, siren-sounding truck into the lead. Church bells rang, Houghton College students held lighted torches high.

Carolyn was smiling and waving out the window of the lead car. The crowd broke into applause. Students carrying a sign stepped in ahead of the white station wagon. On one side of the sign—“Welcome home.” On the other—“To God be the Glory.”

The torch-lit procession wound past the campus to the home of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Paine, where hundreds more were gathered. They broke into song: “To God be the glory, great things he has done.”

Carolyn’s father, Dr. Stephen Paine, was president of Houghton College for 26 years. Carolyn grew up at Houghton and both she and John graduated from that institution. Carolyn was a Wycliffe missionary sponsored by the Student Foreign Mission Fellowship. After seven months of being held captive by the
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