

Conversation
with
Mrs. Michael (Mary) Hoff

2723 River Oak Drive
Orange Park, Florida

December 29, 2012



Recorded by Cindy Cheatwood

Transcribed by Lyn Corley

CINDY-All right, today it is Saturday, December 29, 2012 and we are talking with Mrs. Mary Hoff, the wife of Michael Hoff, the instigator and designer of the POW/MIA flag. Thank you for talking with us today.

MARY-I'm glad to be here.

CINDY-Could you just tell us what brought you to Orange Park?

MARY-I had a friend that I had gone to school with in Michigan in Detroit, and she met this young man, he was a pastor and he, they started dating and he decided you know to make a life together.

CINDY-And that was here in Orange Park?

MARY-Yes. Well, he was over in Pensacola but after we were married we got orders to go down, but now before I met him I came to Florida with my parents. They settled in down in South Florida. But my friend said, "You have to come to Pensacola because that's where all the guys are."



12 September 1959
Wedding of Ens. Mike and Mrs.
Mary Hoff

CINDY-Oh, my goodness. Well, must have worked. So, then you were posted here at NAS JAX?

MARY-No, Cecil Field.

CINDY-Cecil Field, OK and that was 1959,'69?



Lt. Mike Hoff

MARY-Yes, I recollect it was the sixties. All of my kids were born in the sixties, there's five of them. Sixty, the last one was born here in the hospital and he was born in '70. It's easy to get confused after that many years.



1971-Joe, Suzanne, Bob, Mike, Charlie Hoff

CINDY-Yes, it is. So, we'd like to hear your story about the flag and how you got the idea and what happened from there.

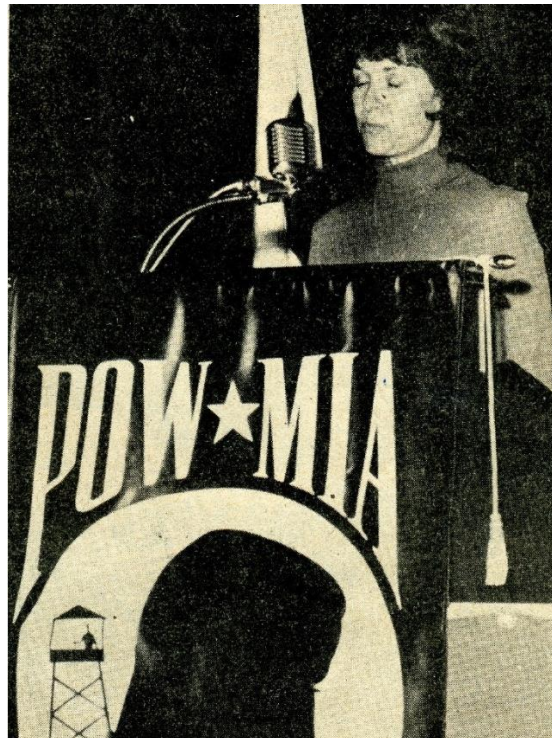
MARY-Oh, it was an exciting time. We were getting discouraged then our spirits were lifted, you know, with the hopes of getting something accomplished. When I read in the paper, I happened to read the little article about this woman who was sewing flags of this country that was going to...

CINDY-Join the U.N.?

MARY-The U.N., yes, and so anyway she, Norman Rivkees made comments about that. It was against their policy to make this flag for a country that was not actually an ally of ours and he wanted to express his concern that, you know, he didn't think this should be pursued like this. So, I wrote to him and I told him I just thought it was wonderful to read about somebody who isn't interested in the American dollar but was just pleased to do something for... So, he cooperated and he set his artist to work on it. I never received that flag. That was the only one that his staff had made and signed. It was an elderly gentleman in World War II and somebody said, "You can tell because he had, across the top is the, the significance of World War II, the, in World War II they had camps and they had the, these watch towers. That was in the flag and a couple of people noticed it but not too many of them because they didn't find towers in... enemies or whatever. But that didn't bother me.

So, anyway he sends me this and it's a banner. It's not a flag. I'm a product of World War II.

"Mrs. Mary Hoff fights back the tears as she thanks everyone for efforts in making the Vietnam War Memorial at Cecil Field a reality. In front of the podium is a banner she designed, which has become a universal symbol of the effort to remember those still missing in action and those held prisoner of war. Her husband is still listed as missing in action, five years after being shot down in Vietnam."



CINDY-How big a banner was it?

MARY-Quite big. It's at the Andersonville Museum. They came out here and they had brought in cardboard and boxes and tissue paper and they carefully, then they realized the box wasn't big enough, there was going to be a fold. So, they went out in the car or truck and got another one and made it like that.

CINDY- You know, I've seen it. I've been to Andersonville and I saw that display.

MARY-Did you really?

CINDY- I had no idea that had been here. How about that?

MARY-I hung it on the front door for years because it was the first one I got and I never got another one. I told him that was perfect. But, I said, "It's limited in its use. It wasn't going to have the exposure a flag would if it's a banner, you know I went around Jacksonville and donated it to different, the mayor, you know different people and so it was always in-doors and it wasn't, you know they didn't use it like the flag, constantly flying it.



Jacksonville, Florida

Mary Hoff presenting a MIA/POW

Banner to Mayor Hans Tanzler

and Lynwood Roberts

CINDY-Not a reminder on a daily basis.

MARY-Yeah, yeah. So, anyway I told them, as for me, "Don't do any more work" and then everybody except The National League of Families, they wanted it. They wanted the money that was being raised. But that wasn't the interest I had in mind so I said, "You know, no, it's not what I...this, well it went on for...a guy asked me about the financing part, where did I get the money to do this. No donations, I just packaged up the bracelets that we started out with the bracelets so then that came into play. But the flag, it was always in my mind to pursue that more than anything and it did, it went into financially, I don't know. I guess I, they sent me the flags, Annin and Company was the company that produced the flag.

CINDY-So was the League involved in distribution of those or anything?

MARY-They didn't do a thing and they tried, they must have searched every drawer in their offices in Washington looking for the, something that would prove that it was theirs and they never could.

CINDY-It never really was. So, your design, you were working with the agency, the Annin Agency with an artist that they found?

MARY-He worked for the company.

CINDY-He was a graphic designer for the company.

MARY-He was the only one that Norman Rivkees appointed to be the designer of it.

CINDY-Do you remember his name?

MARY-Norman Rivkees was the vice president of the company but the designer now he, he didn't want to be found. I have articles on him but he was asked to comment or interview on the subject and he said, "No, that's Mrs. Hoff's job. That's her flag." He said he didn't want anything.

I said, "What's the silhouette? Where did he get the silhouette design from?" He said it was his son. He was at boot camp and he had it drawn.

CINDY-How about that.

MARY-So, he put him on the flag.

CINDY-His son wasn't a POW or MIA?

MARY-No.

CINDY-Well, that's good. So, did you ever find out about your husband?

MARY-Yes, in '79 they had a lot of groups of people that they formed, they formed a team. It was like a team. They had medical officers and they had all different specialists that unearth and look for remains. So, they went out twice, years apart, looking. They were able to find young

men that were there when he was shot down. They, in other words, they went to his crash site. The North Vietnamese didn't even bother to go. They were in Laos when they were fighting.

So, anyway they brought back parts of his aircraft and now since then they've told me that I'm entitled to bury the parts being that there is no remains. They had, they didn't bury him. They just left him on the ground. You just don't do that because of this very wild countryside and there's animals and you just don't find them if you don't bury them.

CINDY-Especially so long afterwards.

MARY-Yeah, that's right. From '70 to '79.

CINDY-I know that was difficult but it did put some other families' minds at peace as well.

MARY-We formed a group of family members that were in that area and did the work of looking for them. They interviewed them, they, people that had some connection to it. They said, "Oh yeah, I saw him." What they saw was what it was like, they described, there was another pilot, another fellow, two pilots in two planes. He was going down on his fourth....to get this convoy of, that was traveling from one country to another at night on these....That was doing the same, he shouldn't have done. I don't know if it was a command or if they did it, but the other fellow and him dropped their ammunition and then they came back on their way, they...

CINDY-Were they shot down or did they have engine trouble?

MARY-Well, they always said to not go over the same area you've already made because they can sense that they were, you know, that was true so he, this is what they saw, the...he was like this and then they wanted to, I guess they were through with their bombing and so when the light comes on to say that you've lost your power. So, he immediately said he was going to eject. Well, then the plane went over and he couldn't bring it up and he went down in a bamboo thicket. So, he was mortally wounded and so his aircraft hit the ground over here and he hit the ground over here. So, they had pretty much an idea that was where he landed. No way could he have gotten...

CINDY-It was probably pretty fast.

MARY-Oh yeah.

CINDY-So, you had nine years of not knowing then they put the facts together for you?

MARY-They, it took nine years from the time they started searching for him and, but they carried him as MIA because they had nothing.

CINDY-No body.

MARY-Yeah, no one at all, they went back again for the second time. They decided that the land had been farmed and there was going to be no chance except the aircraft. They would get the aircraft parts then they can assume that he...

CINDY-Especially since nobody heard from him.

MARY-Yeah. So,

CINDY-So, in the process of trying to sort everything out you were working with The League and The League had other women in your situation and other people as well, I assume. Their goal was to bring awareness. So, what does that better than your flag?

MARY-Yeah, exactly.

CINDY-I can see why the sort of had they thought they had certain rights to it. So, it started out with an idea that became a banner that visited around for a while then wound up coming into the flag idea. So, when did the flag idea actually take?

MARY-It didn't take long.

CINDY-So, when they started the flag did they stop the bracelets?

MARY-No, no. The bracelets were coming out of California. It was something that people in California got wind of these, this was like an awareness type thing that they had done this in the Far East and they just picked it up and then they sent the bracelets with all the names on it.

CINDY-So, do you feel like there was political actions that took place because of the bracelets and the flag? Do you think that motivated Congress or anything?

MARY-Well, I don't think so. It seemed like they were, you know the families just went out on our own and the, they were trying to close us down you know as an organization doing this because they "Oh, you're upsetting all our plans you know." Nobody was coming home but they were you know not, I know we were probably at times put some of the people in Washington on their toes.

Well, like when they went to Paris, you know, that was, they were trying to negotiate there and when I went to Laos we went in, let's see what year was that now? We formed a group of about sixty people-mothers, sisters, fathers of those missing in that part. It was a difficult thing but I think we helped.

There were two, I think family members who recognized, the Laotian people, we would bring the pictures. I asked them to look at them and if you had seen them because this was in Laos. But, it was not dangerous or anything like that, it was just somebody eager to help knowing what our young men did, you know to find some information on them. So, that, we went into Laos. There was actually no fighting going on but there were family members who dearly, we went that far, you know, and when you can't bring them home, you know. But, it was worth it to do it.

CINDY-Out of the sixty, nothing else was gained individually from anybody?

MARY-No, except remains.

CINDY-They did find some remains.

MARY-Yeah, they still, we get a list of say coming up in this period they have found enough that now after, from '79 until now, you know, that's a difficult country to, it's...

CINDY-It's jungle.

MARY-Yeah, and you know it's like anything, your remains don't last forever.

CINDY-So, you made peace with that?

MARY-Yeah, you have to.

CINDY-Well, and the articles on the flag say some very admirable things. It flies over the capital and on special occasions at all the major governmental bodies. So, have you ever been asked to attend any of those?

MARY-Oh yeah, we had, every year we had like a meeting of family members and we were there for a long week-end and not only that but then there is so many people that have approached me about coming to their functions. They also have functions for the...but with my health now I just can't do that. The fellows on the motorcycles you know, they just supported us and we just are so delighted to have them.

CINDY-The American Legion Riders.

MARY-Yes.

CINDY-Rolling Thunder.

MARY-Rolling Thunder. Then they invited me out here one year when they were having the celebration they asked us, so since it was here in Orange Park I had my sons come with me. I have four boys and a girl and they enjoyed seeing because they were just all toddlers you know, they were all born in the '60's.

CINDY-Well, the story definitely, you say you started with reading something in the paper, the Jacksonville paper. So, it definitely has a home-town kind of origin to it. I was wondering about the man that actually, the graphic designer that worked for Annin. Was he from around here or was he from another city?

MARY-You know he just didn't want to be found.

CINDY-Right.

MARY-He was interviewed, I think it was on an American Legion bulletin type thing that they put out occasionally and he spoke with this young writer and he said he just didn't want to be in the spotlight. But he sure was. He was, we tried to put a name on that face you know but he just said, "No." He must have felt our pain.

CINDY-Well, the flag is a reminder to everybody, not just about the Vietnam MIA's and POW's but about all our military and when we got our Veteran's Memorial here in Orange Park we had the ceremony and we talked about the importance of the flag. The riders actually did that part of it, Rolling Thunder.

MARY-Did they really?

CINDY-They did. They explained about the flag and they raised the flag for the first time.

MARY-Oh, how nice.

CINDY-Have you been able to see that?

MARY-No, I haven't.

CINDY-You should see some time. It's really nice.

MARY-They've taken away my driving rights.

CINDY-(LAUGH)

MARY-No more driving. Then I sold my car. Now I have to depend on, always somebody to take me.

CINDY-And your boys are here.

MARY-Yes, they live, one lives over in Mandarin and the other lives over where Hodges and J. Turner Butler, that area right there.

CINDY-So, I'm curious about your friend who gave you the idea to come to Orange Park. Did you keep up that relationship?

MARY-Oh yes. She ended up down in Atlanta.

CINDY-You didn't follow her this time.

MARY-No. She's been fighting cancer for so many years and she just fights right back and she once jumped in her car and just drove to the nearest gambling place on the Gulf Coast.

CINDY-I thought she was married to a minister. (LAUGH)

MARY-He died long ago.

CINDY-Oh, OK. She's had quite a life then.

MARY-Yes, she was a go-getter.

CINDY-Well, to finish this up I just wonder if you had anything that you would tell the people in the future that see this and learn the story of the flag. Is there something you want to tell them?

MARY-Oh, I just hope that young people will notice it and learn about it. It's up to our schools to make this possible and that's what I feel like it needs to be told. You know, we all have heroes, young people need them more than we do.

CINDY-That's exactly right. You could also take away, they could also take from you the message that when you care about something, there is always something you can do as you've proven.

MARY-Yeah, I, nothing, wasn't anything that I did. I feel like that. What the emphasis should always be on those young men who just hadn't even gotten started in life.

CINDY-They needed your voice though.

MARY-Yeah.

CINDY-And you gave them that voice. On their behalf I thank you for that.

MARY-Oh, you're welcome.

CINDY-OK, well thank you.



1968-Michael George Hoff with sons Michael, Bobbie, Charlie

Mary Hoff with Bobbie, Charlie, Michael

A FAMILY WHO SERVED FOR THE FREEDOMS OF OUR NATION

