

Conversation
with
Primm Wright

March 13, 2017
Orange Park, Florida



Recorded and Transcribed
By
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TAPE 1 SIDE A

LYN-Today is March 13, 2017 and I am in Orange Park, Florida with Primm Wright. Primm was, and is, a Navy wife. Our project is going to concern Cecil Field Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. Cecil is no longer a Naval Base but we are in an attempt to record life that was at that very strategic base in Naval history, a Master Jet Base for the U.S. Navy in America.

PRIMM-It was a master jet base for the East Coast.

LYN-Thank you Primm for being willing to talk to us. We want to know your story.

PRIMM-I came to Pensacola to teach school. I was a school librarian.

LYN-Now where did you come from?

PRIMM-Mississippi-Indianola, Mississippi. I graduated from MSCW, Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus, Mississippi. I came there to make money really because at the time the State of Mississippi only paid I think two thousand and some dollars a year.

LYN-A year? (Laug)

PRIMM-So I interviewed at Brownsville Junior High School.

LYN-Brownsville, right outside of the base.

PRIMM-Yes. Sydney Nelson told me the salary was three thousand, five hundred and I said, "I'll take it." He said, "You haven't seen the library". I said, "I'll take it." (Laughing) This was in the day and age when I had come from an all girls' school, an all-girls' college.

LYN-I did too, Tift College in Forsyth, Georgia.

PRIMM-It was a very strict school. I'm from the day and age when there were hats. We wore hats. I interviewed with a hat.

Anyway, I ended up living there with two other, one was from "The W" Mary Jo Melnick, well she married Joe Atkins, she's Melnick now. She married a Navy person and she was a home economics teacher at Warrington Junior High and then my other roommate was Mary Suttle and she's Mary Suttle Paine now. She was the home economics teacher at Brownsville Junior High School.

The three of us lived out on Colbert Street in Warrington, right on the border of the base. That's where I met my husband, was in Pensacola. He was going through the flight training program.

In those days they had what they called "P-Dances" and we were invited to the base and I met him there. I saw him again at another party off the base and we started dating and that's how I met my husband. We were married in Pensacola at Christ Church Parrish.

LYN-Do you remember about the date that you met him? Then tell us when you were married.

PRIMM-I don't remember roughly when I met him, it was some time, I guess sometime in the beginning of maybe '58, the end of summer in '58. I'm not sure. But we were married in '59.

LYN-What is your wedding anniversary?

PRIMM-The 1st of August. From there we went to Texas, Corpus Christi, Texas where he got his wings. Then we went from Texas back to school in Norfolk for a while before we went to Brunswick, Maine. He was in P-3's patrol planes at first. We were stationed there and they moved the entire squadron from Brunswick to Jacksonville. That's how we got down here the first time.

Then my daughter had been born in Texas. My son was born here in Jacksonville.

LYN-And mine too. What year was that?

PRIMM-My son was born in 1962.

LYN-And your daughter?

PRIMM-'60.

LYN-So you were happy to come back South I assume. Or not?

PRIMM-It was an adventure because I had never, well I had been out of the state of Mississippi grant you, but in those days people didn't go across country and do things like that. It was quite an adventure to live in Brunswick, Maine where in July they didn't have watermelons.

(LAUGH) You couldn't go barefoot because it was still cold. No, it was an adventure and there were no interstates. We had to travel the old routes.

Then we got the tour here because during that tour here while he was in VP probably he was home a year out of the three years he was in the squadron because they were gone a lot when you go to sea.

LYN-Now what ship?

PRIMM-He wasn't on a ship. Patrol planes were not on ships. But he was doing the Cuban crisis. He was down, they flew them out on that patrol. They had pictures of the Russian ships leaving Cuba.

LYN-At the time the Cuban crisis was going on, did you know he was involved?

PRIMM-Oh yes.

LYN-You did. He was allowed to tell you what he was doing.

PRIMM-No, I had a piece of paper somewhere in all my paperwork that said that if anything happened I was to take my children and go to Gainesville to some place down there. That was where I was supposed to go. So, I didn't go. I stayed here. My parents said, "Come home to Mississippi" and then my father said, "Well, you may not be able to get any gasoline if you run out of gas". So, I stayed here. I had two bags packed and I kept those in the hall closet and that was it. You just sat it out.

LYN-So you were more aware, probably more than most anyone, certainly of my generation who was not in the military, what a critical time it was in the history.

PRIMM-Oh no, because they left and I said, "When are you gonna be home?" He said, "When you see the white of my eyeballs." (Laugh) That was it because in the patrol planes they could patrol for like twelve hours. They were gone long, gone for a whole day or even longer.

Then when we left here he went to be an instructor in Milton, Florida. We lived out at Gulf Beach, well we didn't live there, we stayed in a motel until we could get into Navy housing in Milton. He instructed there for just about a year and a half and then the Vietnam War was coming on and the senior officer of our division that he was in at Milton offered him the chance. He said, "I know you what to go to jets, Fred." They need instructors in Meridian. So, after living in Milton, Florida for a year and a half we picked up cat and caboodle and moved to Meridian, Mississippi where he instructed in jets.

They transitioned automatically into jets then. So, we were there for a year and a half and that took up our three years. My daughter went to kindergarten school there.

Then from there we drove all the way to Lemoore, California, cross country, in a '57 Chevrolet with a Beagle, a cat, and two children and no station wagon. (Laugh) It was just a two-door car. Excuse me, '64. We had traded cars by that time.

LYN-I did the same with one dog and only one son and it was a little bit later but there were no interstates then.

PRIMM-Oh, no because from here to Pensacola there was no Interstate 10. We arrived there around Christmas time. Fortunately, we had Navy friends who had gone through flight training with him and we kept up with. They loaned us a little wooden Christmas tree and we moved into a motel again waiting for, and then finally into an apartment waiting for Navy housing again. We then moved onto the base in Lemoore in Navy housing.

Lemoore, there were two schools aboard the base, five hundred houses, enlisted and officer. I went to work as the district librarian for Central Union School District. I had the two schools

aboard the base and two off the base. One in Lemoore, out from Lemoore, and then another one. I loved that.

My children could walk to school because the elementary school was right there. My only, I was very aware of the war situation because of course he was going off to Vietnam. My neighbor, my own neighbor was hooked-up by a garage, it was two houses. That's the way they were built in Lemoore. My neighbor was Nancy McCainey and her husband was shot down and that's all she knew. He was a POW for seven and a half years.

Her children and my children played together. Her youngest, John Bryan, the son, was a baby. He was like seven years old when his father came home. So, my husband, we used to take Nancy because there were three attack squadrons in that air wing.

He made his first West Pac on Ticonderoga and the second on the, I've drawn a blank, out of Alameda. The first one was out of San Diego which we drove to and put him on the ship. Then the second, and I went over and joined him in Singapore. Then from Singapore we went to Bangkok and from Bangkok to Hong Kong and then back to The Philippines where the ship was coming back in there. That was wonderful. They gave him leave so we were able to do that.

LYN-How long was that trip?

PRIMM-Probably two weeks.

LYN-Did you go in a group?

PRIMM-No, there was another couple, Charles and Joanie Barnett that we traveled with. He was in 195 with my husband. Joanie and I flew over together and met them in Singapore. We traveled together and we were flying, when we flew over Vietnam and we could see the spotter plane down below. We flew probably over, not quite south of Danang then a little bit north. We did fly over Vietnam.

LYN-You have not told me your husband's full name.

PRIMM-Fredrick Williston Wright, III. He was born in Buffalo, New York and his birthday is the same day as mine except he is a year younger. He lived in Haworth, New Jersey and then his parents, while we were in Milton, Florida his parents, his father worked for Babcock and Wilcox so his father had taken, they did the boilers on the ships so his father had taken the Ticonderoga on its shake-down cruise.

Then the second cruise of West Pac, back to back was the Oriskany. It's the one that is off Mustin Beach in the water if I'm not mistaken. They sunk it as a coral reef. [sank 24 miles southeast of Pensacola, Florida as an artificial reef]

LYN-Oh, I thought the Lexington.

PRIMM-The Lexington was stationed there. That's what they did their carrier quals on. But the Oriskany they sunk in the water.

That was the second West Pac cruise and in those days, you didn't make, after you made two back-to-back you didn't make a third one, you came back. From there we came across country to Norfolk to the Armed Forces Staff College for six months which has all the services at that time. They no longer have it. We lived, there were 600 children aboard the base. The kids had the run of the base because it was right there within Norfolk. They tell you what you are taking. It was all services. We had Air Force, Army, everything and they went to class for six months and then he had orders to the Carrier Wing 3 which was at Cecil Field and he was the Operations Officer.

So, we came back to Cecil Field. I stayed with his parents for not quite a month and we moved into housing, Navy Housing Quarters at Cecil Field. That's where I lived.

LYN-I noticed that you have always lived on base.

PRIMM-Yes.

PRIMM-Why was that your choice? Because the first house we owned when we moved from Norfolk, no from Brunswick, Maine down here, we purchased a house and we sold it when we left. The guy, those were the days when they were over-building in Jacksonville, per usual as they are doing now. At any rate this was in, we lived on, Church of the Epiphany and back in there, where the streets are named after Goldilocks and all those.

LYN-Miss Muffat and Goldilocks and Cinderella over off Normandy.

PRIMM-That's where we lived. At any rate, Knotts Drive. The guy walked out and so the Florida Title Mortgage was calling us for a house payment and we had gone into Navy housing just because we didn't know how long we were going to be there. With that we moved into Navy housing. Since then, simply because we got out of it because we were not the first owners, somebody else was the first owners. It fell back to the first owners, the mortgage did. The guy we sold it to, who was a Navy guy, and we had gone to the legal on the base but no, he walked out. They were walking away and leaving the keys in the door in those days.

LYN-Which has happened in recent times, in the 2013,'14,'15 era. People are doing the same thing. We are in Orange Park now and I have a friend who had bought a lovely home and they bought a business and they did the same thing. They walked out and they went to Texas where there was some economy for his job. That was the cycle.

PRIMM-It's a cycle because when you over build and people don't move back in people just take the keys, leave them, walk off and leave the house.

LYN-Think about, can you remember first seeing Jacksonville and Cecil? It was very isolated it seemed to me.

PRIMM-I grew up in the country in Mississippi, the Mississippi Delta. (Laugh) I loved Lemoore because it was in cotton country in the valley there. That's in the middle of nowhere, Dear. There's only Lemoore, the town of Lemoore and the town of Hanford. Then you go to Fresno. There's nothing there, no entertainment whatsoever. So, you learn...

No, I was not that shocked. In fact, I liked it. I loved it.

LYN-So you lived on base. Where did you shop?

PRIMM-The commissary. Yeah, but where did I shop? When I first lived in Jacksonville in the Dark Ages I lived on the Westside and Downtown was still vibrant. I used to go Downtown to May Cohens and all those stores.

LYN-Furchgott's and Ivey's.

PRIMM-And Rosenblum's. I took my children to the zoo. We went to the zoo a lot and to the Cummer Art Museum. But when I moved here the second time, Roosevelt Mall, we used Roosevelt Mall too because the children loved to see the ducks. That was when they had the ducks inside.

LYN-Tell me about the ducks. I don't remember the ducks.

PRIMM-This was when Roosevelt Mall was enclosed. In the center, back in the center of the thing was a pond and they had ducks in there.

LYN-I can't even remember that.

PRIMM-Well, they did. That was a way to entertain the children.

LYN-What year did you first come to Cecil?

PRIMM-'70.

LYN-That's when I came also. I married my little Navy guy and moved here in 1970. I was in shock.

PRIMM-Oh yeah, because there was nothing down 103rd, there's still nothing down 103rd and that's it. There was nothing down Normandy.

LYN-Right. Now Normandy has changed.

PRIMM-Has changed a bit but no, there was nothing down 103rd and nothing down Normandy. If you lived aboard the base they had a sign that they brought out and it said, "Towing an Air

Plane". That meant that if you went up 103rd you were going to get behind an A-7 with its wings folded and a sailor sitting on top and you could not pass and you had to stay behind the air plane. So, you would be late getting to things in Jacksonville and everybody knew why. Once it got up onto 295 you could pass it but no 103rd because it was going over for rework at JAX. [Naval Air Station Jacksonville on Roosevelt Boulevard]

LYN-NAS JAX.

PRIMM-So they had a sign saying, "Air Plane being Towed" so that you knew to go up Normandy if you could. Otherwise if you missed that towing sign and went out the gate it was a long trip. There were no cell telephones.

LYN-Absolutely not. That brings up a thought to me when our husbands were serving there were no cell phones. There were no computers.

PRIMM-There was no Skype. There was nothing.

LYN-The communication, it was lonely not having that communication.

PRIMM-You numbered your letters.

LYN-Oh, you numbered your letters. I didn't know that.

PRIMM-You had to because sometimes the second letter got out there before the first one did. The letters went with the big air plane. They went into Europe and they were picked up there and taken aboard the carrier. The air plane landed on the carrier for mail. But you numbered your letters.

LYN-Well, I didn't number my letters. (LAUGH)

PRIMM-There was no, I guess when we were doing the West Pac in Lemoore we, they did have the tape recorders you could tape a message and send it home. But here again, it still had to come by air mail. Everything was free. All the mail was free because it was air mail in wartime. So, the guys got their mail went off the ship free.

LYN-I still have some of my letters. Do you have some of your letters?

PRIMM-I don't know whether I have any or not. I have, they sent newsletters which I have from each ship of the squadrons and things of what they were doing and where they were going. But, I'm sure I do. I just haven't looked for them in all the stuff I've got. You numbered the letters because here again you didn't know when they were going to get them or when they would fly them out to the ship.

LYN-Well, we paid some mighty big phone bills from Europe because I wanted to hear his voice when he was there. But we did the HAM operator. Did you ever do that? It was very awkward.

PRIMM-We had no HAM operators really around. The only time he called me with a HAM operator and that was through Georgia was when he in VP-7 and he was calling from, I can't remember now where he was calling from. I guess it was after I had Frederick because he was gone when I had my second child. My neighbor ended up taking me to the hospital.

LYN-To have a baby.

PRIMM-My mother had to stay home with the other child. He was gone when I had the second child. But we numbered the, there was no correspondence other than letters so you wrote a lot of letters.

When he went on the Saratoga to the Mediterranean they did a charter flight to Athens, Greece and we, they let the charter plane fly out of Cecil Field. It picked up people in Quonset Point and Norfolk and then brought us down, came on down and picked up the wives at Cecil.

LYN-What year was that?

PRIMM-In '71.

LYN-We did the reverse in '71.

PRIMM-Then the men came home.

LYN-Yes. My husband chose to come home from the Med.

PRIMM-We flew over and the guys took the plane back. The ones that were coming home came home.

LYN-I was pregnant so I didn't go over so he flew home. It was around Easter, I remember that.

PRIMM-This was in the summer. But we got to see Greece together. My children were in, I guess they were in camp is where they were in Virginia. They used to go to camp in Virginia. When I went to West Pac in Lemoore I let them stay with a lady aboard the base there for the two weeks that I was gone.

LYN-Did you have a school here in Jacksonville?

PRIMM-I sent them on a Navy bus to Sacred Heart Catholic School.

LYN-Did you continue your career while you were in Jacksonville?

PRIMM-I only worked, some bases I would work and other bases I wouldn't. I did Navy Relief. I was a big volunteer with Navy Relief. When I was at Cecil, of course I, Carolyn McLynn who was the CO's wife said, "Oh, you would be good since our CAG's wife was not coming down, Nancy Gilcrest was not coming down to live here. Fran was leaving so she said, "You need to take, they need a CAG tree staff member". So, I ended up going on the Cecil, on the Officer's

Wives Board with the squadron wives and all. Then I ended up being president of the Cecil Field Officer's Wives.

LYN-Tell me what the Cecil Field Officers' wives goal was, what you think you were able to accomplish. Was that a support organization for the wives?

PRIMM-For the wives. We had luncheons and we had different things, speakers and different things. Any money we raised in those days of course we were selling POW/MIA bracelets. The money was helping that. We also donated to the National League for Nancy Nystrom and Mary Helen Hoff at that time who were POW wives or MIA wives I should say.

Their goal was just to, so that we knew everybody and we had our own community to rely on really. You know, if you don't have your Navy friends when you are there you are not going to have anybody.

LYN-Well, I had church friends.

PRIMM-I had Church of Epiphany and I had church friends but it's your neighbors and it's your, if you live aboard the base it's your neighbors, your Navy friends that you rely on.

LYN-That's what I was contrasting how different our lives were even though...

PRIMM-Some chose to live and be more attuned to the community. I chose to live, in those days your husband was the bread winner and your husband's career was the thing. The Navy Wife was a Navy wife. There's was an old saying in those days, "If the Navy had wanted you to have a wife they would have..."

LYN- "They would have issued it with your sea bag".

PRIMM-You know, I was brought into it with a book about you know the Officers' Wives and what was expect of you. In those days you had to call on our commanding officers and leave our calling cards and all that, which we did. It was the old school I guess in the old Navy. The guys, they stayed together too because they were friends you know. We, as I say, it was Navy friends and that was it. We didn't rely on the civilian community because you have to remember when we lived in California, if you got into some of those communities, you know California, you must remember we were in the "Hippie generation" that was against the West Pac and the men were not accepted.

LYN-Anti-Vietnam.

PRIMM-Yes, although at Lemoore the MWR out there, they gave you a book of tickets for Disney which were good for all the rides. You could go and you rode the rides free. That was after you had a tour in Vietnam.

LYN-They gave you a Disney trip.

PRIMM-Yes. They didn't give you the trip, they gave you the tickets so you didn't have to pay. It was a lot cheaper then. They gave you a discounted ticket if you buy them here at the base. We did a lot of camping in the Sierras. When he was home that's what we did, we camped. We had a camper and we spent time camping in the summer.

LYN-When you came here Cecil did become your home town.

PRIMM-It was. We had one car. My husband used to take the car from the house over to the hangar to work.

LYN-Which was about how far?

PRIMM-About two and a half blocks. (Laugh) He could walk it but he wouldn't do that. I had my daughter's bicycle and I had a basket on the back and I rode my bicycle to the commissary, to the exchange, and everywhere. Cecil was a little community within itself. All Navy bases are. They are little communities, even the one in Meridian was too. You knew everybody and that's it you know.

Usually every base we were in, let's put it this way, except when we were in Norfolk, all those bases were always in isolated areas where there were small communities, civilian communities and not much to do. You had to rely on the base for your entertainment. As far as swimming pools, we spent a lot of time at the swimming pool at Lemoore and at Cecil Field. That's what we did, spent the time at the swimming pool. That was the place to go to eat because there were few places to eat except in some places.

LYN-I would guess it would be probably ten miles before you could have found a restaurant or fast food from Cecil.

PRIMM-There was no fast food.

LYN-Well, there was McDonald's.

PRIMM-No, we had no fast foods. We didn't grow up with fast food.

LYN-She went off -tape but she is saying they didn't grow up with fast food so that wasn't something in her life.

PRIMM-The first fast foods we saw were in California. I think it was something "Jack", "Jumping Jack".

LYN-Jack in the Box. They were in California.

PRIMM-My kids saw that in San Diego.

LYN-That's exactly where I saw them was in San Diego.

PRIMM- But the only place drive-in in Lemoore was the Root Beer place.

LYN-The point was that by Cecil there was nothing. There were a couple of bars and strip clubs along Normandy.

PRIMM-They might have been on Normandy but there wasn't any on 103rd. The first, you might come to a restaurant, there used to be a like a Morrison's Cafeteria.

LYN-S&S.

PRIMM-S&S Cafeteria there in Cedar Hills. See Cedar Hills has gone down too because it used to be a nice shopping center. When the community went down it went down too. When I first went to Cecil Field in order to get to Orange Park you couldn't, there was no 295. I went 103rd and went through down Wheat and down Collins and Collins to Blanding and that's how we got to Orange Park.

LYN-Tell me, once you got to Cecil and you got set up, then tell me about your husband's work and career. What did he do?

PRIMM-He was the Operations Officer. The Operations Officer with an air wing he checking with the Operations Officer in the squadron to tell them, you know, to keep their flights going for the air group. He reports to his boss the CAG.

LYN-How long were you there before he...

PRIMM-He was shot down in November of '72 but Captain Marshall, the CEO of the base, told me that I could live there as long as I wanted to. I moved in February of '73 to Club Continental to an apartment.

LYN-So you moved to Cecil in '70. Were there cruises?

PRIMM-Yes, immediately, just like I was used to it because when he reported to his first squadron in Brunswick, Maine our stuff was in storage and we didn't have any place to live and I went back to New Jersey and lived with his parents from August until December until he found a house in Brunswick. He was able to come back but he was in Newfoundland. At any rate, I had to go into storage and pull out winter clothes because I had summer clothes and get his uniforms out because unfortunately that was the first and last time we packed his uniforms because the squadron was leaving and they allowed him a day or so to get his stuff to leave with the squadron. So, I was used to that.

When he got to Cecil Field, yes, he left to work immediately because he was getting ready to take this job and he had to go through 174 through the RAG to get checked out again in an A-7. By this time, they were flying A-7's here instead of A-4's. He had flown A-4's at Lemoore.

That was I have forgotten how many months and that was in the days when there was no money in the Navy so they had a lot of A-7's that were capped over and were not flying. You flew when there was money and there wasn't always money for the Navy.

Once he joined, they had the change of command he joined, the CAG took over and he took over for Daryl Zipper as the CAG Ops. They started work-ups. They did shake-downs for a couple of weeks and then they would come home and go back out and do shake-downs, and shake-downs, and shake-downs until they went on a cruise.

LYN-So, the cruise, do you remember the month he left on the cruise?

PRIMM-I don't remember the first cruise of the Saratoga, what month he left, I'd have to go back and look it up. He had a cruise book. But he left for the second one on the Saratoga because the Saratoga the second one when it left for Vietnam it left in 72 hours. They did not have all the crew, even the ship's company aboard. They flew them aboard the ones that were on leave. They finally caught up before they went around the Horn to get to West Pac. No, they left in 72 hours.

LYN-The Saratoga did leave from Jacksonville for that cruise. [The Saratoga was home-ported at Naval Station Mayport for its entire commissioned career]

PRIMM-Yes. Fred flew out of Cecil Field to join the ship.

LYN-When he left, at that time, what did you, did you ever think "I wonder how long he would be gone? I wonder what this was going to be?"

PRIMM-My children, having lived in Lemoore and the next-door neighbors' wife was a MIA wife and they knew those children didn't have a father and didn't know where he was. My daughter who was twelve at the time, she asked her father when she saw his stuff packed, she said, "Where are you going. Are you going back to the Med?" He said, "The West Pac" and that brought her down. It affected her. It also affected my son but not outwardly so because he was only ten. That's how old the kids were when he was killed.

No, Cindy didn't want him to go back to Vietnam because the whole time he was in Vietnam she was afraid he was going to get shot down because she knew he could be shot down by a little woman in a boat shooting at an airplane. You know because attack planes fly in low and having known those children there because Nancy was not the only POW wife living aboard the base. There were good lord, I've forgotten how many.



The Frederick Wright Family
Primm, Cindy, Fred, and Fred, IV

LYN-There were a number at Cecil?

PRIMM-No, at Lemoore.

LYN-When you got to Cecil were there any?

PRIMM-There was none. There were just, there were only eighteen houses in Officers' Housing at Cecil Field so I think ourselves and Dick Colburn across the street, I think we were the only, oh, and Don Brown, there were only about four of us on the back street there in housing that were in squadrons. The other was a housing officer and supply and that sort of stuff so they weren't going to sea. They were on shore duty. So, there were only about four and one was the replacement air group, so there were only about four that were going to sea and so forth.

But, you still filled out, even back when we were in VP, I was given the Power of Attorney and they still filled out the forms for when they went to Vietnam as to how much your wife was going to receive if you were shot down and all that sort of stuff. So, yes, but I had been out to the carrier and seen, well, every time he went to the Med we drove to Mayport constantly. That was a drive and then I would drive out there to pick him up.

LYN-Can you remember back in those days, was there a big "to-do" when the ship came and went like it is now with the city. The city celebrates the Navy.

PRIMM-Oh sure. I don't remember the city because of course getting aboard, in those days you could still, you could still get aboard, you didn't just drive aboard the base without a sticker or without somebody saying you know "You're allowed to go aboard the base."

LYN-The point being like these days the news channels are celebrating the "coming home" of the groups.

PRIMM-Let's put it this way, when he went to Vietnam you were not, the wives were not allowed to say where they were going.

LYN-It was much more secretive.

PRIMM-You know the old saying like World War II, "Loose lips sink ships". Well, that was the feeling then. We were told and advised not to say anything. We were not allowed to say where they were. When the ship came in, yes, they came in but I don't know, they allowed some news crews but not when the ship first came in. They allowed them to interview I think later. There was not.

LYN-The big hoopla that there is today. There was a lot of secrecy because we were at war.

PRIMM-We were at war and we weren't allowed to say. Even when he was in VP and they weren't at war I would ask him where he was going and he would say, "That's why we subscribed to Time Magazine" for years because Time would always say where they were going. No, I knew where he was going roughly but I didn't, I wasn't supposed to advertise. No, we didn't advertise. We couldn't.

LYN-So, do you remember the last time you took him to the ship?

PRIMM-That was when he was on shake-down because we would get up and we were always afraid he was going to miss movement. I don't know if you know what I mean. So, you drive from Cecil Field and you've got to go through downtown Jacksonville. It was usually Union Street and State Street that way to get out there and get aboard the carrier. Then of course I drove back to Cecil but I don't remember, I guess, no, I didn't pick him up because when they came in, they truck-loaded their stuff in from the ship to the base because they took everything. They stripped their hangars when they left. No, I don't remember.

I know when he flew out. He flew out in April when they left so he would have been probably in March he was going on shake-down. They thought they were going to the Med and then all of a sudden "No" it was a West Pac. Admiral Zumwalt who was the CO at the time came down to see them off. He came down to the carrier to speak to them. Which was a closed, nobody knew that except the Navy and that was not advertised. He came down to talk to them because they left, in 72 hours they pulled out.

LYN-So, I'm thinking back, you're talking about the Saratoga. I know the Kennedy was here. I don't think the Forrestal was here.

PRIMM-The Forrestal was here when it had the fire.

LYN-Later on it was in Norfolk. My husband had to go to Norfolk to leave on his cruise I think. At Mayport there was the Saratoga and the Kennedy were homeported here.

PRIMM-The Kennedy wasn't here yet, I don't think.

LYN-I know that his friends went out on the Kennedy and didn't return for 13 months. It wasn't homeported here.

PRIMM-The Kennedy came down, I think it was homeported out of Norfolk. Then they got reassigned here when the Saratoga got decommissioned.

LYN-I know that another squadron went out for carrier quals on the Kennedy and they were gone 13 months. They made a West Pac.

PRIMM-Yes. It left. The Saratoga left in April and didn't come home until February. I left his stuff aboard the ship. I was advised instead of having it sent back by whatever transportation. All his belongings were packed up in a cruise box and they brought the cruise box to me when they come home.

LYN-Did you normally know how long he would be gone? Did you have ideas?

PRIMM-I never thought of it as time. It was his job. He was gone as long as he needed to be gone. This was the first time of course he had gone that far away with the carrier and I knew it would take a month to get there and a month to get back, not quite a month. But anyway, it took a while to get there. It was a longer time than normal you know because when we were in California they were gone maybe four, five, maybe six months and that was it and they would come back. They weren't on-line the whole time. Then they would pull back into the Philippines and be off-line. It was when they were on-line that everybody worked.

I don't know, your husband would probably enjoy, I have an email that someone sent me talking about the most dangerous job in the Navy and it's all the flight crew and it is absolutely fantastic. It shows them on the carrier. You have to remember how hot it was in Vietnam. I mean those guys, it was hot and humid, very hot and humid. Of course, it was hot and humid here too but not as much as Vietnam. As I say, have you been aboard a carrier?

LYN-No, I haven't.

PRIMM-Well, then that's a different life for you. They lived in a small room.

LYN-Very small cubicle.

PRIMM-Even my husband who was an officer lived in a small room. It was bunk bed and a bed here and there was drawers under the bed and there was a desk and a chair and that was it.

LYN-I have pictures of that, my husband in those spaces.

PRIMM-That's where they lived. I still hear from a man, he was an AT, I've forgotten his rate now, but Glenn he lives in Morgan City, Louisiana, and he was in 195. He was you know an enlisted guy and I hear from him all the time and he's just a terrific guy but Fred, we always went I was always made, not made to go, I always went joyfully to everything. If the enlisted

were having a party we went to that. My husband believed in knowing who he worked with. He said, "I can't get in the air without them", which was true. Then of course with VP there were enlisted in the airplane itself. That was a big crew. So, no I was always a part of, I guess that's why I joined in as being part of Navy wives because I felt it so strongly.

LYN-I neglected that.

PRIMM- It depends on, my husband was making a career of the Navy.

LYN-And my husband, I thought, was not. He did stay in a lot longer than we planned.

PRIMM-It's a different outlook on the Navy. My husband, this was his life and this was his career.

LYN-That brings me to this, he loved to fly.

PRIMM-Oh my god...

LYN-He lived to fly.

PRIMM-His mother, he wanted to fly airplanes since he was this little kid so this was his greatest joy and quite frankly if I could be catapulted off the carrier I would go too.

LYN-Oh, really.

PRIMM-Oh, yes. He took us up. He had his private license. In California he took the kids and I up and we could see where we lived and we could see all the fields and everything. I had gone up with him with my son. Somebody kept my daughter on the ground but he was looking at an old airplane in Maine and I went up with the canopy open. But I had gone up in the airplane when I was like in high school. I had known somebody that flew airplanes. Yes, I loved to fly. He loved to fly and I understood it. It is, I always said, "I just as soon live between the two runways at Cecil if they were still flying". Their Charlie pattern was over my house. I could see the airplanes you know in Charlie pattern.

LYN-I'm going to just put this in because we kind of danced around it but during our day there were actually three Naval Air Stations in this area which was more than anywhere else in the world.

PRIMM-Correct.

LYN-There was Mayport and there was JAX and Cecil Field. We haven't even said this but at some point, the Navy decided to close Cecil Field which shocked us all. I think it shocked us all.

PRIMM-Washington decided, Virginia decided.

LYN-Virginia wanted more business.

PRIMM-And they got it in spades and they don't like it.

LYN-We all have experience with Norfolk. (phone call in background)

Jacksonville was a Navy town, it was just everywhere. The economy.

PRIMM-It depended on the Navy because the Navy put their money back out into town. The government gave a subsidiary to each school that had so many military children. They received so much money for those military kids.

LYN-You know like Finnegan School which is out at Mayport, was built for the military and it has remained over these decades just a wonderful little school. You could actually come right from the base, there was a gate and they walked right into the school. It was a lovely place.

I don't believe there was a school at Cecil.

PRIMM-There was no school that's why I say my children got aboard a gray Navy bus that was going to NAS JAX and taking the sailors there and the kids that were going to the Catholic school were allowed to ride that Navy bus to Sacred Heart and it picked them up in the afternoon.

LYN-Public school, I can't even imagine, did the kids go to Whitehouse?

PRIMM-Whitehouse.

LYN-Whitehouse, which was kind of a country little area and a sweet little school so there was some kind of support there.

PRIMM-But there wasn't much over in Whitehouse. Those people that bought out there where they have, where they do touch-and-go's they don't like that.

LYN-No they don't like that. (Laugh)

PRIMM-But they should have known how loud it would be. Have you ever been there? I watched my husband and the CAG do touch-and-go's there. But, no, if you live aboard a Navy base you're gonna hear airplanes unless you live in one of the newer ones where the housing is built further away from the base.

LYN-We lived near Oceana and it seemed like many, many miles away but when those engines roared at night when they worked on them, oh my goodness. Our bedroom was on the second floor and oh my goodness how loud the noise was that we heard. It was incredible.

PRIMM-When we lived at Cecil Field just down south of us was VA-45, instruments. At any rate, that's where they worked on the engines down there and they would run them up and you could hear them at night. We got used to it. We went to sleep. (Laugh)

LYN-I didn't. You were a good Navy wife.

PRIMM-Of course my husband was used to it because on the carrier you can hear the planes launching overhead. But, no those things come and go.

LYN-Well the interesting thing you talked about the dangers involved. My husband did work on the flight deck on the Forrestal and, which people fell off. They literally fell off. Planes had gone right over the end of the flight deck if the catapult failed.

PRIMM-Or else they were getting tied down on the side of the aircraft and if they weren't tied down and the engines started up they could be blown off.

LYN-There was enormous danger.

PRIMM-And deaths.

LYN-Enormous deaths. I think I remember that there was at least one person who died on the Forrestal every day during the cruise.

PRIMM-If the catapult [catching cable] broke it whipped like a whip and it could just cut a person in two.

LYN-I remember again Sherman Field my husband was on watch one night and a pilot had died and he had to stand duty around that area. Then I remember at Cecil Field that some airman was sucked into the intake of a jet and somehow, he survived. Do you remember that?

PRIMM-Yes. Then we had one when we were in Lemoore that got sucked through the intake and he went through the blades.

LYN-I can't even imagine the trauma for the rest of his life.

PRIMM-Can you imagine the trauma with the men seeing it happen?

LYN-Right.

PRIMM-My husband saw one of his shipmates who was catapulted off the end of the ship was the last launch of a West Pac and he went in. You know I mean...

LYN-There's no survival.

PRIMM-There was no survival. You're not in the envelope to get out, to punch out.

LYN-The point being that every day...

PRIMM-Is a danger, life or death.

LYN-It was no matter what you were doing.

PRIMM-No matter what you were doing.

LYN-Life is a little bit different for some people in the military now but it is a dangerous time. The deployments are just incredibly dangerous.

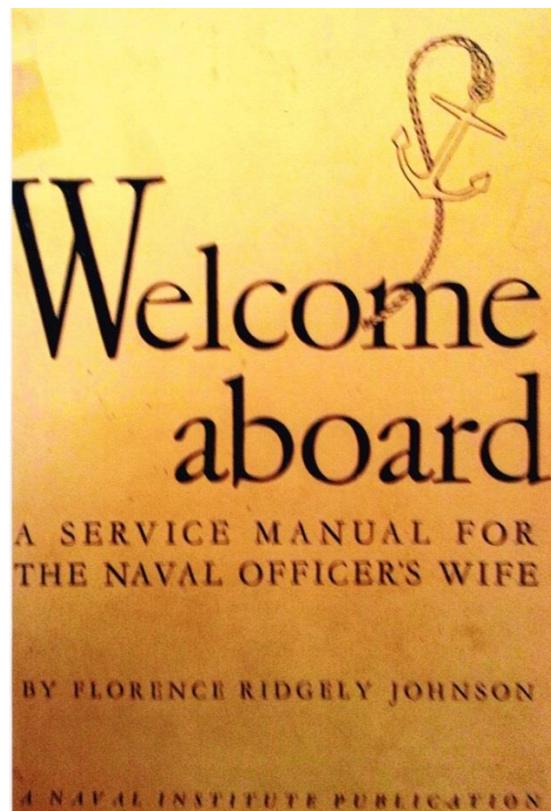
PRIMM-Any time you are working, just like the people that work on light poles and they get electrocuted you know, but there seems to be more chances of someone aboard a carrier because it is so many people in a small area.

LYN-I believe, it seems like to me there were about 3,000 people on the carriers. That's a whole town. You're from Mississippi, you can see that being a town.

PRIMM- Having been aboard the carrier and eating in the mess and going to the rooms.

[Primm has brought in some books from her days as a Navy wife]

LYN-We're looking at "Welcome Aboard, a Service Manual for the Naval Officer's Wife" by Florence Ridgely Johnson.



Primm's copy of The Navy Officer's Wives' Manual

PRIMM-It came out of the Naval Institute. But any rate, it is chapter and verse, it tells you everything that can happen to you. Believe me, the cars broke down, everything always happened when the ship pulled out. This is a West Pac, the Ticonderoga.

LYN-It's like an annual for the Ticonderoga.

PRIMM-Yes, I have about, I don't know how many of these. One for each cruise. This is our CAG, Bill Craven. He was a terrific guy. I've gone to the Golden Nuggets, 23. This is our CAG, Bill Craven. This is the CAG, the airwing my husband was in when he was in California.

LYN-When we finish I would like to take photos so we can include that.

PRIMM-This is the squadron here.

LYN-195, Attack Squadron 195.

PRIMM-195, there's Charlie that we traveled with and Dick. I will come to Fred here in a moment. Here he is. They put them in line of seniority.



Frederick Williston Wright, III

LYN-Here he is at his home away from home.

PRIMM-Yes, because this cruise book will tell you all about you know what their job is and all that sort of thing, the history. When I went to see a good friend's change of command in Atsugi, Japan, a young man that I had known since he was about ten years old and he is now a captain in the Navy. 195 was stationed in Japan so I got to see 195 again see those people even though I didn't know them. It was a different younger group. But they have the pictures of everybody, the enlisted.

LYN-I have a friend, a woman, who is a Captain was over the hospital in Japan. She was also over the dispensaries, there a lot of islands so she was over them.

PRIMM-One of my neighbors, I lived at Club Continental, Peg Hanberger, had been the head Navy nurse, she was the retired Navy captain at NAS JAX. This is the Saratoga. (Primm is flipping through the pages of a cruise book)

LYN-Which has real fond memories for many people of Jacksonville. There was an effort to keep the Saratoga here as a museum but it did not happen.

PRIMM-Here's Paul Gilcrest, my husband's boss. There's Fred. CAG staff was very small as you can see. They are larger now but it was very small. Then there were the squadrons in there. Then I don't know, you probably are not interested but I brought these out simply because these are old telephone directories of Cecil.

LYN-Oh my goodness.

PRIMM-But, that's where I got the history from. This is the memorial that's out there with the trees and the airplanes.

LYN-The names are listed there.

PRIMM-On each tree.

LYN-Are they listed in the directory?

PRIMM-No, they're not. It's the directory and it's all the different groups stationed at Cecil Field and what they do. Then those are the streets.

LYN-I would like to copy that so we can preserve it.

PRIMM-I can't find the one that has the base streets.

LYN-And they have been renamed.

PRIMM-Avenue A and C.

LYN-They have new names.

PRIMM-There is another picture in here. Here's the chapel. The officer's wives are the ones that purchased the wings. [installed on front outside wall of chapel] One is navigators and one is aviators.



Naval Air Station Cecil Field-Jacksonville, Florida
Chapel

LYN-It's a beautiful building. Unfortunately, the inside has been decimated.

PRIMM-It's been stripped. Here are all the squadrons.

LYN-VA-83 the Rampagers. [Lyn's husband's squadron]

PRIMM-Do you realize in Pensacola in their park downtown as you are coming west, heading east there is a wall in the park. It's not as high, it's a smaller wall but it's down there. The park is close to where the old train station used to be. Of course, there is a memorial. It's been moved, it used to be in town hall. They put Fred's name with a flame which was at city hall. My son tells me it's been moved to a cemetery somewhere there in Jacksonville.

LYN-The flame is right downtown.

PRIMM-No, different flame. I know the flame is by the wall they have down there.

LYN-No, there is a flame down almost on the river by the old city hall.

PRIMM-Is it still there?

LYN-I think so. It's at Bay and Liberty I believe.

PRIMM-Is it a memorial to Vietnam?

LYN-It's a memorial but I'm not sure it's to Vietnam. I think it's to all those military.

PRIMM-I know my husband's name was put in there because I went down to that service some time ago.

LYN-That's actually where the city of Jacksonville first laid out its street at Bay and Liberty.

PRIMM-I guess I don't have that in here. He was more concerned with Cecil Field. I'm sure he has given you all the information about Cecil Field because I gave him copies.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

Lyn asked Primm about learning that her husband's plane was missing.

PRIMM-I was working Navy Relief at Cecil Field and the door opened and in came a chaplain and Betty Presell who was a staff wife and close friend and I guess Doug Mow, Captain Mow. I sat up and I thought something might be wrong but I didn't know what. So, they told me that Fred had been shot down and Betty said, "Do you want me to drive you home?" I said, "Betty, you know me better than that, I'll drive myself home." (Laugh) So I drove myself home.

LYN-Do you remember the date?

PRIMM-Yes, he was shot down on the 10th of November of '72. I said, "I want someone to get my children because I want to tell them." Betty McKeen and Helen Brown that lived across from each other that lived in housing that I knew, they drove into Sacred Heart and at first the nuns didn't want to release them because but they couldn't tell them why because they didn't want the children to know. They got my two children and brought them home so that I could tell them that their father had been shot down. Then another wife, Tina Leseur, came and Claudia and Jack Calhoun came They were Navy friends.

So, people were trying to stay with me so I wouldn't alone which was good. Mary Belle, the CAG's wife couldn't get from Orange Park to me so she tried to get hold of Beth Putnam. So, I told my children and then my parents were arriving from Mississippi on their way to South Florida. Then for some reason they felt something was wrong too so they arrived and I just told, and Doug Mow came back to the house that night and asked me, "Who do you want for your CAG which is your CACO officer?" I said, "I want Wally Leseur". I had known him from Lemoore and he was an upbeat man and I needed, I wanted that and the same personality type as most Naval aviators.

At any rate, he told Wally, "You can't have Primm and be a CACO because you already are a CACO for two other wives." Wally, said, "I can handle it." So, Wally handled it and very well because in those days females did not have credit. Everything was in your husband's name. So, when I called the bank in New Jersey where we banked I wanted to know our bank balance since we had a joint checking account, which was supposedly set up so I could get into it. They wouldn't tell me my bank balance. So, I told Wally, my CACO officer, and he came over to the quarters later on in the afternoon the next day or so and said, "OK, this is your bank balance." I said, "How did you get this Wally?" He said, "I just called them up and said, "Well hell, if you're not going to give it to she'll just take all the money out." So, they told him. (Laugh) I'm sure he explained. At any rate they were not, they were not used to this either because this is a little tiny bank in Dumont, New Jersey and they just had not heard of anything like that.

So, then I told them that I wanted to get things because within, then they told me to go to the clinic and I could send a package to him. I sent ear wax and some aspirin, you know to clear his ears. I forgot, I think aspirin and I sent a pack of cigarettes or something like that.

At any rate, a month later I was unloading groceries at the house and Doug Mow, he was CLAW 1 at that time, the air wing, over all the squadrons and he came and he said, "Primm, I have bad news." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Fred has been declared dead." I said, "Oh, OK." He walked off and left me which is sometimes typical. I guess men don't know how to handle it or what

So, with that I said, I told the Navy because the Navy was very good. At that time, we had base operators so everybody that called aboard the base had to go through the base operator and ask for it so I got no calls from the Navy. The Navy, the outside world knew nothing about this.

Cecil Field guarded me like a mother hen. Nobody bothered me. Nobody called or anything because they monitored all the calls and wouldn't let them. I knew those base operators anyway because there was only about three of them. I used to take candy to them because my father would call and it would be collect. They would cut him off, not collect, they would cut him off after he called and he got so mad because it was costing him money if I wasn't at home. He would get so upset. (Laugh) So, I always took money to the operators.

I said, "OK, if that's the case, he's been declared then I want to get through a service so we can have some sort of Christmas because this was, they came back a month later in December and told me that he was dead." That's what we did.

We had a memorial service since there were no remains, at Cecil Field. Cecil turned out in throngs and filled the chapel. It was very good. They had a fly-over and everything. They presented me with the flag and that was it. I had Dick May come from Church of the Epiphany who did, he did it just like a burial service was what he did.

Then we moved and all the stuff that I had sent to Fred in a little package came back and it had all been opened which is not unusual. I had sent him stuff when we were in Lemoore and it had been opened and stolen. It was a gold tie clasp.

Anyway, they had taken everything except the ear wax or something. But I could not, they did not tell, I asked and "I can't tell you because it's during war time" and all that good stuff, which it was. It was at the end of the war. So, I knew nothing. Then when the ship came back the good guys that Fred flew with 37 in the air wing, VA-37, it's 105 and 37 were the two attack squadrons. You know they had two fighters.

So, someone, before they came back someone aboard the staff sent me a picture, a photo that they had taken of the plane, where the plane was and the canopy had been blown. I knew that he had somehow, they, no they didn't tell me that he had ejected but at any rate, this one person on the staff, who shall remain unnamed because that was just unheard of, but anyway he sent me the slide of the plane, Fred's plane. So, I knew that he had gotten out of the plane. Then when they came back one of the guys in 37 who had gone on a rescap to see if they could rescue him had told me that they thought he was hanging in the parachute in a tree.

Later on, when the Freedom of Information Act came out, we didn't find that out until after. Then 18 years later, at about the same time that he had been shot down, I'm at work. By this time, I had gone to work for Civil Service. I was at work at the library at Cecil and I pick up the phone and this woman's voice, she said she was calling from the Navy in Washington. She says, "We think we have your husband's remains." I said, "Oh, OK." Phone call. Then they sent a little guy out to be my CACO officer who was as young as my kids. It was funny. I thanked him for coming. There wasn't anything he could do at this point.

My son said, "They're going to ruin our Christmas again." Sure enough, December they called and they sent actually a mortician and a dental guy to debrief me. They had his Geneva Convention card and his ID card. I said, "Where are his dog tags?" They said, "We don't have those." I said, "OK." They debriefed me and asked me would I accept the identification.

I accepted because of the dental records because Fred had a baby tooth that had never come out. I probably got, which is horrible to say, but I probably got about maybe three-fourths of his remains as a skeleton. They had a picture. What they had done was they had buried it in a small box like they do in Vietnam until it decomposes and then they put it in an even smaller box. I think they had, the mortician thought they had played with it. So, I said, "I want to escort my husband's remains home to Arlington." He always wanted to be buried at Arlington.

So, at the time, here again, it was somebody that he had flown with and we had known from the VP squadron and gone into attack and had been a POW himself for two hundred and some days. He called from Washington and said, "This is what I'll do Primm." I said, "OK." He said, "All right we'll pay your way to Travis Air Force Base in California to receive his remains." I paid for my son, my daughter didn't want to go. I paid for my son so the two of us went and the Air Force put us up in their wonderful, very nice VIP quarters. They allowed me to go out on the tarmac and they brought his remains off in a small casket to welcome him home which I was able to do.

Then we went into a gym where the mortician is because I'm going to be escorting the remains. You know when you escort something you stay with it, you can't leave. So, he very morbidly and very kindly said, "Do you want because I just had the uniform and ribbons put on. Would you like to see it?" I said, "Yes." So, he lifted the top of the casket and we were able to see because they lay them out with the uniform as if the body is in there. So, we were able to see the uniform. He told me that I had to, you know, when we changed planes in Chicago that I had to see that that casket got on the same plane.

So, we rode in the hearse, in the white hearse, from Travis Air Force Base into Oakland to get on a commercial airplane in San Francisco. They had a VFW guy that was very nice to escort us out there. So here is Frederick and I and the driver in a hearse with Fred and our suit cases and Fred in the back. (Laugh) We went and we went to the tarmac and saw the casket go on the plane and we had to change planes in Chicago and the stewardess did not want to let me off. I said, "Oh yes. He told me not to leave it and I'm not leaving it and this plane is not leaving without me." I told my son, "Go down and tell them." He said, "Yes, mother."

She allowed me to walk down the outside steps there and get and watch. In those days the pilot does not announce that there is a...they don't announce that like they do now. So, no one knew what we were doing. But that's OK.

So, I was told that when they came to debrief me the year before I went out there that they had Hanoi had released I think twenty remains. We, they felt fortunate my husband's name was on his casket. At any rate, it was him and I felt very strongly that it was him.

Then we get into Ragan Air Port and here again we met with the hearse. We had to go down and make sure his body was going on the hearse. We followed the hearse and Navy band to Arlington Cemetery. They put it in a little shed until the funeral.

A friend of mine took us out there the next day. My daughter was there by that time, so that we could put a flag on his casket, so that she could be there. We went over and they had taken his memorial marker from the memorial section of Arlington and it was in the bottom of the grave so we knew that. I will be buried on top of him. [spouse can be buried in the same grave as a veteran. Whomever is buried first is put on bottom and the remaining spouse is placed on top at the time of their death]

On the 18th of December we had a grave side service is what we had since we had already had a service. Again, Dick May from Church of Epiphany, he was no longer with the Church of the Epiphany, he was in Williamsburg, Virginia, he came to Arlington and marched behind the hearse all the way after they take you into the circle where they put the casket. They take it out of the hearse and put it on the caisson. At any rate, he did that for me and then was there for the service. Quite a few people showed up who were in the area. We had a grave side service and his mother fortunately was able to come. This was her only son. So, she was able to know that he was home. So that was it.

We went through it three times actually. We went through it being announced that he was MIA and then KIA and then finally his remains were back. So, it jerked us around three different times. I've been told this by another, Billy Jo Key, whose husband was shot down and his tree is out there [Cecil Field Memorial] Billy Jo said, "I just got a handful of remains." She told me because I hadn't received word at this time, she said, "I just got a phone call." I said, "Oh." That was it. That's what happens. You just get a phone call and they just ungraciously tell you what's going on.

LYN-I'm sorry.

PRIMM-It's their way of dealing with things I guess. I don't know. It doesn't seem but it's been that way for as long as I've known anything to happen. But, here again, when it happened we had already had somebody shot down in the air wing and Mary Belle, the CAG's wife, had set it up and I was with her to talk to the CO and the XO's wife and she said, "This is the way it will happen." "If someone is shot down in this squadron we will take, this other squadron will take food and be sure that they have food." So, she had set up and that's the way it went. People were very kind who came and took care of things. Here again, this good friend whose wife loaned us the Christmas tree in Lemoore, he was stationed here and he came out and he was Cindy Primm's godfather, but anyway he came out. He had two boys at home so he took Frederick for

the night. He took him and let him stay with them. You know then Betty Pursell took him one of those times too.

LYN-So interject your children's' whole names while we are talking about them.

PRIMM-My daughter's name is Cynthia Primm Wright. She is now Cynthia Wright Covington. My son is Frederick Williston Wright, IV. They are fifty-seven and fifty-five. They are grown.

LYN-One was born here you said.

PRIMM-The second one. The first one was born in Corpus Christi, Texas while we were in the training command. The second one was born here at NAS JAX. I moved from Brunswick, Maine seven months pregnant. Yes, they let our husbands come back and drive us down because I could barely get in and out of the car. I tried driving and we were towing a car too and all this good stuff. We had Cindy Primm.



The Frederick Wright Family

In those days you had no seat belts so we had the crib mattress on the back seat and that was her playground and her sleeping.

LYN-How long was that trip?

PRIMM-We stopped somewhere, Fred had driven and driven and driven and I think we were in the Carolinas and he said, "I've got to stop and sleep." So, we stopped at a motel somewhere up there in a Holiday Inn and spent the night and then got in the car and came back.

LYN-So you drove for two days while you were seven months pregnant with a baby in the back. (Laugh)

PRIMM-And a toddler in the back. (Laugh) But I had driven, when I had her in Corpus, when we left Corpus we came back to Pensacola to pick up the second car but I had gone on to Mississippi to stay while he went to school in Norfolk. I drove from Mississippi from Norfolk with a baby on a pillow in the front seat of my car. I stopped at good friend's house in Huntsville, well actually New Market, Alabama, and then I spent the night somewhere else and then I finally made it to Norfolk. But no seat belts. That was it.

I remained at Cecil Field all those years until it was closed. I got transferred from the Family Service Center, they closed the library and I went to the Family Service Center. From Family Service Center I went to the hospital at NAS JAX briefly and then I got attached back to Family Service Center back at JAX. So, I stayed at Cecil almost until it closed.

LYN-Do you remember when it closed?

PRIMM-I can't find it but we got a newspaper when the base was closing.

LYN-We all remember hearing it.

PRIMM-I want to say it was '90. I can't tell you. [1999]

LYN-I know it was after '87 when we moved back to Jacksonville and it was a shock to hear that it was closing.

PRIMM-It was in the nineties.

LYN-Then what was going to happen and then we know that the city did receive the property. I think it is 18,000 acres that still sits there pristine, absolutely pristine as if it were 1970 and I had just driven up. It is quite amazing how well it is maintained.

PRIMM-It's sad because I drive out there and all the buildings are gone. They've torn them all down. I think hangar 13 and hangar 14 are still there, the oldest hangars.

LYN-They are. 174, the training building is still there that was there in '70.

PRIMM-That's a newer hangar. All those hangars are there but I'm talking about the barracks.

LYN-The barracks are gone.

PRIMM-Medical building.

LYN-The old dispensary is gone.

PRIMM-The enlisted club. All those places are just torn down. It's just flat.

LYN-There are trees.

PRIMM-Well there has always been pine trees out there you know, tons of them. But it's just as flat as can be.

LYN-But it is amazingly, immaculately maintained. The City of Jacksonville in general is not a well-maintained city.

PRIMM-But there's not anybody out there to throw any trash and even when there was, when we lived there, they sent the sailors out along the side the streets to clean up there, believe me.

LYN-But the grass is mowed, the trees...

PRIMM-Well they planted those trees in '90.

LYN-I think it is amazing that they are maintaining it.

PRIMM-It's like a cemetery.

LYN-It is like a cemetery.

PRIMM-It is, exactly, that's what it looks like to me is a cemetery. The people that are out there working, the civilians they might as well not be there because, although they do use the hangars still because they've got the drug enforcement people out there. There was an old airplane down at operations somebody told me it was gone. I don't know.

LYN-There is a plane there, I just saw it.

PRIMM-There was an A-4 there but I don't think it is an A-4 anymore.

LYN-What's the plane that has the radar on the top.

PRIMM-Oh my god why would they have that there?

LYN-They have it there. I saw it.

PRIMM-That was never stationed there.

LYN-My husband worked on them. They had the round radar on the top.

PRIMM-Yeah, that's the (making humming noise). (Laugh)

LYN-There's one under a canopy out there and I said, "Look, that looks like an E-2." Ted said, "That's because it is one." So, I don't know why it is there.

PRIMM-You're talking about...

LYN-There's a canopy out there and there's one sitting under it.

PRIMM-Where is there a canopy? Oh, like a you put over a carport?

LYN-Metal, yes, a gigantic one.

PRIMM-It's over the airplane? I know, so they don't have to repaint it. They are trying to keep the birds from it. When there was an A-4 there, there was a bird's nest in it.

LYN-I want to ask you, I have become aware in the last two weeks about the efforts to preserve a memorial, MIA/POW, to rename the main road going into Cecil that is now New World, to be named POW/MIA Boulevard, and to have a museum. [In the lease agreement with Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial, Inc., there is no indication of road re-naming]

PRIMM-I know that's, his ambition. My main concern, I was speaking to Mike, was "How are you going to fund it?" I guess is my main thing. I cannot imagine, I have a hard time, I know funds are tough. They had a hard time, they couldn't keep the Saratoga here because of funding. I wonder how, but he seems to feel that he will. He's a very, I admire him, and I wish him a whole lot of luck. I'm behind him all the way. I swear I do not know...

LYN-How it can be done.

PRIMM-Or how it can continue, how to keep it up. That's the thing. Once they take it over they are going to have to maintain it.

LYN-Well, the goal is for the first five years that the city would continue the funding that they are doing now in their maintenance. After that five years it would be a whole other issue. So, the city already pays for all of that. He is just asking the city.

PRIMM-I've delayed going there because I don't want to see it because I know it's in poor array, the trees.

LYN-No, they have just trimmed them.

PRIMM-It doesn't make any difference.

LYN-They cleaned up recently.

PRIMM-Because we used to go out, my son and I used to go out and he would break as many branches off as he could. He just tried to. They needed to have tree trimmers. This was of course after Cecil was closed we were going out there.

LYN-We are talking about Mike Cassata and Mike has a dream that 30 acres of Cecil would become a memorial, POW/MIA memorial, and that the chapel, the city will probably do a resolution to make it historical preservation status.

PRIMM-They want to bring a museum.

LYN-A museum.

PRIMM-I wonder if he realizes, I forgot to tell him, there used to be in the back of the chapel there was a big board that had every name of every person, officer and enlisted, that was killed at Cecil Field. It went, they moved it to NAS JAX. That was what I was told. What's happened to it now I have no idea. But it should go back there really and truly. I think some of the plaques have been taken off.

LYN-Well we can put them back. They can be redone. Mike's goal is that eventually this would become the national POW/MIA memorial, of America. He's a young man and he has a dream and he is on a mission. It is going to be interesting to see how this unfolds.

PRIMM-Yes, it is.

LYN-But there is certainly a beautiful piece of land with an amazing history, a lot of memories there, and it's sitting there waiting for something.

PRIMM-It certainly is. I don't know whether he talked to Frankie Ford or not.

LYN-I'm not sure.

PRIMM-She's the, one of the only other wife that I know that is alive whose husband's tree is out there. Frankie lives in Ocala, Randolph Ford and he was buried in St. Augustine's National Cemetery down there. I gave, I don't know whether he's talked to her or not. I've only talked to her once when Mary Helen died. [story of Mary Helen Hoff included at end of this conversation]

Mary Helen Hoff is dead and Nancy Nystrom is gone and see Nancy has a daughter but I don't know where her daughter is here. She was here, I don't whether she's still here or not. Mary Helen has two sons here. I don't know how much support he's getting from the families, you know from Mary Helen Hoff's family or I'm sure he has not been able to find Nancy Nystrom's. But Frankie Ford, I did find her phone number and I gave that to him. I'm assuming he has talked to her.

LYN-He is sending me, each day I get a name. Tomorrow I will interview Commander Callao, I don't know if you know him.

PRIMM-Who is he?

LYN-He was at Cecil. He came as a E-1 and became a Commander. He is a Filipino. I'm feeling like he has quite a history to tell.

PRIMM-Well, you would also, did he give you Jerry Terrell's name.

LYN-He is only giving me one at a time.

PRIMM-I gave him, and I told him and I said, when I copied this history of Cecil out of the back of this telephone book, Captain Jerry Terrell was the CO. Jerry was on the Saratoga and then got transferred over to another carrier because Charlie Barnett was shot down and killed so he got transferred to be CO of the squadron from Lemoore with the idea that he would come back here because his family was here. Then Jerry went on to be CO of Cecil Field. I gave him Tom Watson's name, Admiral Watson's name because he had a squadron there. He had, I can't remember what squadron Tom had. Then he was the Commodore at Cecil.

LYN-He gave me a Gillespie. Do you know Dennis Gillespie? He went by Dizzy Gillespie. I'll be interested to find his history and he is championing this memorial effort. So, it will be an interesting to see how our city responds and how the Navy community responds.

PRIMM-Well, the Navy community doesn't know about it.

LYN-They don't?

PRIMM-I don't think they know about it. Because there are a lot of people sitting in Jacksonville and Orange Park that are ex-Cecil Field.

LYN-Then I'm sure he has a plan because he is a man on a mission.

PRIMM-Isn't he though? I tell you, I really admire him. I give him all the credit in the world and I'm behind him a hundred percent.

LYN-It looks like a big task.

PRIMM-Well, I guess the main thing is the up-keep, the funding and all. That's what I find. People are very enthusiastic right at first and then they just fall by the wayside. I can remember sitting with Nancy getting signatures for the National League of Families to get MIA's accounted for and all that sort of stuff and you know you just sit there for hours and some people, "Yeah, we'll sign your thing." But most of the time they would you know but we did that forever and a day. I still support the National League of Families. I'm sure, I feel very certain they were the ones that brought more pressure on Hanoi than anybody. Some may not feel that way but I feel very strongly that way.

LYN-And I don't know but that's interesting.

PRIMM-They are still going even though their group is getting smaller and smaller. I still, I don't go to their meetings any more, once a year, but they still go to the congressmen. They are still accounting for, they are still printing names. Remains that have come back. (showing newsletter)

LYN-This one is in 2014 and 2015. That's very impressive, isn't it?

PRIMM-Yes, that's why I say, they work through, but the neat thing is that the identification people in Hawaii they now identify people from Korea, World War II. They do a lot of identification. They try, or they just tried with the DNA, because this was before Fred's remains here, they were asking if they had the mother's DNA they could trace it. But no, they are still going strong even though the group is dwindling.

LYN-A very important mission.

PRIMM-But, I know that their funding is hard to come by. I pay my dues to them every year and I wish I could give them more but, and their board serves gratis, they're not paid a salary.

LYN-Where are they headquartered?

PRIMM-In Washington, actually in Virginia. No, but their board comprises, a lot of them are children of MIA'S and POW's. Nancy Nystrom was on that board for years but she had to go to board meetings and she flew from here to D.C. at her own expense.

LYN-In my own life I can say this, it's very expensive to be a volunteer and to do good work.

PRIMM-Yes, because you, nobody wants you to say "No" and everybody is asking "Would you do this and would you do that?" and you do it. Having being, I volunteered to death and I now say "No" very easily. (Laugh) I'm trying to get my daughter to say "No". She's a Rotarian and she's still going and teaching classes and she won't say "No" to them at her own expense.

LYN-Does she have a career?

PRIMM-Her husband is semi-retired and she works, does work a little bit for him. No, not now. She's into Rotary Club and so is he for that matter. He goes with her some of the time.

LYN-So they are enjoying that.

PRIMM-They have made four trips to India with, we no longer do it in the United States with the sugar cube you know but it's what they do in India still.

LYN-I remember my sugar cube during elementary school.

PRIMM-My children took it. I took it. Then they had shots. They no longer do it in the United States, the sugar cube. They just made a trip this year in January to India. So, and she is gone all

the time teaching for Rotary and I said, “You’ve got to say no, you’ve got to rest” and she just enjoys it and she is good at it.

LYN-So, I wish Mike well.

PRIMM-I sure as heck shutter at the thought. I know that he’s got plans for it. I would love to see those plans. I’m sure I will see them soon. I don’t know how much, there’s not many people around that would be interested I don’t think.

LYN-Well, he sees it as a draw from across America. I don’t know how that happens but there are people a lot smarter than me in PR.

PRIMM-There are people that how to do this.

LYN-Let me ask you, you said that you lived at Club Continental and how did you, did you stay there long?

PRIMM-Oh good lord, I stayed there from ’72 until, about ten years. Then I moved into a house over in Mandarin and that fell through and I moved out to Orange Park and I’ve lived here in Orange Park since.

LYN-I remember when we were at Cecil, to me you married and you had a home and had children. Orange Park was beginning to be the place to move because around the base was not lucrative. So, when he said you were in Orange Park, I think of Orange Park as a Navy area.

PRIMM-It is.

LYN-So here you are in Orange Park and you are happy in Orange Park.

PRIMM-Oh yes, I much prefer Orange Park. I always have. I just do.

LYN-Well, thank you for being a good Navy wife.

PRIMM-(Laugh) You’re welcome.

LYN-You served a long time.

PRIMM-I had no choice. It was either join and go along or else you know forget it and get out and a lot of them did. A lot left, they said “this is not for me”, the wives then just pulled away.

LYN-They left their spouses. I do remember that divorce rate in the first two years of marriage was about 50% failure.

PRIMM-There was no Family Service Center when we moved. We planned our own moves, we called in the movers you know. I unpacked the boxes after they packed them. And I mean they packed everything.

LYN-I'll tell you a funny story about my first move. We were living in a lovely apartment and I had gotten my husband off of the Forestall and we were on our way to Memphis and had a new baby. The movers came in a little bit earlier than I thought they were coming.

PRIMM-They always do.

LYN-By the time they left they had packed the coffee cup that was sitting in the sink before I could wash it.

PRIMM-You see this, this is called a silent butler. When I moved from one place to the next and I opened it up it was all cigarette butts they had packed. They had packed the whole damn thing. (Laugh) Be sure to get your clothes out and get them out of the way.

LYN-They just packed through.

PRIMM-They packed everything. Now I think you can rent your own truck and move yourself and I think I would never try that in a hundred years.

LYN-Well, we did it. When we got out after ten years my husband was accepted to Coast Guard OCS at the same time he was accepted at Seminary. We lived in Norfolk and they would pay to move you back, what did you call that, where you had entered. They chose the reimbursement to the place you had first entered which was Atlanta.

We turned down the Coast Guard and we went to Seminary in New Orleans in 1976. It was just the beginning that you could do your own move. We were moving twice as far as a mover would have been paid for and we made the decision to move ourselves. Oh, my goodness. The U-Haul truck was not big enough, we found a truck that was bigger, we filled it, we had a little boy that turned five the day that we moved. What was left that wouldn't go in I said to my neighbors "Enjoy yourselves". Oh, my goodness. I was so excited that my husband got to pursue his career in the ministry. We towed our little car behind the truck and I drove to New Orleans. That was the beginning of when you could make your own move and make those decisions. It was a hard move.

PRIMM-It was different too because when we moved from California to Norfolk we could only take so much. You lived aboard the base at the War College. You had to live aboard the base. You could only take so much. So, they packed all of our furniture. The only thing we took was Cindy's, we took the piano and we took a rug and I think that's it because the houses came furnished with Navy furniture. And our clothing, so everything that they packed in Lemoore was packed like it was going overseas in a crate. When we moved to Cecil Field, everything that came from California which had been in storage all that time, for six months, was fine. Everything that came from Norfolk was soaking wet.

LYN-Oh no. Our Norfolk move was the worst for us.

PRIMM-Those packers, I don't know where they stored it. I have no idea what happened but, the rug was dripping. It wasn't moist it was wet. I have no idea where they stored it.

LYN-My washer and dryer didn't come for about two months. Finally, they found my washer and dryer.

PRIMM-We had one box that we got years ago and it wasn't mine. We were missing a tricycle on one move.

LYN-It never appeared?

PRIMM-No. The boxes that we were missing they never got to us.

LYN-I don't know how my washer and dryer got separated but somehow, they did.

PRIMM-I could never lose the ironing board. (Laugh) I still had the dad gum thing.

LYN-We did get to choose the movers. Did you get to choose the movers?

PRIMM-No. That went out on bid.

LYN-We got a choice it seems like when we left here. I know when we left Memphis we got a choice.

PRIMM-It went out on bid and whoever got it showed up.

LYN-And packed your cigarette butts and my coffee mug.

PRIMM-Oh, everything. I mean they packed everything. I'm surprised they didn't pack dirty diapers.

LYN-They may have in many cases.

PRIMM-They didn't but I'm surprise they didn't. You just sat back and let them you know, do their thing, because we were packing to leave here in '62 when Kennedy was killed. So here we are and they packed everything and all of a sudden somebody says, "Turn your television on". We didn't know whether they were going to pick up our stuff the next day or after the week-end because of the funeral. We didn't know if we were going to be able to move. We thought we were going to be stranded sitting in the house with everything packed up.

LYN-Those were the days. So, you came to Orange Park and you found it is still your Navy community.

PRIMM-I still associate with Navy wives. There's a couple in South Carolina that were in our first squadron. I talk to them. I need to try to drive up there and see them. So, you run into each other you know then the aviation community was very small in the Navy, let's put it that way.

Everybody, if you knew somebody or somebody knew somebody or something to that effect. We found that out when we were at the Armed Forces Staff College. The Air Force people did not know another group. They never moved. They moved very rarely. It's just a different...

LYN-Way of life. We lived on base one time and that was in Memphis, Millington. We had Marines living with Navy which proved to be very hard. They just didn't get along. Their wives really didn't get along.

PRIMM-Oh gosh, because we had Marines with us of course when we were in Meridian and they were terrific. And we had Marines with us in Milton and we loved them.

LYN-Well, they just didn't get along there and remember I had never lived on base. I didn't live the military life so it was very eye-opening. We were only there nine months. It was a different life for me.

PRIMM-We stayed, how many weeks did we stay in Memphis? In route to a training command, they moved the instruments from somewhere in Pensacola and they moved it to Memphis. We were in Memphis and the Navy paid for us, we moved in a Holiday Inn that had two rooms and a little kitchenette type thing. We were only there six weeks or so. Then we went on to Texas. We took whatever they would pay you.

LYN-We did that once. That's how we got to California. My husband was sent to California to [Miramar] we lived in like two rooms in a hotel. He wrote the manual for the VAST program with a person out there. It was supposed to be a short time and it ended up being many months. That was our time in California.

PRIMM-I love San Diego. Did you go to the zoo?

LYN-Oh my goodness yes. We walked into Tijuana several times. That was a whole another thing but that was back in the '70's and the weather was just spectacular.

PRIMM-Except now they're having such rains.

LYN-They are having a lot of rain now. I remember I was used to rain, I grew up in Florida, and I so yearned for a thunder storm and I remember sitting in a church one Sunday and it started thundering and I'm like, "Thank you God." It felt like home.

PRIMM-We didn't have thunder storms even in Lemoore.

LYN-There was one and then it was a very hot summer and there was very little air conditioning out there and they had this heat wave. That's what I remember but the evenings were just spectacular. Then we went back to Virginia. He was stationed at the base in Norfolk and we lived in Virginia Beach. It was good to be back home in our house rather than living in a little hotel.

PRIMM-I'm glad I'm not on the West Coast now but I loved it while I was there. Now I'm leery of the people in California. They're quite wild. I have a cousin, Fred's cousin lives out there and so when I do pass through there I see Fred Wood but and I hear from him but, it's just you know, it's their children are grown and of course and their grandchildren aren't but they're getting grown but it's just a different world.

LYN-It's a whole different culture.

PRIMM-And I have some friends that are retired out there and they seem to like it but I just, it's not my way, my cup of tea, let's put it that way.

LYN-I don't think it would be mine.

Again, I'm going to say "Thank you" for being a good Navy wife.

PRIMM-You are so kind.

LYN-The Navy would have been so smart to issue people like you.

PRIMM-Wouldn't they though? (Laugh)

LYN-There was so much support needed.

PRIMM-And we did. I guess that's why I was so supportive of the wives and all was because they were the ones you fell back on and you know, when I, even dear Nancy whose husband wasn't there she was, here she is a POW wife, a MIA wife and I mean she was my big support. We used to take five kids and go to a Mexican restaurant. We put the kids at one table and we would sit at another one. She said, "I'm going to buy a dump truck and put the kids in it." But no, I could not have made it without Nancy. She is still my good buddy. She lives over in Pensacola and I just dearly love Nancy and her husband when he came back. I loved him to death. He was just as sweet as he could be.

LYN-Now tell me about the bracelet you have on your right arm.

PRIMM-The MIA/POW bracelet?

LYN-For those who read this and listen who were not aware, there was a period of time that we in America wore bracelets, and I prayed for Jeremiah Denton, I don't know if you remember Jeremiah Denton.

PRIMM-My good friend, Mary Belle Bordone when her husband died she ended up marrying Jeremiah Denton.

LYN-You are kidding me.

PRIMM-No.

LYN-Did you see the movie recently about his life?

PRIMM-No, I haven't but Mary Belle, she had been married many years to Dick Bordone and so when he died she kept, she said that he introduced her as Mary Belle Denton. His wife was one of the starters of the National League of Families.

LYN-I lived in Virginia Beach just down the road from them.

PRIMM-I had met him at, I guess one of Dick's change of commands up there in Norfolk. A real nice guy.

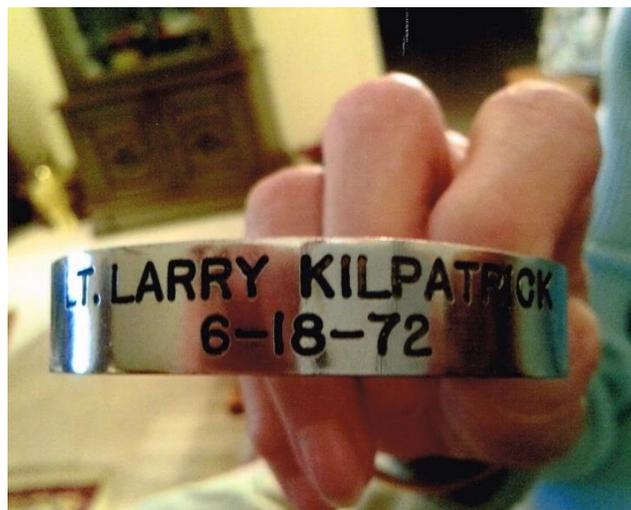
LYN-Nice. With a bunch of children. He left behind a lot of children.

PRIMM-He was a good Catholic as we say. (Laugh)

LYN-There is a movie that I have just recently seen about his life. I didn't know if you knew about that. I can't remember where I saw it. [Documentary on Public Broadcasting] I am going to take a picture of your bracelet.

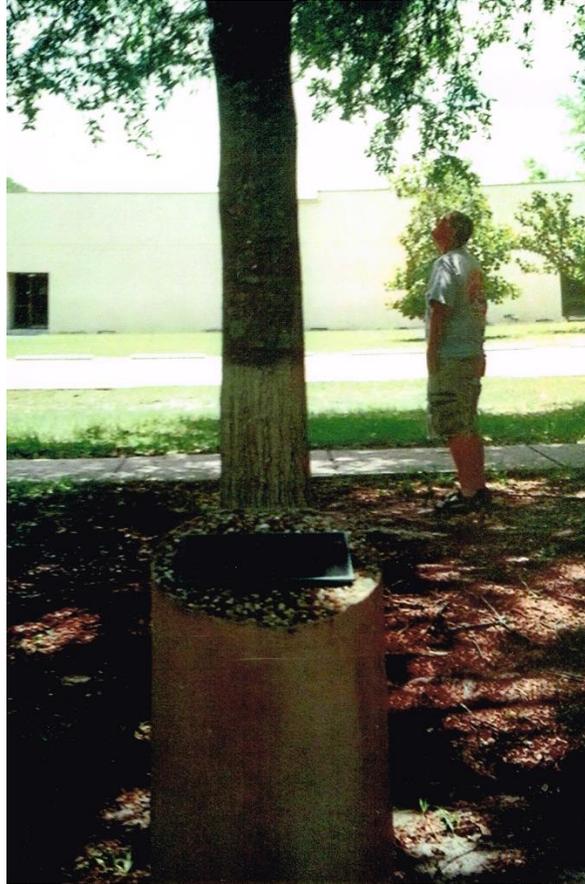
LYN-Let me get this on tape-this man is not on the tree. His name is Lt. Larry Kilpatrick.

PRIMM-He was in our air wing.



Primm had her husband's bracelet struck in silver and wears it still 35 years after he was shot down during the Vietnam War. People across our nation bought POW/MIA bracelets to use to remind them to pray for and support families of others who were missing after they left their families behind-some never to return.





Frederick Williston Wright, IV
at the memorial plaque and tree
commemorating the life of his father
Commander Frederick Williston
Wright, III

Cecil Field, Florida

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Frederick Williston Wright, III

Commander

CVW-3, USS SARATOGA, TF 77, 7TH FLEET

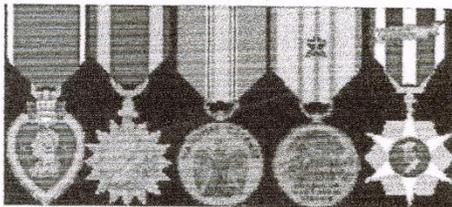
United States Navy

Haworth, New Jersey

July 11, 1936 to November 10, 1972

FREDERICK W WRIGHT III is on the Wall at Panel W1, Line 90

See the full profile or name rubbing for Frederick Wright



Mary Helen Hoff story

This Month In Clay County History

Submitted by Vishi R. Garig, Archives Specialist,
Clay County Archives, Green Cove Springs, Florida

Mary Helen Hoff: An American Hero



Mary Helen Hoff

Mary Helen Hoff was buried November 17, 2015. She had a motorcycle honor guard escort from St. Catherine's Church in Orange Park to her final burial place at the Jacksonville National Cemetery. Drove of men and women, many of them Vietnam veterans and almost all bearing the POW/MIA flag patch were at her funeral mass. The parking lot of St. Catherine's was filled with the roar of their Harleys. They came out to honor a woman who never forgot them or their brothers who never came back from war.

Mary Hoff was the widow of Michael George Hoff, a Navy pilot who was shot down over Laos in 1970. She never forgot him and out of her yearning, sorrow and determination was born the POW/MIA flag that we all instantly recognize as the symbol of "you are not forgotten."

In 1970 Mary was living in Orange Park with her children. She was serving her county as a Navy wife: by keeping the home fires burning and keeping her aviator's children safe, healthy and loved. She had met Mike Hoff in 1959 when he was a flight instructor in Pensacola. In 1970 her husband was stationed at NAS Cecil Field. He wasn't home though; he was on deployment, flying strafing and bombing missions off the USS Coral Sea.

On January 7, 1970, Hoff was shot down near the Laotian Ho Chi Minh trail. He never returned home. And so began Mary's journey, her life's work, the path of a hero.

Mary worked tirelessly to bring him back. In October of 1973, Mary along with a contingent of other members of the League of Families of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Southeast Asia went to Laos. There she spoke to a Pathet Lao colonel who gave her some hope that Hoff and others might still be alive or at least their bodies found. "He always left open the possibility they might be found, but without committing himself," she told The Oregonian newspaper.

Think about her trip to Laos. She went all the way to a country at that was still embattled and dangerous, and put her "boots on the ground" in an attempt to find her husband. Comparatively, this would be like a modern day military wife going to Afghanistan,



traveling through Taliban held territory, and asking a Taliban leader, "where is my spouse?" Mary was what a Navy wife, an American hero, looks like.

She scoured military documents, reports, wrote letters, sold POW/MIA bracelets, sent Freedom of Information Act requests, anything to help find Mike. She told everyone about the face of the POW/MIA's. She gave interviews in an attempt to

make people remember, to never forget. In a 1973 interview she told the reporter that she was "more confident now than I have ever been that my husband is alive." That type of hope and determination: that's what a hero thinks like.

In 1974 Mary wrote a letter to the Oregonian newspaper. She detailed the plight of the POW/MIA she believed were still in Vietnam and Laos. She called out the Pathet Lao for not being forthcoming or even truthful about the fate of then 1,242 missing military and civilians. She implored citizens to write to their senators, to General Alexander Haig, Dr. Kissinger, President Nixon, the Chinese, the Russians--anybody who could make a difference.

"Don't wait for Mike to do it, because Mike has been waiting for help since he became

"Don't want for Mike to do it, because Mike has been waiting for help since he became missing on Jan. 7, 1970. We are Mike's family. If you won't do it for him, do it for us," she wrote. She signed the letter "Mrs. Michael G. Hoff and Children, 2723 River Oak Drive, Orange Park, Florida." That is what an American hero sounds like.

A 1977 letter from Mary, with the letterhead "Help Our Missing Men" and the POW/MIA emblem, contained a FIFA request. And the bureaucrats responded with "we are unable to find and reference to Mr. Michael G. Hoff in our records." This did not deter Mary Hoff. Heroes don't get deterred by government paper pushers.

In 1983, the government wrote her a letter giving her the "facts" as the Navy saw them about the shoot down and subsequent fate of Michael Hoff. "While the chances of your husband's survival cannot be encouraged, in the absence of evidence confirming his fate, he is considered to be missing in action," the naval officer wrote. It didn't even slow her down.

It wasn't till 1993 that the government was able to tell Mary about what happened to Michael. This information was from a Laotian villager who found the body. He took off Mike's flight suit and some other personal effects to sell for rice. Michael had been mortally wounded. He was left near his crashed jet. The witness said a photo of the pilot, Helen and the kids was in the pocket of his flight suit. Michael was left unburied.

In 1997, a recovery team went to Laos and searched for the body of Michael Hoff. He was not recovered but the investigators felt that the suspected crash site and the items recovered from there "are sufficient to establish a probable correlation to the aircraft involved in the case 1546 incident." Case 1546 was Mike's case number.

Though the 1970's, 80's and into the 1990's Mary had lived in limbo, an uncertainty that would crush most people. She too was a prisoner of war, subjected to a grief that few of us can understand. But Mary persevered. She had children to raise. And she did a great job. Her son Michael, his voice cracking during her eulogy, reminded us all that Mary didn't let that limbo take over her life. She helped others always. She was a hero named "Mom".

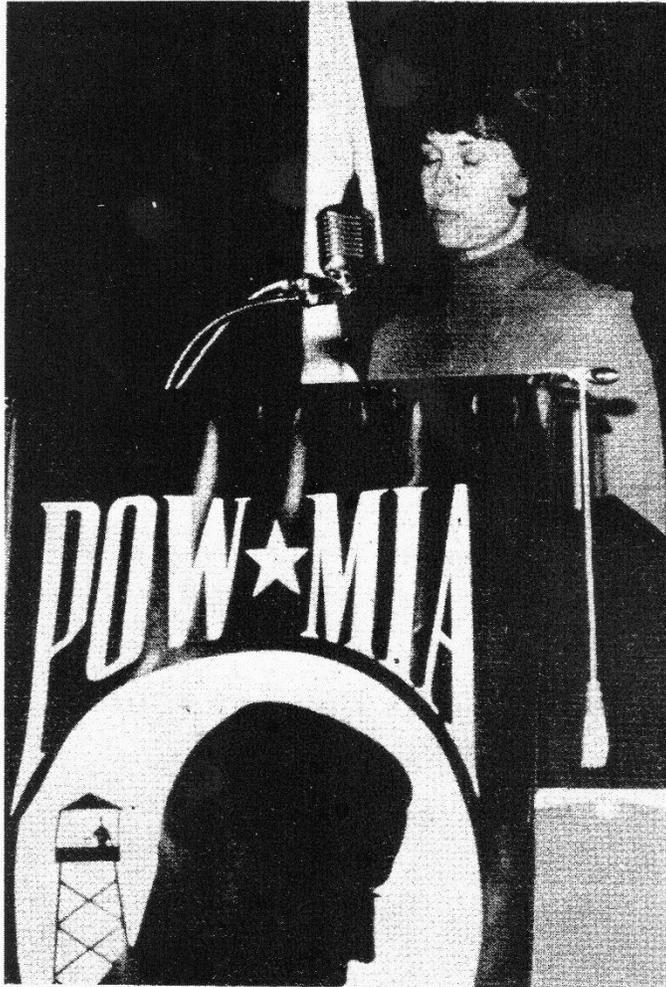
In 1970, Mary, as a member of the League of Families, recognized the need to create a symbol to be used as a reminder of the missing and imprisoned. She had graphic designer, Norman Rivkess design the emblem. Today, that is the POW/MIA flag that flies alongside Old Glory everywhere. It is the only other flag to ever fly over the US Capitol besides the American Flag.

Mary Helen Hoff died on November 10, 2015. She got to spend Veterans Day with her hero, Michael Hoff.

Mary wanted us never to forget our POW/MIA's. If we have something to be thankful for as Americans, be grateful for the gift of Mary Helen Hoff, an American hero.

Sources: the files of the Clay County Archives. Genealogybank.com

Cecil Field Vietnam War Memorial Dedication December 7, 1974



EMOTIONAL MOMENT - Mrs. Mary Hoff fights back the tears as she thanks everyone for his 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.

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