

History of the POW/MIA Flag as a Recognized Symbol

In 1971, Mrs. Mary Hoff, an MIA wife and member of the National League of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, recognized the need for a symbol of our POW/MIAs. Prompted by an article in the Jacksonville, Florida TIMES-UNION, Mrs. Hoff contacted Norman Rivkees, Vice-President of Annin & Company that had made a banner for the newest member of the United Nations, the People's Republic of China, as a part of their policy to provide flags to all UN member nations. Mrs. Hoff found Mr. Rivkees very sympathetic to the POW/MIA issue, and he, along with Annin's advertising agency, designed a flag to represent our missing men. Following League approval, the flags were manufactured for distribution.

The flag is black, bearing in the center, in black and white, the emblem of the League. The emblem is a white disk bearing in black silhouette the bust of a man, watch tower with a guard holding a rifle, and a strand of barbed wire; above the disk are the white letters POW and MIA framing a white 5-pointed star; below the disk is a black and white wreath above the white motto YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN.

Concerned groups and individuals have altered the original POW/MIA Flag many times; the colors have been switched from black with white - to red, white and blue, -to white with black; the POW/MIA has at times been revised to MIA/POW. Such changes, however, are insignificant. The importance lies in the continued visibility of the symbol, a constant reminder of the plight of America's POW/MIA'S.

On March 9,1989, a POW/MIA Flag, which flew over the White House on the 1988 National POW/MIA Recognition Day, was installed in the United States Capitol Rotunda as a result of legislation passed overwhelmingly during the 100th session of Congress. The leadership of both Houses hosted the installation ceremony in a demonstration of bipartisan congressional support. This POW/MIA Flag, the only flag displayed in the United States Capitol Rotunda, stands as a powerful symbol of our national commitment to our POW/MIAs until the fullest possible accounting for Americans still missing in Southeast Asia has been achieved.

On August 10,1990, the 101st Congress passes U.S. Public Law 101-355, which recognized the National League of Families POW/MIA Flag and designated it 'as a symbol of our Nation's concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. Thus ending the uncertainty for their families and the Nation'. Beyond Southeast Asia, it has been a symbol for POW/MIAs from all American Wars.

The importance of the National League of Families POW/MIA Flag lies in its continued visibility, a constant reminder of the plight of America's POW/MIAs. Other than 'Old Glory', the POW/MIA Flag is the only flag ever to fly over the White House, having been displayed in the place of honor on National POW/MIA Recognition Day since 1982.

With the passage of Section 1082 of the 1998 Defense Authorization Act during the first term of the 105th Congress, the..... 'POW/MIA Flag' will fly each year on:

Armed Forces Day - (3rd Saturday in May)

Memorial Day - (Last Monday in May)

Flag Day - June 14

Independence Day - July 4

National POW/MIA Recognition Day

(3rd Friday of September)

Veterans Day - November 11

The POW/MIA Flag will be flown on the grounds or the public lobbies of major military installations as designated by the Secretary of Defense, all Federal National Cemeteries, the National Korean War Veterans Memorial, the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the White House, the United States Post Offices and at official offices of the Secretaries of State, Defense and Veteran's Affairs, and Director of the Selective Service System.

'National League of POW/MIA Families' -- CALL THE LEAGUE UPDATE LINE: For the latest information, 24-hours a day, call 202 / 659-0133. To make inquiries, call 202 /223-6846, send email to: natlleague@aol.com, or write:

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POW MIA Flag Origin

Newt Heisley was a pilot during World War II, a dangerous role that accounts for many wartime POWs and MIAs. Years after the war, he had come to New York looking for work. "It took me four days to find a bad job at low pay," he later said of his introduction to "Big Apple" advertising agencies. But, by working hard, by 1971 he had gradually moved upward in the industry, eventually working for an agency with many national accounts.

As a veteran, the call for a flag designed to raise awareness of our Nation's POW/MIAs was a personal challenge. It was even more challenging when he considered that his oldest son Jeffrey was, during these Vietnam War years, training for combat with the United States Marines at Quantico, Virginia. As he pondered this new challenge a series of events set in motion the ideas that would create a flag unlike anything since the days of Betsy Ross. First, Jeffrey became very ill while training for combat. The illness, diagnosed as hepatitis, ravaged his body emaciating his face and structure. When he returned home, medically discharged and unable to continue further, his father looked in horror at what had once been a strong, young man. Then, as Newt Heisley looked closer at his son's gaunt features, he began to imagine what life must be like for those behind barbed wire fences on foreign shores. Slowly he began to sketch the profile of his son, working in pencil to create a black and white silhouette, as the new flag's design was created in his mind. Barbed wire, a tower, and most prominently the visage of a gaunt young man became the initial proposal.

Newt Heisley's black and white pencil sketch was one of several designs considered for the new POW/MIA flag. Newt planned, should his design be accepted, to add color at a later date...perhaps a deep purple and white. "In the advertising industry, you do everything in black and white first, then add the color," he says. Mr. Heisley's proposal for the new flag was unique. Rarely does a flag prominently display the likeness of a person. None-the-less, it was the design featuring the gaunt silhouette of his son Jeffrey that was accepted and, before Mr. Heisley could return to refine his proposal and add the colors he had planned, the black and white flags were already being printed in quantity by Annon & Company. (Though the POW/MIA flag has been produced in other colors, often in red and white, the black and white design became the most commonly used version.)

The design for the POW/MIA flag was never copyrighted. It became a flag that belongs to everyone, a design that hauntingly reminds us of those we dare not ever forget. Behind the black and white silhouette is a face we can't see... the face of a husband, a father, or a son who has paid with their freedom, for our freedom. Beneath the image are the words.... **"You Are Not Forgotten"**

Submitted by:

Jack Bernazzani
USAF 1968-1972