

Mary Hoff, Creator of the POW/MIA Flag

By Cindy Cheatwood



In the late 1960's, Mary Hoff and her Navy pilot husband, Cmdr. Michael Hoff and five children settled in Orange Park, having receiving orders to report to Cecil Field. Little did they know that this would be the last home Cmdr. Hoff would ever know. He was soon sent to Laos and on Jan. 7, 1970, was shot down during a bombing mission.

Later that year, Mrs. Hoff, became a member of the National League of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia and recognized the need for a

symbol for our POW/MIAs. She read a newspaper article in the Florida Times-Union about Annin Flagmakers that manufactured the flags for the newer UN member nations. After contacting Annin, Mrs. Hoff found Norman Rivkees who was VP of Sales at the time very sympathetic to the cause. He in turn contacted a local advertising agency and contracted graphic designer Newt Heisley to design a flag to represent the group. Mrs. Hoff offered input, specifying that the flag should be black and white against the opinions of many who preferred the idea of colors.

The job came just as Heisley's son Jeffrey was returning from Marine training at Quantico, VA. Jeffrey's gaunt appearance, resulting from becoming ill during training, became the inspiration for the male silhouette on the flag. Newt Heisley, was himself a World War II veteran who flew missions in the Pacific.

During her ordeal, Mary Hoff became an activist for prisoners of war and those missing in action, forming a local branch of the National League of POW-MIA Families. She even traveled with a group of 60 similar POW/MIA family members to Laos in 1973 to meet with government representatives. She sold POW-MIA bracelets, each with the name of a missing patriot, to raise funds for a memorial at Cecil Field, the naval air station where her husband was assigned.

Mrs. Hoff would not find out for 23 years exactly what had happened to her husband. In 1993, the Navy sent her a letter with the details of her husband's death obtained in an interview with a Laotian villager. Assigned to VA-86 at Cecil Field NAS, Hoff was flying off the USS Coral Sea in the Gulf of Tonkin when he attempted ejection from his crippled jet over Laos. The villager who had witnessed the crash took Hoff's flightsuit and other belongings to trade to Vietnamese soldiers for rice. The mortally wounded pilot had been stripped of his possessions and left near his crashed jet. Among the articles found in the pockets of Hoff's flightsuit was a photo of the pilot, his wife and baby Michael. What bothered Mary Hoff more than anything was that he was left to die and never buried in an area known for wild animals.

The first POW/MIA flag designed was actually a banner which hung across Mrs. Hoff's Lakeside area front door for decades. This was later loaned out to groups for special observances. Mrs. Hoff realized a more practical version was needed. With the generous support of Annin, flags were produced and distributed far and wide. In 1990, Congress recognized the POW-MIA flag and

designated it "as the 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 South Asia, thus ending the uncertainty for their families and the Nation."

This flag is the only other flag to ever fly over the United States Capitol. In 1998, Congress passed a law designating the flag to be flown on Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, POW-MIA Recognition Day and Veterans Day. Mary Hoff has traveled with other family members to many ceremonies near and far, representing those lost.

Once, when asked what message she wanted to share, Mrs. Hoff said, "Oh, I just hope that young people will notice it (the flag) and learn about it. It's up to our schools to make that possible. That's what I feel like. It needs to be told. We all have heroes and young people need them more than we do."

She also modestly offered, "Nothing I did was anything [significant], the emphasis should always be on those young men who had just gotten started in life "

Orange Park's Mary Hoff has given the world a tangible reminder that people do indeed notice and learn from. She has been a voice for those silenced too soon. Her story is preserved on video with the **Historical Society of Orange Park** as well as the **Clay County Archives**.

