The Story of the POW/MIA Flag

Sep 18, 2009

In 1971, Mrs. Michael Hoff of Jacksonville, Florida, wife of MIA Michael Hoff, a Navy Pilot, had the idea that the National League of Families of POW/MIA should have a banner, or flag, to represent its important cause. The League agreed, and told her to proceed to have a flag for the League designed. Mrs. Hoff went to Annin Flag Company, and met with Alan Rivkees, the Vice President. He agreed that Annin would design a flag for the POW/MIA and the League of Families, and assigned it to their advertising agency in New Jersey. Newt Heisley, a World War II Veteran pilot (who passed away on May 14, 2009) was Creative Director at that agency and the project of designing the POW/MIA Flag emblem became his project.

I had the pleasure of meeting Newt and spending two days with him in Colorado in October of 2008. He took me on a tour of the Air Force Academy. He told me then that he had submitted three rough sketch designs to Mrs. Hoff, and her committee chose the one you see on that flag today. Evelyn Grubb, wife of POW "Newk" Grubb, as National Coordinator of the National League of Families, then submitted that final design to the National Board for their approval. Heisley had discussed colors with Evie, and there was some discussion about whether it should be red and white, or other colors, but the final decision was to produce the flag in black and white, which represented the sorrow, anxiety and hope of their cause, and made it different from other flags.

The flag's design features a silhouette of a Prisoner of War against an unbroken white circle of hope. The young man who modeled for the silhouette is Newt Heisley's son Jeff, who had just returned from Marine boot camp. Jeff had been very ill, and looked emaciated, the way Newt had seen POWs look in the Bataan Death March of WWII. The guard tower and barbed wire symbolize his prison. The words "You Are Not Forgotten," emblazoned across the lower part of the flag, are the motto of the National League of Families of POW/MIA. Heisley said that when he was flying in the South Pacific in World War II, he thought about how awful it would be to be shot down, captured and then put into a desolate POW prison camp and forgotten by his fellow Americans. Thus "You Are Not Forgotten" became the League's symbol for remembering our prisoners and missing troops.

Evelyn Grubb and Carol Jose chose that for the title of the book about the founding of the League of Families and the domestic/U.S. Government/Geneva Convention aspects of the POW/MIA issue, which continue to resonate today. Heisley decided that the flag and his

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design should belong to all Americans, and that it would remain in the public domain. So it was never copyrighted. The flag was to honor all U.S. military missing and/or imprisoned troops. Unfortunately, parts of Newt Heisley's original flag design have been copied by other flag companies, not always in the proper design chosen by the League of Families of POW/MIA, and has also been used for many other sales articles, from medallions to patches to Zippo lighters, knives, hats, bumper stickers, and the like.

In October, 1971, Evelyn Grubb, as National Coordinator of the League of Families of POW/MIA, presented the first rendition of the League's, and the Nation's, official POW/MIA flag to then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, accompanied by Jan Ray, her office assistant, whose brother was MIA. It remains so today. The POW/MIA flag also has become the national symbol of the suffering and sacrifice of our troops far from home. It flew over the White House for the first time on National POW/MIA Recognition Day in 1988. In 1989, it became the only flag on permanent display in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Other than the Stars and Stripes, it is the only flag to fly over the White House. National POW/MIA Recognition Day is observed annually on the third Friday in September.

The League POW/MIA flag flies at military installations, many government buildings, monuments. Also at Andersonville, the infamous former Civil War Prison Camp in Georgia, where more that 30,000 Union POWs were incarcerated and more than 12,000 perished from disease and starvation. They and others are buried there in the Anderson National Historic Site Cemetery, home of the National POW/MIA Museum.
The book, "You Are Not Forgotten" is in the bookstore there.

In 2006, the POW/MIA flag flew from the nose area of the C-141 Starlifter #177, dubbed the "Hanoi Taxi," on its final flight, with many former POWs it had ferried home in 1973 aboard. The famous craft then landed its final time, and was ceremoniously, and tearfully, retired. Rolling Thunder motorcycle escorts fly the POW/MIA flag when escorting the Moving Walls, as do the American Legion Riders. Rolling Thunder is named from the 1965 Bombing missions over North Vietnam in which Larry Guarino of Indian Harbour Beach, FL and many other POW/MIA were shot down and captured or went missing. Larry remained a POW for over 7 brutal years in Hanoi. Fortunately, he survived to return. The C-141 Starlifter #177, the Hanoi Taxi, flew him home to freedom in 1973. He and his wife Evelyn, whose book "Saved By Love" depicts her time as a POW wife and mother of four sons, and the aftermath when Larry retuned, reside in Indian Harbour Beach, FL.

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Please purchase the book "You Are Not Forgotten" (2009 Indie Book Award - History) If not for yourself, then for a student, or your local library.
For each book purchased you receive a 10% discount.
Also a 20% donation goes to The National League of Families.

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To request Carol Jose as a speaker, call 877-843-8877 or
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