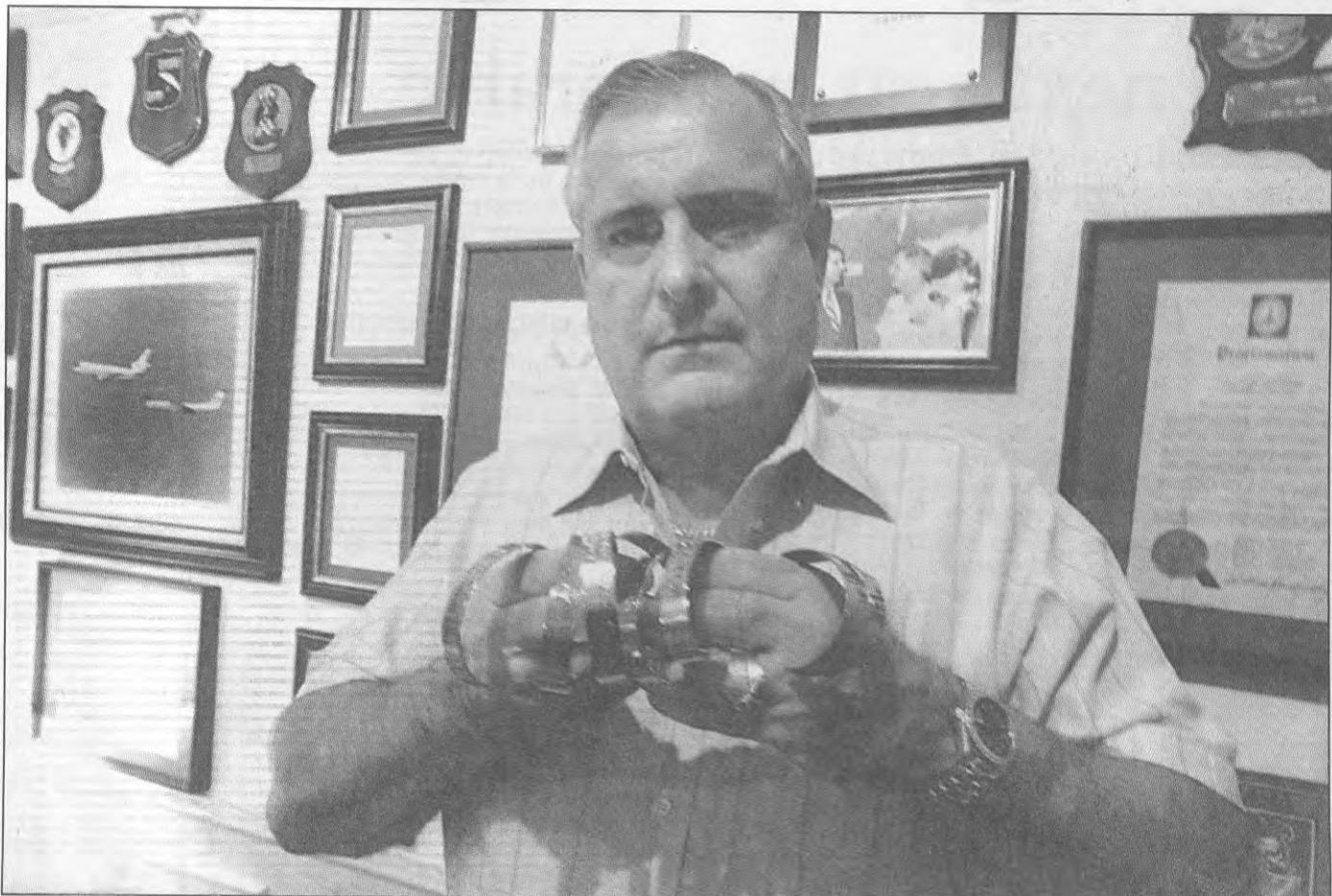


THE

MISSING L.I.N.K



The more than 400 POW/MIA bracelets in Bernard Talley's collection bear his name.



"Each bracelet is a part of someone's heart," says Bernard Talley, who keeps the mementos in his den.

A former POW proudly collects the bracelets people once wore in his honor

By Michael Precker
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Bernard Talley's den is filled with the usual memorabilia of a distinguished Air Force career: models of aircraft he flew, photographs of himself with famous people, walls full of commendations and congratula-

Then there's the jar. Inside the glass are hundreds of bracelets, each shiny and silver, each with the same inscription.

Maj. Bernard Talley
9-10-66

Each was worn by someone determined that Bernard Talley would not be forgotten during the 2,369 days he was held prisoner after he was shot down over North Vietnam. Each has been sent to him or given to him since his release, and each has a story behind it.

"It meant so much to know people were thinking of

us," says Mr. Talley, an American Airlines pilot who settled in Dallas 15 years ago. "Each bracelet is a part of someone's heart. I always thanked people for wearing it and said if they chose not to wear it anymore, I would love to have it back."

Once Mr. Talley was working with a flight attendant who told him about the bracelet she wore for years.

"She was telling me how much it meant to her, and all of a sudden she realized I was the person on her bracelet," he says. "We got so emotional. She couldn't believe it."

Vietnam is two decades past. At 53, Bernard Talley focuses on his wife and 13-year-old daughter; he flies Boeing 767s rather



Mr. Talley (third from right) celebrates with fellow Air Force officers in San Antonio after his release in 1973.

than F-4 Phantom jets.

But occasionally another bracelet and another story

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Bracelets have a place in ex-POW's heart

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make their way to the Talleys' home in North Dallas.

The latest was last month. Jerri Chidester, a former university registrar, now retired and living in Palm Beach, Fla., pulled a couple of bracelets from the bottom of her jewelry case.

She hadn't thought about them for years, until she responded to an announcement in the *Palm Beach Post* seeking readers who still had POW/MIA bracelets.

"We bought them in the early 70s," Ms. Chidester says. "A lot of us felt the war was winding down, but what about all those prisoners over there? They were always in our prayers."

When U.S. troops left South Vietnam in 1973 and North Vietnam released 589 American captives, Ms. Chidester checked newspaper reports for the names on her bracelets — Don Lyon and Bernard Talley. She didn't find either.

"I kept wearing the bracelets and waiting for more names," she says. "Five or six years later I finally gave up and decided they weren't going to come back."

Don Lyon is still listed as missing in action in Southeast Asia. But in a Veterans Day feature on the bracelets, the *Post* reporter found Mr. Talley alive and well in Dallas.

Ms. Chidester says the reporter called her "and said, 'You're never going to believe this. I just spoke with Bernard Talley.' I thought she was kidding. I just felt so good."

After learning of Mr. Talley's collection, Ms. Chidester sent her bracelet for the big jar. They've exchanged letters and, thanks to Mr. Talley's job, figure to meet one of these days.

With the bracelet count well past 100, you'd think the former Air Force pilot might be a little tired of this. Not a chance.

"Those seven years were really the most meaningful of my life," he says. "My whole personality and character changed so much. I was with such an impressive group of people, with a camaraderie you can't understand unless you lived

An enduring symbol of concern

Don't think that silver POW/MIA bracelets are just another icon of a previous generation, like tie-dyed shirts and granny glasses, tucked away in drawers and forgotten.

"This is still very important to a lot of people," says Steve Rodgers, whose Odessa engraving business turns out about 1,000 bracelets each month. "One day I'll think this is all over, and the next day I'll get an order for 100."

The bracelets originated in the late 1960s, when a now-defunct group called Voices In Vital America came up with the idea to increase awareness of Americans missing or held prisoner in Vietnam.

By the mid-1970s, an estimated 5 million had been sold. The phenomenon faded once American troops left Vietnam in 1973, but never disappeared.

"I get requests for bracelets every single day," says Mary Dzaugis, director of operations for the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. "People are very much attached to

them."

The league's Ohio chapter makes and sells bracelets, but anyone with an engraving machine can do the same. Mr. Rodgers' prices range from \$5 for a red aluminum bracelet to \$50 for stainless steel with gold-filled letters.

The goals are the same: to make sure Americans don't forget the 2,248 Americans missing in Vietnam and to press the U.S. and Vietnamese governments for a full accounting.

The league of families, which is based in Washington, says a few families of MIAs have requested that their loved ones' names not be used on bracelets, and those requests are honored. But most, Ms. Dzaugis says, are gratified that people remember and want to help.

To obtain bracelets, the league suggests writing to its Ohio chapter, P.O. Box 14853, Columbus, Ohio 43214, or to Stemarco Engraving, 1908 E. 7th St., Odessa, Texas 79761.

— Michael Precker

through it.

"But I'm really saving all this for my daughter. I want her to have this, and I hope she'll appreciate it."

Mr. Talley, who was promoted to major when he returned home and retired from the Air Force reserves as a colonel, still sees many of his fellow ex-prisoners. He says at least 10 live in the Dallas area, and several hundred gather for reunions every other year. But he doesn't know of anyone with so many bracelets.

Neither does Mary Dzaugis, director of operations for the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

"I've never heard of a collection like that," she says. "It just shows that people remember, and that's the whole idea."

Mr. Talley, who spent time in seven prison camps around Hanoi, remembers his curiosity at noticing silver jewelry in family pictures that American POWs were allowed to receive.

"At first nobody knew what it was, but it was obvious everybody had this jewelry on," he says. "Then some more recent 'shotdowns' came in and told us they were POW bracelets. We were ecstatic. For the first time we knew our plight had not been forgotten."

Even before he came home in March 1973, he had several jump starts for a collection. His father was active in the National League of Families, and his mother corresponded with many people who wore Bernard Talley's name and wrote to offer prayers and encouragement while he was still held captive.

Many of them followed up by sending bracelets, along with letters describing their joy at the news of his release.

"Some people said they had never taken them off," Mr. Talley says. "Others sent me bracelets in pieces with letters about how they'd worn them for 738 days, then they were heartbroken when they broke."

Unlike many Vietnam veterans who felt scorned after returning from an unpopular war, the POWs came home heroes. At speeches and public appearances around the country, Mr. Talley received bracelets in emotional, impromptu presentations.

"I was in a parade once, and someone ran out to the car," he says. "She was just hanging on the car and gave me a bracelet. The driver didn't slow down, and I never really had a chance to say thank you."

After the homecoming festivities subsided, Mr. Talley says, the Air Force Academy asked former prisoners to donate bracelets for a tribute at the Colorado Springs, Colo., campus. He politely refused.

"I just chose not to," he says. "I think they wanted to melt them down for a monument. But they just meant too much to me."

Over the years, the bracelets kept coming. A couple of years ago a man bought a used car in El Paso, then found a bracelet in the back seat.

"He went to all that trouble to track me down and send it to me," Mr. Talley says. "What can you say? Now I'll always have it."