

# History of the POW/MIA Bracelets

by Carol Bates Brown

Over the years, people have contacted the League looking for information on the history and background of the POW/MIA bracelets, originated and worn extensively in the 1970s, and continuously since by POW/MIA family members, veterans and other interested Americans. The following historical information was written by Carol Bates Brown, one of the originators.

I was the National Chairman of the POW/MIA Bracelet Campaign for VIVA (Voices In Vital America), the Los Angeles based student organization that produced and distributed the bracelets during the Vietnam War. Entertainers Bob Hope and Martha Raye served with me as honorary co-chairmen.

The idea for the bracelets was started by a fellow college student, Kay Hunter, and me, as a way to remember American prisoners of war suffering in captivity in Southeast Asia. In late 1969 television personality Bob Dornan (who several years later was elected to the US Congress) introduced us and several other members of VIVA to three wives of missing pilots. They thought our student group could assist them in drawing public attention to the prisoners and missing in Vietnam. The idea of circulating petitions and letters to Hanoi demanding humane treatment for the POWs was appealing, as we were looking for ways college students could become involved in positive programs to support US soldiers without becoming embroiled in the controversy of the war itself. The relatives of the men were beginning to organize locally, but the National League of POW/MIA Families had yet to be formed.

During that time Bob Dornan wore a bracelet he had obtained in Vietnam from hill tribesmen, which he said always reminded him of the suffering the war had brought to so many. We wanted to get similar bracelets to wear to remember US POWs, so rather naively, we tried to figure out a way to go to Vietnam. Since no one wanted to fund two sorority-girl types on a tour to Vietnam during the height of the war, and our parents were livid at the idea, we gave up and Kay Hunter began to check out ways to make bracelets. Soon other activities drew her attention and she dropped out of VIVA, leaving me, another student Steve Frank, and our adult advisor, Gloria Coppin, to pursue the POW/MIA awareness program.

The major problem was that VIVA had no money to make bracelets, although our advisor was able to find a small shop in Santa Monica that did engraving on silver used to decorate horses. The owner agreed to make 10 sample bracelets. I can remember us sitting around in Gloria Coppin's kitchen with the engraver on the telephone, as we tried to figure out what we would put on the bracelets. This is why they carried only name, rank and date of loss, since we didn't have time to think of anything else.

Armed with the sample bracelets, we set out to find someone who would donate money to make bracelets for distribution to college students. It had not yet occurred to us that adults would want to wear the things, as they weren't very attractive. Several approaches to Ross Perot were rebuffed, to include a proposal that he loan us \$10,000 at 10% interest. We even visited Howard Hughes' senior aides in Las Vegas. They were sympathetic but not willing to help fund our project. Finally in the late summer of 1970, Gloria Coppin's husband donated enough brass and copper to make 1,200

bracelets. The Santa Monica engraver agreed to make them and we could pay him from any proceeds we might realize.

Although the initial bracelets were going to cost about 75 cents to make, we were unsure about how much we should ask people to donate to receive a bracelet. In 1970, a student admission to the local movie theater was \$2.50. We decided this seemed like a fair price to ask from a student for one of the nickel-plated bracelets. We also made copper ones for adults who believed they helped their "tennis elbow." Again, according to our logic adults could pay more, so we would request \$3.00 for the copper bracelets.

At the suggestion of local POW/MIA relatives, we attended the National League of Families annual meeting in Washington, DC in late September. We were amazed at the interest of the wives and parents in having their man's name put on bracelets and in obtaining them for distribution. Bob Dornan, who was always a champion of the POW/MIAs and their families, continued to publicize the issue on his Los Angeles television talk show and promoted the bracelets.

On Veterans Day, November 11, 1970, we officially kicked off the bracelet program with a news conference at the Universal Sheraton Hotel. Public response quickly grew and we eventually got to the point we were receiving over 12,000 requests a day. This also brought money in to pay for brochures, bumper stickers, buttons, advertising and whatever else we could do to publicize the POW/MIA issue. We formed a close alliance with the relatives of missing men – they got bracelets from us on consignment and could keep some of the money they raised to fund their local organizations. We also tried to furnish these groups with all the stickers and other literature they could give away.

While Steve Frank and I ended up dropping out of college to

work for VIVA full time to administer the bracelet and other POW/MIA programs, none of us got rich off the bracelets. VIVA's adult advisory group, headed by Gloria Coppin, was adamant that we would not have a highly paid professional staff. As I recall the highest salary was \$15,000, a year and we were able to keep administrative costs to less than 20 percent of income.

In all, VIVA distributed nearly five million bracelets and raised enough money to produce untold millions of bumper stickers, buttons, brochures, matchbooks, newspaper ads, etc., to draw attention to the missing men. In 1976, VIVA closed its doors. By then the American public was tired of hearing about Vietnam and showed no interest in the POW/MIA issue.