

Stacey Andrews and Her Missing Gulf War Prisoner

By Rudi Williams
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ARLINGTON, Va., Feb. 13, 2002 -- Feb. 28, 1991, wasn't a good day for Air Force Capt. Bill Andrews or his wife, Stacey. His F-16C fighter was shot down over Iraq on the last day of the Persian Gulf War.

Stacey Andrews was in a state of confusion for the next four days. "It was very hard because I didn't know whether he was alive or dead," she told more than 200 at DoD's eighth annual POW/MIA prayer breakfast here. "I suffered what several of the people here in this room today are (still) going through."

The afternoon of Feb. 28, Andrews was napping while her two children, Sean, 5, and Shannon, 2, were in the child care center at Hahn Air Base, Germany. She was awakened abruptly by someone calling her name. No one was in the house, though, so she shrugged it off as a weird dream. Later, visitors rang her doorbell.

She immediately knew it was bad news.

"I told them to say what they had to say, then get out -- not nice," she recalled. "He told me my husband had been shot down and was missing in action. My father served in Vietnam twice, so to me, MIA meant I had very little hope left."

Friends and her husband's co-workers gathered around her to help her cope. Her father flew to Germany.

"It was a wonderful coming together of people in support and love," Andrews said. "We were sitting there one afternoon and there was a report of a U.S. pilot with a broken leg that had showed up in Baghdad -- had to be Bill!" she exclaimed. "He'd reported that he'd trashed his leg when he ejected."

That was the good news -- her husband was alive.

"We went to the club on the base and I rang the bell -- drinks for everyone!" Andrews exclaimed. "It was a huge celebration, not because my husband was a prisoner of war, but because he was alive."

Then uncertainty set in again. The Iraqis released U.S. prisoners to the Red Cross, but the captain's name wasn't listed. "His status hadn't been changed," Andrews said. "We didn't even know if the Red Cross had him at that point."

The uncertainty turned to joy when Andrews called his family shortly thereafter from the hospital ship USNS Mercy.

"That was the only phone call that could make my life right again," she said. Andrews packed up the family and headed for Andrews Air Force Base, Md., to meet her husband. After surgery and recovery, he and the family returned to Hahn a few weeks later.

"The reception there was amazing," Andrews said. "Our whole small village turned up to welcome him home. We were greeted with an old German tradition of a bottle of wine from the year of his birth and one from the current year -- his rebirth."

She said her husband told her that he always had faith in his country and in God. He knew that people around the world were praying for him and that he was a recipient of those prayers.

"His faith and my faith in the country and God sustained us," Andrews noted. She said he'd only felt lost once, when he was hiding under some stuff as the Iraqis fled from the advancing U.S. Army.

"He was scared he wouldn't survive the barrage where he was," she said. "The war stopped just short of his location. It grew quiet -- no more artillery from the American side -- and he prayed."

Andrews said five-year-old Sean knew something was wrong, although Shannon was "happily oblivious, too young to know what was happening." The family since has grown by a third child, 8-year-old Patrick.

"At five years old, my son had a fair understanding of what was happening because, prior to my husband's incident, we had lost my best friend's husband in a midair collision," Andrews said. "My son was best friends with their son. My son asked me, 'Is this what happened to Daniel's daddy? Is daddy coming home?'"

"I explained that it wasn't exactly what happened to Daniel's daddy and we didn't know if he was coming home," she said.

Bill Andrews, now a colonel, is operations group commander at Mountain Home. He's currently deployed as vice commander of the 366th Air Expeditionary Wing.

Stacey Andrews thanked the spouses and families of former POWs and MIAs for attending the prayer breakfast. "If we had the opportunity to change places with our spouses, we would have done so in a heartbeat," Andrews told the audience. "We can't ever fully appreciate what they've gone through."

The prayer breakfasts show people in the government still care and are concerned about the well-being of former POWs, missing servicemen and their families, she said.

"It also shows that there is still someone who wants to make a difference in the lives and make things better for those of us who have gone through this sort of thing and those of us who are still going through this uncertainty," she said. "The support and love of many people made life easier."

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