



BAPTIST PRESS
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
Telephone (615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Walker L. Knight, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30309, Telephone (404) 873-4041

DALLAS Orville Scott, Chief, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 741-1996

NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Gomer Lesch, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37203, Telephone (615) 254-5461

RICHMOND Jesse C. Fletcher, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (703) 353-0151

WASHINGTON W. Barry Garrett, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

July 27, 1973

Israel's 25th Anniversary:

Christian Roots
In the Holy Land

By W. C. Fields
Director, Baptist Press

Early this year a group of Baptist journalists crossed the Sea of Galilee in a rainstorm. As we neared Tiberias on the west shore the rain slackened and the sun broke through. Instantly a brilliant rainbow arched over the north end of the lake. It reached from Capernaum on the west shore, where Jesus resided at one time, to the Golan Heights on the east shore, where Arab artillery fired on Jewish farms until the 1967 Six Day War changed things.

That rainbow seems to be a fitting symbol of the drama and pathos, the despair and hope which have competed in this corner of the earth since time began.

Here man's oldest family feud continues from time to time in pathological fury. Enmity between Jew and Arab traces back a hundred and fifty generations to the sons of Abraham, the half-brothers, Isaac, and ancestor of the Jews, and Ishmael, an ancestor of the Arabs.

From Dan to Beersheba and from the Mediterranean to the Mountains of Moab, modern Israel is a living museum of 4,000 years of triumphs and tragedies.

Invaders, despoilers and "protectors" have included the Assyrians, the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs (673-1072), Seljuks (1072-1099), Crusaders (1099-1291), Mamluks (1291-1517), Ottoman Turks (1517-1917) and British (1917-1948).

The declaration of the independent Jewish state, Israel, May 14, 1968 marked the first real Jewish government since Titus' Tenth Roman Legion destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

For the Jews to have survived these millenia of adversity, and for the modern state of Israel to have flourished in spite of three wars and the unremitting hostility of 100 million Arabs over the last 25 years, are miracles of endurance and ingenuity.

Israel is a young nation, celebrating its silver anniversary this year and abounding with the vigor and zeal of youth, but its future is guided by a long and vivid memory.

Yad Vashem in eastern Jerusalem is a deeply moving memorial to the six million Jews who were exterminated in cold blood by the Nazis. These martyrs have not been forgotten. Their names are listed. They have been granted "Memorial Citizenship in the State of Israel."

A mile away other honored dead rest in a military cemetery on Mount Herzl, named for Theodore Herzl, the father of Zionism. The lessons of other years are not lost on the young Israelis.

Down by the Dead Sea is Masada, the mountaintop fortress built by Herod the Great in the first century. Here a band of determined Jews held off Rome's legions for three years. When defeat was near, 960 men, women and children committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans.

Now, 1,800 years later these Jewish martyrs are not forgotten. Certain Israeli military units conduct their oaths of office on top of this windswept desert stronghold. As Jews of the world used to say, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Israelis are saying today, "Masada will never fall again!"

In Israel the old is linked with the new. Antiquity and modernity go hand in hand.

The most deeply moving moment for many visitors to Israel is that first glimpse of the Sea of Galilee.

Seeing it there at the foot of the mountains, blue and cool and calm, suddenly brings into focus many of the events in the life of Jesus and the disciples.

The lake, now surrounded by kibbutzim, the Jewish communal farms, was the locale of much activity in the short public life of Jesus. Apparently he loved this region, and with good reason. It is the most beautiful part of Israel.

This is the essence of the Christian's special feeling for the Holy Land. Jesus lived there.

The Apostles and early disciples walked these hills and valley. Before them were the prophets, kings and other notables of Old Testament times.

The roots of our religious history are in the soil of Israel. A journey through this ancient land is therefore an emotional experience.

The earliest Christian struggles were in Israel. It is natural that we who are their heirs should identify with them and the scenes of their joys and sorrows.

Each year Christian visitors (and they now number into the hundreds of thousands) has his own response to the special places for his faith--Joseph's carpenter shop in Nazareth, the place of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River near Jericho, Lazarus' tomb on the east side of Jerusalem, Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle, the well in Nablus (Shechem) where Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman, and the many places in Jerusalem which make vivid his life, death and resurrection. Indeed, every turn in the road seems to have its own biblical association.

This special kind of continuity makes the sometimes unholy land preeminently a place of pilgrimage, a prime destination for the faithful. There is an extraordinary moving of the spirit for the Jew in praying at the Western Wall, the "wailing wall;" for the Muslim in kneeling in the Mosque of Omar, the Dome of the Rock; and for the Christian in a few moments of solitude at Bethlehem or on the Mount of Olives. To walk in the steps of the prophets and apostles is to attempt to come nearer to their dreams and visions.

Jerusalem has about 11,000 Christians. There are 75,000 believers in the entire country, many of them Arabs.

Southern Baptist work began there in 1921. Today we have thirteen career missionary couples in the country. They have been resourceful in being good neighbors as well as good witnesses.

Christian missions in the Middle East among both Jews and Arabs has tended to temper the partisanship of USA Christians. Concern for Arab as well as for Jewish refugees has been stymied by the continuing political stalemate.

On the greatest of the Christian festivals, Easter, the believer's thoughts turn once again to Jerusalem and to the transcendent importance of what happened there nearly two thousand years ago. This small corner of the earth has given a message of universal importance to mankind.

Like us in the USA, how approaching our 200th anniversary, the Israelis in their 25th year of nationhood still have an open question on their success as trustees of a spiritual heritage.

Israel is fascinating to us today because it is still a microcosm of the dreams and nightmares of humanity, the fortunes and misfortunes of man's restless energy, a special arena where man continues to search for godliness and neighborliness.

If and when men can learn to live together in peace at this Middle East crossroads of culture, politics and religion, there will be genuine hope for the rest of us at other crossroads around the world. Shalom! Peace.

POW Victim of Brutality
Feels Pity, Not Hatred

GRANBY, Colo. (BP)--A navy commander who survived beatings and other physical tortures during almost six years in a prison camp told 38 families of recently-released prisoners of war and persons missing in action that he felt sympathy, not hatred for his captors.

In an address at a retreat at remote Snow Mountain Ranch, 87 miles northwest of Denver, Commander Eugene McDaniels of Virginia Beach, Va., said he told himself many times during his captivity that he would come home to a freedom his captors would never know.

"I feel no hatred for the North Vietnamese. Instead I feel a great deal of sympathy for them, and I pray that they too will know God," the Naval officer said.

Tracing the various ways God spoke to him as a prisoner, McDaniel, member of First Baptist Church of Virginia Beach, said God made his presence known after "some of the worse and most brutal beatings and physical tortures the human mind can imagine.

"In 1969, after two weeks of brutal beatings, I came very close to dying, but God made known to me his presence. He was always with me."

The retreat was the fifth sponsored in June and July by High Flight, a non-profit religious foundation started a year ago by former Apollo 15 astronaut James Irwin.

During the retreats, about 1300 members of 310 ex-POW and MIA families attended at High Flight's expense. They received help from specialists in the fields of law, family guidance, psychiatry, psychology, and religion.

One of the features of greatest interest was the questioning of the eleven ex-POWs by the MIA families.

During a 90-minute inquiry, the ex-POWs responded to questions ranging from prison mail service to whether the government was sharing all of the information it had about men missing in action.

McDaniel, who fielded most of the questions, said he learned that all the information he gave during debriefings was sent on to appropriate MIA relatives.

Air Force Colonel Joseph Kittinger, of Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala., supported McDaniel. He told the MIA families he wanted to assure them that the government's first priority was to get all the information available about men missing in action and to release it when the government was sure of the facts.

The red-haired Kittinger had no sympathy for persons who speak favorably of North Vietnam or support U.S. foreign aid for that country.

"I think it is ridiculous to even think about giving aid to North Vietnam till they account for every person captured, and I get angry when Ramsey Clark and Jane Fonda tell what kind, compassionate people the North Vietnamese are."

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Wrapup

POW-MIA Special Problems
Surface at Retreat

By Roy Jennings

GRANBY, Colo. (BP)--A group of ex-POW and MIA families who arrived at Snow Mountain Ranch near here a week ago, many defensive and withdrawn, left Friday rested, with smiling faces and profuse appreciation and many with new purposes in life.

During the seven-day interval, the 119 members of 39 families, 11 of them ex-prisoners of war, got help from specialists in such fields as psychology, psychiatry, family guidance, law and religion.

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They also met old friends, hiked on mountain trails, toured the Rockies, and were entertained by such personalities as Norma Zimmer of the Lawrence Welk show.

The families were the guests of High Flight, a non-profit religious foundation started a year ago by retired Air Force Colonel James Irwin, the Apollo 15 astronaut.

The retreat, a fifth and last in a series High Flight has conducted since the middle of June at its expense, attracted 1300 members of 310 ex-POW and MIA families from throughout the United States.

A variety of problems surfaced during discussions among the families. They ranged from how to be kind to sympathetic but bumbling neighbors to integrating a husband back into the family.

The problems also included how to accept the fact that a son is missing in action, the removal of bitterness from their lives and the need for a deeper faith to map out a future without a husband.

The specialists tried to deal with the problems in group and personal conferences. Durward Davis, leader of a conference on what the Bible says about facing problems, acknowledged the problem of overly sympathetic neighbors.

"Unfortunately, neighbors don't know how to act natural around POW and MIA families. My advice to these neighbors is to try to be a friend and to give these families the opportunity to share, but to leave the decision up to them. Beyond that, people need to let their POW-MIA neighbors become a natural part of the community like everyone else," said Davis, pastor of The Rock Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta.

The 11 ex-POWs sought to help MIA families in a 90-minute discussion of their lives in prison, prisoners' chances for survival, and government efforts to share information about men missing in action.

Navy Commander Eugene B. McDaniel of Virginia Beach, Va., told MIA families that all the information he gave during the debriefings was given to appropriate relatives.

Air Force Colonel Joseph Kittinger of Orlando, Fla., supported McDaniel and emphasized that the government's first priority was to gather all information about men missing in action and to share it when the facts were validated.

The red-haired Kittinger, now stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base near Montgomery, Ala., had no sympathy for persons supporting U.S. foreign aid to North Vietnam or speaking favorably about that country.

"I think it's ridiculous to even think about giving North Vietnam aid until they account for every person captured," Kittinger told the applauding group.

"And I get angry when people like Ramsey Clark and Jane Fonda tell what kind, compassionate people the North Vietnamese are."

While beaten almost to death by his captors, McDaniel, member of First Baptist Church of Virginia Beach, said he still felt sympathy, not hatred, for them.

During almost six years of his captivity, McDaniel said he told himself many times that he would ultimately go home to a freedom his captors would never know.

"I feel no hatred for the North Vietnamese," McDaniel, said. "Instead, I feel a great deal of sympathy for them, and I pray that they too will see God."

Tracing the various ways God spoke to him as a prisoner, McDaniel, a tall, quiet self-disciplined man, said God made his presence known after "some of the worse and most brutal beatings and physical tortures the human mind can imagine. I came very close to dying, but God made known to me his presence. He was always with me."

Allen, who worked an 18-hour day as a pastoral counselor, opened the retreat with a plea for the ex-POWs and MIA families to get out of their shells of depression and to start helping other people in need.

"God cares about your body and wants you to fix it up," Allen said. "He wants you to know he doesn't forget you when you're down. He recognizes that your actions create your moods and he wants you to do something. He wants to speak to you in the common places of life, perhaps through a child or a friend. He's got something important for you to do and he trusts you to do it. And he's given you spiritual brothers and sisters to help you."

"I found more need per inch among these people than in any other situation in my ministry of 30 years," he disclosed.

Miss Zimmer, the hit of the retreat, especially with the older members of families, gave two concerts and her Christian testimony.

"I was from a family that was poverty-stricken in many ways," she revealed. "We didn't go to church. I was so shy, so unhappy. I didn't feel anyone loved me."

"But I was invited to join the church choir at 16 and they let me sing those beautiful hymns. It wasn't long before Jesus came into my heart. I constantly thank him for my voice. I take no credit for it. I'll be praying for you."

The retreat project was developed by High Flight when it became apparent that the spiritual lives of the ex-POW and MIA families were getting no attention. William Rittenhouse, vice president of the non-denominational organization, said.

Originally scheduled for two weeks, the project was expanded to five because of the response.

"We felt the POW and MIA families have been wined and dined and given everything materially possible but had received nothing spiritually," Rittenhouse explained.

Rittenhouse said High Flight started the project on a shoestring and it became a week to week living example of faith in action.

High Flight officials borrowed money weekly from interested Christians to buy airline tickets for the families. Irwin, president of High Flight, mortgaged his home in Colorado Springs for \$25,000 to pay the transportation for his guests the first week.

With \$50,000 in the bank and \$250,000 in debts, High Flight will conduct a fund-raising campaign during the next three months to finance the project, Rittenhouse said.

Specialists providing guidance the final week also included Dr. Charles Lear and Robert Jupe, both from San Francisco and Dr. Jo Hunter, assistant director of the prisoner of war research center in San Diego.

Rittenhouse said the specialists and program personalities contributed their services.

An MIA wife whose husband has been missing more than eight years wrote after the retreat, "This is the first time anyone has offered us spiritual uplifting as a group."

"My children found out for the first time they are not the only children with a father missing in action," responded a mother. "We need more religion and counseling for our children."

Expressing appreciation for the opportunity of getting away from the outside world to remote 3,000-acre YMCA-operated retreat, 87 miles northwest of Denver, an MIA wife added:

"I feel one chapter of my life is completed. Through my contacts with God and through my husband's faith, I am at peace. I know he is with God and he is happy."