

Barbara Singleton-West, a Woman Warrior with a Mission

Recently Colin Kimball interviewed our very own Barbara Singleton-West for the documentary he was producing entitled "Perspectives of Vietnam." The film features poignant interviews and stories from North Texas Vietnam Veterans and their experiences while fighting in Southeast Asia and after their return home. This documentary is sponsored by the Collin County Historical Society & Museum and was produced by Colin Kimball.

Most of us know her as Barbara Singleton-West. However, she is known to history's most influential people as Bonnie Singleton. She has met President's Commander's in our military, Ross Perot and confronted the communist Vietnamese delegation during the Vietnam war. You and I have known her as the loving, humble, fun, gracious sister that heads up GCRW Hospitality, and wife of Jim West; and sadly widow of Jim.

Bonnie was pregnant with her oldest son, Richard, when her husband went to serve in Vietnam. He was a rescue helicopter pilot. With only one mission under his belt, his helicopter was shot down on his second mission in November of 1965. He evaded capture for five days but was captured and became a Prisoner Of War, POW. Meanwhile, Bonnie was sent a letter that her husband was Missing In Action, MIA. She was told, by the government, not to go public with this information. Days turned into months and months turned into years while she tried to adjust to being a MIA wife and single mother. The military eventually encouraged her to meet with other wives facing this same situation. She did. In her discovery she found three other strong women that wanted answers. It became their mission to get them.

In 1968, they witnessed the capture of the USS Pueblo by North Korea and the release of the prisoners from that event after seven months of captivity spurned in-part due to one of the wives of the Pueblo crew that publicly resisted the governments demands to remain silent. She took her case to the American people. Inspired by this effort and outcome, Bonnie pursued the local Dallas press and to an initial tepid response with three lines in the obituary section. That did not detour them. Through the help of their local Congressman Olin Teague, she went to the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and became a focal point of the VFW's new mission for the year – to bring the POW issues to the public attention and do anything they could to help Bonnie and her friends.

The ladies were in their hotel room that night of the main convention meeting with rollers in their hair and cold cream on their face when the VFW Commander called the them to ask what they wanted. Bonnie told him, "We want to go to meet with the Vietnamese in Vietnam and find out if we are wives or widows." Abruptly the Commander said that would not be

happening because we cannot be responsible for your safety and security. Again, Bonnie said that was what they wanted. Later that evening, at 2:00 a.m., the ladies received a phone call from the Congressman Teague asking them to come up to his hotel suite to meet with the VFW right now. They wiped their faces, took at the rollers and bustled down there. When they stepped into the room there were the VFW leaders who determined that they could not send Bonnie to Vietnam but they could send her to Paris to meet with the North Vietnamese delegation who were beginning a long process known as the Paris Peace Talks.

Bonnie and three other north Texas MIA wives went to Paris in September, 1969 with the help of WFAA TV and ABC Television and confronted the Communist North Vietnamese and asked them, are we widows or wives? Bonnie and her three companions made history, they were the first POW wife's to confront the North Vietnamese. This visit didn't go the direction she and the others had hoped as the North Vietnamese told them to go home and be quiet. Sound familiar? Two months later Ross Perot Called and said its time to go back and demand answers. In November, 1969 they made a return trip to demand answers from the communists. This time the North Vietnamese delegation gave her piece of paper with Rene Davis's name and home phone number. Rene was the one of the infamous Chicago Seven, and a founder/member of the Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground, all communist front groups active here in America. They told her to contact Rene and join the 'Peace Movement,' protest against our governments involvement in Vietnam and maybe the North Vietnamese would find a way to let her husband communicate with her. She did not. She stood firm in the face of the coercive pressure from the communists. She was ultimately chastised in a letter from Cora Wise, another communist sympathizing activist trying to seed the Peace Movement with wives of prisoners of war to do the bidding of the communists on our own soil, telling Bonnie if she ever disrespected them again she and Richard never hear from her husband and that the Black Panthers would be responsible for delivering any communications to her house. This bold mother stood against the intimidation and communism and brought attention to the horrific human rights violations that the communists were committing on our brave men held captive in North Vietnam.

In 1970, she eventually learned that her husband was a POW but unfortunately for the three ladies that accompanied her in her efforts, their husbands were dead and still listed as MIA. She did eventually communicate with her husband via small form letters that were submitted through Moscow before being delivered to Vietnam.

Bonnie/Barbara's efforts, embarrassed the Communists in North Vietnam and helped inspire them to provide more lenient treatment for the POW's. Bonnie met with other World leaders which helped focus world wide attention on the abusive nature of the communist leadership in North Vietnam. Every POW will tell you that After September, 1969, when she made her first

visit, treatment improved significantly. Official North Vietnamese records released to the US indicate that there were over 700 men held captive in Vietnam yet only 591 returned when the war ended in 1973 as over 200 men died in captivity due to the brutal conditions they were subjected to. Bonnie as well as the other POW wives including Shirley Johnson, helped inspire the Nixon administration to pressure the North Vietnamese for the release of the our POWs and at the same time made the North Vietnamese aware that the world was watching them, helped save their lives as the communist finally released our POWs in February of 1973, after he husband had been held captive for over seven years.

Our Woman Warrior, Bonnie/Barbara is an example of a courageous American that stayed focused on the mission to fight for her husband. She never became attached to her own celebrity. She gave thanks to God and prayed for strength every day.

Thank you Lord, for honoring us with Barbara's devotion and drive to fight for our country.