

PRISONER OF "CHINA"

By Mrs. Mary Downey as told to J. Robert Moskin LOOK STAFF WRITER

In a cell in the Grass Basket Prison in Peking sits a young American named Jack Downey, living out a sentence of life imprisonment. Accused by the Chinese Communists of "espionage," he languished there for the past eight years—nearly 3,000 days and nights—remembered today by only a few officials and by those who knew him. His widowed mother waits for him in a gray house on a peaceful maple-lined street in New Britain, Conn. Wearied by grief and her unending efforts to win Jack's freedom, Mrs. Downey sits in her shadowy parlor and talks of her son:



I SAID good-by to Jack Downey on the little station platform at Berlin, Conn., one November morning nine years ago. Jack kissed me and said, "Don't worry, Mom; I'll be back." A shudder went through me then, and although my younger son tells me I was imagining, I have always felt it was a premonition of the horrible thing that was to happen to Jack.

On the day he was graduated from Yale in June, 1951, Jack had driven to Washington to work as a civilian employee of the Department of Defense. In November, he spent one week end at home. Then, because of

the Korean War, he was on his way to Japan by Christmas. He has not been home since.

With Jack gone, I felt very alone. Bill, Jack's younger brother, was studying at Yale, and his sister Joan was at school. I kept busy teaching my sixth-grade class at the Lincoln Public School here in New Britain.

When Jack had been overseas about a year, I received a telephone call at the school one morning from a priest at St. Maurice Church across the street. He told me I should go home right away.

The urgency in his voice frightened me, and I asked him, "Father, is

it something about my Jack?"

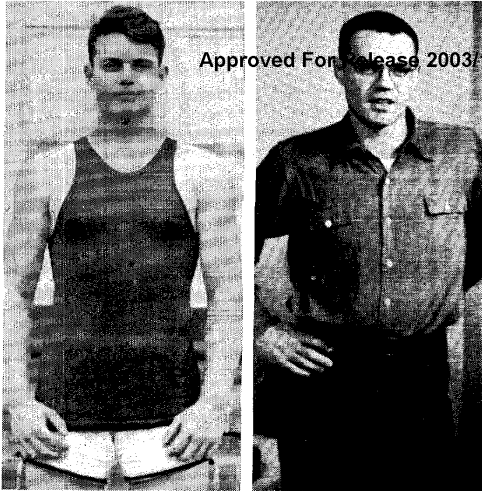
"I think you'd better go home, Mary," he said quietly. I thought something terrible must have happened. I felt weak. I drove myself home. There was a telegram from Washington telling me that, on an airplane flight returning from Korea to Japan, Jack was missing.

The next months were heartbreaking. Like so many mothers in wartime, I clung to the hope that my son would turn up alive. I listened to the news broadcasts. I waited for the mailman. I prayed.

When the Korean armistice was signed, I kept hoping he would ap-

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Jack Downey as he looked dressed in his high-school track uniform and in clothes he wears in prison in Peiping.

“When I heard that my son was alive, the world stopped.”

ear with the prisoners who were returning. But there was no word of Jack. Then the death certificate arrived. It was like the closing of a chapter.

I took the pictures and diplomas down from the wall of his room and gave away his clothes. I used some of his savings to help Bill through Yale; I knew Jack would have wanted that. All I kept were his pictures, the short stories he had written, the big burly storm coat he had enjoyed so much and a college sweater that had been his father's before him. I mourned my son as dead.

I had raised the three children myself since that October afternoon back in 1938 when their father, who was a lawyer and judge of probate, had been killed in an automobile accident. Jack, then only eight, read of his father's death in the local newspaper before I could tell him.

I had returned to teaching and managed to scrape the boys through Choate and Yale. They worked summers; scholarships helped. They were outstanding boys—happy and popular. Brought up without a father, they were closer than most brothers.

Jack was president of his class at Choate and a star athlete and sang in the glee club. His father and Morton Downey were first cousins, and Jack, too, has a good singing voice. His classmates voted him most respected, most to be admired, most versatile. At Yale, he wrestled and was the regular left guard on the varsity football team.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, 1954, I went home as usual for my lunch. At one o'clock, I went to school and went into the principal's office to look at the bulletin board. I was talking to the principal's secretary. A reporter from

the New Britain *Herald* was on the line. He asked, “Are you Mrs. Downey? Do you have a son John, and is he in the Far East?” I told him my son was dead. But he went on: “A broadcast came over that the Chinese Communists announced they had a John T. something and that the last name sounded like Downey.”

The world stopped for me. I sat down. I asked the reporter to repeat what he had said. He then told me the radio had announced that Jack had been given a sentence of life imprisonment.

The Chinese Communists, I learned later, said that Jack was an “outstanding example” of American espionage against their country and that he and his companions had “intruded into China to carry out subversive activities.”

Our State Department replied that the accusations were “utterly false.” It said that Jack had been a passenger on a routine flight between Korea and Japan, and called the sentencing “a violation of the Korean armistice . . . a grave provocation.”

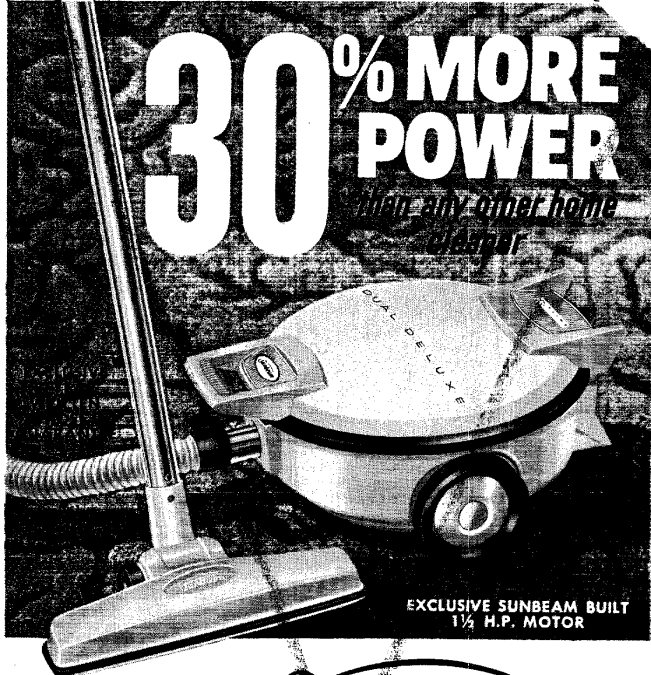
That Christmas, I fell on the ice and broke my pelvis. As I lay in the hospital, a letter came from Jack—the first word in more than two years.

“Dearest Mom, Joan and Billie: Hi, family, how're you doing? This is about the happiest day I've known in two years, for now I'm able to talk with you, even if only through a letter. I've learned many things about life and about myself since I've been here and most important is how very much I love you and how little I've ever done to show it—especially to you, Mom, who have thought of and worked so hard for us always and in all things. In my first days of imprisonment, I found that when I had nothing else to fall

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we agreed to obey the rules.

We were led into a second room and were seated by a glass window covered with opaque paper to keep out the cold. In front of us was an inlaid table. There was a stove in the room, but I kept on my coat against the cold.

Suddenly, the door opened, and there was Jack. "Mom," he said. I sprang from my seat and embraced him. I cried, "Oh, Jack!" He said over and over again, "Oh, Mom, it's good to see you."

When I recovered my composure, we sat and talked for the two hours we were allowed. Jack looked well—a little thinner, but it was hard to tell under his padded Chinese jacket. Certainly, his spirits were good, and he never showed signs of depression to us. He could laugh readily, as he always did. Jack is the kind of person who would say, "Well, I'm in this situation; I might as well make the best of it."

Jack wanted to hear about the family, how we all were. He and Bill talked a lot about sports. He was mazed to see how Bill had grown and filled out. He said, "Mom, just look at him—and the voice on the kid!" Except for a British diplomatic representative who had been allowed to visit him once, we were the first

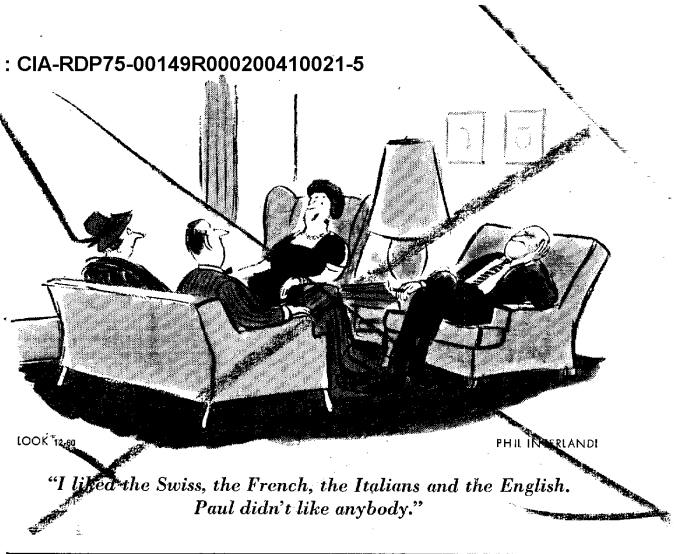
Westerners he had talked with in five years.

We asked to see Premier Chou En-lai while we were in Peiping, but were taken to see the minister of health instead. Mrs. Redmond flew from Shanghai to join us at the meeting, and we submitted a petition asking for our sons' release.

We were permitted to visit Jack three times a week for two hours. For our seventh and last visit, we were allowed to bring in food and eat lunch with Jack and Dick Fecteau in prison. We dashed around buying steaks and vegetables, coffee and a great container of ice cream, of which Jack is so fond. The meal was a wonderful occasion. The boys ate until they could eat no more. Jack said the ice cream was just like that we made at home years ago when his Sunday-afternoon chore was to turn the crank. The prison officials sat in a corner of the room, but this time I forgot completely that they were there.

This was the first time I had met Dick Fecteau. He had only been in the Far East a few weeks before he was captured. He is a bit older than my Jack, a handsome, friendly boy.

When I had to leave Jack, it was terrible. He walked Bill and me to the door of the room. I kissed him



LOOK 'EM UP

PHIL INVERLANDI

"I liked the Swiss, the French, the Italians and the English. Paul didn't like anybody."

and said, "Good-by, Jack; be a good boy." I thought: How could you be anything but good in prison? "Good-by, Mom," he said over and over. "Good-by, Mom."

Before we left Peiping, Chi Feng of the Chinese Red Cross came to Bill's hotel room to read us an official reply to our earlier petition to Premier Chou En-lai to release our sons. We all had the feeling Chi hated to read it; he seemed tense. "The

Premier fully understands the feelings behind your appeal. But your sons have violated Communist Chinese law and must be dealt with accordingly. Therefore, the Communist Chinese Government cannot consider your appeal. Any criminal who behaves well may have the opportunity of leniency. This applies also to your sons."

Deep inside me, I had hoped that a miracle would happen and I would

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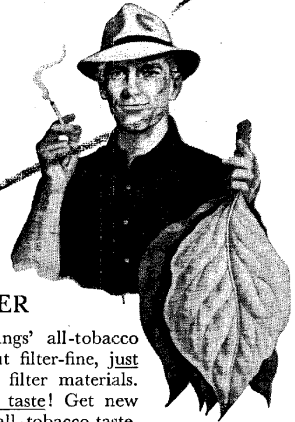
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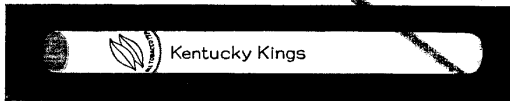
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