

REVIEWS

The books, TV shows and films causing a stir in the history world this month

THE LEAGUE OF WIVES

A powerful story that highlights the courage and bravery of military spouses

Author Heath Hardage Lee **Publisher** Constable **Price** £20 **Released** Out now

Already optioned for a Hollywood movie, there is a considerable amount of hype surrounding *The League Of Wives*. As we all know, quite often hype can be a negative thing, particularly if the book does not meet our bolstered expectations. However, we are pleased

to say that this book is a must-read and one that we couldn't put down.

Recounting the story of the wives who fought to bring home their husbands who were taken prisoner or went missing during the Vietnam War, it's not a light read. It is heart-wrenching to learn that these women "were seen not as

bereaved individuals who needed comforting but as the stuff of public relations nightmares, and potential liabilities for the POWs."

Then, in 1966, a disturbing video emerged from North Vietnam. It was a propaganda interview, broadcast on national television, with POW Admiral Jeremiah Denton. His wife, Jane Denton,

their children and family were shocked to see how haggard he looked, but they didn't understand the full implication of the footage - in it, he blinks the word 'torture' in morse code.

It confirmed the fears that the American POWs were actually being treated as war criminals, yet their wives were still being kept in the dark. Jane, along with Sybil Stockdale (the wife of Jim Stockdale, the highest-ranking Navy POW) and other POW/MIA wives, continued to visit Washington for answers but

with no success - President Johnson was sticking to his 'keep quiet' policy.

Frustrated, Sybil took matters into her own hands and founded the National League Of Families in 1967, which included Jane and the rest of the wives, to advocate for the safe return of their husbands. It is hard not to immediately think of the growing feminist movement emerging in the United States at this time, although Lee makes it clear that these women did not identify themselves as 'feminists.'

Not only were these women fighting on behalf of their loved ones, but they were doing so in the midst of both the financial and emotional turmoil caused by the impact of their husbands going missing, and the government's failure to support them. There are numerous moments that are just so cold and cruel, you might wish in vain that they are a work of fiction - but they are not.

The League openly challenged the government, travelled to North Vietnamese embassies across Europe, held both local and national meetings, and launched a media campaign to get their voices heard.

By the time President Nixon entered the White House, the powerful lobbying of these women could not be ignored like it had been under the Johnson administration.

Despite Nixon's downfall after the Watergate Scandal, many of the POW/MIA wives continued to laud him for the return of their husbands, which finally happened in 1973. While it is uplifting to read that many of the men were returned safely, it is also heartbreaking that many of them, still MIA, never came home - even their remains were never found. Ultimately, the author, Heath Hardage Lee, sums it up rather nicely when she concludes: "Sybil and her League Of Wives remain role models for courageous women who speak the truth to power today."

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