

A Baker City connection to the POW-MIA flag

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
Baker City Herald

The black-and-white flag that honors America’s military members who are prisoners of war or are missing in action has a direct connection to Baker City.

The connection is Michael George Hoff. Hoff, who was born in Baker City on Sept. 11, 1936, was flying an A-7 Corsair over Laos, a country bordering Vietnam, on Jan. 7, 1970.

Hoff’s jet was shot down. Hoff, a 33-year-old commander in the U.S. Navy, was listed as missing in action. He was never found, alive or dead.

His wife, Mary Helen Hoff, waited in her Florida home with the couple’s five children, the oldest just seven, the youngest not yet two.

The second-youngest of Michael Hoff’s children, and the only daughter, is Suzanne Hoff Ogawa. She was just two when her father’s plane was shot down.

“I have no memories of my father at all,” Ogawa, who lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky, said in a phone interview.

But as she grew up, Ogawa learned not only about her dad, but about her mom’s diligent efforts to ensure that the families of other missing aviators, soldiers, sailors and Marines had a way to publicly display their plight.

“My mother was really an amazing lady,” Ogawa said.

Mary Hoff had seen the Blue Star and Gold Star banners hanging in windows.

Blue Star banners are for families who have a member serving in the armed forces.

Families with a Gold Star banner have had a member killed while serving.

But it was the families who, like the Hoff’s, were mired in the purgatory where there are only questions, but no answers, that Mary Hoff was thinking about.

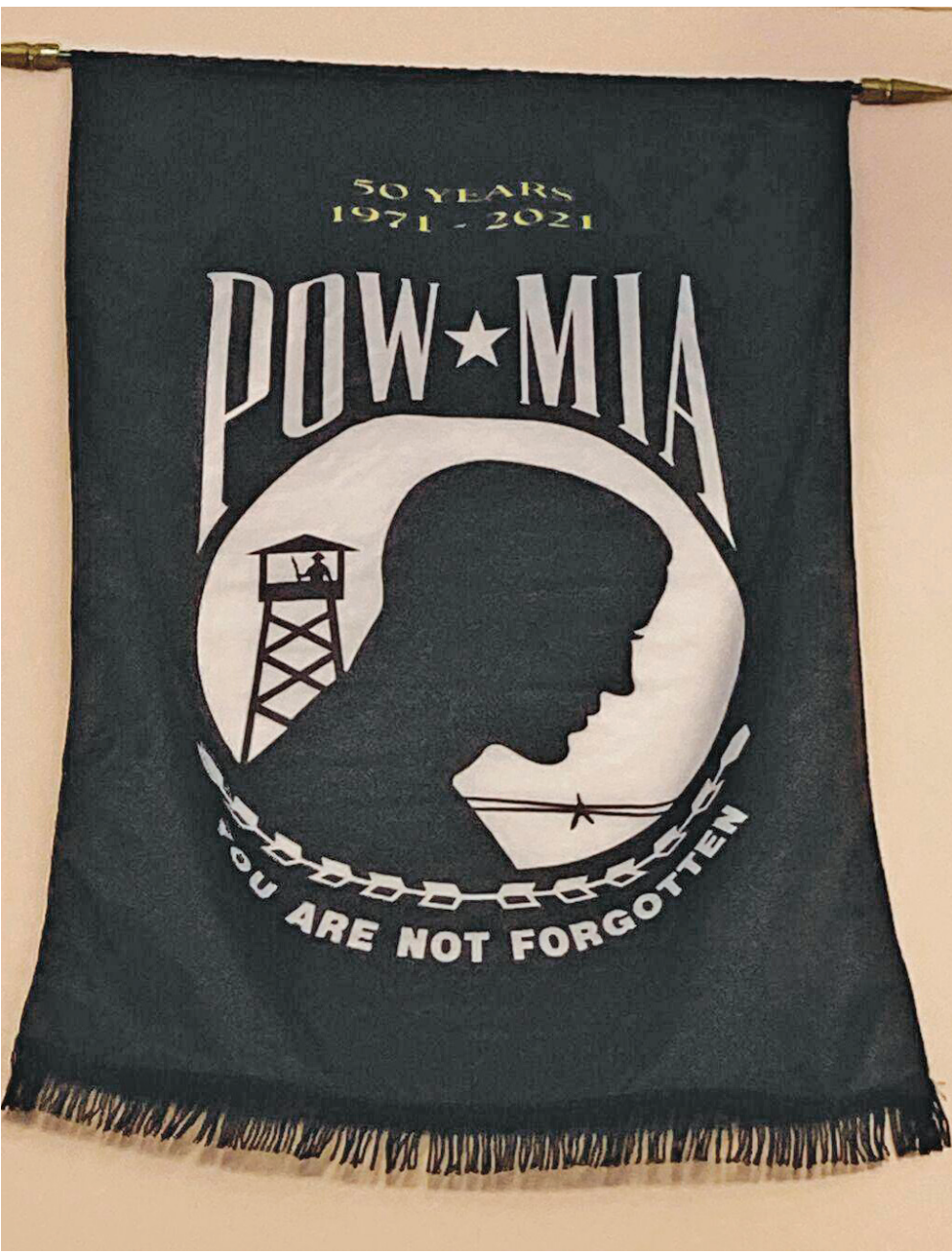
“She really felt like they didn’t have a symbol,” Ogawa said. “She wanted something she could put in her window, to let people know what we’re going through.”

In 1971 Mary Hoff got in touch with Annin & Co., an Ohio firm that has been making flags and banners since 1847.

The result was the black-and-white banner, with the phrase “You Are Not Forgotten,” that has become a common sight across the country.

“Now we have this national flag,” said Ogawa, who emphasized that the original design was in fact a banner, designed to be placed in a window, rather than a flag. “It’s a pretty neat thing.”

Earlier in 2021, a Kentucky nonprofit, Charging Forward For America Inc., contacted Annin Flagmakers with the goal



Samantha O’Conner/Baker City Herald

A 50th anniversary version of the POW-MIA banner hangs inside Baker City Hall.

of recreating the original banner with an inscription, which Ogawa designed, recognizing the 50th anniversary.

Charging Forward For America has been traveling the U.S., donating the commemorative banners.

One of those now hangs in Baker City Hall, in recognition of Michael Hoff.

“This town is where the POW-MIA Flag story starts,” the organization wrote in a recent post on its Facebook page.

The Baker City connection

Ogawa said her father attended St. Francis Academy in Baker City before graduating from Baker High School in 1954.

She still has her father’s high school diploma.

Michael Hoff attended Eastern Oregon College in La Grande for a year or two before joining the Navy in February 1957.

“That was his dream — to fly jets,” Ogawa said.

He earned his pilot’s wings in 1959 and began the itinerant life typical of a Navy aviator.

Hoff met his future wife, Mary, in Pensacola, Florida. Ogawa said her mother grew up in Michigan.

The couple had five children in seven years.

“We used to joke that they had a kid at

every base where they were stationed,” Ogawa said with a laugh.

Ogawa said her father, rather than fearing combat, was afraid he would miss a chance to serve his country in war.

“He really wanted to do his part,” she said.

Although Ogawa was so young when her father disappeared that she can’t remember him, she looks occasionally at photographs and marvels at what she sees.

One photo in particular, taken in September 1967.

In the photo her father is holding her, an infant, while her three older brothers look on.

“I don’t remember my father but I know I heard his voice,” Ogawa said.

Ogawa said that although her father had relatives in Oregon, mainly in the Portland area, she doesn’t believe he visited Baker City after joining the Navy.

His name is on the memorial on the east side of the Baker County Courthouse that lists local residents who have died in war.

What happened to Hoff?

Ogawa said her mother was never satisfied with the lack of information about what befell her husband on that January day over Laos.

“She was angry at the government,” Ogawa said. “She just wanted to get answers.”

Ogawa believes the lack of clarity had much to do with where her father was flying — over Laos, not Vietnam.

Ogawa has a Western Union telegram that her mother sent to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, seeking information about Michael Hoff.

About 20 years later, Ogawa said her family learned that Michael Hoff probably died the day his plane was shot down.

His best friend, who was the squadron leader, reported seeing Hoff’s plane, upside down and flying just a couple thousand feet above the ground. The other pilot didn’t see a parachute.

Although her father’s actual fate remains a mystery, Ogawa said she strives to focus instead on what her mother accomplished — a legacy that is displayed in thousands of places across the county in the form of the POW-MIA flag.

Ogawa said she’s thankful for both of her parents.

She remembers how her mother’s efforts, on behalf of her family and of so many other families, brought people solace in the most difficult times.

“I think it’s beautiful how these women and families banded together,” Ogawa said.

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