

Vietnam vets stalk grounds for missing girl

By GLENN CHAPMAN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

A contingent of jungle-seasoned Vietnam veterans, rallied by Kenneth Schweiger to aid in the search for his missing 12-year-old daughter, took to the dense woodlands at Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) yesterday with the idea of matching military wits with Andre Rand.

Cardinal John O'Connor, Archbishop of New York swept into Westerleigh yesterday, encouraging and supporting the Schweigers, and urging the volunteers on in their hunt for the girl.

"A child like Jennifer has a very special place in my heart," said Cardinal O'Connor, who started his clerical career as a priest working with children with Down's syndrome. "Children like Jennifer are a special treasure... to lose that, nothing is more difficult for people to bear."

Rand has been charged with kidnapping Jennifer Schweiger,

and police managed to follow the girl's trail to SIDC before losing it. It is believed that Rand was an Army veteran, possibly in a commando unit, but authorities have refused to release any information about the suspect's background.

"We'll use military methods to track down a military mind," said Tony Bianco of Dongan Hills, one of the Vietnam veterans. "If he is a veteran, he would be thinking along the lines they taught him, and we all know what to look for. We're putting our government training to good use."

Bianco and other veterans, most dressed in army fatigues and wearing supply belts, joined several hundred people who gathered at the Holy Family R.C. Church yesterday to press the search for some trace of Jennifer.

As searchers gathered in the church meeting hall at about noon, reviewing maps and plotting strategy for the day,

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Cardinal O'Connor addresses the volunteers who spent the day searching for Jennifer.

200-1000

Schweiger, already sweat-soaked from hours of searching, breezed in with his wife, Karen, and Cardinal O'Connor.

Embracing a new battle plan, the entire volunteer search effort was focused on SIDC.

Donna Cutugno, co-ordinator of a group called the Friends of Jennifer, called on the searchers to keep an eye out for fox holes and dry wells, along with any garbage bags, traces of clothing, and freshly dug earth.

Creeks, sheds, and Andre's former campsite on the SIDC grounds were also targeted. Tips from psychics, children who would regularly see Rand in the community, and former SIDC employees were all being followed up on.

Searchers yesterday were eagerly following up on witnesses reports that they saw Rand with what appeared to be Jennifer's purse. The witnesses said they saw Rand driving a brown car and carrying Jennifer's purse after her disappearance.

Whistles were handed out to help people keep track of each other in the woods. Stacks of thousands of missing persons posters bearing Jennifer's picture were quickly scooped up by volunteers who would be pinning them up and handing them out during the day.

"You are looking for the family's real treasure," Cardinal O'Connor told the determined group. "If you can help return that gift, you're making a tremendous contribution."

As the cardinal turned to embrace Mrs. Schweiger, volunteers filed into the parking lot and prepared to march on SIDC. Soda, ice, flashlights, and shovels were loaded into cars and trucks, supplies for the day's mission.

"We'll do what we call a sweep," Bianco said, referring to a criss-cross search pattern employed by soldiers in Vietnam.

James Donohue, Martin Merjave, and Tim Goldbach, all veterans with the New York POW MIA Public Awareness Coalition, helped review maps of the area as the group assembled in the church parking lot.

Volunteers without military training, but seasoned by weeks of trodding through the Island's woodlands, themselves took on the look of commandos. Hiking boots, caps, canteens, and walking sticks were standard gear.

The troop swept into SIDC, setting up a rest station which included a Red Cross mobile kitchen. On previous days, an Emergency Medical Service technician had been tending to the cuts, insect bites and poison sumac. Yesterday Dr. David Pfaff of Dongan Hills volunteered to tend to the wounded.

"I was a little surprised," said Richard Carisi, acting supervisor of SIDC's security force yesterday. "We are behind what they (searchers) want to do, we just wish we knew they were coming."

Volunteers fanned out through the woods, while Ken Schweiger, himself a veteran, led a team of the former jungle fighters to Rand's former campsite home.

"We've got to find something," Schweiger said resolutely.

Mrs. Schweiger, accompanied by a tightly knit group of family members and friends, helped track the search effort and direct some of the volunteers.

"They (the Schweigers) are tremendously courageous people with a deep faith," Cardinal O'Connor said yesterday, "a truly inspiring couple."

A specialized team of police officers trained to search rugged terrain were out earlier in the day, searching through sections of the Greenbelt in Sea View, and portions of William H. Pouch Boy Scout Camp, according to Sgt. Norris Hollomon, a police spokesman. The police search is scheduled to be in the same areas today, the sergeant said.

Police are also checking into three notes found earlier in the search in the woodlands near Rockland Avenue and Manor Road in Sea View. Pieces of paper with the words "Jen" and "Jeni" were found

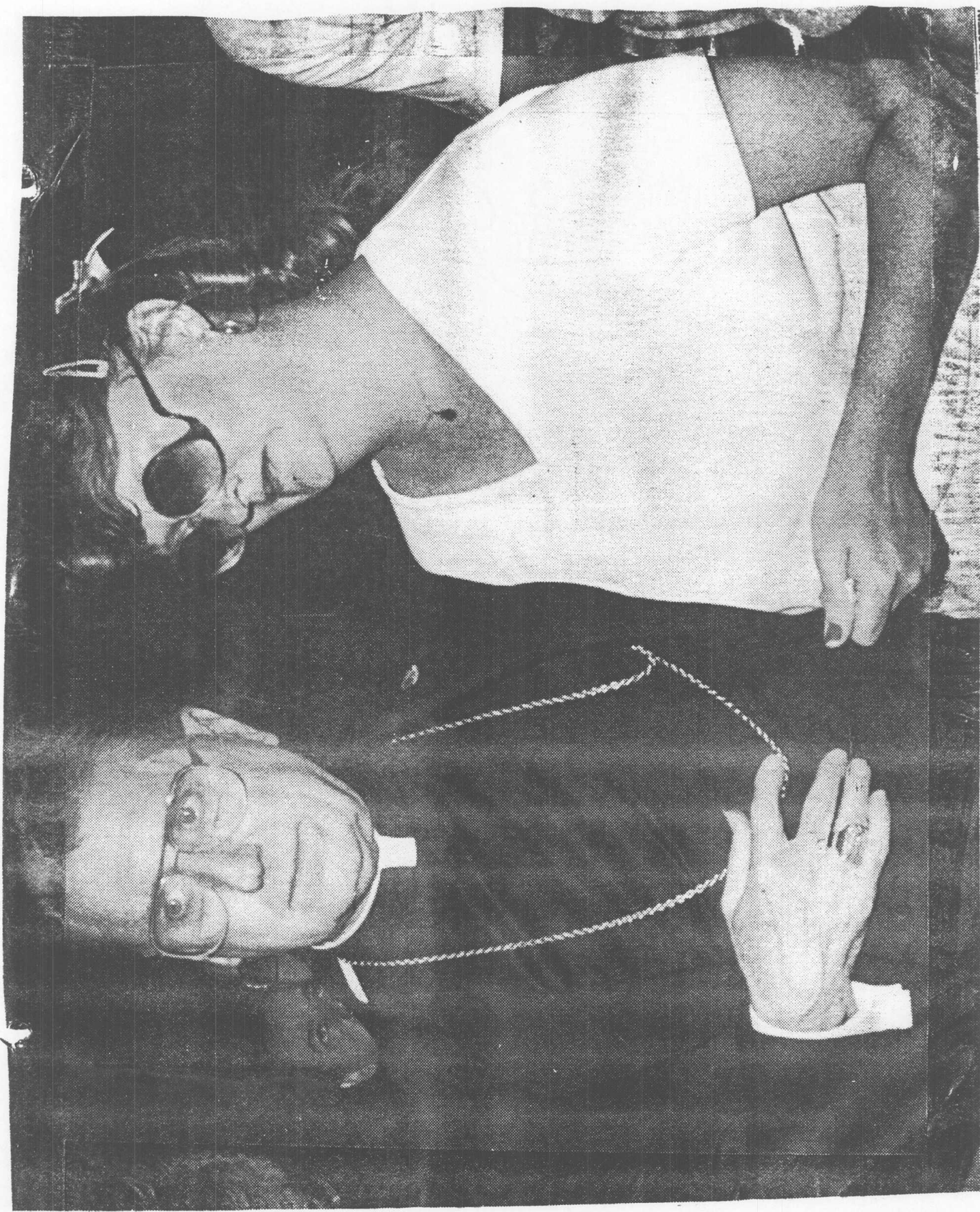
taped to trees in the area, according to Mary Reilly, who was among the volunteers who made the discovery.

Volunteers will continue to gather at the Holy Family Church daily at noon and 7 p.m., and a special mass in honor of Jennifer will be held in the

church Thursday.

Searchers yesterday, undaunted by the heat and storm clouds, continued to search into the night.

"It's not the heat," Dennis Wonica said wiping sweat from his brow during the search. "We're running out of time. Who's taking care of Jennifer?"



Cardinal John J. O'Connor comforts Karen Schweiger, mother of the missing 12-year-old.

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The crowd gathers as volunteers prepare to begin a day of combing the area for any sign of the girl.



Members of the New York Prisoners Of War Public Awareness Coalition study a map of the search area. The volunteers are, from left, Martin Merjave, Tim Goldbach and Jim Donohue.

Prisoners of War