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A Pentagon study provides new details—about bravery, torture, and endurance—on the experience of American POWs in Vietnam.

Honor Bound

By Stewart M. Powell

NAVY Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton was the senior officer of the 40 Prisoners of War who left Hanoi on Feb. 12, 1973, aboard the first Air Force C-141 out of North Vietnam. Once airborne, Denton calmly asked a flight attendant for a piece of paper. He thought for a moment and then scribbled the memorable words that he would utter in a short time as he and his comrades stepped off the airplane into the arms of freedom at Clark AB in the Philippines.

"We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances," Denton declared. "We are profoundly grateful to our Commander in Chief and to our nation for this day. God bless America."

With that, the Navy pilot who went down in an A-6 carrier attack aircraft during a bombing run over North Vietnam's Thanh Hoa bridge complex on July 19, 1965, marked the end of the longest wartime captivity of any group of US prisoners in history.

It was a triumph for Denton, who had alerted the world to the communists' torture of prisoners in May 1966. Dragged before propaganda cameras after 72 hours of nonstop indoctrination, the sleep-deprived pilot had numbly blinked his eyelids to relay the message "t-o-r-t-u-r-e" in Morse code as a Japanese television news crew filmed the interview.

A total of 771 Americans were captured and interned during the Vietnam War. Of those, 113 died in captivity and 658, or 85 percent, were returned to US authorities during or at the end of a grueling conflict that claimed the lives of more than 58,000 American troops in Southeast Asia.

The number of prisoners taken during the Vietnam War was relatively small. Of the 142,255 Americans captured and interned during major wars

American POWs in the Vietnam War endured the longest captivity of any group of US wartime prisoners. One of them was Navy Lt. Paul Galanti, shown here in an East German propaganda film, sitting under a sign that reads "Clean. Neat."

in the 20th century, a total of 17,033 died in captivity. The Korean War had the highest casualty rate among US prisoners—with 38 percent of the 7,140 prisoners perishing.

For Americans searching for meaning in a controversial conflict and yearning for heroes, the POWs became a touchstone for the traditional values of loyalty and inspiration often overlooked during the conflict itself.

The First POW

The first American taken prisoner by the Viet Cong was Army Spec. 4 George F. Fryett, seized Dec. 26, 1961, while riding a bicycle on the way to a swimming pool on the outskirts of Saigon. He was freed in June 1962: His captors simply came out of the jungle at a main road and put him on a bus back to Saigon.

The last POW was seized Jan. 27, 1973—the day the cease-fire was signed in Paris. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Phillip A. Kientzler, shot down near the Demilitarized Zone, was held for two months in North Vietnam under perhaps the most benign conditions of the war, with captives and captors awaiting prisoner releases. Kientzler was freed March 27, 1973, with the last wave of captives to go home.

Between these two bookends, the

story of American POWs unfolded. Their triumphs and tragedies are vividly recaptured in *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973*. The immensely detailed 592-page study was prepared by Stuart I. Rochester, deputy historian of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Frederick Kiley, a former Air Force Academy professor and noted POW historian. Drawing from memoirs, interviews, classified documents, and other sources, the historians

provide the most sweeping view of American POWs since the return of the prisoners in 1973.

"We were convinced in the end that, on the whole, the PWs [the acronym commonly used by the military services] of the Vietnam War were indeed an extraordinary company of men who endured an extraordinary captivity," the historians wrote. "Both suffering and valor, tragedy and triumph, occurred on a large scale."

Prisoners captured and held in



Encouraged by the anti-war movement in the US, Hanoi went to great lengths to present its case through a persistent propaganda campaign aimed at its own people and the world, in this example staging the capture of a downed "pilot." In propaganda films made about the time of the Hanoi March, USAF F-105 pilot Capt. Murphy Jones was paraded first bandaged and dirty, clad in underwear, then (at top) aboard a truck, wearing his flight suit. Both films were part of the North Vietnamese effort to establish American pilots as "criminal aggressors" and "air pirates."

South Vietnam had a far different experience than the aviator officers shot down and held in the North. During the early years, one out of three Americans taken prisoner was expected to die in captivity—a toll reduced to one out of five by war's end. In the North, only one in 20 captives died in prison.

The longest held POW was captured in the South and spent much of his imprisonment there. Army Ranger Capt. Floyd J. "Jim" Thompson, commander of a Special Forces detachment in Quang Tri Province, was captured March 26, 1964, following the shootdown near the DMZ of his low-flying reconnaissance aircraft. He was held at a dozen jungle sites during the nearly nine years before his release on March 16, 1973. Thompson's captivity made him the longest held Prisoner of War in American history.

In the North, Navy Lt. j.g. Everett Alvarez Jr. became the first American pilot shot down. His carrier-based

A-4 Skyhawk was hit during retaliatory airstrikes on Vietnamese patrol boats and oil storage facilities Aug. 5, 1964, not long after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in which Navy destroyers *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy* reported coming under North Vietnamese attack.

Alvarez, who ejected not far from shore, was captured by armed Vietnamese in a fishing vessel. By Aug. 11, he had been taken to Hanoi's notorious Hoa Lo Prison, a turn-of-the-century French-built facility with thick two-story concrete walls known in Vietnamese as the "fiery furnace." Rats infested his cell. Food, consisting of animal hooves, chicken heads, rotten fish, and meat covered with hair, was sickening.

North and South

Prisoners in the North suffered far more extensive and systematic torture than comrades held captive in the South. "With the expanding American war effort, prison authorities were under increasing pressure to obtain information and statements that could be used for propaganda purposes," the historians said. "To produce these they had to break down the PWs' resistance."

The Air Force lost its first pilot in early 1965. Air Force Lt. Hayden J. Lockhart, flying an F-100, was seized by the communist forces March 2, 1965, after evading capture for a week. He was locked in the dreaded central prison in Hanoi soon thereafter.

The complex, ringed with guard towers, soon became known as the "Hanoi Hilton," with sections known as "Heartbreak Hotel," "New Guy Village," "Little Vegas," and "Camp Unity." The complex was so formidable that not a single US serviceman managed to make an escape during the entire war.

The most systematic torture of American POWs during the conflict began in fall 1965 and didn't end until fall 1969, when the Nixon Administration finally went public with evidence of the mistreatment. An estimated 95 percent of the prisoners in the North experienced some form of torture.

Navy Lt. j.g. Rodney A. Knutson, a radar intercept officer captured with pilot Lt. j.g. Ralph E. Gaither when their F-4 was shot down on Oct. 17, 1965, got an early taste of

what lay ahead. His captors bound his arms so tightly that they lost circulation. He was denied food and water. He was beaten. When he still refused to cooperate, his torturers moved on to a new, more sinister method—the "rope torture." Knutson was subjected to this technique on Oct. 25, 1965. The prisoner was forced face down onto a bunk with his ankles in stocks and a rope tied at his elbows, with the rope then pulled up to run through a hook in the ceiling. The guard hoisted the prisoner off the bunk so he could not ease any of his weight—producing extreme pain and constricting breathing.

USAF Capt. Konrad W. Trautman suffered the rope torture on a dozen occasions. "The pain is literally beyond description," said Trautman, who was shot down and captured Oct. 5, 1967. "After about 10 or 15 minutes in this position, tied up so tightly, your nerves in your arms are pinched off, and then your whole upper torso becomes numb. It's a relief. You feel no more pain. ... However when they release the ropes, the procedure works completely in reverse. It's almost like double jeopardy—you go through the same pain coming out of the ropes as you did going in."

Hanoi March

On July 6, 1966, 52 prisoners were assembled, blindfolded, handcuffed in pairs, and taken by truck to downtown Hanoi. The plan was to

parade the Americans in public view and then use them as props in a war crimes show-trial to take place at a nearby stadium. This event came to be known as the "Hanoi March" and is viewed as a watershed in the propaganda war. "Oh boy, I love a parade," quipped USAF Capt. Robert B. Purcell, captive since July 27, 1965, when his F-105 went down 30 miles west of Hanoi.

The prisoners were prodded through the streets at the point of bayonets, past the Soviet and Chinese Embassies and through threatening crowds standing 10 deep. One prisoner estimated the crowd as high as 100,000. Guards incited the angry mob with loudspeakers. Over a two-mile route, the POWs were punched and pummeled by flying bricks and bottles. The march highlighted the lengths to which Hanoi would go to score propaganda points against the US.

Air Force Capt. Earl G. Cobeil, captured on Nov. 5, 1967, feigned mental illness, as did some other POWs, to protect himself from the experimental brainwashing carried out by a dreaded Cuban interrogator. The Cuban, known among POWs as "Fidel," convinced that Cobeil was faking, mercilessly beat him day after day. One day, Cobeil refused to bow. For the offense, Cobeil on May 21, 1968, was trussed in ropes overnight and mauled for 24 hours straight. Fidel, enraged, emerged from one torture session to shout to prisoners within earshot: "We've got [a POW]



In 1967, the propaganda war continued as USAF Lt. Col. James Hughes was paraded through Hanoi visibly injured the day after his capture. Such scenes backfired, resulting in international revulsion at the prisoners' mistreatment.

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Hugh Stafford broke his arm, collarbone, and ribs when his A-4 was downed by a SAM over Haiphong in August 1967. After three days without water, he was then subjected to the rope torture. Despite his injuries (damage to his left arm is evident in this photo), he became what the study's authors call "a spark plug in the resistance."



that's faking. Nobody's gonna fake and get away with it. ... I'm gonna teach you all a lesson. ... I'm gonna break this guy in a million pieces." Cobeil was last seen in the fall of 1970 and did not return with the other POWs in 1973. The Vietnamese later reported Cobeil had died in November 1970; his remains were returned March 6, 1974.

The prisoners believed that, when captured, "their mission had changed, from one of active fighting to one of resistance and survival," the Pentagon historians said. "They still had a soldierly function to perform—to disrupt, to stymie, to exhaust the enemy, finally to defeat him, in this case on the battlefield of propaganda and psychological warfare."

One prisoner estimated that communist torturers exacted statements of some sort from 80 percent of the POWs. As soon as they recovered from the physical trauma, the prisoners faced the torment of having collaborated and, theoretically, having violated the Code of Conduct. However, the Code, updated after the Korean War and reviewed after the USS *Pueblo* incident off Korea in 1968, assumed that captors would

observe the minimum provisions of the Geneva Convention governing POWs. Under relentless torture, "the Code increasingly seemed to be a noble, but meaningless, abstraction that paled into irrelevance before the harrowing reality of the ropes and stocks," the historians found.

Cherry's Ordeal

Vietnamese communists played the race card. Air Force Maj. Fred V. Cherry, the highest ranking black POW in the North, recalled his captors trying to exploit him by treating him differently. The Vietnamese housed Cherry with Navy Lt. Porter A. Halyburton in apparent hopes of sowing dissension between a black aviator and a white Southerner. The tactic backfired. Cherry later credited Halyburton with saving his life, when his injuries from being shot down became so infected that he had to be fed by hand and assisted with his bodily needs.

Cherry's resistance won him some of the war's most severe exactions—including one 93-day stretch of unbroken torture and 53 straight weeks of solitary confinement.

Prisoners fashioned elaborate

means of reaching out to comrades. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Robert H. Shumaker spied a fellow prisoner in March 1965 and surreptitiously left a note in the latrine that was never found. Guards found a second note, and Shumaker was threatened with punishment. His persistence paid off in the summer of 1965 when he left another note in the latrine that was read by Air Force Capt. Ronald E. Storz, downed while flying a small observation airplane near the DMZ. Storz scratched his name in reply on a piece of toilet paper with the burnt end of a match.

"Thus was accomplished the first exchange of messages among American PWs in North Vietnam," the historians said.

The names of captured pilots soon appeared on the undersides of plates and the handles of food pails as makeshift communications began. By the summer of 1965, Air Force Capt. Carlyle S. Harris perfected and spread a tap code that became the gold standard for communication throughout the prisoner population. Harris recalled the code from survival training at Stead AFB, Nev., where an instructor had shown him the code during a coffee break.

The prisoners used a five-by-five grid for the letters of the alphabet, with two numbers assigned to each letter. They dropped the "K." Prisoners quickly reverted to short cuts—so that "God bless you" became GBU—the universal sign-off.

By the summer of 1966, Navy Cmdr. James B. Stockdale, the senior officer and the POW leader, had become so proficient that he carried on a virtual conversation with Air Force Maj. Samuel R. Johnson, a prisoner in an adjoining cell.

In his memoir, Stockdale recounted, "Our tapping ceased to be just an exchange of letters and words; it became conversation. Elation, sadness, humor, sarcasm, excitement, depression—all came through. ... I laughed to think what our friends back home would think of us two old fighter pilots standing at a wall, checking for shadows under the door, pecking out a final message for the day with our fingernails—'Don't let the bedbugs bite' [DLTBBB]."

The grueling, day-to-day stresses took a toll. A generational split developed between prisoners captured between 1965 and the bombing suspension of November 1968 and the

younger generation of pilots shot down after resumption of bombing in December 1971. Newly seized prisoners tended to be more cynical about the war, the Pentagon historians found. They also operated under a more flexible interpretation of the Code of Conduct.

"Peace Committee"

Dissension remained an undercurrent.

"In truth, over the years, there would be breakdowns of authority, lapses in the chain of command, intramural squabbling, even instances of resentment and outright disobedience of the leadership," the historians found. For example, by the fall of 1971, a group of at least eight enlisted prisoners became known as the "Peace Committee," its members receptive to the communists' propaganda. "Whether they were turncoats who willfully disobeyed orders, ratted on comrades, and bartered anti-war messages for special privileges, or were simply confused youngsters who sincerely opposed the war and saw no downside to expressing their feelings, depends on the perspective of participants," the historians said.

In January 1973, after the signing of the Paris peace accords, freedom drew near. Resentful American prisoners weighed the idea of executing members of the Peace Committee. USAF Lt. Col. Theodore W. Guy, the senior officer in charge at the POW camp called "Plantation," spent two weeks

persuading the angry conspirators to drop that plan. He also talked them out of a subsequent plan to shave the Peace Committee members' heads. He planned to file court-martial charges after their release.

The most prominent turncoat of the war was Marine Pfc. Robert R. Garwood, 19, a motor pool driver who disappeared on Sept. 28, 1965, near Da Nang, South Vietnam. He cooperated with the enemy and remained in Vietnam long after the other Americans had been repatriated. Garwood himself voluntarily returned to the US on March 22, 1979, and was immediately taken into custody. The historians found that Garwood "did cross over [to collaboration with the communists] but that his 'defection' stemmed more from opportunism than any genuine political or ideological conversion."

Throughout the war, barriers to escape were indeed formidable, so much so that not a single GI made it to freedom from North Vietnam, according to the historians. While the Code of Conduct called for prisoners to "make every effort to escape," senior commanders realized that escape attempts triggered such Draconian retaliation that attempts could jeopardize the lives of other prisoners.

Air Force Capt. John A. Dramesi, who was captured April 2, 1967, was determined to escape despite the odds. The pugnacious former star high school wrestler and son of a boxer had already tried to escape

en route to Hanoi. For months, he and fellow conspirators squirreled away string, wire, and bamboo that could be used for tools or weapons. Donated scraps of food were hidden in a cache. They gathered straw, thread, and cloth to weave civilian attire. Conical peasant hats were fabricated from rice straw taken from sleeping mats. Dramesi acquired brown iodine pills for water purification and to help darken the skin color of those attempting to escape. On May 10, 1969, Dramesi and Air Force Capt. Edwin L. Atterberry advised the leadership, "We're going tonight."

Horror Chamber

They did. Dramesi calculated that, by dawn, they had traveled four or five miles from the compound. But that was it. A North Vietnamese patrol found the pair hiding in a bramble thicket near an abandoned churchyard. The two were captured, blindfolded and handcuffed, and returned to prison. Dramesi was tortured for 38 days, flogged with a fan belt, punched, strapped into excruciating positions by ropes, and kept awake. He was strung in the ropes 15 times. Eventually he broke.

In a horror chamber close to Dramesi, the communists tortured Atterberry so gruesomely that his shrieks of pain could be heard two blocks away. Atterberry died on May 18, 1969, just eight days after the breakout.

The communists didn't stop with punishing Dramesi and Atterberry. They tortured other prisoners—some for weeks—who had not participated in the escape attempt and even extended the torture to other prisons.

"So traumatic had been the overall experience that even when escape became a more feasible option late in the captivity, the prisoners were still haunted by the catastrophic consequences of the Dramesi-Atterberry attempt," the historians wrote.

To the South, the historians found that about two dozen Americans—about 10 percent—managed to escape from their captors and make it to freedom.

Perhaps the most stunning getaway was the one that was staged by Army Lt. James N. Rowe, a Special Forces advisor seized Oct. 29, 1963, in the Mekong Delta, along with Army Capt. Humbert R. Versace and Army Sgt. Daniel L. Pitzer. Versace later was



Navy Lt. Cmdr. John McCain (now a US senator) suffered severe injuries in 1967 from bailing out of his A-4 over Hanoi and being beaten by a mob. A prize hostage because of his prominent father, he rejected offers of quick repatriation.

executed by his captors. Pitzer was released in 1967.

On Dec. 31, 1968, after more than five years of jungle captivity, forced marches, starvation, and disease, Rowe and his Viet Cong guards cowered in the underbrush to elude US gunships and advancing South Vietnamese troops seeking battle. Suddenly, Rowe found himself alone with a single guard. He clubbed the man unconscious, rushed to a clearing, and waved frantically toward a descending US helicopter gunship.

Luckily, the commander of the air cavalry group, Army Maj. David Thompson, spied what he thought was a Viet Cong guerrilla vulnerable to capture and, rather than opening fire, swooped in to pick him up. "Only when the command ship swept in and lifted the black-clad figure out of the jungle amid a hail of fire from VC in the woods did the helicopter crew realize that it had bagged an American," the historians wrote.

Rowe left the Army in 1974, returned to duty in 1980, and died in April 1989, victim of an ambush by left-wing Marxist terrorists in the Philippines.

Dreams of escape similarly inspired two GIs who received the Medal of Honor posthumously for valor during captivity. Marine Capt. Donald G. Cook remained endlessly defiant after being captured east of Saigon in late December 1964, when Viet Cong overran the South Vietnamese force he was advising. Cook

nursed civilian Douglas Ramsey, a US foreign service officer captured in January 1966, back from a sinking malaria-induced coma and saved his life, despite the ravages of his own illnesses. On Dec. 8, 1967, as the POWs were moved to another camp, Cook died on a jungle trail, probably from a malaria seizure, stated the historians. Ramsey's account of Cook's heroism, provided upon his release in 1973, led the US on May 16, 1980, to bestow on Cook the nation's highest decoration for valor.

Tale of Lance Sijan

Air Force 1st Lt. Lance P. Sijan also received the Medal of Honor. The backseater on a disabled F-4 that crashed in Laos on Nov. 9, 1967, Sijan bailed out at low altitude and evaded capture for 46 days, despite a compound leg fracture, mangled hand, and head concussion. North Vietnamese soldiers found him by the side of the road on Christmas morning 1967. He was taken in early 1968 to North Vietnam, where he was held with Air Force Lt. Col. Robert R. Craner and Capt. Guy D. Gruters. His Air Force Academy buddy Gruters did not recognize him. The strapping 220-pound former football player had lost a great amount of weight. His leg was badly infected, yet he asked his comrades to help him exercise so he could escape. Sijan died of pneumonia on Jan. 22, 1968. In March 1976, Sijan was awarded the Medal of Honor—the first graduate

of the Air Force Academy to receive the award.

Some prisoners were lucky enough to win early release. Prisoner leaders, including Navy Lt. Cmdr. Richard A. Stratton and Navy Lt. Cmdr. John S. McCain III (now a US senator and Presidential candidate) rejected Vietnamese offers of immediate repatriation, fearing that such a release would yield a propaganda bonanza for Hanoi and have a disastrous impact on POW morale and cohesion. They also thought that such an act would run contrary to their duty to stay with their men until all were safe.

On Feb. 16, 1968, in the midst of the Tet Offensive, North Vietnam released three prisoners from Plantation, turning them over to peace activists Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest, and Howard Zinn, a professor of history and government at Boston University. Navy Ensign David P. Matheny, a 24-year-old pilot, Air Force Maj. Norris M. Overly, and Air Force Capt. Jon D. Black were turned over. The freed officers became known at Plantation as the "MOB," an acronym for their last names. The stay-behinds debated whether the freed prisoners had broken faith. Many saw the value in having Matheny carry out the memorized names of at least 70 POWs, helping the Pentagon update the list of captured pilots.

Senior officers became deeply concerned over the possibility that early release offers could decimate unity. USAF Lt. Col. Hervey S. Stockman, senior officer at Plantation, was fearful that his men now knew that Hanoi's "promises of amnesty were not completely empty." He quickly issued orders that future releases under the early release program would be accepted "only in order of shootdown with sick and wounded first."

Additional releases followed. Navy Seaman Douglas B. Hegdahl, freed by North Vietnam in 1969, came out with the first word actually confirming that American servicemen had been captured by the communists in Laos and were being held prisoner. Hegdahl, 19, the youngest POW seized in the North, had been serving as an ammunition handler aboard the guided-missile cruiser USS *Canberra* in the Gulf of Tonkin. During a night bombardment, he went topside where he was knocked overboard by the



As a 19-year-old Air Force Academy cadet, Lance Sijan learned survival skills that he later used to elude the North Vietnamese for 46 days. He received a Medal of Honor posthumously for his heroic fight for freedom and determined resistance.

concussion of the ship's guns. He was picked up by North Vietnamese fishermen and turned over to the militia.

Turning Point

The release of Hegdahl and two others on Aug. 4, 1969, marked a turning point in the Nixon Administration's public relations policy, with an end to the low-key approach to allegations of mistreatment and torture. The plight of American prisoners was brought to the attention of the world, and, about that same time, a new regime took over in North Vietnam upon the death of Ho Chi Minh. Conditions began to improve in the prisons of North Vietnam.

By the time of the peace accords, a



USAF Maj. Roger Ingvalson, an F-105 pilot captured in May 1968, reads what was called Christmas mail in a propaganda photo, at top. Navy officers (l-r) Lt. j.g. David Everett, Lt. Carroll Beeler, and Lt. Cmdr. Theodore Triebel and USAF Maj. James Padgett were among the POWs brought forward to meet an American who traveled to North Vietnam in fall 1972.

total of 113 American POWs had died in captivity. Operation Homecoming saw the return of 600 prisoners—591 Americans and nine foreign nationals. The Americans included:

- USAF, 325
- Navy, 138
- Army, 77
- Marines, 26
- Civilians, 25

Air Force Lt. Col. Robinson Risner, a Korean War ace and test pilot, scored a symbolic victory for the prisoners at Unity who had just been notified of their impending release. Risner had been held captive since Sept. 16,

1965. He had commanded the Hanoi Hilton as the senior officer in charge since Sept. 20, 1965. An interpreter for the presiding North Vietnamese officer known as Dog read from a prepared text, telling the prisoners that they would be released 120 at a time in two week increments. Dog demanded that the prisoners "show good attitudes" until release. He then dismissed the prisoners.

For all of Dog's officiousness, it was not until Risner did a smart about-face, looked at his men, and issued the order that the prisoners moved. Risner called the men to at-

tention. Some 400 men snapped to attention, and, as one POW remembered it, "the thud of 800 rubber tire sandals coming together smartly was awesome." Squadron commanders returned Risner's salute and dismissed their squadrons in unison.

Some prisoners ran into each other's arms, hugged, and whooped with joy. Others felt the weight of their suffering drain from their bodies, what Navy Lt. Cmdr. Hugh A. "Al" Stafford called a "profound, bottomless fatigue."

"What the hell had I done the last seven [years]," wondered Navy Lt. Gerald L. Coffee, downed while on a photoreconnaissance mission near Vinh on Feb. 3, 1966. "During the prime years of my life, I'd sat on my ass in some medieval dungeons, broken my teeth, screwed up my arm, contracted worms and God knows what else, and had gotten old."

The vanguard of the prisoners arrived at Clark on Feb. 12, 1973. It was there that many of the ex-prisoners finally relinquished the self-control that had enabled them to survive.

One of the Best

Ernest C. Brace, a pilot for a private airline flying supply missions in Laos and Thailand under contract to the US Agency for International Development, had been held since May 21, 1965, the day his small airplane was ambushed on a runway in Laos.

He "survived barbarous mistreatment and decimating illness over an eight-year period ... to

become one of the most seasoned and respected PWs among all the Americans captured in Southeast Asia," the historians wrote.

But upon hearing that his wife had left him, Brace broke down and cried at the processing center in an emotional outpouring that he could not remember yielding to through all the years of beatings and persecution.

Over three to five days, prisoners called families, went through debriefings and medical evaluations, and, in general, decompressed before the trip home.

Air Force Maj. George E. "Bud" Day, captured Aug. 26, 1967, after being shot down near the DMZ and later awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism, learned that some family members had died during his captivity. Day had managed to escape his initial capture and evade the enemy for two weeks and was within two miles of a US Marine outpost when he was shot and recaptured. His legendary resistance to communist torturers won him the everlasting respect of his colleagues.

Day recalled feeling "as if I might melt into the phone" as he spoke to his wife for the first time in more than five years. "She came through strong and clear. She was well. The children were well. They were as anxious to see me as I was to see them. All of the important things in my existence were in order."

Lt. John H. Nasmyth, taken captive Sept. 4, 1966, recalled locating a bathtub in a staff room, locking the door, and "wallowing" in the hot water until it spilled over the tub. His first bath lasted an hour—the first of half a dozen he took the first night of freedom.

As they prepared to fly home, some ex-prisoners found it hard to leave fellow POWs who had shared the same horrific experiences.

"Of course, getting out was what we had all anticipated and dreamed of," recalled Craner, captured Dec. 20, 1967. "But I and everyone did establish friendships and very intimate personal relationships up there,



Operation Homecoming brought back 600 POWs, including then Maj. R.E. "Gene" Smith, who was among the jubilant group repatriated in March 1973 and who went on to become an AFA president and board chairman. He had been a POW since 1967.

which I don't believe any other set of circumstances would have allowed. And it was with just a little bit of melancholia that I finally said goodbye."

At Travis AFB, Calif., Air Force Capt. Peter P. Camerota got a quick lesson that little had changed. A crew member on a B-52 that had been shot down in the December 1972 raids, he had eluded capture for 10 days by hiding in a cave. He knew he was home when he went through processing and he was told that he would be paid \$5 for each of his 88 days in captivity. But, Camerota explained, he had been in North Vietnamese territory for 98 days, including the 10 days of evasion.

The official explained that the money was expressly for "substandard quarters and subsistence" and that during his 10 days evading capture he had no quarters and subsistence and therefore did not have substandard quarters and subsistence.

Coming face to face with that bureaucratic explanation, said Camerota, "I knew I was home."

Coming Home

The historians found that some prisoners made the transition to life back home more easily than others.

"Some picked up their lives as normally as if they had merely served overseas for the better part of a decade, and some never recovered from dissolved marriages, missed career opportunities, or the awful memories," the study found.

Two returned POWs committed suicide soon after release. One, Marine Sgt. Abel L. Kavanaugh, was a young man captured on April 24, 1968, after being inadvertently left behind by Marine helicopters lifting his unit back to base camp. Kavanaugh had been a member of the so-called Peace Committee. He killed himself June 27, 1973.

Ex-prisoners ran for public office, including four elected to Congress—Denton, McCain, Johnson, and Douglas B. "Pete" Peterson. Peterson, an Air Force captain who later represented a Florida Congressional district, became the first postwar US ambassador to Vietnam, taking up his post on May 9, 1997.

"Those who made it back gave their countrymen an occasion to celebrate patriotism and heroism unencumbered by the vexing moral and political issues that clouded so much of the war effort," the Pentagon historians concluded. "The PWs, even when they were no longer incarcerated, continued to wield a symbolic power out of proportion to their small numbers. Their proud return to a grateful nation remains one of the few truly shining moments of that troubled era."

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