

POW Recollections

A Brief Memoir

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I had never thought about documenting my military service prior to reading the “Voices of Vets” article in the 12/2016 *Wapsipinicon*. Not knowing if my story would be of any interest, I contacted Cecille Gerber, the Tiskilwa Historical Society’s Museum Director, to find out. After briefly describing my work in 1973 with American prisoners of war following their release from captivity in North Vietnam, Cecille encouraged me to record my experiences and to submit the results for inclusion in the “Voices of Vets” archive. As soon as I started, it became apparent I would need to begin with an account of how the POWs and I came to be in the same place at the same time forty-four years ago, because, as you will see in the narrative that follows, the route leading me to that destination was convoluted in the extreme and had it not been for a series of improbable, mostly serendipitous events, our paths would never have crossed and there would have been no prisoner-of-war memoir to write. If you will bear with me, I promise we will get to the POWs in due course, but borrowing from radio broadcaster Paul Harvey’s famous tagline, I first need to lay out some background so that “...you know the rest of the story.”

- From mid-1970 to late 1973, I was assigned to the Mental Health Clinic, USAF Regional Hospital, Westover Air Force Base situated in the verdant Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts...think timeworn grist mills with water wheels turned by rushing streams originating in the nearby Berkshires and 18th century white clapboard churches, their iconic steeples keeping watch over immaculate village greens and weeping willow-shaded duck ponds, the latter being the preferred recreational venue for squabbling iridescent mallards and imperious snow-white swans in summer and for red-nosed bundled-up ice skaters in winter. This is Norman Rockwell country, both in appearance and in fact, for Stockbridge, the town of the famed illustrator’s home and studio, the place where he spent the last twenty-five years of his life, was but a leisurely Sunday afternoon excursion from Westover. One day while driving into Stockbridge, Pat and I passed an elderly couple riding bicycles along the edge of the road, and though it was only the briefest of glimpses, I was pretty certain the man was none other than the

town's most famous resident. A short time later, we stopped in at a drug store lunch counter for a bite to eat and I told our matronly waitress about the cycling couple we'd seen on our way into town. I said I felt certain the man had to have been Norman Rockwell. "No doubt it was," she responded matter-of-factly, "Norman and Molly ride that same route just about every morning this time of year when the weather's fit." How wonderfully interesting it would be, I mused on our way home later that day, to reside in a historic New England village where a world-renowned artist... "America's Artist" ...lived and worked, painting those nationally revered front covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* and scores of calendars for the Boy Scouts of America, using his friends and neighbors as models for the people in those paintings, and where everyone in town, matronly lunch counter waitresses included, knew him simply as, "Norman."

- Although I was officially classified as a psychiatric technician at Westover, I was permitted to work there as a psychologist, having finished a Master's Degree a couple of weeks prior to reporting for active duty. It was, in fact, the Air Force's "Delayed Enlistment Program" that afforded me the additional three months I needed to complete the degree requirements. The Draft Board in Princeton, Illinois had already classified me 1-A ("available for military service") and my draft lottery number from the December 1, 1969 drawing was only 154; nothing below 250 was expected to be safe from induction that year, though as it turned out, 195 was the highest number drafted. Had I been born two days (actually 28 hours) later, my lottery number would have been 311 and I would never have entered the military at all...either by draft or enlistment. With that 154 number, however, the Army and Marines both had a keen interest in me and their only option was immediate active duty, no delays permitted.

As it turned out, I was in Des Moines, Iowa being sworn into the Air Force a mere twenty-four hours before I was to leave Princeton on a charter bus with fifty or so other draftees bound for the U.S. Military Induction Center at 400 South Jefferson Street in Chicago, the slightly terrifying human equivalent of the Chicago Union Stockyards. It was a gargantuan building that covered an entire city block and where I'd already been twice before for draft physicals. The place had to be the mother of all anxiety generators and an all day visit there undoubtedly topped the list of most-dreaded experiences for every draft-eligible young man residing within the induction center's enormous Midwestern catchment area...light years ahead of such namby-pamby alternatives as a root canal without Novocain or sticking your big toe in a hot electrical socket. But gallows humor aside, while those other things may be excruciatingly painful, at least they are time-limited and unlikely to be lethal. By contrast, 400 South Jefferson Street was the place draftees were randomly handed one-way tickets to oblivion, and every one of us who

passed through that horrid place knew it. Being thrust into a situation that forces a young man to confront the reality of his own mortality is a sobering experience, indeed. Of course, this has been true for every conscript in every war since the dawn of man; at the time, Vietnam was just the most recent example, though the widespread unpopularity of that war and, by association, those who fought in it, probably made the “South Jefferson Street threat” more palpable than it might have otherwise have been.

That miniscule twenty-four hour time gap between Des Moines and Chicago wasn't entirely a coincidence, though. Because tens of thousands of young men nationwide were clamoring to get into the Air Force to avoid being drafted into the Army or Marines, and the Air Force couldn't possibly accommodate them all, Air Force recruiting offices all across the country were being given maximum monthly enlistment quotas. Sergeant Mickel, the recruiter in Peoria with whom I'd been working for several weeks, was only being allowed fifteen enlistment slots a month. He was sympathetic to my need to complete graduate school, but told me I was down quite a ways on his waiting list and it would be some time before my name would climb into the top fifteen. In the meantime, however, I received one of those infamous “Greetings” letters from the President ordering me to present myself for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States and setting my reporting date at the South Jefferson Street processing center in Chicago. And then, three days before I was to get on that Chicago-bound bus, Sergeant Mickel called to say he had been given one extra enlistment slot that very morning and had immediately sent my name in to the Air Force. He apologized for not taking time to check with me first, but figured what he'd done was probably OK. I assured him it was. My time had almost run out, but I made it to De Moines with those twenty-four hours to spare and an extra ninety days to finish school. Pat and I had been married a little over a year at that point and we both breathed a huge sigh of relief.

- But even after all that, I didn't start out my Air Force enlistment working in mental health. When I arrived at Lackland in San Antonio (“the largest Air Force base in the world without a runway”) for basic training, I learned that all college graduate enlistees were being assigned to a program called “Palace Dog” in the Defense Department's Defense Language Institute-English Language School (DLI-ELS). We were told we would learn how to teach English as a foreign language and then we would be assigned to a base in Nha Trang, South Vietnam where our students would be South Vietnamese helicopter pilots. That's what DLI officials told us in 1970; however, if you Google “Palace Dog” today you'll see that the program was considerably more complicated and a lot more clandestine than that. In any case, fortunately for me the DLI English Language School was located at Lackland. (There was also a DLI Foreign Language School

in Monterey, CA and one of the fellows in our unit who had scored high in foreign language aptitude testing was going to be heading out there after basic training to learn Chinese.)

Hoping to get into the mental health field I took a chance one day and went to see my drill instructor. I said I wasn't trying to be a wise guy, but I had a Master's Degree in Psychology and I wanted to see if I could find an assignment in mental health, but first I would have to get out of the Palace Dog program. His response was unexpectedly supportive: "Hell, if I was in your shoes, he said, "I'd be trying to do the same damn thing." And so he gave me permission to walk a mile or so across base to the language school to see if I could negotiate an assignment switch. That mile walk was a really intimidating experience since basic trainees were never to be found outside the base's recruit training area by themselves and with our freshly shorn heads and no stripes on our sleeves it was obvious to even the casual observer who we were. I finally reached my destination unscathed, though, and was directed to Senior Master Sergeant Geiselhart, the seven-stripe NCO who was the Defense Language Institute's Palace Dog administrator. Sergeant Geiselhart said if had I come to him a week sooner or a week later he couldn't have helped me, but at the moment he had more college grads than he needed and if I could find another assignment within the next few days, he would release me from the program. Of course, I had absolutely no idea how to go about doing that, but he had a suggestion: "Go over to Wilford Hall and talk to Chief Master Sergeant Murphy" (eight stripes this time).

Now, "Wilford Hall" was Wilford Hall Hospital. With 1,000 beds in 1970, it was the largest U. S. Air Force medical facility in the world and was commanded by a Major General (2 stars). This time it was a half mile walk in a different direction. Again trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, I finally managed to slip through Wilford Hall's front entrance unchallenged. After a half hour or so of asking directions and going down wrong hallways, I finally found the Chief Master Sergeant down in a basement office sitting at a desk covered with official-looking paperwork. Amazingly, he was willing to stop what he was doing and take time to hear me out. Undoubtedly he and Sergeant Geiselhart were acquainted; perhaps Sergeant G. had called to say I was coming over. In any event, as soon as I'd finished making my case, it was clear the Chief had concluded the Air Force would benefit more from my working in mental health than it would from making an English teacher out of me. And it was at that very moment when I first understood the validity of the age-old armed forces maxim that it may be the officers who issue the orders, but it's the sergeants who run the military, because the Chief told me straight out I would be receiving orders to report to Sheppard AFB in Wichita Falls,

TX to go through medic training and then I would be assigned to Wright-Patterson AFB in Ohio as a psychiatric technician. Just like that! No...“I’ll get back to you.” No...“I’ll have to run this past the Colonel.”...Nothing but his say so! And, indeed, it all subsequently played out according to the Chief’s ten-minute seat-of-the-pants plan for what turned out to be the start of my entire professional career...except that in the end I went to Westover instead of Wright-Pat. But, I almost didn’t go to either Westover or Wright-Pat because when I completed the medic training course there were no orders sending me to either of those bases. And so, for more than two weeks while awaiting orders I moved furniture back and forth between officer family housing and the base supply warehouse. Then one evening upon returning to my dorm room after work I found an envelope on my bed containing my Westover orders. I learned the next morning, however, that I had dodged yet another assignment bullet, because the officer in charge of Sheppard’s medical training unit told me that if the orders hadn’t arrived by the end of that week (i.e. within the next two days), they were going to arbitrarily assign me to an Air Force hospital or clinic somewhere in the world and it *wouldn’t* have been as a psychiatric technician.

The delay in orders and change of destination from Wright-Patterson to Westover notwithstanding, it nevertheless seemed Chief Murphy’s influence must have radiated throughout the U.S. Air Force’s Medical Service Corps because when I finally arrived at Westover I found that the mental health clinic only had two psychiatric technician slots and both of them were already filled; what would have been a deal-breaker for men of lesser stature or determination was apparently of no consequence to Chief Murphy who had simply forced thirty pounds of flour into a twenty pound sack; it may have taken the Chief a couple of extra weeks to pull it off, but pull it off he did. The people at the Westover clinic couldn’t understand how it had happened, but they never pressed the issue. And then, a couple of months after I’d arrived so unexpectedly, one of those original psych techs got orders reassigning her to another base, thereby apparently completing Chief Murphy’s master plan for my entry into Air Force mental health.

In the end, the only thing I was ever able to conclude from all of this was that Chief Master Sergeant Murphy, whom I never saw or spoke to again following our brief encounter down in Wilford Hall’s basement, had pretty much done and seen it all during his three-decade career and one of the few things still capable of lighting his fire was an opportunity to manipulate the system. I’ve always remembered the orders I received that started the ball rolling by sending me to Sheppard were signed by a 1st lieutenant and for forty-seven years I have had this picture in my mind of Chief Murphy walking into that young lieutenant’s office cubicle, sliding a copy of the orders he had just

created across the desk and saying, "I need your signature on these orders, sir." Now, no recently minted junior officer is going to question the wisdom or motives of a 30-year Chief Master Sergeant in such a situation...and so, that, as they say, was that...end of story.

- In 1970, Westover, with its 12,000 foot runway, was a Strategic Air Command installation that was home to SAC's 99th Bombardment Wing composed of two squadrons of Boeing B-52 Stratofortress bombers and one squadron of Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refueling planes. At that point in the Vietnam War, nearly all of Westover's bombers and tankers were stationed at Andersen AFB on the island of Guam in the Western Pacific, 1500 miles east of the Philippines. The B-52s were flying bombing runs over North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, a 5200 mile round trip with a total non-stop mission time of 12-14 hours; the tankers were engaged in aerial refueling of bombers and jet fighters, over the Philippine Sea west of Guam, providing them with just enough fuel to ensure they made it home safely. A KC-135 crew member once told me that when they left Andersen they never knew how many or what type of aircraft they would need to service so they always took off with a full load of transfer jet fuel on board...approximately 30,000 gallons. He said that if they were refueling B-52s they would unload all of it, but often they linked up with just one or two jet fighters which typically needed only three or four hundred gallons each. For safety reasons, however, they were prohibited from landing with any transfer fuel remaining on board so all the excess had to be dumped in the ocean before touching down. "And we were just one of dozens of tankers making refueling runs 24/7" ...meaning that tens of thousands of gallons of jet fuel were being discharged into the ocean every day.
- Nuclear weapons were stored at Westover in several guarded bunkers fenced off from the rest of the base. They were easy enough to see, though...huge earth-covered reinforced concrete domes with big sliding steel doors that you could simply drive past on a perimeter road and even photograph if you wanted to; clearly, terrorism wasn't on the Department of Defense's radar screen 47 years ago. The same sort of visual access was also true for the few B-52s and tankers that remained at Westover. I took lots of close-up pictures of them. The planes were guarded around the clock by security policemen armed with M-16s. Two of them walked a beat around each aircraft. They couldn't talk to anyone, weren't allowed transistor radios to help pass the time, always had to be opposite each other on the patrol path and in winter they could enter the heated guard hut for only about ten minutes each hour (obviously not at the same time) if the temperature dropped very low. As I recall it had to be less than 25° before they

could step inside to warm up. As you might expect, we saw lots of them in the mental health clinic, especially in the winter time.

- The base's mental health clinic was always staffed by two board-certified psychiatrists, a master's-level social worker, two psych techs and the NCOIC (Noncommissioned-Officer-In-Charge) who was responsible for administrative oversight of the clinic. I worked under the clinical supervision of Westover's Chief of Psychiatry and met with him for two or three hours every Friday afternoon to review each of my active treatment cases. He and I once had a short-term assignment at the U.S. Air Base at Goose Bay, Labrador. Being board-certified in child as well as adult psychiatry, he'd been asked to go up there to evaluate several children of Air Force personnel and he took me along to do the psychological testing. While we were at Goose Bay he finagled a brief visit for both of us to the U.S Air Base at Thule, Greenland. [Note: U.S. Air Force installations located on foreign soil are called Air Bases, not Air Force Bases.]

The far northwest coast of Greenland...in late October, no less! Geographically, we were 700 miles inside the Arctic Circle; 950 miles from the North Pole; 75 miles from Qaanaaq, the nearest Inuit village; and halfway between Washington, D.C. and Moscow. Before we got off the plane (a commercial Boeing 727) the ground crew backed it into a hanger and rolled the doors closed. That wasn't done for passenger comfort when we disembarked; rather, it was standard procedure to ensure the plane stayed warm enough to restart the engines when we were ready to leave. There was almost no snow on the ground at Thule; in fact, we were told, it seldom snows there because the area is an arctic desert. Base personnel said most of what little snow they got blew in off the ice cap. All the steam lines heating the base were above ground and went up and over the roads to keep from melting the permafrost; all the buildings were likewise raised off the ground for the same reason, otherwise, everything would have simply sunk into the mud. Every building had an extremely well insulated air lock to keep the heat in and the cold out. Several airmen told me that because the base experienced 24 hours of sunlight from late April until early September, the only way they could make their bedrooms dark enough to sleep during those four-plus months of continuous sunshine was to cover the windows with tin foil. That last week of October when we were there, however, they were at the brink of their 3 ½ months of total darkness and the brightest the sun ever got was roughly equivalent to 5:00 pm in January in Illinois. Being a SAC base, Thule also had a squadron of B-52s and we were told that in order to get their engines started in winter when temperatures could drop anywhere from 40° to 60° below zero, they had to use dynamite; no fooling, they had to insert and detonate explosive cartridges in the engines to get them to turn over. But while we were there

they'd been having a spell of unusually warm weather, the high temperature being a balmy 15° *above* zero.

- The mental health clinic's NCOIC retired toward the end of 1972 and at that point I became NCOIC, assuming those administrative responsibilities along with my clinical work for the last year of my assignment. In addition to providing routine outpatient psychiatric treatment and psychological counseling to active duty personnel and their adult dependents (children and adolescents were referred to civilian practitioners), the mental health clinic was also responsible for administering the Defense Department's "Human Reliability Program" which monitored the psychological stability of all active duty personnel with access to nuclear weapons...as well as dependents residing in the household of the active duty member. The medical record folders of all these persons (several hundred in number) were each marked with a red triangle sticker in the top right corner so that all hospital personnel could immediately identify every individual who might pose a direct or indirect risk to nuclear security. All of the clinic's physicians, social workers, the NCOIC and I had rolls of these red triangle stickers in our desks to apply to the medical charts as needed.
- In the 1970s, a U.S. Air Force B-52 bomber crew consisted of five officers and one enlisted man. The officer complement included the aircraft commander (pilot), co-pilot, electronic warfare officer (EWO) who was in charge of radar-jamming counter measures, radar navigator (also known as the weapon systems officer, or bombardier), and navigator. The enlisted crew member was the rear-facing tail gunner who controlled quad 50 caliber machine guns and communicated with the flight crew 150 feet behind him via a phone line...an arrangement which could result in serious problems if that line was knocked out, as when, for example, the aircraft was hit by a missile and the tail gunner couldn't find out what was going on up at the front of the plane. On such occasions he would have to decide on his own whether to bail out.

During the Vietnam War, B-52s were vulnerable to missile attack from both ground-based launchers and MIG fighter interceptors in large part because they were gigantic, relatively slow moving targets with extremely limited maneuverability. Seventeen of them were shot down during the war and several more were damaged so severely they had to be scrapped. If one of these 4-story, 8-engine behemoths were to be parked on a football field with one wing tip on Team **A**'s goal line, the other wing tip would be on Team **B**'s 38. The plane's wings were so long and heavy when filled with fuel that retractable outrigger wheels had to be affixed to each wing tip to help support the immense weight when the aircraft was on the ground or roaring down the runway on

takeoff. But with a top speed of just 650 mph, it was even less nimble and only slightly faster than today's passenger jetliners. When a B-52 was disabled by ground fire or by a MIG fighter and the crew had to abandon the aircraft, the pilot, co-pilot and EWO, who were all seated on the upper flight deck, ejected out the top of the plane; the bombardier and navigator, whose duty stations were on the lower flight deck, ejected downward out the belly of the aircraft. The tail gunner had no ejection seat. Instead, he activated a mechanism that caused the entire tail cone of the bomber to fall away and he simply stepped out.

One of our clinic's social workers who had a private pilot's license was invited one day by a B-52 crew member to accompany them on a training flight. They took off around 7:00 am and were back before noon. He said the aircraft commander had let him take control of the plane for a little while, something he no doubt still tells his grandchildren. I asked him where they'd gone, expecting him to say they had cruised around New England and New York and maybe Pennsylvania. "Oh," he replied almost as an afterthought, "we flew out over Utah and Nevada for a while and then we turned around and came home." Obviously, a big plane requires a big practice area. Pat and I are still very close friends with that social worker and his wife.

- ***Following ratification of the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, the North Vietnamese government released 591 American prisoners of war they had been holding in captivity for periods ranging from a few months to nearly a decade. The POWs' return to American soil was called "Operation Homecoming" and the release/return process was officially known as "repatriation." Unlike in prior wars, however, where U.S. POWs were primarily enlisted men, the overwhelming majority of Vietnam POWs were Air Force, Navy and Marine officers who were members of flight crews shot down over enemy-controlled territory.***
- When North Vietnam released the U.S. POWs en masse early in 1973, the base commander was notified that twenty-five of them would be coming to Westover for in-depth medical and psychological assessment. Preparations to house them in the hospital began immediately. Base engineers converted four-bed wards into large single-occupancy bedrooms which were outfitted with brand new drapes and residential furniture. The hospital's food service department was directed to keep the kitchen open around the clock and to have cooks and bakers on duty 24/7 throughout the POWs' stay. They were to be given whatever they wanted to eat whenever they wanted it: a hot fudge sundae at midnight..."No problem!"...T-bone steak and eggs sunny side up at

0300 hours, "Yes, sir, right away, sir!" I don't remember hearing whether any of them actually took advantage of the all-night restaurant service, but it was always there for the asking.

- SAC headquarters at Offutt, AFB in Omaha sent a psychiatrist to supplement the two on the clinic staff and the four of us divided our group of POWs roughly equally to administer psychiatric questionnaires which included in-depth mental status examinations and documentation of capture and captivity histories for each POW. The questionnaire was nearly 20 pages long and extraordinarily detailed. It had been meticulously crafted by the Defense Department over a period of several years in anticipation of the POWs' eventual release and it left no diagnostic stone unturned when it came to ferreting out actual or potential psychological disturbance. It was also designed to obtain detailed documentation of the torture techniques employed by North Vietnamese interrogators to elicit information and war crimes confessions from the POWs.
- After leaving North Vietnam, all the POWs were flown to Clark Air Base in the Philippines where they received treatment for any critical medical or dental problems. After a week or two at Clark they headed to various bases in the States. Our group of twenty-five arrived at Westover a couple of days after leaving the Philippines and entered the U.S. through McCord AFB in Washington State. Over all, we found them to be in good to excellent mental and physical shape. A couple of the POWs told me that their survival in captivity had been helped considerably by training they had received prior to their deployment overseas. While in virtually all cases treatment by their captors was physically and psychologically brutal (men captured toward the end of the war tended to fare somewhat better), they pretty much knew what to expect. They said that being forewarned about how they were likely to be treated (that is to say, mistreated) had contributed significantly to withstanding the atrocities of captivity.
- The Ford Motor Company gave each of the 591 returning POWs free use of a brand new automobile (usually a Crown Victoria sedan) for an entire year. We would frequently see them driving around the base in their new cars wearing their new casual civilian clothes. They really stood out from the other base personnel. During one evaluation session, a POW who was an F-105 pilot told me he'd been driving his new car for a week but hadn't yet ventured off the base. He said it had been so long since he'd been behind the wheel that he didn't feel comfortable maneuvering in local town traffic; he said he didn't yet trust either his reflexes or his reaction times. I was astonished! Here was a veteran fighter pilot who, prior to his captivity, had thought nothing of engaging in

aerial combat at supersonic speeds while experiencing G-forces that would make you and I instantly black out, and now the prospect of driving to a downtown restaurant at 35 mph gave him the willies!

- As a group, our POWs had been in captivity anywhere from a few months to nearly seven years. The captivity range for the five men I evaluated was 3 months to 6 years. It was not unusual for men who had been imprisoned for exceedingly long periods to have been promoted while in captivity. Two examples from our group of 25 come to mind. One, who was captured as a captain, found upon release that he had been promoted to major. In the other instance, a major at capture emerged from captivity as a lieutenant colonel. Sometimes POWs who had been imprisoned for several years expressed amazement at things we took for granted, but which were entirely new to them, having been introduced while they were in captivity. The one specific example that I have always remembered was pantyhose. The POW said he had no idea what they were the first time he saw them. I never asked him to elaborate on the circumstances of that first pantyhose encounter.
- Westover's group of POWs included only one noncommissioned officer, a master sergeant B-52 tail gunner. He was not one of the men I evaluated, and I never knew the details of his case other than that he had endured an extraordinarily long period of captivity (around six years) and experienced terrible episodes of torture throughout that time. But while I never knew much about him, I do vividly recall that his wife had become a national leader among the POW spouses. She was a tireless advocate for the POWs' release and was frequently on national television, including appearances on the Today show. A relentless POW freedom advocate on Capitol Hill in Washington, she had also met with President Nixon at the White House to solicit his help in gaining their release. But her greatest visibility was on the international stage pleading for release at the Paris Peace Talks where she met on more than one occasion with Dr. Henry Kissinger as well as with both the South and North Vietnamese negotiators.
- The degree of independence and self-sufficiency of the master sergeant's wife which emerged while her husband languished in a North Vietnamese prison may have bordered on unique in its magnitude, but it definitely was not unique in its substance. Most of the wives whose husbands had been in captivity for long periods became extraordinarily independent in their handling of every aspect of family life, financial affairs and public relations. They'd had no choice if their families were to survive. Many of the returning 591 POWs were bewildered by the changes they found at home, though...homes which a lot of them no longer recognized. The stresses on these

marriages were incredible and many of those unions did not survive; sadly, in a few instances, the POWs themselves did not survive. One in our group was among those casualties; he committed suicide not long after returning home. He was not among the five that I evaluated.

- And now I will turn to the stories of “my” five POWs. These first-person accounts are excerpted from reports I submitted to the Defense Department, copies of which I kept for my personal files. In them, you will see several references to the “Hanoi Hilton” and the “Zoo.” The Hanoi Hilton was definitely not a four-star hotel. It was, rather, Hoa Lo Prison located in central Hanoi, North Vietnam; built by the French in the 1880s when Vietnam was a French colony and Southeast Asia was called Indochina, during the Vietnam War it was a brutal incarceration facility housing hundreds of American prisoners of war. All the POWs sarcastically referred to this hell-hole as the “Hanoi Hilton.” By contrast, prison camp Cu Loc, located in the southwest Hanoi suburbs and nicknamed the “Zoo” by the POWs, was considered a “showplace” where the North Vietnamese military made propaganda films showing American POWs enjoying recreational activities like basketball and volleyball and preparing for Christmas. It was all staged, of course, and fed to news outlets worldwide as proof of the humane treatment these “American war criminals” were receiving from a benevolent adversary. The POWs did, however, receive better treatment at the Zoo than at the Hanoi Hilton.

(1) **Major G.** is a 37 year old U.S. Air Force F-105 pilot with a wife and an 11 year old daughter, repatriated following six years of captivity in North Vietnam. He was shot down north of Hanoi on 11 March, 1967 while engaged in a raid against an iron works. Major G’s plane was struck twice by ground fire, first in the rear causing moderate but manageable damage, and then near the cockpit immediately disabling the engine and causing the plane to burst into flames. After radioing his position and the nature of his emergency, he ejected from the aircraft and was apprehended immediately upon landing by soldiers of the Chinese Army who promptly relinquished him to the custody of North Vietnamese Army officials. He was subsequently placed in a truck and driven south to the outskirts of Hanoi where he was briefly put on display to be mocked by the local civilians. Following his public exhibition, he was placed in solitary confinement for a period of 40 days. He says that he was able to fairly quickly estimate how long he would be in solitary by counting scratch marks on the wall of his cell made by POWs who had occupied the space before him. He was kept in leg irons throughout this period and endured protracted episodes of brutally punitive interrogation during which his captors made constant threats on his life. Once each day for the first several weeks, they removed him from his cell and took him to another building in the prison camp where

they placed a pistol against his temple and pulled the trigger. He freely admitted that after several days of these mock executions he prayed there would be a bullet in the chamber so that the nightmare would end. He was also subjected to virtually all of the behavior control [i.e. torture] methods itemized in the DOD psychiatric questionnaire.

Major G. divides his six-year captivity into two phases with the break point being the fall of 1969. Prior to that time (i.e., his first 2 ½ years of captivity) , Major G. and all those imprisoned with him experienced constant threats of non-repatriation and being tried as war criminals with minimal infractions of camp rules being punished with extreme severity, e.g., 30 days in solitary bound in leg irons for talking back to a guard. Communication with POWs outside one's own cell was absolutely forbidden with violations resulting in severe physical torture. Major G. states he was moved to six different prison camps around Hanoi during the first six months of his captivity and in each instance he was housed with 2-4 other men in cells ranging from 7'x7' to 8'x8' with time outside the cell limited to 20 minutes a day. The stress resulting from as many as five men occupying 50-60 square feet, 23 ½ hours a day, coupled with incessant physical and psychological mistreatment was the most difficult aspect of his captivity with storytelling and exercise being the primary coping mechanisms.

In the fall of 1969, the "pressure and propaganda" suddenly and inexplicably ceased and the severe punishment stopped. All the prisoners began receiving letters and packages from home and were allowed to write to their families. Cell size increased as did the number of men to a cell. Time outside the cell likewise lengthened. From 1969 to 1970, 8-10 men were housed in each room and from 1970 through the end of 1972 there were frequently 30-40 men in several large rooms. It was at this time that the prisoners developed their own "educational program" to pass the time and there were nightly lectures on a wide range of topics delivered by prisoners proficient in each subject, e.g., mathematics, art, foreign languages, hunting, business, cinema, etc. Weekly religious services were also instituted. Toward the end, their North Vietnamese captors left them almost totally to their own devices and all but ignored their activities. Major G. noted that during his last 18 months of captivity, "There was no pressure; I could have taken another five years of that if I'd had to."

(2) **Captain P.** is a 31 year old single U.S. Air Force F-4 pilot who was repatriated following a 5½ year captivity in North Vietnam. His plane was downed by ground fire in July 1967 near Hanoi. When he ejected from the aircraft he sustained what was later determined to be compression fractures of two vertebrae and for the first three months of imprisonment he was unable to stand. Captured soon after his plane crashed, he

spent the first 13 days in solitary confinement. Although he thinks he may have been drugged during this period, he was not subjected to any physical mistreatment. After release from solitary, he was joined by an American lieutenant colonel pilot previously based in Thailand. From that point on, he was housed with other American POWs, 2-3 men to a cell, and on one occasion in a room with at least 50 other American flyers. He was moved frequently from camp to camp in and around Hanoi and from May 1972 until the beginning of his repatriation process in January 1973 he was kept in a "dungeon-like" prison camp near the Chinese border. Interestingly, he says he received the best treatment of his captivity in this last prison facility where he regained much of the weight he'd lost during his earlier years of imprisonment, being fed rice enriched with noodles and a daily ration of beef. He had a tooth pulled by some sort of North Vietnamese physician and although the dental facilities were rudimentary and unsanitary, the instruments appeared to be modern and he was administered ample anesthetic. He says that overall, the medical care he received there, although crude by American standards, was more competent and available than he ever imagined it would be. Similarly, his captors were far more humane than he'd anticipated. Captain P. experienced only one episode of physical abuse during his 5½ years of captivity which involved being required to sit on a stool for five days with his hands and feet tightly bound. He was allowed to get off the stool only to relieve himself and was struck repeatedly by his captors while struggling to keep from falling off.

Captain P. cites the total lack of privacy with no opportunity to gain physical or psychological distance from his fellow POWs as the most stressful aspects of his captivity. On the positive side, he says being unmarried made it easier for him to cope with the stress of imprisonment because he had no wife or children back home to worry about.

(3) **Major P.** is a 40 year old U.S. Air Force F-105 EWO with a wife and four children repatriated following 10 months in captivity in North Vietnam. He and his pilot were shot down in May 1972 while engaged in a raid 60 miles north of Hanoi. He was in the last group of prisoners to be released and left Hanoi on 28 March 1973. The aircraft in which Major P. was functioning as navigator/electronic warfare officer was disabled by ground fire and he ejected at an altitude of 2000 feet. He landed in a hilly area across a valley from his pilot. They communicated with each other by radio for 24 hours until the pilot was captured. Major P. evaded his pursuers for another 48 hours after which he was also caught. He came under machine gun fire during the chase but was not hit. Following his apprehension he was force marched for 10-12 hours, locked in a hut and allowed to sleep for a portion of that first night and then force marched for the next

three days. Toward the end of the fourth day he was placed in a truck and driven the remaining distance to Hanoi where he was placed in solitary confinement for the next 14-16 days. He describes his interrogation as "intensive." He was constantly threatened with execution and endured physical torture primarily consisting of beatings, forced self-actions and the now well-known use of ropes. He describes his state of mind as being "completely frightened to death" and says his first month in captivity was "terrifying." He was certain his captors were absolutely serious in their threats to execute him and he expected that at any moment he would be taken from his cell and shot. Although these fears diminished when he was given roommates he says he never ruled out the possibility that he would be executed, even when his captivity was drawing to a close. It was only in October 1972 when rumors of peace negotiations began circulating throughout the camp and repatriation seemed to be in sight that he began to believe he would come out of the ordeal alive. In January 1973, he and his roommates were moved from their prison camp on the outskirts of Hanoi into the Hanoi Hilton in preparation for release.

(4) **Captain B.** is a 26 year old U.S. Air Force B-52 EWO with a wife and one child repatriated following 3 months in captivity in North Vietnam. His plane was downed by a surface-to-air missile during a bombing raid against a radio transmitter site outside Hanoi. He was in the last group of prisoners to be released and left Hanoi on 29 March, 1973. When struck by the missile, the B-52 burst into flames knocking out all internal communication which required him to make an independent decision to abandon the aircraft. He ejected at an altitude of 40,000 feet, but during the ejection process his helmet was knocked off and he made the 7½ mile decent without benefit of an oxygen supply. He free-fell for approximately 2½ minutes, engaging in pressure breathing to keep from losing consciousness and his chute opened automatically at an altitude of 14,000 feet. Upon exiting the aircraft he suffered burns to his right hand and wrist and lacerations to his head, right arm and right thigh. He landed in an open field and says he hid for about two hours before being captured by militiamen and civilians from a nearby village.

Captain B. states he was given almost immediate medical attention by a French-speaking North Vietnamese physician with whom he conversed in French and he was given food, hot tea and cigarettes. His treatment at this point was good and he was actually protected by his captors from other more militant civilians in the village. He was transported by truck and jeep to the Hanoi Hilton where he was placed in solitary confinement for two days during which time he was interrogated, though he says, the interrogation was not intense and he was neither punished nor tortured. He was,

however, threatened with execution and trial as a war criminal, but did not believe those threats and states he had been prepared for such interrogation techniques by his survival training prior to his deployment overseas. Following his interrogation, Captain B. was reunited with three of his crew members and although the room assignments changed frequently, he was usually in close proximity to both the captured members of his crew and other flyers from his Thailand-based unit who had been shot down a few days earlier. Early in January 1973, Captain B. and his fellow crew members were moved from the Hanoi Hilton to the Zoo where the living conditions were much improved and they were largely ignored. Toward the end of January the prisoners learned of the signed peace accord from a North Vietnamese guard. Food rations increased and medical care was readily available. Captain B. and the other men with him were permitted to work outside their cells and cared for three injured American flyers that had been placed in the room with them. A language major in college, Captain B. also taught a class in German while awaiting repatriation.

(5) **1st Lieutenant G.** is a 25 year old U.S. Air Force B-52 co-pilot with a wife, but no children, repatriated following 3 months in captivity. His plane was shot down north of Hanoi on 20 December, 1972 during a routine bombing mission. His aircraft was hit by three surface-to-air missiles which destroyed all internal communications and although the aircraft commander gave the order to eject, he didn't know if the other crew members heard it or whether they got out of the plane. All crew members except the pilot and Lt.G are currently listed as MIA. Lt. G. was immediately captured by North Vietnamese civilians who turned him over to army authorities. He was force-marched a short distance and then taken by truck to Hanoi where he was imprisoned in the Hanoi Hilton. He spent nine days in solitary confinement and was interrogated rigorously throughout this period. He says he was frequently threatened with execution and told he was going to be tried as a war criminal, however physical abuse was minimal and he was not tortured.

On 12 January, 1973, 23 days after capture, he was transferred from the Hanoi Hilton to the Zoo where his treatment and living conditions were considerably improved. He reasoned that if he was going to be executed or tried as a war criminal he wouldn't have been given better living conditions, and his level of anxiety diminished greatly. Indeed, the threats of execution and trial ceased, as did the Communist political indoctrination propaganda. He and his seven roommates were largely ignored by their captors and they were frequently allowed out of their cell to wash the clothes and dirty food dishes of their fellow prisoners. Lt. G. says that he had been aware of the rapidly progressing

peace negotiations in Paris before he was captured and this knowledge sustained him during his imprisonment.

This concludes the account of my 3 years, 10 months and 2 days of active duty with the United States Air Force, officially documented on my DD Form 214. “Keep this document in a secure place, preferably in a safety deposit box,” we were all told at our final discharge briefing. “It’s your admission ticket to all future veterans’ benefits.” And indeed it was. I needed it to qualify for a VA loan when we bought our first house and I used it again five years later to sign up for my tax-free veterans’ education benefits when I enrolled in graduate school at the University of Minnesota.

When we’d arrived at Westover three years earlier, I learned the base’s NCO Club had recently been destroyed in a fire and a temporary facility had been set up in a vacant building. A funding request for \$3 million to rebuild the club had been submitted to the Defense Department. Amazingly, the request had been approved; even more amazingly, the approval had been swift. I guess the Strategic Air Command must have had a lot of pull at the Pentagon during wartime. Over the next several months we all watched the new club take shape. It was a beautiful structure that seemed to be made mostly of glass with just enough brick and stone to hold all those glass panels together. And it had a huge drive-through covered portico at the entrance to shield fashion-conscious visitors from the elements. We knew it was all nearing completion the day the furnishings started arriving...crate after crate of furniture accompanied by roll upon roll of carpeting. But then, just as everything was about to be unpacked and installed, it was announced the base was closing; the new \$3 million NCO club would never open. The day our family, now numbering four, drove off the base for the last time heading to our new home and my new job in Indiana, we passed that gorgeous unfinished monument to government waste with all those unopened crates looking out forlornly through the sparkling floor-to-ceiling glass walls. An old obsolete air force base and its new never-to-be-used NCO club were frozen in time, but we were moving on.

David A. Rosenquist
Former Staff Sergeant, United States Air Force
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