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Nation & World | Health | Money & Business | Education | Opinion | Science | Photo | Video | Rankings |

John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account

By John S. McCain III, Lieut. Commander, U.S. Navy

John McCain spent 5½ years in captivity as a POW in North Vietnam. His first-person account of that harrowing ordeal was published in U.S. News in May 1973. Shot down in his Skyhawk dive bomber on Oct. 26, 1967, Navy flier McCain was taken prisoner with fractures in his right leg and both arms. He received minimal care and was kept in wretched conditions that he describes vividly in the U.S. News special report:



Lt. Cmdr. John S. McCain III after his release from captivity in Vietnam.

(Thomas J. O'Halloran for USN&WR/Courtesy Library of Congress)

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Of the many personal accounts coming to light about the almost unbelievably cruel treatment accorded American prisoners of war in Vietnam, none is more dramatic than that of Lieut. Commander John S. McCain III—Navy flier, son of the admiral who commanded the war in the Pacific, and a prisoner who came in "for special attention" during 5½ years of captivity in North Vietnam.



John McCain lies in a hospital bed in Hanoi, North Vietnam, after being taken prisoner of war.

(Francois Chalais)

Now that all acknowledged prisoners are back and a self-imposed seal of silence is off, Commander McCain is free to answer the questions many Americans have asked:

What was it really like? How prolonged were the tortures and brutality? How did the captured U.S. airmen bear up under the mistreatment—and years spent in solitary? How did they preserve their sanity? Did visiting "peace groups" really add to their troubles? How can this country's military men be conditioned to face such treatment in the future without crumbling?

Here, in his own words, based on almost total recall, is Commander McCain's narrative of 5½ years in the hands of the North Vietnamese.

The date was Oct. 26, 1967. I was on my 23rd mission, flying right over the heart of Hanoi in a dive at about 4,500 feet, when a Russian missile the size of a telephone pole came up—the sky was full of them—and blew the right wing off my Skyhawk dive bomber. It went into an inverted, almost straight-down spin.

I pulled the ejection handle, and was knocked unconscious by the force of the ejection—the air speed was about 500 knots. I didn't realize it at the moment, but I had broken my right leg around the knee, my right arm in three places, and my left arm. I regained consciousness just before I landed by parachute in a lake right in the corner of Hanoi, one they called the Western Lake. My helmet and my oxygen mask had been blown off.

I hit the water and sank to the bottom. I think the lake is about 15 feet deep, maybe 20. I kicked off the bottom. I did not feel any pain at the time, and was able to rise to the surface. I took a breath of air and started sinking again. Of course, I was wearing 50 pounds, at least, of equipment and gear. I went down and managed to kick up to the surface once more. I couldn't understand why I couldn't use my right leg or my arm. I was in a dazed condition. I went up to the top again and sank back down. This time I couldn't get back to the surface. I was wearing an inflatable life-preserver-type thing that looked like water wings. I reached down with my mouth and got the toggle between my teeth and inflated the preserver and finally floated to the top.

Some North Vietnamese swam out and pulled me to the side of the lake and immediately started stripping me, which is their standard procedure. Of course, this being in the center of town, a huge crowd of people gathered, and they were all hollering and screaming and cursing and spitting and kicking at me.

When they had most of my clothes off, I felt a twinge in my right knee. I sat up and looked at it, and my right foot was resting next to my left knee, just in a 90-degree position. I said, "My God--my leg!" That seemed to enrage them—I don't know why. One of them slammed a rifle butt down on my shoulder, and smashed it pretty badly. Another stuck a bayonet in my foot. The mob was really getting up-tight.

□ About this time, a guy came up and started yelling at the crowd to leave me alone. A

John S. McCain III, 37, is a 1958 graduate of the U. S. Naval Academy and a trained Navy pilot. His father, Adm. John S. McCain, Jr., was commander in chief of all U. S. forces in the Pacific during the Vietnam war. His grandfather also was a four-star admiral, his great-uncle an Army general during World War I. Lieut. Commander McCain is married, with three children. Their permanent home is in Orange Park, Fla. During captivity his weight dropped as low as 100 pounds. He still walks with a limp from his injuries. He plans to stay in the Navy, has been assigned to attend the National War College this August.

woman came over and propped me up and held a cup of tea to my lips, and some photographers took some pictures. This quieted the crowd down quite a bit. Pretty soon, they put me on a stretcher, lifted it onto a truck, and took me to Hanoi's main prison. I was taken into a cell and put on the floor. I was still on the stretcher, dressed only in my skivvies, with a blanket over me.

For the next three or four days, I lapsed from conscious to unconsciousness. During this time, I was taken out to interrogation—which we called a "quiz"—several times. That's when I was hit with all sorts of war-criminal charges. This started on the first day. I refused to give them anything except my name, rank, serial number and date of birth. They beat me around a little bit. I was in such bad shape that when they hit me it would knock me unconscious. They kept saying, "You will not receive any medical treatment until you talk."

I didn't believe this. I thought that if I just held out, that they'd take me to the hospital. I was fed small amounts of food by the guard and also allowed to drink some water. I was able to hold the water down, but I kept vomiting the food.

They wanted military rather than political information at this time. Every time they asked me something, I'd just give my name, rank and serial number and date of birth.

I think it was on the fourth day that two guards came in, instead of one. One of them pulled back the blanket to show the other guard my injury. I looked at my knee. It was about the size, shape and color of a football. I remembered that when I was a flying instructor a fellow had ejected from his plane and broken his thigh. He had gone into shock, the blood had pooled in his leg, and he died, which came as quite a surprise to us—

a man dying of a broken leg. Then I realized that a very similar thing was happening to me.

When I saw it, I said to the guard, "O.K., get the officer." An officer came in after a few minutes. It was the man that we came to know very well as "The Bug." He was a psychotic torturer, one of the worst fiends that we had to deal with. I said, "O.K., I'll give you military information if you will take me to the hospital." He left and came back with a doctor, a guy that we called "Zorba," who was completely incompetent. He squatted down, took my pulse. He did not speak English, but shook his head and jabbered to "The Bug." I asked, "Are you going to take me to the hospital?" "The Bug" replied, "It's too late." I said, "If you take me to the hospital, I'll get well."

"Zorba" took my pulse again, and repeated, "It's too late." They got up and left, and I lapsed into unconsciousness.

Sometime later, "The Bug" came rushing into the room, shouting, "Your father is a big admiral; now we take you to the hospital."

I tell the story to make this point: There were hardly any amputees among the prisoners who came back because the North Vietnamese just would not give medical treatment to someone who was badly injured—they weren't going to waste their time. For one thing, in the transition from the kind of life we lead in America to the filth and dirt and infection, it would be very difficult for a guy to live anyway. In fact, my treatment in the hospital almost killed me.

Three Generations of a Famous Navy Family

In 1906, the first John S. McCain was graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. He served in World War I as a junior officer. In World War II, he rose to the rank of a four-star admiral in the Pacific theater. At war's end, he witnessed the Japanese surrender aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri*.

In 1931, John S. McCain, Jr., won his commission as an ensign at Annapolis. He compiled a brilliant record as a submarine commander in World War II. Then he became a top admiral, climaxing his Navy career as commander in chief of all U.S. forces in the Pacific. He retired in 1972, and lives now in Washington, D. C.

In 1958, John S. McCain III left Annapolis as an ensign and went on to win his wings at Pensacola. He served as a Navy flier in the Caribbean during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. His first mission over North Vietnam was in mid-1967.

I woke up a couple of times in the next three or four days. Plasma and blood were being put into me. I became fairly lucid. I was in a room which was not particularly small—about 15 by 15 feet—but it was filthy dirty and at a lower level, so that every time it rained, there'd be about a half inch to an inch of water on the floor. I was not washed once while I was in the hospital. I almost never saw a doctor or a nurse. Doctors came in a couple of times to look at me. They spoke French, not English.

For a guard, I was assigned a 16-year-old kid—right out of the rice fields. His favorite pastime was to sit by my bed and read a book that had a picture in it of an old man with a rifle in his hand sitting on a fuselage of an F-105 which had been shot down. He would point to himself, and slap me and hit me. He had a lot of fun that way. He fed me because both my arms were broken. He would come in with a cup that had noodles and some gristle in it, and fill a spoon and put it in my mouth. The gristle was very hard to chew. I'd get my mouth full after three or four spoonfuls, and I'd be chewing away on it. I couldn't take any more in my mouth, so he'd just eat the rest himself. I was getting about three or four spoonfuls of food twice a day. It got so that I kind of didn't give a damn—even though I tried as hard as I could to get enough to eat.

After I had been there about 10 days, a "gook"—which is what we called the North Vietnamese—came in one morning. This man spoke English very well. He asked me how I was, and said, "We have a Frenchman who is here in Hanoi visiting, and would like to take a message back to your family." Being a little naive at the time—you get smarter as you go along with these people—I figured this wasn't a bad deal at all, if this guy would come to see me and go back and tell my family that I was alive.

I didn't know at the time that my name had been released in a rather big propaganda splash by the North Vietnamese, and that they were very happy to have captured me. They told a number of my friends when I was captured, "We have the crown prince," which was somewhat amusing to me.

"It Looked to Many as if I Had Been Drugged"

They told me that the Frenchman would visit me that evening. About noon, I was put in a rolling stretcher and taken to a treatment room where they tried to put a cast on my right arm. They had great difficulty putting the bones together, because my arm was broken in three places and there were two floating bones. I watched the guy try to manipulate it for about an hour and a half trying to get all the bones lined up. This was without benefit of Novocain. It was an extremely painful experience, and I passed out a number of times. He finally just gave up and slapped a chest cast on me. This experience was very fatiguing, and was the reason why later, when some TV film was taken, it looked to many people as if I had been drugged.

When this was over, they took me into a big room with a nice white bed. I thought, "Boy, things are really looking up." My guard said, "Now you're going to be in your new room."

About an hour later in came a guy called "The Cat." I found out later that he was the man who up until late 1969 was in charge of all the POW camps in Hanoi. He was a rather dapper sort, one of the petty intelligentsia that run North Vietnam. He was from the political bureau of the Vietnamese Workers Party.

The first thing he did was show me Col. John Flynn's identification card—now Gen. John Flynn—who was our senior officer. He was shot down the same day I was. "The Cat" said—through an interpreter, as he was not speaking English at this time—"The French television man is coming." I said, "Well, I don't think I want to be filmed," whereupon he announced, "You need two operations, and if you don't talk to him, then we will take your chest cast off and you won't get any operations." He said, "You will say that you're grateful to the Vietnamese people, and that you're sorry for your crimes." I told him I wouldn't do that.

Finally, the Frenchman came in, a man named Chalais—a Communist, as I found out later—with two photographers. He asked me about my treatment and I told him it was satisfactory. "The Cat" and "Chihuahua," another interrogator, were in the background telling me to say that I was grateful for lenient and humane treatment. I refused, and when they pressed me, Chalais said, "I think what he told me is sufficient."

Then he asked if I had a message for my family. I told him to assure my wife and others of my family that I was getting well and that I loved them. Again, in the background, "The

Cat" insisted that I add something about hoping that the war would be over soon so that I could go home. Chalais shut him up very firmly by saying that he was satisfied with my answer. He helped me out of a difficult spot.

Chalais was from Paris. My wife later went to see him and he gave her a copy of the film, which was shown on CBS television in the U. S.

As soon as he left, they put me on the cart and took me back to my old dirty room.

After that, many visitors came to talk to me. Not all of it was for interrogation. Once a famous North Vietnamese writer—an old man with a Ho Chi Minh beard—came to my room, wanting to know all about Ernest Hemingway. I told him that Ernest Hemingway was violently anti-Communist. It gave him something to think about.

Others came in to find out about life in the United States. They figured because my father had such high military rank that I was of the royalty or the governing circle. They have no idea of the way our democracy functions.

One of the men who came to see me, whose picture I recognized later, was Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dienbienphu. He came to see what I looked like, saying nothing. He is the Minister of Defense, and also on North Vietnam's ruling Central Committee.

After about two weeks, I was given an operation on my leg which was filmed. They never did anything for my broken left arm. It healed by itself. They said I needed two operations on my leg, but because I had a "bad attitude" they wouldn't give me another one. What kind of job they did on my leg, I do not know. Now that I'm back, an orthopedic surgeon is going to cut in and see. He has already told me that they made the incision wrong and cut all the ligaments on one side.

I was in the hospital about six weeks, then was taken to a camp in Hanoi that we called "The Plantation." This was in late December, 1967. I was put in a cell with two other men, George Day and Norris Overly, both Air Force majors. I was on a stretcher, my leg was stiff and I was still in a chest cast that I kept for about two months. I was down to about 100 pounds from my normal weight of 155.

I was told later on by Major Day that they didn't expect me to live a week. I was unable to

sit up. I was sleeping about 18 hours, 20 hours a day. They had to do everything for me. They were allowed to get a bucket of water and wash me off occasionally. They fed me and took fine care of me, and I recovered very rapidly.

We moved to another room just after Christmas. In early February, 1968, Overly was taken out of our room and released, along with David Matheny and John Black. They were the first three POW's to be released by the North Vietnamese. I understand they had instructions, once home, to say nothing about treatment, so as not to jeopardize those of us still in captivity.

That left Day and me alone together. He was rather banged up himself—a bad right arm, which he still has. He had escaped after he had been captured down South and was shot when they recaptured him. As soon as I was able to walk, which was in March of 1968, Day was moved out.

I remained in solitary confinement from that time on for more than two years. I was not allowed to see or talk to or communicate with any of my fellow prisoners. My room was fairly decent-sized—I'd say it was about 10 by 10. The door was solid. There were no windows. The only ventilation came from two small holes at the top in the ceiling, about 6 inches by 4 inches. The roof was tin and it got hot as hell in there. The room was kind of dim—night and day—but they always kept on a small light bulb, so they could observe me. I was in that place for two years.

Communication Was Vital "for Survival"

As far as this business of solitary confinement goes—the most important thing for survival is communication with someone, even if it's only a wave or a wink, a tap on the wall, or to have a guy put his thumb up. It makes all the difference.

It's vital to keep your mind occupied, and we all worked on that. Some guys were interested in mathematics, so they worked out complex formulas in their heads—we were never allowed to have writing materials. Others would build a whole house, from basement on up. I have more of a philosophical bent. I had read a lot of history. I spent days on end going back over those history books in my mind, figuring out where this country or that country went wrong, what the U. S. should do in the area of foreign affairs. I thought a lot about the meaning of life.

It was easy to lapse into fantasies. I used to write books and plays in my mind, but I doubt that any of them would have been above the level of the cheapest dime novel.

People have asked me how we could remember detailed things like the tap code, numbers, names, all sorts of things. The fact is, when you don't have anything else to think about, no outside distractions, it's easy. Since I've been back, it's very hard for me to remember simple things, like the name of someone I've just met.

During one period while I was in solitary, I memorized the names of all 335 of the men who were then prisoners of war in North Vietnam. I can still remember them.

One thing you have to fight is worry. It's easy to get uptight about your physical condition. One time I had a hell of a hemorrhoid and I stewed about it for about three days. Finally, I said, "Look, McCain, you've never known of a single guy who died of a hemorrhoid." So I just ignored it as best I could, and after a few months it went away.

The story of Ernie Brace illustrates how vital communication was to us. While I was in the prison we called "The Plantation" in October, 1968, there was a room behind me. I heard some noise in there so I started tapping on the wall. Our call-up sign was the old "shave and a haircut," and then the other guy would come back with the two taps, "six bits."

For two weeks I got no answer, but finally, back came the two taps. I started tapping out the alphabet--one tap for "a," two for "b," and so on. Then I said, "Put your ear to the wall." I finally got him up on the wall and by putting my cup against it, I could talk through it and make him hear me. I gave him the tap code and other information. He gave me his name--Ernie Brace. About that time, the guard came around and I told Ernie, "O.K., I'll call you tomorrow."

It took me several days to get him back up on the wall again. When I finally did, all he could say was, "I'm Ernie Brace," and then he'd start sobbing. After about two days he was able to control his emotions, and within a week this guy was tapping and communicating and dropping notes, and from then on he did a truly outstanding job.

Ernie was a civilian pilot who was shot down over Laos. He had just come from 31½ years' living in a bamboo cage in the jungle with his feet in stocks, and an iron collar around his neck with a rope tied to it. He had nearly lost use of his legs. He escaped three times, and

after the third time he was buried in the ground up to his neck.

In those days—still in 1968—we were allowed to bathe every other day, supposedly. But in this camp they had a water problem and sometimes we'd go for two or three weeks, a month without a bath. I had a real rat for a turnkey who usually would take me out last. The bath was a sort of a stall-like affair that had a concrete tub. After everyone else had bathed, there usually was no water left. So I'd stand there for my allotted five minutes and then he'd take me back to my room.

For toilet facilities, I had a bucket with a lid that didn't fit. It was emptied daily; they'd have somebody else carry it, because I walked so badly.

From the time that Overly and Day left me—Overly left in February of 1968, Day left in March—my treatment was basically good. I would get caught communicating, talking to guys through the wall, tapping—that kind of stuff, and they'd just say, "Tsk, tsk; no, no." Really, I thought things were not too bad.

Then, about June 15, 1968, I was taken up one night to the interrogation room. "The Cat" and another man that we called "The Rabbit" were there. "The Rabbit" spoke very good English.

"The Cat" was the commander of all the camps at that time. He was making believe he didn't speak English, although it was obvious to me, after some conversation, that he did, because he was asking questions or talking before "The Rabbit" translated what I had said.

The Oriental, as you may know, likes to beat around the bush quite a bit. The first night we sat there and "The Cat" talked to me for about two hours. I didn't know what he was driving at. He told me that he had run the French POW camps in the early 1950s and that he had released a couple of guys, and that he had seen them just recently and they had thanked him for his kindness. He said that Overly had gone home "with honor."

"They Told Me I'd Never Go Home"

I really didn't know what to think, because I had been having these other interrogations in which I had refused to co-operate. It was not hard because they were not torturing me at this time. They just told me I'd never go home and I was going to be tried as a war

criminal. That was their constant theme for many months.

Suddenly "The Cat" said to me, "Do you want to go home?"

I was astonished, and I tell you frankly that I said that I would have to think about it. I went back to my room, and I thought about it for a long time. At this time I did not have communication with the camp senior ranking officer, so I could get no advice. I was worried whether I could stay alive or not, because I was in rather bad condition. I had been hit with a severe case of dysentery, which kept on for about a year and a half. I was losing weight again.

But I knew that the Code of Conduct says, "You will not accept parole or amnesty," and that "you will not accept special favors." For somebody to go home earlier is a special favor. There's no other way you can cut it.

I went back to him three nights later. He asked again, "Do you want to go home?" I told him "No." He wanted to know why, and I told him the reason. I said that Alvarez [first American captured] should go first, then enlisted men and that kind of stuff.

"The Cat" told me that President Lyndon Johnson had ordered me home. He handed me a letter from my wife, in which she had said, "I wished that you had been one of those three who got to come home." Of course, she had no way to understand the ramifications of this. "The Cat" said that the doctors had told him that I could not live unless I got medical treatment in the United States.

We went through this routine and still I told him "No." Three nights later we went through it all over again. On the morning of the Fourth of July, 1968, which happened to be the same day that my father took over as commander in chief of U. S. Forces in the Pacific, I was led into another quiz room.

"The Rabbit" and "The Cat" were sitting there. I walked in and sat down, and "The Rabbit" said, "Our senior wants to know your final answer."

"My final answer is the same. It's 'No.' "

"That is your final answer?"

"That is my final answer."

With this "The Cat," who was sitting there with a pile of papers in front of him and a pen in his hand, broke the pen in two. Ink spurted all over. He stood up, kicked the chair over behind him, and said, "They taught you too well. They taught you too well"—in perfect English, I might add. He turned, went out and slammed the door, leaving "The Rabbit" and me sitting there. "The Rabbit" said "Now, McCain, it will be very bad for you. Go back to your room."

What they wanted, of course, was to send me home at the same time that my father took over as commander in the Pacific. This would have made them look very humane in releasing the injured son of a top U. S. officer. It would also have given them a great lever against my fellow prisoners, because the North Vietnamese were always putting this "class" business on us. They could have said to the others "Look, you poor devils, the son of the man who is running the war has gone home and left you here. No one cares about you ordinary fellows." I was determined at all times to prevent any exploitation of my father and my family.

There was another consideration for me. Even though I was told I would not have to sign any statements or confessions before I went home, I didn't believe them. They would have got me right up to that airplane and said, "Now just sign this little statement." At that point, I doubt that I could have resisted, even though I felt very strong at the time.

But the primary thing I considered was that I had no right to go ahead of men like Alvarez, who had been there three years before I "got killed"—that's what we say instead of "before I got shot down," because in a way becoming a prisoner in North Vietnam was like being killed.

About a month and a half later, when the three men who were selected for release had reached America, I was set up for some very severe treatment which lasted for the next year and a half.

One night the guards came to my room and said "The camp commander wants to see you." This man was a particularly idiotic individual. We called him "Slopehead."

One thing I should mention here: The camps were set up very similar to their Army. They

had a camp commander, who was a military man, basically in charge of the maintenance of the camp, the food, etc. Then they had what they called a staff officer—actually a political officer—who was in charge of the interrogations, and provided the propaganda heard on the radio.

We also had a guy in our camp whom we named "The Soft-Soap Fairy." He was from an important family in North Vietnam. He wore a fancy uniform and was a real sharp cookie, with a dominant position in this camp. "The Soft-Soap Fairy," who was somewhat effeminate, was the nice guy, and the camp commander—"Slopehead"—was the bad guy. Old "Soft-Soap" would always come in whenever anything went wrong and say, "Oh, I didn't know they did this to you. All you had to do was co-operate and everything would have been O.K."

To get back to the story: They took me out of my room to "Slopehead," who said, "You have violated all the camp regulations. You're a black criminal. You must confess your crimes." I said that I wouldn't do that, and he asked, "Why are you so disrespectful of guards?" I answered, "Because the guards treat me like an animal."

When I said that, the guards, who were all in the room—about 10 of them—really laid into me. They bounced me from pillar to post, kicking and laughing and scratching. After a few hours of that, ropes were put on me and I sat that night bound with ropes. Then I was taken to a small room. For punishment they would almost always take you to another room where you didn't have a mosquito net or a bed or any clothes. For the next four days, I was beaten every two to three hours by different guards. My left arm was broken again and my ribs were cracked.

They wanted a statement saying that I was sorry for the crimes that I had committed against North Vietnamese people and that I was grateful for the treatment that I had received from them. This was the paradox—so many guys were so mistreated to get them to say they were grateful. But this is the Communist way.

I held out for four days. Finally, I reached the lowest point of my 5½ years in North Vietnam. I was at the point of suicide, because I saw that I was reaching the end of my rope.

I said, O.K., I'll write for them.

They took me up into one of the interrogation rooms, and for the next 12 hours we wrote and rewrote. The North Vietnamese interrogator, who was pretty stupid, wrote the final confession, and I signed it. It was in their language, and spoke about black crimes, and other generalities. It was unacceptable to them. But I felt just terrible about it. I kept saying to myself, "Oh, God, I really didn't have any choice." I had learned what we all learned over there: Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine.

Then the "gooks" made a very serious mistake, because they let me go back and rest for a couple of weeks. They usually didn't do that with guys when they had them really busted. I think it concerned them that my arm was broken, and they had messed up my leg. I had been reduced to an animal during this period of beating and torture. My arm was so painful I couldn't get up off the floor. With the dysentery, it was a very unpleasant time.

Thank God they let me rest for a couple of weeks. Then they called me up again and wanted something else. I don't remember what it was now—it was some kind of statement. This time I was able to resist. I was able to carry on. They couldn't "bust" me again.

Prayer: "I Was Sustained in Times of Trial"

I was finding that prayer helped. It wasn't a question of asking for superhuman strength or for God to strike the North Vietnamese dead. It was asking for moral and physical courage, for guidance and wisdom to do the right thing. I asked for comfort when I was in pain, and sometimes I received relief. I was sustained in many times of trial.

When the pressure was on, you seemed to go one way or the other. Either it was easier for them to break you the next time, or it was harder. In other words, if you are going to make it, you get tougher as time goes by. Part of it is just a transition from our way of life to that way of life. But you get to hate them so bad that it gives you strength.

Now I don't hate them any more—not these particular guys. I hate and detest the leaders. Some guards would just come in and do their job. When they were told to beat you they would come in and do it. Some seemed to get a big bang out of it. A lot of them were homosexual, although never toward us. Some, who were pretty damned sadistic, seemed to get a big thrill out of the beatings.

From that time on it was one round of rough treatment followed by another. Sometimes I

got it three or four times a week. Sometimes I'd be off the hook for a few weeks. A lot of it was my own doing, because they realized far better than we did at first the value of communicating with our fellow Americans. When they caught us communicating, they'd take severe reprisals. I was caught a lot of times. One reason was because I'm not too smart, and the other reason was because I lived alone. If you live with somebody else you have somebody helping you out, helping you survive.

But I was never going to stop. Communication with your fellow prisoners was of the utmost value—the difference between being able to resist and not being able to resist. You may get some argument from other prisoners on that. A lot depends on the individual. Some men are much more self-sufficient than others.

Communication primarily served to keep up morale. We would risk getting beat up just to tell a man that one of his friends had gotten a letter from home. But it was also valuable to establish a chain of command in our camps, so our senior officers could give us advice and guidance.

So this was a period of repeated, severe treatment. It lasted until around October of '69. They wanted me to see delegations. There were antiwar groups coming into Hanoi, a lot of foreigners—Cubans, Russians. I don't think we had too many American "peaceniks" that early, although within the next year it got much greater. I refused to see any of them. The propaganda value to them would have been too great, with my dad as commander in the Pacific.

David Dellinger came over. Tom Hayden came over. Three groups of released prisoners, in fact, were let out in custody of the "peace groups." The first ones released went home with one of the Berrigan brothers. The next group was a whole crew. One of them was James Johnson, one of the Fort Hood Three. The wife of the "Ramparts" magazine editor and Rennie Davis were along. Altogether, I think about eight or nine of them were in that outfit. Then a third group followed.

The North Vietnamese wanted me to meet with all of them, but I was able to avoid it. A lot of times you couldn't face them down, so you had to try to get around them. "Face" is a big thing with these people, you know, and if you get around them so that they could save face, then it was a lot easier.

For example, they would beat the hell out of me and say I was going to see a delegation. I'd respond that, O.K. I'd see a delegation, but I would not say anything against my country and I would not say anything about my treatment and if asked, I'd tell them the truth about the conditions I was kept under. They went back and conferred on that and then would say, "You have agreed to see a delegation so we will take you." But they never took me, you see.

One time, they wanted me to write a message to my fellow prisoners at Christmas. I wrote down:

"To my friends in the camp who I have not been allowed to see or speak to, I hope that your families are well and happy, and I hope that you will be able to write and receive letters in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1949 which has not been allowed to you by our captors. And may God bless you."

They took it but, of course, it was never published. In other words, sometimes it was better to write something that was laudatory to your Government or against them than say, "I won't write at all"—because a lot of times it had to go up through channels, and sometimes you could buy time this way.

How Dick Stratton Was " Really Wrung Out"

At this point I want to tell you the story of Capt. Dick Stratton. He was shot down in May of 1967, when the American peace groups were claiming that the United States was bombing Hanoi. We were not at that time.

Dick was shot down well outside of Hanoi, but they wanted a confession at the time an American reporter was over there. That was in the spring and summer of '67—remember those stories that came back, very sensational stories about the American bomb damage?

"The Rabbit" and the others worked on Dick Stratton very hard. He's got huge rope scars on his arms where they were infected. They really wrung him out, because they were going to get a confession that he had bombed Hanoi—this was to be living proof. They also peeled his thumbnails back and burned him with cigarettes.

Dick reached the point where he couldn't say "No." But when they got him to the press

conference, he pulled this bowing act on them—he bowed 90 degrees in this direction, he bowed 90 degrees in that direction—four quadrants. This was not too wild to the "gooks," because they're used to the bowing thing. But any American who sees a picture of another American bowing to the waist every turn for 90 degrees knows that there's something wrong with the guy, that something has happened to him. That's why Dick did what he did. After that they continued to keep pressure on him to say he wasn't tortured. They tortured him to say that he wasn't tortured. It gets to be a bad merry-go-round to be on.

Dick made some very strong statements at his press conference here in the States a few weeks ago. He said he wanted the North Vietnamese charged with war crimes. He's a fine man. He and I were at "The Plantation" together for a long time, and he did a very fine job there. He's an outstanding naval officer, a very dedicated American, and a deeply religious man.

I think a great deal of Dick Stratton. He just was very, very unfortunate in getting the worst that the "gooks" could dish out.

We had a particularly bad spring and summer in 1969 because there had been an escape at one of the other camps. Our guys carried out a well-prepared plan but were caught. They were Ed Atterberry and John Dramesi. Atterberry was beaten to death after the escape.

There's no question about it: Dramesi saw Atterberry taken into a room and heard the beating start. Atterberry never came out. Dramesi, if he wasn't such a tough cookie, would probably have been killed, too. He's probably one of the toughest guys I've ever met — from south Philly. His old man was a pro boxer, and he was a wrestler in college.

The reprisals took place all through the other camps. They started torturing us for our escape plans. The food got worse. The room inspections became very severe. You couldn't have anything in your room—nothing. For example, they used to give us, once in a while, a little vial of iodine because many of us had boils. Now they wouldn't let us have it because Dramesi and Atterberry had used iodine to darken their skin before they tried to escape, so they would look like Vietnamese.

That summer, from May to about September at our camp, twice a day for six days a week, all we had was pumpkin soup and bread. That's a pretty rough diet—first, because you get awfully damn tired of pumpkin soup, but also because it doesn't have any real nutritional

value. The only thing that could keep any weight on you was the bread, which was full of lumps of soggy flour.

On Sunday we got what we called sweet bean soup. They would take some small beans and throw them in a pot with a lot of sugar and cook it up, with no meat whatsoever. A lot of us became thin and emaciated.

I had the singular misfortune to get caught communicating four times in the month of May of 1969. They had a punishment room right across the courtyard from my cell, and I ended up spending a lot of time over there.

It was also in May, 1969, that they wanted me to write—as I remember—a letter to U. S. pilots who were flying over North Vietnam asking them not to do it. I was being forced to stand up continuously—sometimes they'd make you stand up or sit on a stool for a long period of time. I'd stood up for a couple of days, with a respite only because one of the guards—the only real human being that I ever met over there —let me lie down for a couple of hours while he was on watch the middle of one night.

One of the strategies we worked out was not to let them make you break yourself. If you get tired of standing, just sit down—make them force you up. So I sat down, and this little guard who was a particularly hateful man came in and jumped up and down on my knee. After this I had to go back on a crutch for the next year and a half.

That was a long, difficult summer. Then suddenly, in October, 1969, there were drastic changes around the camp. The torture stopped. "The Soft-Soap Fairy" came to my room one day and told me that I would get a roommate. The food improved greatly and we started getting extra rations. The guards seemed almost friendly. For example, I had a turnkey who used to just bash me around for drill. The door would open— and he'd come in and start slugging me. They stopped that kind of thing. I attribute all this directly to the propaganda effort that was directed by the Administration and the people in the United States in 1969.

My younger brother, Joe, was very active in the National League of Families of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia. That was the umbrella for all the POW family groups. So he has filled me in on why the North Vietnamese attitude toward the American prisoners changed, and given me this information:

As the bombing of the North picked up in 1965, 1966, Hanoi made its first propaganda display by parading beaten, subjugated American pilots through the streets. To their surprise, the press reaction around the world was generally negative.

Next, the North Vietnamese tried the tactic of forcing Cdr. Dick Stratton to appear and apologize for war crimes. But he had obviously been mistreated, and was doing this only under extreme duress. That backfired, too. They followed this by releasing two groups of three POW's in February and October, 1968. These men had been there less than six months and had suffered no significant weight loss and were in pretty good shape.

Until the Nixon Administration came to office in 1969, the Government back home had taken the attitude: "Don't talk about the prisoner-of-war situation lest you hurt the Americans still over there." Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, early in 1969, went over to the peace talks with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Paris. [Talks had begun under President Johnson late in 1968.] Laird took pictures of severely beaten men, such as Frishman, Stratton, Hegdahl—all of whom had suffered extreme weight loss. He got the photos through foreign news services. He told the North Vietnamese: "The Geneva Convention says that you shall release all sick and wounded prisoners. These men are sick and wounded. Why aren't they released?"

In August, 1969, Hanoi let Frishman come home. He had no elbow—just a limp rubbery arm—and he had lost 65 pounds. Hegdahl came out and had lost 75 pounds. Also released was Wes Rumbull, who was in a body cast because of a broken back.

Frishman was allowed to hold a press conference and spilled out the details of torture and maltreatment. Headlines appeared all over the world, and from then on, starting in the fall of 1969, the treatment began to improve. We think this was directly attributable to the fact that Frishman was living proof of the mistreatment of Americans.

I'm proud of the part Joe and my wife, Carol, played here at home. The temptation for the wives, as the years went by, was to say, "God, I want them home under any circumstances." When Carol was pressed to take this line, her answer was, "Just to get him home is not enough for me, and it's not enough for John—I want him to come home standing up."

I received very few letters from Carol. I got three in the first four months after I was shot

down. The "gooks" let me have only one during the last four years I was there. I received my first package in May of 1969. After that, they let me have approximately one a year.

The reason I got so little mail was that Carol insisted on using the channels provided by the Geneva Convention for treatment of prisoners of war. She refused to send things through the Committee for Liaison with Families run by the antiwar groups.

This brings me to something that I want to discuss in more detail:

As you may know, back in 1954, the North Vietnamese had a big hand in toppling the French Government in Paris because the French voters had no more stomach for the Vietnam war their Government was waging at the time. That was the way the North Vietnamese won in 1954—they didn't win in Vietnam.

The French agreed to pull out of Indo-China with no questions asked when they signed the agreement. As a result, they got back just one third of their POW's.

I'm convinced that Hanoi hoped to win in our case by undermining morale among the people at home in America. They had to marshal world opinion on their side. I remember in 1968 or '69 [North Vietnam Premier] Pham Van Dong's speech to the National Assembly, because we were blasted with these things on the loud-speakers. The title of his address was, "The Whole World Supports Us," not, "We Have Defeated the U. S. Aggressors," or anything like that.

In 1969, after the three guys who were released went back to the U. S. and told about the brutality in the POW camps, President Nixon gave the green light to publicizing this fact. It brought a drastic change in our treatment. And I thank God for it, because if it hadn't been for that a lot of us would never have returned.

Just one small example of the way things improved: Over my door were some bars, covered by a wooden board to keep me from seeing out, and to block ventilation. One night, around the end of September, 1969, "Slopehead," the camp commander himself, came around and pulled this thing off, so that I could have some ventilation. I couldn't believe it. Every night from then on they pulled that transom so I could get some ventilation. We started bathing more often. It was all very amazing.

In December of 1969 I was moved from "The Pentagon" over to "Las Vegas." "Las Vegas" was a small area of Hoala Prison which was built by the French in 1945. It was known as the "Hanoi Hilton" to Americans. "Heartbreak Hotel" is also there—that's the first place that people were usually taken for their initial interrogations and then funneled out to other camps.

This whole prison is an area of about two city blocks. At "Las Vegas," I was put in a small building of just three rooms called the "Gold Nugget." We named the buildings after the hotels in Vegas—there was the "Thunderbird," "Stardust," "Riviera," "Gold Nugget" and the "Desert Inn."

I was moved into the "Gold Nugget," and immediately I was able to establish communications with the men around the camp, because the bath area was right out my window, and I could see through cracks in the doors of the bath and we would communicate that way. I stayed in that one, in solitary confinement, until March of 1970.

There was pressure to see American antiwar delegations, which seemed to increase as the time went on. But there wasn't any torture. In January of 1970, I was taken to a quiz with "The Cat." He told me that he wanted me to see a foreign guest. I told him what I had always told him before: that I would see the visitor, but I would not say anything against my country, and if I was asked about my treatment I would tell them how harsh it was. Much to my surprise he said, "Fine, you don't have to say anything." I told him I'd have to think about it. I went back to my room and I asked the senior American officer in our area what his opinion was, and he said he thought that I should go ahead.

So I went to see this visitor who said he was from Spain, but who I later heard was from Cuba. He never asked me any questions about controversial subjects or my treatment or my feelings about the war. I told him I had no remorse about what I did, and that I would do it over again if the same opportunity presented itself. That seemed to make him angry, because he was a sympathizer of the North Vietnamese.

At the time this happened, a photographer came in and took a couple of pictures. I had told "The Cat" that I didn't want any such publicity. So when I came back—the interview lasted about 15, 20 minutes—I told him I wasn't going to see another visitor because he had broken his word. Also at that time Capt. Jeremiah Denton, who was running our camp

at that time, established a policy that we should not see any delegations.

In March, I got a roommate, Col. John Finley, Air Force. He and I lived together for approximately two months. A month after he moved in, "The Cat" told me I was going to see another delegation. I refused and was forced to sit on a stool in the "Heartbreak" courtyard area for three days and nights. Then I was sent back to my room.

The pressure continued on us to see antiwar delegations. By early in June I was moved away from Colonel Finley to a room that they called "Calcutta," about 50 yards away from the nearest prisoners. It was 6 feet by 2 feet with no ventilation in it, and it was very, very hot. During the summer I suffered from heat prostration a couple or three times, and dysentery. I was very ill. Washing facilities were nonexistent. My food was cut down to about half rations. Sometimes I'd go for a day or so without eating.

All during this time I was taken out to interrogation and pressured to see the antiwar people. I refused.

Finally I moved in September to another room which was back in the camp but separated from everything else. That was what we called "the Riviera." I stayed in there until December, 1970. I had good communications, because there was a door facing the outside and a kind of louvered window above it. I used to stand up on my bucket and was able to take my toothbrush and flash the code to other prisoners, and they would flash back to me.

In December I moved into "Thunderbird," one of the big buildings with about 15 rooms in it. The communication was very good. We would tap between rooms. I learned a lot about acoustics. You can tap—if you get the right spot on the wall—and hear a guy four or five rooms away.

Late in December, 1970—about the twentieth, I guess—I was allowed to go out during the day with four other men. On Christmas night we were taken out of our room and moved into the "Camp Unity" area, which was another part of Hoala. We had a big room, where there were about 45 of us, mostly from "Vegas."

There were seven large rooms, usually with a concrete pedestal in the center, where we slept with 45 or 50 guys each room. We had a total of 335 prisoners at that time.

There were four or five guys who were not in good shape that they kept separated from us. The Colonels Flynn, Wynn, Bean and Caddis also were kept separate. They did not move in with us at that time.

Our "den mother" was "The Bug" again, much to our displeasure. He made life very difficult for us. He wouldn't let us have meetings of more than three people at one time.

They were afraid we were going to set up political indoctrination. They wouldn't let us have church service. "The Bug" would not recognize our senior officer's rank. This is one thing that they did right up until the end, till the day we left. If they had worked through our seniors, they would have gotten co-operation out of us. This was a big source of irritation all the time.

In March of 1971 the senior officers decided that we would have a showdown over church. This was an important issue for us. It also was a good one to fight them on. We went ahead and held church. The men that were conducting the service were taken out of the room immediately. We began to sing hymns in loud voices and "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The "gooks" thought it was a riot situation. They brought in the ropes and were practicing judo holds and that kind of stuff. After about a week or two they started taking the senior officers out of our room and putting them over in another building.

Later in March they came in and took three or four of us out of every one of the seven rooms until they got 36 of us out. We were put in a camp we called "Skid Row," a punishment camp. We stayed there from March until August, when we came back for about four weeks because of flooding conditions around Hanoi, and then we went back out again until November.

They didn't treat us badly there. The guards had permission to knock us around if we were unruly. However, they did not have permission to start torturing us for propaganda statements. The rooms were very small, about 6 feet by 4 feet, and we were in solitary again. The most unpleasant thing about it was thinking of all our friends living in a big room together. But compared with '69 and before, it was a piece of cake.

The great advantage to living in a big room is that way only a couple or three guys out of the group have to deal with the "gooks." When you're living by yourself, then you've got to

deal with them all the time. You always have some fight with them. Maybe you're allowed 15 minutes to bathe, and the "gook" will say in five minutes you've got to go back. So you have an argument with him, and he locks you in your room so you don't get to bathe for a week. But when you're in a big room with others, you can stay out of contact with them and it's a lot more pleasant.

All through this period, the "gooks" were bombarding us with antiwar quotes from people in high places back in Washington. This was the most effective propaganda they had to use against us—speeches and statements by men who were generally respected in the United States.

They used Senator Fulbright a great deal, and Senator Brooke. Ted Kennedy was quoted again and again, as was Averell Harriman. Clark Clifford was another favorite, right after he had been Secretary of Defense under President Johnson.

When Ramsey Clark came over they thought that was a great coup for their cause.

The big furor over release of the Pentagon papers was a tremendous boost for Hanoi. It was advanced as proof of the "black imperialist schemes" that they had been talking about all those years.

In November of 1971 we came back from "Skid Row," and they put us in one of the big rooms again in the main Hoala Prison area. This was "Camp Unity." From that time on we pretty much stayed as a group with some other people who were brought in later. We ended up with about 40 men in there.

In May, 1972, when the U. S. bombing started again in earnest, they moved almost all the junior officers up to a camp near the China border, leaving the senior officers and our group behind. That was when President Nixon announced the resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam and the mining of the ports.

"Dogpatch" was the name of the camp near the border. I think they were afraid that Hanoi would be hit, and with all of us together in one camp one bomb could have wiped us out. At this time, the "gooks" got a little bit rougher. They once took a guy out of our room and beat him up very badly. This man had made a flag on the back of another man's shirt. He was a fine young man by the name of Mike Christian. They just pounded the hell out of

him right outside of our room and then carried him a few feet and then pounded him again and pounded him all the way across the courtyard, busted one of his eardrums and busted his ribs. It was to be a lesson for us all.

"I Was Down to 105 Pounds"

Aside from bad situations now and then, 1971 and 1972 was a sort of coasting period. The reason why you see our men in such good condition today is that the food and everything generally improved. For example, in late '69 I was down to 105, 110 pounds, boils all over me, suffering dysentery. We started getting packages with vitamins in them—about one package a year. We were able to exercise quite a bit in our rooms and managed to get back in a lot better health.

My health has improved radically. In fact, I think I'm in better physical shape than I was when I got shot down. I can do 45 push-ups and a couple hundred sit-ups. Another beautiful thing about exercise: It makes you tired and you can sleep, and when you're asleep you're not there, you know. I used to try to exercise all the time.

Finally came the day I'll never forget—the eighteenth of December, 1972. The whole place exploded when the Christmas bombing ordered by President Nixon began. They hit Hanoi right off the bat.

It was the most spectacular show I'll ever see. By then we had large windows in our rooms. These had been covered with bamboo mats, but in October, 1972, they took them down. We had about a 120-degree view of the sky, and, of course, at night you can see all the flashes. The bombs were dropping so close that the building would shake. The SAM's [surface-to-air missiles] "were flying all over and the sirens were whining—it was really a wild scene. When a B-52 would get hit—they're up at more than 30,000 feet—it would light up the whole sky. There would be a red glow that almost made it like daylight, and it would last for a long time, because they'd fall a long way.

We knew at that time that unless something very forceful was done that we were never going to get out of there. We had sat there for 31½ years with no bombing going on-- November of '68 to May of '72. We were fully aware that the only way that we were ever going to get out was for our Government to turn the screws on Hanoi.

So we were very happy. We were cheering and hollering. The "gooks" didn't like that at all, but we didn't give a damn about that. It was obvious to us that negotiation was not going to settle the problem. The only reason why the North Vietnamese began negotiating in October, 1972, was because they could read the polls as well as you and I can, and they knew that Nixon was going to have an overwhelming victory in his re-election bid. So they wanted to negotiate a cease-fire before the elections.

"I Admire President Nixon's Courage"

I admire President Nixon's courage. There may be criticism of him in certain areas—Watergate, for example. But he had to take the most unpopular decisions that I could imagine—the mining, the blockade, the bombing. I know it was very, very difficult for him to do that, but that was the thing that ended the war. I think the reason he understood this is that he has a long background in dealing with these people. He knows how to use the carrot and the stick. Obviously, his trip to China and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with Russia were based on the fact that we're stronger than the Communists, so they were willing to negotiate. Force is what they understand. And that's why it is difficult for me to understand now, when everybody knows that the bombing finally got a cease-fire agreement, why people are still criticizing his foreign policy—for example, the bombing in Cambodia.

Right after the Communist *Tet* offensive in 1968, the North Vietnamese were riding high. They knew President Johnson was going to stop the bombing before the 1968 elections. "The Soft-Soap Fairy" told me a month before those elections that Johnson was going to stop the bombings.

In May of 1968 I was interviewed by two North Vietnamese generals at separate times. Both of them said to me, in almost these words:

"After we liberate South Vietnam we're going to liberate Cambodia. And after Cambodia we're going to Laos, and after we liberate Laos we're going to liberate Thailand. And after we liberate Thailand we're going to liberate Malaysia, and then Burma. We're going to liberate all of Southeast Asia."

"North Vietnamese Believe 'Domino Theory'"

They left no doubt in my mind that it was not a question of South Vietnam alone. Some people's favorite game is to refute the "domino theory," but the North Vietnamese themselves never tried to refute it. They believe it. Ho Chi Minh said many, many times, "We are proud to be in the front line of armed struggle between the socialist camp and the U. S. imperialist aggressors." Now, this doesn't mean fighting for nationalism. It doesn't mean fighting for an independent South Vietnam. It means what he said. This is what Communism is all about—armed struggle to overthrow capitalist countries.

I read a lot of their history. They gave us propaganda books. I learned that Ho Chi Minh was a Stalinist. When Khrushchev denounced Stalin in the late 1950s, Minh did not go along with it. He was not a "peaceful coexistence" Communist.

At this particular juncture, after *Tet* in 1968, they thought they had the war won. They had gotten General Westmoreland [commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam] fired. They were convinced that they had wrecked Johnson's chances for re-election. And they thought that they had the majority of the American people on their side. That's why these guys were speaking very freely as to what their ambitions were. They were speaking prematurely, because they just misjudged the caliber of President Nixon.

To go back to the December bombing: Initially, the North Vietnamese had a hell of a lot of SAM's on hand. I soon saw a lessening in the SAM activities, meaning they may have used them up. Also, the B-52 bombings, which were mainly right around Hanoi in the first few days, spread out away from the city because, I think, they destroyed all the military targets around Hanoi.

I don't know the number of B-52 crewmen shot down then, because they only took the injured Americans to our camp. The attitude of our men was good. I talked to them the day before we moved out, preparing to go home, when they knew the agreements were going to be signed. I asked one young pilot—class of '70 at West Point—"How did your outfit feel when you were told that the B-52s were going to bomb Hanoi?" He said, "Our morale skyrocketed."

I have heard there was one B-52 pilot who refused to fly the missions during the Christmas bombing. You always run into that kind. When the going gets tough, they find out their conscience is bothering them. I want to say this to anybody in the military: If you

don't know what your country is doing, find out. And if you find you don't like what your country is doing, get out before the chips are down.

Once you become a prisoner of war, then you do not have the right to dissent, because what you do will be harming your country. You are no longer speaking as an individual, you are speaking as a member of the armed forces of the United States, and you owe loyalty to the Commander in Chief, not to your own conscience. Some of my fellow prisoners sang a different tune, but they were a very small minority. I ask myself if they should be prosecuted, and I don't find that easy to answer. It might destroy the very fine image the great majority of us have brought back from that hellhole. Remember, a handful of turncoats after the Korean War made a great majority of Americans think that most of the POW's in conflict were traitors.

If these men are tried, it should not be because they took an antiwar stance, but because they collaborated with the Vietnamese to an extent, and that was harmful to the other American POW's. And there is this to consider: America will have other wars to fight until the Communists give up their doctrine of violent overthrow of our way of life. These men should bear some censure so that in future wars there won't be a precedent for conduct that hurts this country.

By late January of this year, we knew end of the war was near. I was moved then to the "Plantation." We were put together in groups by the period when we were shot down. They were getting us ready to return by groups.

By the way—a very interesting thing—after I got back, Henry Kissinger told me that when he was in Hanoi to sign the final agreements, the North Vietnamese offered him one man that he could take back to Washington with him, and that was me. He, of course, refused, and I thanked him very much for that, because I did not want to go out of order. Most guys were betting that I'd be the last guy out—but you never can fathom the "gooks."

It was January 20 when we were moved to the "Plantation." From then on it was very easy—they hardly bothered us. We were allowed out all day in the courtyard. But, typical of them, we had real bad food for about two weeks before we left. Then they gave us a great big meal the night before we went home.

There was no special ceremony when we left the camp. The International Control

Commission came in and we were permitted to look around the camp. There were a lot of photographers around, but nothing formal. Then we got on the buses and went to Gia Lam Airport. My old friend "The Rabbit" was there. He stood out front and said to us, "When I read your name off, you get on the plane and go home."

That was March 15. Up to that moment, I wouldn't allow myself more than a feeling of cautious hope. We had been peaked up so many times before that I had decided that I wouldn't get excited until I shook hands with an American in uniform. That happened at Gia Lam, and then I knew it was over. There is no way I can describe how I felt as I walked toward that U. S. Air Force plane.

Now that I'm back, I find a lot of hand-wringing about this country. I don't buy that. I think America today is a better country than the one I left nearly six years ago.

The North Vietnamese gave us very little except bad news about the U. S. We didn't find out about the first successful moon shot [in 1969] until it was mentioned in a speech by George McGovern saying that Nixon could put a man on the moon, but he couldn't put an end to the Vietnam war.

They bombarded us with the news of Martin Luther King's death and the riots that followed. Information like that poured continuously out of the loud-speakers.

I think America is a better country now because we have been through a sort of purging process, a re-evaluation of ourselves. Now I see more of an appreciation of our way of life. There is more patriotism. The flag is all over the place. I hear new values being stressed—the concern for environment is a case in point.

I've received scores of letters from young people, and many of them sent me POW bracelets with my name on it, which they had been wearing. Some were not too sure about the war, but they are strongly patriotic, their values are good, and I think we will find that they are going to grow up to be better Americans than many of us.

This outpouring on behalf of us who were prisoners of war is staggering, and a little embarrassing because basically we feel that we are just average American Navy, Marine and Air Force pilots who got shot down. Anybody else in our place would have performed just as well.

My own plans for the future are to remain in the Navy, if I am able to return to flying status. That depends upon whether the corrective surgery on my arms and my leg is successful. If I have to leave the Navy, I hope to serve the Government in some capacity, preferably in Foreign Service for the State Department.

I had a lot of time to think over there, and came to the conclusion that one of the most important things in life—along with a man's family—is to make some contribution to his country.

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