Veterans Day 2013

40th Anniversary: American POWs Released From Vietnam

By Dr. Richard Kelley

On Monday, Americans will observe Veterans Day, a time when we pause each year to honor and thank all who have served in our armed forces. For me, Veterans Day will be a special occasion this year because 2013 marks an important milestone in the Vietnam War, a 20-year struggle that split U.S. society, spawned riots in the streets and cost 58,000 American lives. At the time, I was eligible to be drafted into the Army and I came close to being called on to don a uniform and join other dedicated men and women who were facing hazardous duty in a faraway land. I hope the following bit of history and my personal experiences during those years will help readers understand why this Veterans Day brings forth such poignant memories for me.

Vietnam was part of a broader area to the south of China that also includes today’s Laos and Cambodia, which France had colonized in the 19th century. With France’s defeat by Germany in the early days of World War II in Europe, Germany’s ally Japan effectively took over this area – by then called French Indochina. In the north of the country, the Vietnamese resistance to the Japanese – like many of the resistance movements in the occupied countries of both Europe and Asia – was led by local Communists. With the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945, French officials returned to Indochina to re-establish colonial control. The Vietnamese Communists, led by Ho Chi Minh and supported by the USSR and China (both ruled by Communist Parties), turned their weapons on the French and finally defeated them in 1954. A Communist regime was then established in the northern part of the country, while a non-Communist regime retained power in the south.


Because I was practicing medicine and physicians were badly needed to care for the members of our armed services in that country, my draft board called me to the Army induction-processing center, then located at Ft. DeRussy in the center of Waikīkī. I passed the physical but was told to go home. They had enough young docs to fill Hawai‘i’s quota by taking those born on or after January 1, 1934. I was born on December 28, 1933, four days before the cutoff date!

In Vietnam, it was tough, hazardous duty on land, sea or in the air. Total U.S. dead and wounded came to 211,454, and over 2,000 are still classified as missing.

Over 2,251 U.S. aircraft were shot down or lost in the 20-year conflict. When aircraft were disabled over North Vietnam-controlled territory, many pilots were able to parachute to the ground but most were immediately captured...
and imprisoned in the harshest of conditions. Many of our aviators did not survive the ordeal.

As the Vietnam War wound down in 1973, there were nearly 600 U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) in North Vietnamese prisons. There were 13 such facilities, and our servicemen gave them names such as Alcatraz, Briarpatch, Dirty Bird, Dogpatch, Rockpile and Skid Row. The most famous was Hoa Lo in Hanoi, which our guys promptly dubbed the Hanoi Hilton.

I have personally met four American officers who spent many years in one of those facilities including:

- Vice Adm. James Stockdale (2,713 days, or nearly seven and a half years)
- Capt. Jerry Coffee (2,566 days, or just over seven years)\(^2\), \(^3\)
- Lt. Col. Orson Swindle (2,305 days, or over six years)\(^4\)
- Capt. John McCain (1,960 days, or over five years)

Their stories are heart wrenching. They told of being shackled to a concrete slab that served as a bed with no covers, blankets or padding. The food, when provided, was miserable. There was minimal medical care for wounds resulting from being shot down or illnesses acquired under harsh prison conditions, which included beatings and torture. In solitary confinement and isolated, the prisoners supported each other by tapping Morse code on their bunks or the bars of their cell. Often they tapped out their motto: “R-E-T-U-R-N” for God Bless America.

Ex POWs cheer as their aircraft leaves Vietnam airspace, 1973.

I visited the remains of the Hanoi Hilton three years ago. Even though it has been cleaned up and most of the grim prison facilities removed, a small museum provides a glimpse of what the American captives endured. (Compare that with the comfortable facilities the U.S. provides terrorist captives at Guantanamo Bay.)

Forty years ago, U.S. and North Vietnamese negotiators arranged the transfer of 591 American prisoners back to the United States. Huge Air Force C-141 Starlifters picked them up in Hanoi and, as the pilot announced the aircraft had cleared North Vietnamese airspace, the freed POWs broke out in loud celebration. The C-141s stopped to refuel at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu. There Capt. Jerry Coffee went down the stairs, bent down and kissed the ground – the U.S. soil he thought he might never see again.

President Richard Nixon held a dinner at the White House to honor all 591 freed POWs and their families. It was the largest event of its kind ever held at the White House.

Earlier this year, the same group, less those who have passed on over the last four decades, had a reunion dinner hosted by the Nixon Foundation in Yorba Linda, California. The film of this occasion, which includes clips from the White House dinner 40 years ago, is truly inspiring and I recommend it to everyone, particularly those under 40 who may have little concept of what took place in Vietnam over two decades from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.\(^1\)

Today more than ever, we owe all our veterans honor, respect, thanks and support. The men and women of our uniformed services are a very small percentage of our population yet they give 100 percent of themselves every day to help keep the cause of peace and freedom alive and growing in our country and around the world. This year’s anniversary of the release of American POWs is a sobering reminder of our obligation.

As Jerry Coffee and his fellow prisoners would do in those darkened prisons to close out each day, let's close this message with

- [tap, tap, tap] “G-B” for God Bless
- [tap, tap, tap] “G-N” for Good Night
- [tap, tap, tap] “G-B-A” for God Bless America

\(^1\) A 12-minute YouTube film describing the 1973 White House Dinner for American POWs and the 2013 40-year reunion at the Richard Nixon Foundation Library in Yorba Linda, Calif. www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=lemUfAAY8A&sns=em

\(^2\) Defense Media Article on the 40th anniversary of the release of American POWs from Vietnam www.dvidshub.net/news/104727/vietnam-pows-honored-joint-base-pearl-harbor-hickam

\(^3\) Coffee, Gerald – “Beyond Survival: Building on the Hard Times – A POW’s Inspiring Story” www.amazon.com/Beyond-Survival-Building-Times-Inspiring/dp/0974567604/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1383891180&sr=8-1&keywords=jerry+coffee