

American POW's in North Vietnam

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Each American war possesses distinct characteristics that separate it from the others. The American Revolution has the obvious distinction of being the war that gained American independence. World War I can be labeled as the introduction to modern warfare and a precursor to World War II, while World War II is often credited with vaulting the United States out of more than a decade of economic depression and defeating a global threat of fascism. That being said, the Vietnam War is also unique for several reasons. First, it is the longest of all of the American wars. Second, it sparked more anti-war sentiment on the U.S. home front than any other conflict. It also has the distinction as the first war that featured the use of helicopters in combat and it was fought in a dense jungle terrain unlike American forces had ever encountered. Finally, of course, it is the only American war in which the United States could not claim victory.

There is another very unique aspect of the Vietnam War however, that sets it apart from every other American war and is very seldom discussed in American History books. The American prisoner of war experience, specifically in North Vietnam, is a remarkable story for a number of reasons. For instance, due to the fact that the war was and still is, the longest in American history, the POWs of North Vietnam were held in captivity longer than prisoners in any other American war, some in excess of eight years. In addition, the demographic of the POWs is also very unique in that most of them were volunteer Naval and Air Force pilots and co-pilots, as opposed to other wars where the make-up of prisoners often contained a significant percentage of draftees. As a result, the

POWs were all highly trained, educated, responsible, and disciplined men.¹ This undoubtedly contributed greatly to their establishment of sophisticated communication networks and resistance efforts.² Both of which played a role in guiding them through years of brutal torture and poor living conditions.³

In addition to this, the return of the POWs sets them aside from other groups as well. Not only were they seemingly in better physical shape than previous POWs, a vast majority of them returned with little or no psychological damage despite years of exposure to indoctrination attempts, torture, and solitary confinement.⁴ This healthy return in 1973 can be attributed to their dedication to the exercise of their minds as well as their bodies through such methods as problem solving, memorization of various mathematical procedures, and basic calisthenics.⁵ Also, unlike previous POWs and even combat soldiers returning from Vietnam, the return of the North Vietnam POWs was largely celebrated and well received by the American people. In regards to the combat soldiers, who were often dubbed “Baby Killers” and “Murderers” by those opposed to the

¹ Statistics vary regarding the actual total of American POWs held in Vietnam. 591 is the most consistent total regarding POWs who were repatriated as part of Operation Homecoming in 1973, although it may vary by 1 or 2 depending upon the source. 324 of them were Air Force men, 138 Navy, 77 Army, and 26 Marines. The remaining 26 POWs were civilians of varied occupation. From the military population, there were 487 officers. There was limited racial diversity as only 16 POWs were black. None of the prisoners were draftees. Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

² The POW's communication through various methods, the most effective of which was the “tap code.” The tap code is a “five-by-five matrix of the alphabet” in which the letter K is omitted and was most frequently used by prisoners because it was largely indecipherable by the North Vietnamese. It was utilized by tapping on the wall of a cell, while the receiving prisoner listened intently on the other side. Stuart I Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 102.

³ John L. Frisbee, “Surviving in Hanoi's Prisons,” *Air Force Magazine* 56, no. 6 (1973): 29.

⁴ Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 12.

⁵ Stephan A. Rowan, *They Wouldn't Let Us Die: 26 Prisoners of War Tell Their Stories* (Middle Village, N.Y.: J. David, 1973), 12.

war, their homecoming was very cold and in many instances they were publicly spat upon.⁶

Since their repatriation over thirty years ago, the North Vietnam POWs have been the subject of numerous books and journal articles written by several professional and amateur historians. Within this collection of material lies a variety of historical approaches by these authors intended to provide readers with a unique perspective on the matter. By reading these various materials, one could easily derive an informed understanding of the POWs brutal and lengthy captivity. Nevertheless, it should be noted that such literature, although rich in knowledge, fails to examine any of the personal factors relating to the POWs. More specifically, such works deny the reader a wealth of knowledge pertaining to the personal background of the POWs prior to becoming servicemen and ultimately prisoners of war. Furthermore, historians have routinely neglected to address how the values by which POWs lived prior to the war, were manifested in various situations throughout their incarceration. One cannot help but assume that factors like the POWs' upbringing, religion, family, and heritage among other things, played a major role in explaining their behavior in captivity and thus, contributed greatly to their successful survival. Therefore, this study employs the personal accounts, memoirs, and autobiographies written by the various former POWs in the years following their homecoming to reveal that such personal factors were, in fact, detrimental in enabling them to endure the seemingly never-ending years of their imprisonment.

⁶ Reports of such events as the My Lai massacre caused many American protestors to adopt this view of American soldiers. This is common American cultural knowledge.

The existing books and journal articles pertaining to the POWs of North Vietnam can be divided into two categories. The first category consists of historians like Stephen A. Rowan, Zalin Grant, Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, A.J. Barker, and Craig Howes.⁷ Works by these authors, although different in format, all focus on the particulars of POW captivity in North Vietnam as a whole. For example, they focus more intently on prisoner capture, interrogation procedures, communication, and the Code of Conduct.⁸ Former war correspondents, Rowan and Grant use an interview format that features former POWs sharing with the authors, their individual experiences in captivity thus, allowing Rowan and Grant to display their information as told through the former POWs themselves. In a contrasting format, professional historians like Barker, and Rochester and Kiley take a comparative approach, which places the POW experience of North Vietnam next to the experiences in South Vietnam as well as experiences in other wars. Rochester and Kiley's work elaborates on the POW experience in South Vietnam as well, to show the uniqueness of the experience in North Vietnam.⁹ Meanwhile, Barker, while examining the North Vietnam POWs, also examines others POW experiences in previous wars to achieve the same effect. Moreover, in addition to exploring the particulars of imprisonment, works by these authors add to the efforts of Rowan and Grant, as they are much more in depth and feature more insight by the author. In addition, these works serve to show the POW experience in relation to the unfolding events of the war itself.

⁷ Rowan, *They Wouldn't Let Us Die*; Zalin Grant, *Survivors: Vietnam P.O.W.s Tell Their Stories* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994); Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*; A.J. Barker, *Prisoners of War* (New York: Universe Books, 1975); Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*.

⁸ The U.S. Military Code of Conduct, developed in 1955 under the Eisenhower administration, consists of six articles, "in simple terms these reduce to: no surrender; no [acceptance of] parole; no [giving the enemy] information; [maintain] discipline and loyalty [to U.S.]. As guides to both collective and individual survival these are principles which could be adopted by anybody who faces the possibility of becoming a POW." Barker, *Prisoners of War*, 203.

⁹ Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chap. 2,3,4,13,21 passim.

Howes' study goes a step further. Although he also provides an in depth view of the particulars of imprisonment, his study is centered around the existing accounts of the POWs, suggesting that such accounts only offer the reader a description of the experience that is carefully organized to convey a more valiant POW story. Howes does not suggest that such accounts provide false information, he simply implies that they leave out less enticing facts regarding the POW experience thus, creating a more romantic effect.¹⁰ His work is undeniably the most cynical of the scholarship.

The second category is represented by authors like John L. Frisbee, Charles S. Corcoran, and Edna J. Hunter, who are all narrow in terms of exploring the POWs in North Vietnam and turn their attention to just one or two aspects of their captivity. In a sense, these authors provide very limited reasons for the success of the POWs . In the case of Frisbee, the executive editor of *Air Force Magazine* at the time of his article's publication, the Code of Conduct and loyalty to the U.S. are presented as the main ingredients in determining successful survival of POWs in North Vietnam and in turn, represent his focus.¹¹ He states, "The continuation of military organization in the camps . . . kept alive a sense of cohesiveness and purpose."¹²

Corcoran picks up where Frisbee leaves off by adhering to his belief that without communication it would be very difficult for policies of SROs (senior ranking officers) within the prisons to have been circulated and therefore carried out in an orderly fashion. In his 1991 article in *Air Power History* entitled, "Communication: Key to Survival for American POWs in Vietnam", he states:

¹⁰ Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*.

¹¹ John L. Frisbee, "Surviving in Hanoi's Prisons" *Air Force Magazine* 56, no. 6 (1973) 28-33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

It was necessary for each of the prisoners to know and obey these policies if the organization was going to succeed. Therefore, communication of the policies was necessary.¹³

Hunter in turn, devotes her study only to the resistance effort of the POWs and the affect of age and length of imprisonment on resistance stance.¹⁴ Although different in terms of their respective beliefs, the authors are similar in that they all confine the success of POW collaboration in creating an effective resistance movement and survival strategy to one or two very isolated reasons. Nevertheless, the authors in this category as well as the authors in the first category, virtually ignore the various personal factors of the POWs.

For the purpose of examining such personal factors, this study begins by looking at American society in the wake of the Second World War. Following the struggle of the Great Depression and the invigorating triumph of World War II, the face of America changed drastically. From the mid-1940's through the 1950's Americans became wealthier, blue-collar work subsided to white-collar work, cookie-cutter suburbs blossomed around cities, new highways were constructed, the population increased with the "Baby Boom", and technology ran rampant.¹⁵ Amidst all of this was yet another change in American society, people were becoming much more religious. At the center of the conformity and domestication of Americans in the 1950's, was a mass resurgence of faith. People looked towards religion as a means of solace from the unnerving threat of Communism. Moreover, faith further served to distinguish Americans from the

¹³ Charles S. Corcoran, "Communication: The Key to Survival for American Prisoners of War in Vietnam" *Air Power History* 38, no. 4 (1991) 49.

¹⁴ Edna Hunter et al., "Resistance Posture and the Vietnam Prisoner of War." *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 4, no. 2 (1973): 25-28.

¹⁵ Widely recognized by scholars as occurrences of post World War II America. An excellent description of this is provided in the following work: Reader's Digest, *Our Glorious Century* (New York: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 1994), 246-301.

“atheistic” Communists and perpetuated their perspective of the world as a battle between “good and evil, godly and godless.”¹⁶ The POWs of North Vietnam are certainly no exception to this phenomenon. Many of the POWs were children during this period of transition, living by the religious values placed upon them by their parents. At the same time, others were grown men raising children of their own amidst this religious fervor, passing on their own religious values. Therefore, a common theme throughout the POWs’ personal accounts reveals that a vast majority of them had a preexisting dedication to a Christian faith. A prime example of this is the story of Charlie Plumb. Brought up in post WWII America, Plumb recalls his relationship with God at a young age in his book *I’m No Hero*,

I attended a church camp when I was thirteen. After the service, the minister asked those present if they wanted to receive Christ into their lives, so I went up to the altar . . . Although I had been going to church and Sunday school on a regular basis, it was at that point that I was old enough to understand the meaning of commitment. I consider this my first really close association with God.¹⁷

Similar accounts of early dedication to faith can be found throughout the various autobiographies. For instance, the longest held American prisoner in North Vietnam Everett Alvarez Jr. remembers when he was an altar boy and his local Catholic Church was a “beacon in our neighborhood and an anchor in my early years.”¹⁸ Jeremiah Denton refers to himself as an “average product of Middle America and its values” and recalls his Alabama childhood by claiming, “my religious upbringing and my mother’s strong influence shaped my character.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 92.

¹⁷ Charlie Plumb, *I’m No Hero* (Independence: Independence Press, 1973), 23.

¹⁸ Everett Alvarez Jr. and Anthony S. Pitch, *Chained Eagle* (New York: Donald I Fine Inc., 1989), 73.

¹⁹ Jeremiah A. Denton Jr. and Ed Brandt, *When Hell Was In Session* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1976), 13.

This is not to say that every individual POW was a virtual saint during his upbringing. Sen. John McCain, a POW for nearly five and a half years, admits, “ When I was disciplined by my teachers, which happened regularly, it was often for fighting.”²⁰ Nevertheless, he also tells of exposure to the Episcopalian faith at his private boarding school. He states,

EHS [Episcopal High School] offered me more than a glimpse at a different culture. Students attended chapel every morning. On Sundays, we held morning services at the church on Seminary Hill, and evening services at the chapel.²¹

Despite their various recollections of early associations with God, it is fair to assume that none of them could have ever predicted how intensely their faith would be tested and how much closer to God they would eventually become. From the capture of Everett Alvarez in 1964 until the period of improved treatment in 1970 following Ho Chi Minh’s death, the POWs were subjected to sessions of brutal torture as a part of the North Vietnamese propaganda campaign.²² Routinely, prisoners were told to write confessions, admitting that the targets of their flight missions were innocent civilians. In addition, they were instructed to denounce the United States government and capitalism, and give their approval of the communist ideal. Repeated refusals of these requests resulted in the employment of barbaric torture techniques, which left the POWs searching for protection.²³ Seeing as it was not possible for this protection to come from fellow prisoners, the obvious solution in many cases was to turn to God.

²⁰ John McCain and Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers* (New York: Random House, 1999), 100.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²² By 1970 international pressure had been put on North Vietnam to improve the treatment of the prisoners. Added to this was a sense of vulnerability following the death of Ho Chi Minh. Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chap. 23 passim.

²³ Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 144, chap. 9 passim.

For some, praying seemed to be a quick fix to distract them from the immediate and intense pain. It also served to give them hope that if they prayed hard enough, the pain would eventually subside. A common form of rope torture used in North Vietnam, was one in which a prisoner's arms are tied tightly behind his back and fastened to his ankles with an additional rope secured around the ankles and acting as a noose around the prisoner's throat. This was designed to make the prisoner feel that if he relaxed his body even slightly under the extreme pain, he would ultimately strangle himself.²⁴ During such a session Air Force pilot Robinson Risner, a POW for seven years, tried first to knock himself unconscious by hitting his head against the floor of the torture cell in a failed attempt to free himself from the intense pain. When that proved fruitless he turned to his faith to guide him. He states in his book *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese*,

When the pain really started ripping me, I began desperately to pray. I kept quoting a scripture verse from the Bible over and over: 'My grace is sufficient . . . But this pain . . . I can't stand it . . . God! Help me, please help me!'²⁵

Accounts from other POWs provide examples of how when they prayed for an escape from the pain, their prayers were answered and thus, they felt empowered and were able to press on.²⁶ In Jeremiah Denton's description of his experience, he states that he "offered himself to God" and "repeated a vow of surrender to Him."²⁷ He concluded by saying, "a deep feeling of peace settled into my tortured mind and pain wracked body, and the suffering left me completely" and called it the "most profound and deeply

²⁴ Ibid., 145.

²⁵ Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (New York: Random House, 1973), 94.

²⁶ Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 148.; Denton and Brandt, *When Hell Was in Session*, 126.;

²⁷ Denton and Brandt, *When Hell Was In Session*, 126.

inspiring moment” of his life.²⁸ A comparable instance involving Everett Alvarez happened during a Vietnamese propaganda stunt in 1966 called the Hanoi March.²⁹ While being brutalized by the mob, Alvarez recited the *Hail Mary* and “almost immediately . . . ceased to feel the impact of the blows.”³⁰

Aside from confiding in God in times of torture and excruciating physical pain, the POWs also relied on their religion when placed in solitary confinement for periods of time which, in extreme cases, sometimes spanned up to four years.³¹ Despite the fact that a sophisticated communication network had been established by the first few captives and had been utilized by the prisoners to no end, solitary confinement denied prisoners the therapeutic benefits that came with having a tangible cellmate. During times like these, the POWs would have to find ways to occupy themselves. More importantly, the POWs took comfort in knowing that although they could not see God, God could see them and was receiving their prayers.

POWs like Maj. Sam Johnson, an Air Force man, defend this point. In his book *Captive Warriors* he states,

I could still talk freely to God. I knew with certainty that He was present in that dark, cramped closet of a cell. He listened when I prayed-this I *knew* without doubt . . . God’s intimate interaction with me . . . strengthened me and built my faith, so that I would be able to trust Him in the darkness of the terrible days that still lay ahead for me.³²

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The Hanoi March was designed to show critics around the world that the prisoners were being treated humanely. It was also intended to portray them as shameful by making them march with their heads down. The prisoners were taped marching through the streets of Hanoi amidst throngs of angry civilians. The stunt ultimately failed because the guards were unable to prevent the crowd from brutally attacking the prisoners thus, disproving humane treatment. Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chap. 10 passim.

³⁰ Everett Alvarez and Anthony S. Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 148.

³¹ John M. McGrath, *Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 12.

³² Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 139.

Norman McDaniel, a POW for nearly seven and a half years and a man of great devotion to his Protestant values describes his own experience,

I can not overemphasize the importance of my belief and trust in God as my greatest source of strength in surviving those first months, as well as the entire prolonged period of confinement. Not a single day passed in which I did not spend some time in prayer. I always felt that my prayers were being answered, because upon completion of each session, I felt much more relieved if I had been apprehensive, comforted if lonely, and rejuvenated when feeling depressed.³³

In addition to this, John McCain recalls the times he spent in solitary confinement trying to “combat loneliness” and remembers praying “more often and more fervently than I ever had as a free man.”³⁴ Charlie Plumb is also no exception and states,

During this period of solitary confinement I had much time to think. From the start, I established a definite schedule for personal reflection and appraisal. This included a two-hour worship service in the morning and a similar one in the evening. I spent much time praying-talking informally with God.³⁵

As a part of the relaxed policies during the waning years of their captivity, and as another attempt at coaxing the world into believing in a fair and lenient Vietnamese prison system, the North Vietnamese allowed the POWs to hold Christmas and Easter services, most of which were video taped. In addition to this, POW’s were eventually granted permission to hold vigils every Sunday but could only do so in the presence of a guard.³⁶ Nevertheless, the POWs took advantage of these opportunities to associate with other prisoners and to gain inspiration from each other’s faith. To assume that all of

³³ Norman A. McDaniel, *Yet Another Voice* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1975), 24,25.

³⁴ McCain and Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, 206.

³⁵ Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 78.

³⁶ These Sunday vigils, for the most part, took place in the latter years of imprisonment when large numbers of POWs were living together. This is a result of the Son Tay raid in 1970, in which the U.S. attempted to free prisoners but failed because there were no prisoners at that particular countryside prison. As a precautionary measure the North Vietnamese moved prisoners back into heavier fortified prisons in populated areas like Hanoi. Hanoi’s main prison Hoa Lo, was dubbed the “Hanoi Hilton” by the POWs.

the POWs who were raised upon religious values were deeply and completely faithful prior to capture would be somewhat unrealistic. Nonetheless, within the personal accounts of the POWs reference is made to such prisoners putting a much higher value on their faith upon experiencing the horrors of their imprisonment.³⁷ Sam Johnson remarks, “I could feel the faith that had waned during my teen and adult years begin to grow strong again” and refers to God as a “friend I had unkindly ignored . . . and felt an intense need to ask Him for forgiveness.”³⁸ There is also evidence of atheistic prisoners resorting to religion to guide them through their own harrowing situations. Plumb, states he was “happy to see the three atheists among the first to lay their hands on the opened pages” of the Bible during a worship service in which they initially refused to participate.³⁹

Norm McDaniel elaborates on this fact as well,

All of the prisoners with whom I lived had either a belief in, interest in, or respect for God, and most of them participated in the worship services. There were some men who turned to our Lord for the first time in prison, and there were others whose faith was strengthened.⁴⁰

During their imprisonment, the POW’s of North Vietnam were faced with many uncertainties. There was always concern among them as to whether or not they would ever be released, how long the war would drag on, and whether or not they would survive. That being said, it is evident from reading the various autobiographies and journal articles written by the former POWs, that their religious background, their worship within prison, and ultimately their faith in a higher being, afforded them at least one permanent fixture in what must have felt like an eternity of despair.

There was a series of satellite prisons outside of Hanoi as well. Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 508.

³⁷ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 99.; Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 110.; McCain and Salter, *Faith of my Fathers*, 254.

³⁸ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 99.

³⁹ Charlie Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 230-231.

Religion is a part of the POWs' personal background that undoubtedly played an integral role in pushing them to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. It must be noted however, that there are other personal factors, which are equally as critical to their cause. The POWs' marital and family status is undoubtedly one of those factors. Accounts have shown that many of the POWs in North Vietnam were married men, with a majority of them having one or more children.⁴¹ The families of the POWs, much like their religion, served as a source of inspiration in hard times and often dominated their thoughts during the loneliness of solitary confinement. Robinson Risner recalls, "Kathleen [wife] was an anchor to me all the time I was imprisoned."⁴² This is easily understood, provided the harrowing circumstances of captivity in which the POWs dwelled. Naturally, a man who possesses something so precious as a family and something so sacred as a marriage longs for such things when the prospect that he will ever experience them again is entirely uncertain. Jeremiah Denton recalls having to "discipline myself to fight off the waves of homesickness that swept over me" and follows by stating "just the thought of my family helped me to retain my grip on sanity."⁴³ John McCain offers his own insight on this perpetual longing of the POWs for their families,

My family was often on my mind. I spent a part of each long day worrying and wondering about them . . . In prison, I pictured my family as they had been when I last saw them: my wife healthy and happy; my sons,

⁴⁰ McDaniel, *Yet Another Voice*, 43.

⁴¹ Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*; Denton and Brandt, *When Hell Was in Session*; Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*; McCain and Salter, *Faith of my Fathers*; McDaniel, *Yet Another Voice*; McGrath, *Prisoner of War*; Risner, *The Passing of the Night*; George T. Coker, "P.W.," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 100, no. 10 (1974): 41-46; James B. Stockdale, "Experiences As a POW in Vietnam," *Naval War College Review* 51, no. 1 (1998): 81-86.

⁴² Risner, *The Passing of The Night*, 255.

⁴³ Denton and Brandt, *When Hell Was In Session*, 215.

not much older than toddlers, rambunctious and curious; my daughter a contented, beautiful infant; all of them safe and sound and carefree.⁴⁴

Although Article 71 of the Geneva Agreement of 1949⁴⁵ allows for sufficient correspondence between a POW and his family, the North Vietnamese largely ignored this provision and thus, heavily regulated, censored, and withheld many letters and packages sent to the POWs from their loved ones.⁴⁶ Men like Sam Johnson “prayed every day for a letter from home or for the privilege to write home” and for three years “had no knowledge of the lives and welfare” of his wife and children.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, when the POWs were given an outdated letter or package from their wives, it naturally inspired and encouraged many of them. Risner also admits,

Letters and packages from home had been great morale boosters in prison . . . the packages were like a life line with our family. I can remember picking up each item, no matter how small, holding it and looking at it. Then I would smell it, and hold it to my face, just because I knew my wife and children had sent it and touched it. That was a link that was sacred.⁴⁸

Moreover, the POWs, by corresponding with their families, were provided with the reassurance that their loved ones were well and that their families knew they were still alive. This is ultimately something that could not be obtained simply by conversing with God. Perhaps the most convincing account of the therapeutic qualities that the letters from home had on the POWs is provided by Charlie Plumb, he states,

⁴⁴ McCain and Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, 302.

⁴⁵ Barker, *Prisoners of War*, 220.

⁴⁶ Because the United States had never officially declared war on communist North Vietnam, the North Vietnamese dismissed any obligation to abide by the Geneva Agreements. That being said, they further claimed that the POWs were not soldiers of the opposition, but war criminals guilty of unprovoked attacks on innocent Vietnamese civilians. This insubordination also accounts for the gross mistreatment of the POWs throughout their incarceration. Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 109.

⁴⁷ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*,

⁴⁸ Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 253.

Probably the most touching news of all was the announcement of a baby son or daughter to POWs who had left pregnant wives. Not only did the proud father cry, but so did all of us as we tapped the bulletin from room to room. These reminders of new life refreshed our thoughts.⁴⁹

Furthermore, based on these accounts of inspiration, one could make the argument that because a majority of the POWs were married men with families of their own, they had an increased motivation to keep themselves mentally and physically healthy. Hence, giving them a better chance to endure the torment and return home safely. Sam Johnson recalls having to “force myself not to become morose” and states “I thought of my children and the years I had missed with them.”⁵⁰ This is not to say that POWs like Sam Johnson had more to live for than POWs elsewhere like young draftees for instance, which were forced into the war before they had any chance of marrying or establishing a family. It *is* evident however, that having a wife and children contributed greatly to a POW’s well being. That being said, because they had families that depended upon them, they were inclined, as were other POWs, to perform such preventative measures like mind exercises, designed to steer them away from the temptation of suicide as well as the probability of insanity or indoctrination. Rowan refers to this stimulation of the brain as a “use it or lose it” philosophy.⁵¹ John McCain writes,

The onset of despair is immediate, and it is a formidable foe . . . Many prisoners spent their hours exercising their minds by concentrating on an academic discipline or hobby they were proficient in. I knew men who mentally designed buildings and airplanes. I knew others who spent days and weeks working out complicated math formulas.⁵²

Moreover, the POWs felt they had to maintain an honorable image for their families by not giving in to the pressures the Vietnamese prison officials exerted upon

⁴⁹ Plumb, *I'm No Hero*, 158.

⁵⁰ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 260.

⁵¹ Rowan, *They Wouldn't Let Us Die*, 12.

them as part of their propaganda campaign.⁵³ They admit fearing that the Vietnamese would “convey falsely but convincingly to friends, family and comrades” that they had been “disloyal.”⁵⁴ Jeremiah Denton recalls,

To combat this, I constructed a daily routine. I would pray, exercise, plan escape, eat, nap, communicate with Guarino [POW], and then start the cycle again at the top. And of course, I reflected a lot on the old life and friends and family.⁵⁵

Still, there are other important personal factors that contributed to the survival of the POWs extending beyond their religion and family. Their military background, for example, plays an equally crucial role. As previously stated, nearly all of the POWs in North Vietnam were Naval and Air Force pilots and co-pilots. Rowan maintains that of the 564 men released in 1973, “only 71 of the military men were not officers, and even among the enlisted types all but a handful were career noncommissioned officers.”⁵⁶ As a result, these men had all received survival training prior to their flight missions over North Vietnam.⁵⁷ As a part of this training, the POWs were instructed on how to maintain resistance by adherence to the Code of Conduct.⁵⁸ In addition, they were “taught to expect to be used for propaganda purposes” and received training “in the terror tactics utilized by communist captors.”⁵⁹ The significance of this is clear. It means, despite the fact that the restrictions of incarceration presented a stark contrast to the freedom and mobility of their profession, they were ultimately prepared, to an extent, for the rigors of their captivity. Furthermore, it holds that the POWs were at least aware of the possibility

⁵² McCain and Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, 206, 207.

⁵³ Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chap. 9 passim.

⁵⁴ Denton and Brandt, *When Hell Was In Session*, 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ As stated in note #1, such statistics differ depending upon the source. Rowan’s number of 564 from 1973, differs from Howes’ 1993 number of 565 military POWs. Rowan, *They Wouldn’t Let Us Die*, 13

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 19, 20.

that they could become prisoners in the event of war and thus, were not completely disoriented or void of knowledge of their captors. Navy Cdr. James B. Stockdale, shot down in 1965 and one of the highest-ranking POWs in North Vietnam as well as the leader of the successful resistance movement, defends this point in an article he wrote shortly after his repatriation. He states,

For myself it seemed that becoming a POW somewhere, someday, was a risk I accepted when I entered the Naval Academy. I think it is fair to say that most POWs-including, certainly, those who did not attend services academies-felt the same way. They accepted this as a risk they undertook when they took their oath as officers. To be sure, very few sat around bemoaning their fate, asking the heavens, “Why me?”⁶⁰

Stockdale makes another valid point here. Very seldom in the accounts of the POWs is reference made to prisoners feeling sorry for themselves or wallowing hopelessly in self-pity. Instead, they were generally able to maintain relatively good morale throughout even the worst periods of torture and neglect by encouraging one another in times of despair.⁶¹ This commitment to one another is a common feature of the brotherhood that exists between servicemen in times of war and desperation.⁶²

More importantly, due to their level of training and status as military officers and noncommissioned officers, higher expectations were placed upon the POWs to uphold resistance and leadership responsibilities.⁶³ Therefore, this left little time for personal sorrow and grief and thus, improved their chances at survival. As POW George Coker puts it, “as a military man . . . you must be willing to suffer without giving up”, testifying

⁵⁹ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 46.

⁶⁰ Stockdale, “Experiences as a POW in Vietnam,” 85.

⁶¹ McCain and Salter, *Faith of my Fathers*, 252.

⁶² Many members of the armed forces identify a special bond existing among soldiers, claiming that the military is a family in and of itself.

⁶³ The language specifying this was added in 1964 to the original articles of the Code of Conduct created in 1955. All but two POWs were taken captive after 1964 and thus, were subjected to this. Department of

that an officer's "self-respect does not permit this."⁶⁴ He also states, "You expect an officer to live up to those principles he has sworn to protect. If he is prepared to die for them, he should also be prepared to suffer for them."⁶⁵ Examples such as the ones provided by Stockdale and Coker serve to demonstrate that the POWs in North Vietnam benefited greatly from their training, as well as from the continual devotion to the execution of their duties as officers.

Something else that deserves consideration is the fact that a number of the POWs serving in North Vietnam were veterans of previous wars.⁶⁶ They were decorated pilots who flew countless missions in the Korean War and World War II. It can be said, that the POWs of Vietnam achieved a hero status upon their return to the United States in 1973 however, for those POWs who were veterans of previous wars, that status had already been reached before their capture.⁶⁷ POWs like James Stockdale, Sam Johnson, and Robinson Risner flew in many missions during the Korean War.⁶⁸ Risner, who had earned the distinction of ace while flying over 100 missions and shooting down eight enemy MIGs⁶⁹, was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in early 1965 and was considered to be a legendary American fighter pilot by the time of his capture.⁷⁰ In addition to this, POWs like Larry Guarino, a fighter-pilot of twenty three years by 1965,

Defense, American Forces Information Service, *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force* (Washington, D.C., 1964), 10.

⁶⁴ Coker, "P.W.," 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The research performed for this study failed to provide any statistics regarding the actual number of POWs who served in the Korean War or World War II but, suggests that they were considerably outnumbered by those who did not. The sample of eleven POWs used for this paper however, features four veterans and makes reference to one other. The implication of this is that the veterans of prior wars were among the minority of POWs who published their own accounts.

⁶⁷ Rowan, *They Wouldn't Let Us Die*, 11.

⁶⁸ Stockdale, "Experiences as a POW in Vietnam"; Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*; Risner, *The Passing of the Night*.

⁶⁹ Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 53.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 62.

had flown in numerous missions in World War II as well as Korea.⁷¹ As a product of their extensive combat experience and their years of exposure to the military lifestyle, these men had established a reputation built on courage, honor, and discipline well before the Vietnam War. Therefore, upon imprisonment, maintaining that reputation became a priority as well as a motivator. John McCain attests to this in his memoir when speaking of George “Bud” Day, another POW who served in World War II professing, “Bud had an indomitable will to survive with his reputation in tact, and he strengthened my will to live.”⁷² Moreover, there was a perpetual emphasis on the need to return “home with honor” by all of the POWs in North Vietnam, but for those who were already veterans, that need was surely more vital.⁷³

The years of experience as accomplished combat pilots proved invaluable while in prison for another reason. All of these men, at some point during captivity, assumed the role of either Senior Ranking Officer or another prison leader position thus, placing them in charge of other POWs and requiring them to work cohesively with one another.⁷⁴ Without a doubt, such previous military experience taught these men the value of teamwork and cooperation. Sam Johnson recalls his own experience,

Sixty-two combat missions over North Korea with the 16th Fighter Squadron, 51st Fighter Wing, made me confident . . . Another twenty four combat missions over North Vietnam only increased that confidence; . . . I knew I was part of a team of specialists, and each member was essential to the whole. I understood the principle of interdependence. But I had no idea of the limits to which that principle would be tested in the months and years ahead.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story*, 9.

⁷² McCain and Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, 206.

⁷³ This mantra, as it would become, called for the POW's to refuse to participate in any act that served to defame or denounce the United States and the democratic ideals on which it functions. It strongly encouraged adherence to the Code of Conduct. Corcoran, “Communication: Key to Survival,” 53.

⁷⁴ Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, chap. 17 passim.

⁷⁵ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 25.

Furthermore, it undeniably takes a great deal of determination and self-discipline to first, learn how to fly a plane, and second, to operate it in the life-threatening circumstances of war. Nevertheless such self-discipline, as James Stockdale states, “was vital to self-respect, which is in turn, vital to survival and meaningful participation in a POW organization.”⁷⁶ Therefore, as veteran pilots they had the benefit of exercising and fortifying such self-discipline during their service in Korea and World War II.

In keeping with the discussion of military background and legacy as a motivator and crucial element in the success of the POWs of North Vietnam, it is important then, to examine the unique case of John McCain. McCain, although not a veteran of Korea or World War II at the time of his capture in 1967, was nonetheless driven by a rich military legacy that was passed down to him by his grandfather and father. His grandfather John S. McCain Sr. was a well-known Navy aviator and was named Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air during World War II. His significance to the United States Navy is highlighted by the fact that following his death, a destroyer was named in his honor, the *USS John S. McCain*.⁷⁷ In addition to this, McCain’s father John S. McCain Jr., was a submarine commander during World War II and eventually became “the Navy’s first son of a four-star admiral to reach the same rank as his father.”⁷⁸ McCain admits that as great men, his grandfather and father were always willing to instill in him the values that had contributed to their own success. In reference to his father he writes,

He trusted that when I met with adversity, I would use the example he had set for me just as he had relied all his life on his father’s example. The sanctity of personal honor was the only lesson my father felt necessary to impart to me . . . All my life, he had implored me not to lie; cheat or steal . . . to know my duty and devote myself to its accomplishment without

⁷⁶ Stockdale, “Experiences as a POW in Vietnam,” 83.

⁷⁷ McCain and Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, 45.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

hesitation or complaint. All else, he reasoned, would be satisfactorily managed were I to accept, gratefully, the demands of honor.⁷⁹

McCain carried such fatherly advice with him throughout his time in prison and in times of utter pain and distress called upon it for inspiration. In a battle with physical pain and depression after repeated indoctrination attempts and torture by his captors, McCain recalls exploring his own beliefs and drawing from them this conclusion,

Glory belongs to the act of being constant to something greater than yourself, to a cause, to your principles . . . No misfortune, no injury, no humiliation can destroy it . . . This was the faith that my commanders affirmed . . . It was my father's faith and my grandfather's faith. A filthy, crippled, broken man, all I had left of my dignity was the faith of my fathers. It was enough.⁸⁰

Perhaps the most convincing example of McCain's dedication to uphold the honor instilled in him by his father and grandfather and to maintain their heroic legacy came when his father was promoted to Commander in Chief, Pacific in 1968. Upon learning of this the Vietnamese quickly offered McCain an early release and special treatment "in the hope that it would shame the new enemy commander."⁸¹ Instead, McCain adamantly refused such amnesty despite his numerous severe physical injuries and as a result, endured the harsh conditions of North Vietnamese prisons for five more years.⁸²

Lastly, as revealed by the POWs' personal accounts, autobiographies, and memoirs, there is another important factor relating to their personal beliefs, which contributed to their successful and honorable performance while in prison. That factor takes the form of sheer patriotism and high regard for American ideals. Much like religious devotion, love of family, and military training and heritage, patriotism inspired

⁷⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 257.

⁸¹ Ibid., 235.

and assured the POWs of North Vietnam that their plight as prisoners was for a just and worthy cause. Jeremiah Denton professes that “no sacrifice was too great” on America’s behalf.⁸³ Robinson Risner adds “Duty to our country was something to focus on in prison . . . The flag, our president and what this country represents are things to stand up for.”⁸⁴ The POWs turned their thoughts to certain foundations of the American way of life like freedom and democracy most understandably, because they were denied such privileges in a Communist prison in the heart of a Communist country. John McCain admits, “In prison, I fell in love with my country. I had loved her before then, but . . . it wasn’t until I had lost America for a time that I realized how much I loved her.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, such American staples as the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the national anthem became frequent topics of discussion among prisoners when they needed a jolt of patriotism after prolonged exposure to Communist principles.⁸⁶ Everett Alvarez states,

My strength came from holding fast to my faith in God and belief in the values enshrined in our Constitution . . . Without my absolute belief in the core virtues of our heritage I don’t believe I would have pulled through alive and sane.⁸⁷

Moreover, this patriotic fervor, although enhanced by the prison environment, was certainly engrained into their belief system much earlier. Sam Johnson claims, “some of it was a natural product of growing up during World War II, in a nation that fought hard for its freedom.”⁸⁸ He also credits the POWs training “which sought to instill in us a

⁸² Ibid., 235-238.

⁸³ Denton and Brandt, *When Hell Was In Session*, 120.

⁸⁴ Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, 183.

⁸⁵ McCain and Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, 254.

⁸⁶ Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 237.

⁸⁷ Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 2.

⁸⁸ Johnson and Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors*, 145.

sort of 'Hurrah for God and Country' mentality."⁸⁹ George Coker puts the concept of patriotism as a guideline for maintaining honor and loyalty to one's country into perspective. He proclaims,

A P.W. will resist and take torture for . . . things simply because he believes in them. If he truly believes in what he is doing, he will continue fighting and resisting the enemy to the best of his ability no matter how long it lasts . . . He will maintain his will to resist. He will maintain his spirit and continue fighting.⁹⁰

In conclusion, the POWs of North Vietnam drew upon a variety of personal factors to aid them through the longest captivity of any group of prisoners of war in American history. Through their religious faith, they found a reliable and constant companion in God who nurtured their souls and comforted their battered bodies. Secondly, their families, wives, and children provided them with joyful reminders that something as powerful as love could thrive in even the most dismal and horrifying of circumstances. Their families also brought them inspiration throughout their stay in a country that was so distant from their own in terms of geography, culture, and ideology. In addition, years of invaluable military experience and training afforded them a better understanding of their captors and equipped them with an abundance of courage and self-discipline. Finally, a strong devotion to a system of American values, virtues, and ideals served to coach them throughout their suffering and convinced them that all of the sacrifices they made were justified in their commitment to a greater patriotic cause.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Coker, "P.W.," 45.