

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CAPT (ret) JACK FELLOWES, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Telephone interview with CAPT Jack Fellowes, USN (Ret.) former pilot and POW during the Vietnam War.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Tucson, Arizona, graduated from high school there, then went on to prep school. Then I joined the Navy to go to the Naval Academy in '52 and graduated in '56. From there, I got my wings in November of '57, then became what we call a attack pilot in the Navy serving aboard seven carriers until '66 when I became a guest of the Vietnamese.

What type of aircraft were you flying at that time, in '66?

I started out in what they called a "Spad," an AD-6. It was a single engine prop and I flew that for 2,000 hours. Then I went into jets and ended up in A-6s. It is a twin-engine carrier-based bomber. That's the airplane I was flying in '66.

What carrier were you assigned to?

At the end I was assigned to the *Constellation* [CVA-64].

Had you flown many missions over Vietnam prior to this?

I had 55 missions when I got shot down. So I had 55 good ones. I did my last mission on August 27th of '66.

What was your mission that day?

Putting bombs on a target that consisted of three barges that were supposedly in the river. But it ended up that they were camouflaged and we never could find them.

Where was that, up near Hanoi?

No. It was in the Vinh area, which is in the panhandle section of North Vietnam. I got to Vinh but it was very heavily defended because they were using it as a cross-transportation point. They were dropping supplies off at Vinh and we were bombing it quite a bit. Although my target was in the river leading to Vinh, it was very heavily defended.

Apparently, they shot my right wing off from what my wingman said. The A-6 went into a flat, inverted spin. We both ejected and became guests.

You must have had some things going through your head. You had been trained for the possibility of ejection.

You're never really totally trained. You train but you don't think you're going to be the one. And this particular day, I was the one. It was pretty interesting. Everything went according to

what I expected. I had to eject inverted and I was off the seat. It was a Martin-Baker seat. It was almost guaranteed to give you some back problems.

Is this the seat that had the cannon shell in it?

Yes.

So it was a good wallop.

A good wallop--32 Gs in that one micro-second. It hit me in the butt, and I was off the seat inverted. I was told when I got home that I had suffered a compression fracture of two vertebrae in my back.

When you first ejected, did you feel any pain?

No. There was some excitement because I was over enemy territory and they were shooting at me.

Was it a SAM that took your wing off or was it gunfire?

Just heavy gunfire.

Where did you come down?

Right in the middle of a village.

So evasion and escape were probably not options.

Not an option. And it was lunchtime, too, so the everybody was there.

What happened then?

They captured me immediately. I tried to light up a cigar but they took that away from me. I tried to get a radio signal out but it was too late so I just broke the radio. And that was about it.

Did the Vietnamese appear to be pretty hostile at that point?

Oh, yes. Very hostile, very unfriendly. I didn't see a friendly face in the crowd. There was someone in the village who was rallying them to be excited.

What did they do with you?

There was actually a recovery attempt to get us. They took me to a part of the village that was rather concealed and kept me there for awhile. And then when the airplanes went away, they marched me most of the afternoon to another village. I had no shoes or socks, just bare feet. I think they thought that had I kept them, I would try to escape. They marched me for about 4 hours to another village, where I spent the night.

Did you know about your back injuries? Were you in any pain?

My back hurt but I had no idea what it was. In fact, the Vietnamese solution to the problem . . . Actually, their solution to everybody's problem was to let you sleep on a hard bed board. So I was either sleeping on a cement slab or a hard wooden board. And that tends to help the bad back.

I was in that second village about four nights. Then they picked us up and marched us to another village. We marched around from place to place for about 10 days. Then they put us in a pickup truck and took us up to Hanoi.

When you say "us," are you talking about your crewman?

My bomber-navigator, yes.

He was also captured with you.

He was captured, but not with me. He landed in a rice paddy. They wouldn't allow us in the same room together. They interrogated us separately. Of course, I was supposed to answer all the questions he couldn't answer.

What kinds of stuff did they ask you?

They wanted to know what our war plans were. Of course, I had no idea. The government doesn't ask me, a lieutenant commander, how we're going to go about this or that. But they seemed to think that lieutenant commanders had some weight. So they would ask me how many missions I had--stupid interrogation stuff.

Did they have an interpreter there when they interrogated you?

There were some English speakers in the area who spoke pretty fair English. I was always interrogated by an English speaker, who claimed that he had learned English as a result of the French occupation. They sort of spoke English with a French accent. But they got the questions out, and when they didn't get the right answer they'd beat me up a little bit.

Were you tied up?

Well, my hands were tied behind my back. They untied me when I ate. But when I went to bed, they tied me up. They didn't have a great guard setup like that they did in the Hanoi environment. Usually, some kid would be standing outside the door. I guess they were really concerned about us being great escape artists.

How did they treat you as far as food and water?

They gave me a little water. Actually, it was tea, very weak

tea. Somebody brought me some vegetables which looked like grass, which it was. And then a little bowl of rice. So, for the first 10 days, I didn't really eat but maybe a cup of rice a day and a little vegetable, which was like the roots of grass. Nobody was really very interested in feeding us at all. I think they probably just wanted to get me to Hanoi. I think they thought that my presence in the village would get them bombed.

So, these villages were near Vinh.

Yes. Vinh is about 120 miles south of Hanoi. It took 4 days of travel to get there. They took us there by pickup truck. They had a cloth across the back that they could close. Every so often during the day, they would stop and they'd open the cloth and talk the villagers into throwing rocks at us. They'd throw some rocks, and then they'd close the curtain.

Were you injured in any of these attacks?

Not really.

So, this whole thing was orchestrated by your captors to "get back at the Americans?"

Very orchestrated.

So you got to Hanoi about 4 days later.

I got to Hanoi on September 9th. When we got close to Hanoi the guy who was in back of the truck with us . . . He was kind of a nice guy. He tried to get us some food. He gave us some gristle, which they chew on quite extensively. He didn't speak English but he made gestures indicating that we were not going to have a good time where we were going. And, of course, he was right.

I remember looking out the back of this jeep, pickup or whatever, and seeing how dark it was. Their light bulbs were about 20 watts. It was very dark and gloomy in Hanoi.

Hanoi was not what you would call a bustling city.

No. It was very early in the morning when we got there. When they finally got us to Hoa Loa Prison ["Hanoi Hilton"], they let us out. I don't remember seeing too many people at all till I got into the area where they kept me. They put me in a little courtyard where some people were preparing rice. Then they began the interrogation.

The next morning when it was still dark, they started the heavy interrogation. I didn't give the right answers so they put me in what we called the "rope trick." They tied my arms behind my back and my legs in leg irons so I couldn't move them. I had police cuffs on my wrists and rope tied around the upper part of my arms between

the elbows and shoulder blades. And the arms were tied tightly together behind my back so I was really in a knot. Then they bent my head down to a bar and secured that. Every so often they would raise you up and let you hang there. I was in that position for roughly 14 hours. It was dark when they started this and it was dark when I came out.

You said that this was heavy interrogation as opposed to what you had gotten in those villages. What kinds of things were they asking you?

Essentially the same stuff but there was more involvement of some younger people. Every so often they would beat you with a rifle butt or something. Down in the village, there weren't that many people and it wasn't like Hanoi.

So they wanted again to know what you knew about war strategy.

How many missions, what did I fly, what was I looking for, what my targets were. It was a bunch of BS.

As far as medical care, that probably didn't exist at all.

My arms were injured and I couldn't use them. They put me in with an Air Force lieutenant named Ron Bliss. When he ejected, his helmet and his seat separated from him and then came back and hit him in the head, which was now bare because his helmet was off. So it kind of put a hole in his head. They put him in with me to take care of me as I couldn't move my arms. After having been subjected to this rope trick, I had suffered some cuts and bruises on my elbows and arms. So when I lay in bed they would all drain. I couldn't move my arms. And here's Bliss trying to take care of me with this big hole in his head.

Was Bliss's head injury treated at all?

They packed his head with sulphur. And with me, they tried to do whatever they could do with my arms. They put sulphur on my cuts but my hands got really swollen. They would try to get the swelling down by using a pair of pliers to squeeze where it was swollen. There were a couple of cuts at the knuckles. My middle finger on the left hand got really swollen. So they would squeeze it with pliers to try to drain it. I went through that for a month or so and they finally got the hands to go down to what was somewhat normal.

And this swelling was the result of the rope trick.

Yes. I couldn't move my arms from the shoulders so Bliss had to dress me, feed me, and all kinds of things.

So Bliss, a guy with a hole in his head, is helping you?

Yes. He's doing everything possible to keep me alive.

And what shape is he in at this point?

He's in pretty good shape. You hit an Air Force guy in the head, it's no big deal. He was and is a great guy and real friend.

Was this interrogation routine a daily occurrence?

After my arm problem, the Vs were a little uncomfortable with it.

The Vs?

The Vietnamese. They were very uncomfortable with my condition because, although they had done the rope trick on many others, no one had actually lost the movement of his arms. They actually took me to a little way station where there was a doctor. I don't know what they expected him to do. He stuck a needle in the top of each of my hands and then started pulling out the substance. There was clear liquid--infection liquid-- but no blood. That scared them a little bit. But after a while, Bliss would exercise my arms. And, after a long while, I got my arms back. I got the feeling back in them, which was very painful. No feeling is bad enough but then when the feeling comes back, boy!

They had cut off the circulation.

In two places.

So you were numb from your shoulders all the way down.

Yes.

So they made an attempt to get your arms to work again. You say they seemed worried about this?

It seemed like they were because from then on people would tell me that when they went into the rope trick, the Vs would write the time they put the ropes on. Then they'd come after half an hour and look at the time. If it was over half an hour, they'd relax the ropes and let the circulation come back before they put them on again. So apparently it bothered them. They didn't want me to come out of that prison with no use of my arms. That would have shown the world that they had tortured us, something they denied and continue to deny.

Imagine that when you were involved in this rope trick thing, it must have been tremendously painful.

Yeah, but the arms go numb. The only problem is that you're there for so long. The bar that my legs were tied to was 10 feet

long. The room was 10 by 12. What I'd do was kick the bar so it would hit the wall and then jimmy my ankles so that I could get some feeling back. But once it was over, they told me to stand up. I tried to raise my arms but couldn't. They ran out of the room when that happened and didn't come back till the next morning. Then they put me in with Ron Bliss.

Why did they run out of the room?

I don't think they were comfortable when they saw I couldn't move. I don't think they intended to cripple people like that. If you see someone who is crippled, you can pretty much tell that the Vs had done it. And I don't think they wanted people to know that they were doing it.

At this point, we all knew what the problem was. We all became very alert to the problem as soon as we got there. Once all the BS with the interrogation was over, we knew it was time to go into survival mode. You all know what you're there for so Bliss calmed my nerves and took care of me. And we stayed together till my arms got better. As soon as the Vs [North Vietnamese] felt I could do things on my own, they moved Bliss out. We had been together for 13 months before they separated us. I was solo for the next 15 months before they moved me again.

Where did they take you?

They took me to a place they called the Carriage House.

Did this place have anything to do with the Hilton?

No. This was in a place called the Zoo. The second day I was with Bliss they drove us out to the Zoo and put us in a cell.

What was the Zoo?

We called it the Zoo because it was the only Zoo in the world where the people looked out at the animals.

Where was it located?

Just outside of Hanoi. I had been at the [Hanoi] Hilton at first before they moved us to the Zoo, but I would go back to the Hilton later. I remained at the Zoo for the next 3 years.

Was there more interrogation at the Zoo?

Well there was an occasional interrogation but not for that first year. Nobody came in to see me because of my arms. I remember the guy who ordered the torture came into camp one day and said words to the effect: "If you don't give us the answer, remember, we took your arms. Now we'll take your legs." Then he left and I never saw

him again.

The Vs wouldn't let me write home. In fact, I didn't get to write home for 4 years. I was MIA. My wife didn't even know my status for 4 years.

You were MIA that whole time.

Yes. When we were shot down, the guys in the other aircraft saw one chute come out of the airplane and didn't realize it was me because my bombardier-navigator wouldn't leave.

But he got out at some point.

He got out as soon as I left. He figured he couldn't fly the airplane inverted with a wing missing so he got out. He and I are good friends and I've talked to him about it. He said he thought I would right the airplane.

When they sent you to the Zoo, were you in solitary?

Yes, after my arms got better. After 15 months in the Carriage House, I moved in with Jim Bell.

What kind of cell did you have?

They called the Carriage House. It was really a garage with a big door, and a bed in one corner. It was a pretty big room. It was very comfortable. I had a rat as a friend. He used to come in through a rat hole and sit there. I'd sit there and look at him. It got to where I was talking to the rat, but he never answered me.

How did you keep your sanity all that time?

You're assuming, of course, that I was sane to start with. You're also assuming that I'm sane right now.

No. I'm not making any assumptions.

First of all, you had to have a sense of humor. Then we got the tap code going and were able to talk to each other.

How did that work?

Well, you've got a 26-letter alphabet. We took a letter out--the letter K. Now you have 25. You break that 25 down to five groups of five. So, A, B, C, D, E become group ONE. F, G, H, I, J become group TWO, etc. Now K is out. So K just becomes a tap, pause, two taps, pause, tap. The rest of the letters are in groups. Group ONE is A, B, C, D, E. If I want to tap you an E, I would tap the group--ONE. So I'd tap one, pause for a second and then tap the positional letter in the group, which is five. So it would be one tap, one pause, then five. Tap, pause, tap tap tap tap tap.

We did that right till the bitter end and some guys were still doing in the hospital at Clark. They had nothing else to do.

Someone obviously developed this code and then somehow you all learned it.

We had an Air Force guy named Smitty Harris who brought it into the prison. Smitty knew the code because he learned it in survival school. They told him it might be valuable just in case. He said, he'd learn it but never thought he would need it. Well, he ended up as one of us and got the code passed around.

The guys would come by outside your room and they would sing. Instead of singing the words to the song they would sing the tap code. That's how we first learned about it. Then we also used a 26-letter code which was one tap for A, and 26 for Z. You would put your cup to the wall next to your bed and listen. Then we'd do the cup so we could talk to the wall. But the tap code was the most reliable because we could do it anytime. When people would come back from torture, we would tap on the wall and try to get that person back in shape mentally. It was a very valuable code. In 1960, you could get this code from the box top off a Wheaties. I think it was the Captain Midnight club. They would send you a club card, a decoding ring, and a code. And this was the code. Just think, a 50 cent code saved about 600 lives.

You say that some guys came around and sang. What was that all about?

When you're first there, you don't know what's going on. So, one day someone comes by your room singing, very softly, but singing. He'd be singing "Hello Dolly," or actually the "Hello Dolly" music, but instead of singing the actual words, he'd sing you the tap code. You had to listen to him about three times before you realized what he was doing. But that was the start of it. It worked pretty well. We got a couple of good messages by guys singing strange words to pretty good songs that we knew.

Once you were proficient in the tap code and you started communicating with each other, what kinds of things would you guys talk about?

If you'd been to an interrogation, you would tell your buddies what things the Vs asked you about and what they wanted. Once you got past that, you'd tap anything that might be enjoyable to hear. We'd tap dirty jokes, anything you can think of. We asked people to give their histories. We are you from and all that kind of stuff. Once you got the tap code down, you'd just tap anything to keep each other going.

You had nothing to write with.

No.

So, presumably, if you're telling someone a story with the tap code, you had to be pretty quick in your head to figure out what was going on.

Yes. But I've learned poems with the tap code. Mike Christian would tap five lines of a poem and I would commit it to memory. So, yes, you had to be quick but that was easy because you had nothing else to do.

Did they let you out of the cell for exercise or to bathe?

Yes. Bathe. Twenty minutes a day except Sunday. In the first cell with Bliss they had a shower. Bliss had to turn it on. No hot water. From then on it was well water. So you'd go out and Ron would lift up a bucket of water from the well and pour it on me. This was done in the courtyard. There was no water in the room.

Were these rooms surrounding the courtyard?

In the Zoo, the rooms surrounded the swimming pool the French had probably used. The Vs were using it to raise fish. The water was filthy.

What happened on Sunday?

Nothing. You stayed in your cell.

What kind of clothing did you wear during your captivity?

They gave us shorts and an undershirt made of very coarse cotton, and what we called long johns--pajamas. They were long pants with a cloth belt and a shirt. And they gave us a sweater with a hood. I wore my sweater because . . . When my arms hurt so bad, I wouldn't take a cold shower; I wouldn't let Bliss wash me down. So after so many months of wearing the sweater, the hood rotted off. Then the arm rotted off. I was almost crying when this happened. So I went to the Vs and told them that I needed a hooded sweater. They told me they didn't have any more sweaters. So I ended up with a sweater with one arm and the hood gone. And I had a pair of socks and that was it.

Did you ever have a blanket?

They gave us a blanket and later when the war ground to an end, they were giving us three blankets. But for the first year I only had one blanket.

Was it a coarse woolen blanket?

No. It was made of coarse cotton. They don't have wool there. You'd wear everything to bed because all the windows were bricked up in the cells, so there was no circulation. It was like a freezer in the winter and a steam bath in the summer.

Did you have insects to contend with?

Oh, yeah. We mostly had mosquitoes. There were tons of them. And when you put a mosquito net up at night you couldn't see what you were doing because there were no lights. You couldn't catch them because you couldn't see them.

Were there any sanitary facilities?

A bucket.

Someone would come in and remove the bucket?

You put the bucket outside and a prisoner would empty it. You never saw him do it. Then the guard would open the cell door and you'd take the bucket back.

Personal hygiene--brushing your teeth, anything. How did you do any of that stuff?

With a toothbrush.

You had a toothbrush?

Yes. And it broke right away when I first got it. So I ended up brushing with a nub. They gave us some toothpaste which was terrible, but it was still toothpaste. The big thing was that we didn't have any food that was considered good enough to decay teeth. We didn't have a lot of fats. We didn't have a lot of sugars. We had cabbage soup, pumpkin soup, grass soup, bread. In fact the bread was pretty good when it was hot. And that was it. Two meals a day. You got kind of hungry.

Did you think about food a lot?

Oh, yeah. I like food.

You had all this time on your hands. What did you think about? My God, how many years on your hands?

By '71, we had people to talk to. Before that, we had one or two or me alone. I thought about my family a lot. I remembered things I'd done back home. The first couple of weeks after I got home, I was talking to my wife about things we'd done and she couldn't remember because she hadn't thought about it. She said, "What's wrong with you? You remember a lot." I told her I had nothing to do but remember this. So, you'd put your mind to work to remember

anything you could that was pleasing. That's part of how I got through.

Did you manage to maintain a reasonable level of health while you were there?

Yes. They didn't do anything for us but I think that with the food as poor as it was, it wasn't the kind of food that would clog your arteries. It was really barren food. We'd get colds and get sick and they'd give us bicarbonate of soda or an aspirin. But it was pretty interesting because a lot of guys had some bad days, but for the most part, we survived in there pretty well. We'd just keep going day after day.

How long were in solitary in the Zoo?

I was 15 months in the Zoo. Then I got to room with Jim Bell, then with a guy named Bud Day in the Zoo. Boy, they were tough guys. So I was really in the middle of a good crowd for the next 3 years. That got me through, too.

Were they Navy or Air Force?

Jim Bell was Navy. Bud Day was Air Force. And Ron Bliss was Air Force. These guys were really strong. Finally one day they moved us out of the Zoo and put us in with 40 other prisoners back in Hoa Loa, the Hilton. There were a number of rooms, each holding 40. One room had 20 in it. Now we had someone to talk to all the time.

Now that you had people to talk to, you didn't need the tap code anymore.

Well, we still did because we had to tap between rooms. So we got all the rooms on board. It was really interesting exchanging thoughts and ideas. For those in the same room, we had courses in Civil War taught by a guy named Art Burer, who was from the South and maintains that the South won the war. And nobody questioned him because he was the instructor. And John McCain told Damon Runyon stories. We just had normal living except that we were locked up.

So, McCain was in there with you, too.

McCain was with us the last 3 years.

But he had some real physical problems, didn't he?

At the start he did.

He had some pretty serious shoulder injuries incurred when he ejected.

Shoulder and arms. He had a bad ejection, and by the time they got him in, his shoulder was separated.

At this time, you didn't know what the heck was going in the world. You had no news. You didn't know how the war was going. You didn't know when this ordeal was going to be over and how long you were going to be in there.

Up until 1972 everybody who came in said they didn't know what was going on. Then we got a group who came in '72 and they told us a lot more of what was happening. Of course, the Vietnamese talked about the Paris peace negotiations but it was gloomy because they spent what--a year and a half trying to figure out the size of the table.

When you're trying to survive, you tend to cut loose some stupid things and get right to the basic premise that I'm going to survive. So the people around you were all on the same team. Surviving with our honor became very important. We were all on the same frequency so we were all thinking about one thing--surviving and helping each other out. And when you have about 600 people helping each other out, you're doing pretty well.

The Vietnamese, by the way, provided very little of anything. They did have some medical care. I'll tell you one medical thing. A guy named Myers had developed a very serious infection on his upper leg. The Vs had cut it open, put maggots or leaches in the wound, and then bound it up. One day they came into the room, took a pair of scissors, and stuck it into this blister that had formed. They cut the blister, opened it up, took out the maggots, and then wrapped it up again.

That's an old medical trick. Maggots will only eat dead tissue and leave the healthy tissue untouched.

I saw Myers about 8 months later and you couldn't even tell he had a scar.

The dental work consisted of a foot pedal drill. I wouldn't go in there. I did everything I could to help my teeth. They would say, "Prepare to suffer." And then they'd pedal through your tooth.

Let me see if I understand this. If you had a toothache, they didn't intend to do any fancy dental work. The tooth was simply coming out.

If you had a toothache that was bothering you so much, your choice was getting it out. You'd say, "My tooth hurts." And they would take it out. They only had the foot pedal to power the drill and things. Jack Bumar went in one day to get a tooth removed because it was driving him crazy. The Vietnamese took the tooth out and Bomar

was back in his room. He was walking around the cell and he put his tongue back where the tooth was missing. Suddenly he realized that they took the wrong tooth out. So, in a fit, he kicked out and broke his toe. But he laughed about it later.

So they had some kind of rudimentary dentist there.

They tried. You know, they don't have anything but they try. They told one guy who kept getting blisters in his private parts that he had syphilis. He said, "I can't have syphilis because the only person I've had relations with is my wife." So one guy got on the wall [tap code] and said, "Do you ever take sulphur?"

And he said, "I don't know."

So the guy says, "The next time they give you a pill for anything, just don't swallow it." So after a year or so of this syphilis thing, he put this pill on his tongue and just licked it and he broke out. So his syphilis was a reaction to sulphur.

So he was allergic to sulphur.

Yes. A lot of people are allergic to it. The medical care wasn't so good.

The dentistry was rudimentary and the medical care was in the stone age.

That's the way I looked at it.

And you were fortunate in that you didn't require their services.

I had a tooth that was bad and drove me nuts. What I'd do was take the aspirin they'd bring me and I'd salivate it and stick it on the gum above the tooth and it would numb it. I waited till I got home, which was a year and a half. When I got to Clark, the first thing I said was, "Can I get a tooth removed?" This mean looking guy came in and said, "I'll take it out." And I thought, "He's a tough looking hombre." But the next thing I know, the tooth is gone. I didn't even feel it.

So there were those of us who would almost refuse to have a Vietnamese operate on him.

Were there any prisoners you were aware of who needed advanced medical care like an operation?

Fred Cherry was an Air Force colonel. They had tortured him by bending his wrist and arm behind his back with such force that they broke a rib. The rib popped into the lung so they had to operate on him and take this rib out of his lung. Fred came back and he was fine. So they could operate. The feeling both of us had was, "I

don't want to get involved because there's too much infection even in the good hospital, much less a bad one."

So the best way to stay healthy was to stay out of their hands. Exactly.

Did you have any malaria?

No. We had a couple of guys who caught dysentery but the Vs gave them a drug they called cintoflin, a Chinese drug. They gave them one shot and the thing cleared up. We had guys who got sick now and then but their roommates took care of them. They covered them up with blankets.

What did you wear on your feet?

We had what they called Ho Chi Minh go-aheads. They were made from old tires and had a little lap across the big toe and the next toe and they had no back. It's impossible to escape if you have a shoe without a back. So the escape committee made shoes with a back.

What was the escape committee?

We had guys who wanted to get out. Everybody wanted to get out but being up in North Vietnam, it was kind of hard. We had little escape packs which were kept by one guy. He's the only one who knew where it was.

So one guy had the escape pack.

I was supposed to be the chairman for the whole group for the last 2 years. Some one else maintained the official escape pack.

So you were planning an escape.

We had a couple of guys go out.

Did they actually get away?

No. They both got so far but then were recaptured quickly. I have my own opinion. Americans don't smell like Vietnamese. For example, when a package came from home, sometimes there would be Dial soap. I can't imagine what that must smell like to Vs. Maybe this guy had used some soap from home. They recaptured him. One of the guys was killed in torture; the other guy is fine.

At least there was hope that you might get out of there.

We never gave up hope.

You were talking about packages. Were these Red Cross packages?

No. They were from home. In 1968 they allowed wives to send packages. If they wanted to, the Vs would give them to you. I got two packages the whole time. My wife sent about seven.

What was in your package?

I had bullion cubes in one of them. My wife said that she never sent bullion cubes so I don't where the hell that came from. One guy's wife sent him a bottle of Pepto Bismol.

When did your family learn that you were alive?

November of '71. That was 4 years and 10 months after I had been captured.

So you were captured pretty early on then.

Yes. I was the 61st prisoner.

Do you ever keep up with [Everett] Alvarez?

Oh, yes. We see him quite frequently. We have reunions. I see them all. We are having our 30th reunion in Anaheim this year. We're all good friends because we all helped each other survive. There's a great bond between us.

How did you find out that the war was over and you were being released?

They announced it to us and said that we would be released in four increments. We knew the first group was going. I was supposed to be in the second group. On March 3rd they brought in a razor blade and we shaved. Up till then, we only shaved twice a week, so this was the third time that week. We surmised that something was up. We went out the next day, March 4th. But they didn't tell us. And the food was really bad, too, right up to the end. The food was terrible. We had gastropoliticians who figured that when the food got better, we were going home. No such luck.

Gastropoliticians?

I'm a gastropolitician. When the food got better, they were fattening us up to go home. But it never worked out.

What was that last meal?

The last meal I had was cabbage soup with a side dish of tofu and a loaf of bread.

Did you get any tea?

They gave us one pot of tea a day. In the afternoon they gave us water, which was brown in appearance. It wasn't tea.

What do you recall about the day you were released?

It was raining. When we and the Vs left the cell, they didn't close the door. Usually when they left the cell they closed the door and locked it. So it was off to the buses and out to the airplane.

What did you see when you got to the airfield? What kind of aircraft was it?

It was a C-141. The Vietnamese had a table with a couple of officers reading the names. As soon as we were aboard the airplane, they shut the door and we took off. Everyone was very quiet until the pilot said, "Feet wet." That's when we were over the water. Then the plane broke out with cheering Americans. And we were free.

What happened after you got to Clark?

I spent 3 days there getting cleaned up, and then we flew on to Andrews and then to Norfolk.

What happened at Norfolk?

I saw my wife and kids. It was a great reunion after 7 years. My kids were grown. It was very, very touching. And I'll leave it at that.

Where did you go for medical care when you got back?

Portsmouth Naval Hospital. They found out that we were in pretty good shape, a lot better than expected. And they took care of us very well.

What kind of follow up medical and dental care did you get?

The best in the world. My teeth had problems. I needed crowns. The dental care has been superb. I've really been taken care of very well. Navy medicine has been excellent. I've had some skin cancers they figure was from lack of pigmentation due to the lack of exposure to the outside air.

So they took care of all your physical needs. Was there any kind of psychological counseling?

No. But it was available if you wanted it.

There was a program for ex-POWs down in Pensacola. Are you involved in that?

I was until I had my heart attack. Now the people at Bethesda are taking care of me.

What was the deal in Pensacola? How did that program work?

You'd go down to Pensacola every year. Bob Mitchell's group would give you a physical--take care of you, check you out to make sure you were all right. After about 4 days they would send you home. If I needed consultations, they'd send me to Bethesda. It worked great for me for about 15 years. Then I had the heart attack and had bypass surgery. I've been taken care of so well by Bethesda that I don't need to go to Pensacola.

With the Pensacola program, did the Navy pay your way back and forth?

The Navy paid my way down and they put us up in the BOQ, and they paid my way back. The Navy took care of the whole thing.

What did you do after you came back and had your health issues taken care of?

My first assignment after I got back was 4 years at the Naval Academy teaching leadership and working for the athletic association. The next 2 years I was at the Bureau of Personnel working on a project called "Quality of Life." Then I was 6 years at the Bethesda Hospital working the Disability Board. I retired in 1986.

What do you do now?

I've got about 200 volunteer jobs. I'm a liquor inspector for the city of Annapolis. I work for the state legislature during the session, which is a sedentary job, and I go in and file things for the police. I keep busy to keep alive and help my wife keep her sanity. We were married for "better or worse but not for lunch," a Navy psychiatrist told me at Portsmouth on my return home.