

Feb. 15, 1973: American POWs Come Home With Honor—A Day To Remember



by Rees Lloyd, Attorney

February 15, 2023

February 15, 2023 is the 50th anniversary of a shining moment in American history: It was on that day in 1973 that American prisoners of war began the repatriation process that would finally bring them home from Vietnam with their honor intact.

They had suffered unspeakably harsh treatment and depravation, many for over five, six, or seven years—and two for nearly nine years. The abuses and torture of American POWs were applied by the North Vietnamese communists, and their leader, Communist Ho Chi Minh.

It was a day of great importance in 1973, in an America divided by the war in Vietnam. And, it is a day to remember all these years later in an even more divided America. It is important for what it teaches about duty, honor, sacrifice and country. It is about who we are and what we can be.

The Vietnam War had severely divided Americans. It was and remains the first time in American history that veterans came home from war not to be honored for their service and sacrifice, but to be vilified, defamed as “war criminals,” told by their military commanders not to wear their uniforms in traveling home, many even spat upon as they arrived home at airports, train or bus stations.

Our younger generations need to realize how our valiant POW's were vilified by Progressive Liberal Democrats and celebrities like actress Jane Fonda; her Leftist husband Tom Hayden—a founder of Students For A Democratic Society (“SDS”); the “Prairie Fire” communist domestic terrorist bombers like Bill Ayers (a multi-millionaire's son) and his wife, Bernadine Dorn (a wealthy lawyer's daughter) ; and self-promoting Democrat political opportunists like John Kerry, who publicly accused American troops of war crimes in Congressional testimony without ever being able to offer any proof. Kerry, once Democrat Party nominee for the Presidency, was thoroughly exposed as an utter and contemptible self-promoting liar by the book *“Unfit For Command,”* but remains to this day a leader in the Democrat Party.

These Leftist, Progressive Liberal Democrats, Socialists, Communists, Anarchists, and Communist supporting Democrats, publicly, viciously, and blatantly falsely denounced the POWs as “liars” in claiming “torture.” They insisted that Ho Chi Minh was but a benevolent nationalist Vietnamese patriot who would not engage in torture.

Only after the war was the overwhelming evidence acknowledged that Ho Chi Minh was in fact a dedicated Communist dictator who was in fact responsible for, and had personally ordered, the torture of POWs. Violating basic tenets of international rules for treatment of POWs, Ho refused to follow the Geneva Accords. Today, those facts are indisputable.

Most of the American prisoners of war were American pilots. The very first pilot captured was Lt(jg) [later Commander 0-5] Everett Alvarez, Jr., of Salinas, CA. He was shot down on August 5, 1964, and was held captive of the Communists for over eight years, until February 12, 1973, when Operation Homecoming began.

The only American to serve longer than Everett Alvarez as a POW was Army Green Beret, Colonel Floyd James (“Jim”),

Thompson. He was an enlisted man who became a Special Forces officer. He was captured on March 26, 1964. He remained a captive until March, 1973, only ten days short of nine years as a POW – years in which he suffered almost unbelievable torture.

There were 776 Americans taken prisoner of war; 114 of them died in Communist captivity. The Communists under Ho Chi Minh refused to recognize them as Prisoners of War. Instead, the Communists declared them to be “war criminals” and blatantly violated the Geneva Convention. In what became known by the POWs as the “*Hanoi Hilton*,” and like prisons, the POWs were kept in filthy, windowless, vermin-infested, airless cells, and suffered excruciating torture.

Those seen as “ringleaders” of the resistance, like ranking officers of the resisters in what became known as the “Alcatraz Eleven,” James Stockdale, who would later receive the Medal of Honor, and his second in command, Jeremiah Denton, who received the Navy Cross, would be locked in solitary confinement for over four long years, in which horrific torture was inflicted on them, and the other resisters.

The fact of torture was not confirmed until 1966. Then, the Communists attempted to force Jeremiah Denton to participate in a propaganda broadcast to be filmed by a Japanese crew for international distribution.

Instead, Denton not only did not say what the Communists wanted him to say, but he blinked his eyes as if he had an eye problem. He was in fact blinking in Morse Code: “T-O-R-T-U-R-E.” Naval intelligence immediately understood what Denton was communicating. When the Communists later realized what Denton had done, they tortured him nearly to death, as he recounts in his now classic book on what POWs endured: “*When Hell Was In Session*.” (WND Books)

Overwhelming post-war proof of torture beyond any reasonable doubt has given the lie to torture-deniers Fonda, Hayden, Kerry, et al. Accounts of torture are related in the many books by or about the POWs. These include,

"POW," by John Hubbell, the first extensive history of the POWs in Vietnam; *"Honor Bound,"* the seminal tome of facts by Stuart Rochester and Frederick Kiley; the late Admiral Jeremiah Denton's classic *"When Hell Was In Session;"* *"Surviving Hell,"* by the late Col. Leo Thorsness (USAF, ret.; Medal of Honor); *"The Passing Of The Night,"* by the late Colonel Robinson Risner (USAF); *"American Patriot,"* the biography of the late and legendary POW and Air Force combat pilot Colonel Bud Day, a hero in three wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam), and Medal of Honor recipient who was the most decorated veteran of his era; *"Chained Eagle,"* by Everett Alvarez, Jr., who, as stated above, was the first pilot shot down, a POW for almost nine years;

And, among other books, *"Faith of my Fathers,"* by the late Sen. John McCain— who refused an offer of early release by the Communists because his father was the Commanding Admiral, and suffered horrendous torture for his refusal. Whatever thoughts may be today regarding McCain's actions as a U.S. Senator, McCain was a true hero as a POW; was recognized as such by his fellow POWs; and was left permanently crippled in his arms by torture.

More recently, author Alvin Townley has written a book magnificently telling the true story of the torture POW's endured in Vietnam, and what their families endured at home: *"DEFIANT: The POWs Who Endured Vietnam's Most Infamous Prison; The Women Who Fought For Them, And The One Who Never Returned."*

It was not until February, 1973, that the breakthrough in Paris peace talks came and Operation Homecoming began. The first flight of emancipated POWs out of Vietnam to Clark Air

Force Base in the Philippines was on Feb. 12, 1973. At Clark, the elected spokesman for the POWs, then-Captain Jeremiah Denton, in military uniform, stepped to the microphone, and spoke in short stroke words which began the stirring of the heart of a divided nation:

"We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances. We are profoundly grateful to our Commander-in-Chief and to our nation for this day. God Bless America."

Then came that shining moment three days later on February 15, 1973, when Denton, Jim Mulligan, and the others of the first group of POWs landed at the Portsmouth Naval base in Virginia, back on American soil. Their wives and children rushed to embrace them, as, to the POWs surprise, a huge crowd of Americans roared with cheers for them, waving flags, laughing, some weeping with joyful emotion, Americans at last embracing the Americans they sent to war, welcoming them home – as all Vietnam veterans should have been welcomed.

Many of the Vietnam POWs are no longer with us, including Vice Admiral James Stockdale, Rear Admiral Jeremiah Denton, Col. Bud Day, and many others. But their example is with us challenging us to great accomplishments.

One of those exemplars, though he humbly eschews special recognition, is Lt. Col. Orson Swindle, a much decorated retired Marine combat pilot who flew over 200 combat missions. He was shot down on November 11, 1966, on his 205th and last scheduled mission. He endured six years and four months of torture at the hands of the North Vietnamese Communists who targeted him as one of the worst of the "resisters." At home, he continued to serve in the Marine Corps until retirement. As a civilian, he held several high positions in the Reagan administration. In an interview, Lt.Col. Swindle expressed why he believes it is important *now* to remember what the POW's did *then*. He said:

“I think it is very important to remember and honor the service and sacrifice of the Vietnam War POWs because our democracy depends on our people doing the right thing. The Vietnam POWs did that, in the face of great adversity. We held on for five, six, seven, and even eight years of torture. We did the right thing. We just said ‘No!’

“We knew our country isn’t perfect. But, even knowing the warts and all, our country has offered all people more freedom, and more opportunity than any country ever, and is still, the greatest nation on earth. Deserving of our support, our sacrifice, even our love. That is why we did what we did.

“In the interrogations, in which we were often beaten, abused, or tortured, it would have been so easy to escape punishment by saying what the Communists wanted to hear. But, we said ‘No.’ We often got beaten up, but we said ‘No.’

“I was, I believe, POW Number 144. Ultimately, there would be over 700. I learned so much from those who came before me. They were remarkable leaders who set the example. Men like [Admiral] James Stockdale [Medal of Honor recipient] and [Rear Admiral] Jeremiah Denton [Navy Cross recipient], and Bud Day [as stated above, legendary Air Force combat pilot, Medal of Honor recipient, hero in three wars –WWII, Korea, and Vietnam—and considered the most decorated veteran of his era]. They and the other POWs who followed them ought to be remembered, honored, and followed.

“Following their example, we suffered, but we wouldn’t surrender, through years of abuse, beatings, and torture. We would just say—‘No!’ And we did that time after time.

“I confess that I am greatly concerned about what is happening in our country today. No one seems to be held accountable. We have a debacle in Afghanistan in which Americans were left behind. We have an invasion at our southern border. We have rising inflation. We have crime escalating all across the

country. We have mandates telling us we can't leave our homes, or enter restaurants without masks, or go to church. We have had hundreds of violent riots, looting, burning, police being injured. There is one crisis after another. We are being lied to repeatedly. But, no one is being held accountable. I am afraid if we don't wake up and stand up against this, and against so-called "Woke" culture, we are not going to have a country.

"So, I believe," Lt. Col. Swindle concluded, "citizens need to do today what the POWs did even in the face of terrible torture—do the right thing, and just say 'No'!"

Amen. May the God the POWs served bless and keep them; may the country for which the POWs served and sacrificed so courageously and honorably always remember and honor them—and *their families, who also suffered.*

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY FOREVER; SURRENDER TO TYRANNY—NEVER

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