

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



by Rees Lloyd

February 15, 2022

February 15, 2022 is the 49th anniversary of a shining moment in American history: It was on that day in 1973 that American prisoners of war came home from Vietnam with their honor intact, after suffering unspeakable torture, some for over seven years, at the hands of North Vietnam led by dedicated 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 honor, duty, country, and who and what we are as Americans.

The Vietnam War had divided Americans as never before. 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.

Of the Americans who served, the Prisoners of War who exposed the inhuman torture of POW's by their North Vietnam captors

under the leadership of dedicated Communist Ho Chi Minh, were the most despised, and vilified by celebrities like Progressive Liberal 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. He was later 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, and Communist supporting Democrats, publicly, viciously, and blatantly falsely denounced the POW’s as “liars” in claiming “torture.” They insisted that Ho Chi Minh was but a benevolent nationalist 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 POW’s on his refusal to follow the Geneva Accords.

The American prisoners of war were almost all American pilots, who resisted Communist demands that they betray America despite appalling, inhumane, torture, ordered and orchestrated by dedicated Communist Ho Chi Minh right up to the day of his death. Today, those facts are indisputable.

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 POW’s as the “Hanoi Hilton,” and like prisons, the POWs were kept in filthy, windowless, vermin-infested, airless cells.

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 receive 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 POW’s endured: *“When Hell Was In Session.”* (WND Book)

Overwhelming post-war proof of torture beyond any reasonable doubt has given the lie to Fonda, Hayden, Kerry, et al, including books by many of the POWs. These include, the late Admiral Jeremiah Denton’s classic *“When Hell Was In Session;”* *“Surviving Hell,”* by Col. Leo Thorsness (USAF, ret.; Medal of Honor); *“The Passing Of The Night,”* by the late Gen. Robinson Risner (USAF); *“American Patriot,”* the biography of the late and legendary Air Force combat pilot Col. Bud Day, a hero in three wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam), Medal of Honor recipient who was the most decorated veteran of his era; *“Chained Eagle,”* by Everett Alvarez, Jr., the first pilot shot down, a POW for eight years; and, among others, *“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 be regarding McCain's actions as a politician, 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."*

The nation was and remained terribly divided over Vietnam. 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 POW's 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 POW's are no longer with us, including

Admiral James Stockdale, Admiral Jeremiah Denton, Col. Bud Day, and many others. But their example is with us, and it is a challenge.


Lt. Col. Orson Swindle, a much decorated retired Marine combat pilot who flew over 200 missions before being shot down on November 11, 1966, is one of the surviving POW's. 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." He is universally admired and recognized in almost all of the memoirs of the former POW's, and other books on the POW's. The late POW Col. Leo Thorsness once described Col. Swindle to me as "the toughest of the tough" resisters.

As the 49th Anniversary of the POW's return in honor approached, I asked Lt.Col. Swindle 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 POW's because our democracy depends on our people doing the right thing. The Vietnam POW's 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 [later Admiral and Medal of Honor recipient] James Stockdale, [later Admiral, and Navy Cross recipient] Jeremiah Denton,  and Bud Day [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 POW's 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 Citizens need to do today what the POW's did even in the face of terrible torture–do the right thing, and just say ‘No!’”

Amen. May the God the POW's served bless and keep them; may the country for which the POW's served and sacrificed so courageously and honorably always remember and honor them–*and their families.*

© 2022 Rees Lloyd – All Rights Reserved

E-Mail Rees Lloyd: ReesLloydLaw@gmail.com