

Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

A VIETNAM TAPESTRY

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Our memories can be funny things. We tend to categorize them as recent memories, distant memories, and—in some cases—*really* distant memories. And anything recalled from a half century ago falls into a category that some consider ancient history. On 12 February 2023, the half-century mark was tallied since the return of the first group of America’s Vietnam-era prisoners of war (POWs), who had been held—illegally and inhumanely—in North Vietnam for up to eight years.

On that overcast and windy Monday afternoon in February 1973, a group of returnees boarded a C-141 nicknamed “Freedom Bird” for the first leg of their return to the nation they had served so heroically. Aboard this flight, Lieutenant Commander Porter Alexander Halyburton, who had been held in captivity for 2,675 days (nearly seven and a half years), flew east to return to the embrace of his wife, Marty, and their daughter Dabney—the child whom he had known for only five days before he deployed aboard USS *Independence*. Halyburton’s incredible and inspiring story now has been told in his new book, entitled *Reflections on Captivity: A Tapestry of Stories by a Vietnam War POW*. Through his skillful use of introspective prose and often heartrending poetry, he tells a story filled with the Navy’s core values of honor, courage, and commitment.

That story began on 17 October 1965, when naval flight officer Halyburton strapped into an F-4B Phantom fighter-bomber for his seventy-sixth combat mission over North Vietnam. He was part of a strike force of more than thirty aircraft that launched off *Independence* on that bright Sunday morning. During a low-altitude run forty miles north of Hanoi, the plane encountered heavy ground fire and took a direct hit in the cockpit from a 37 mm antiaircraft shell. Recognizing that the plane had sustained critical damage and that the pilot, Lieutenant

Commander Stan Olmstead, had been killed, Halyburton ejected from the aircraft. He hit the ground and slipped out of his parachute but quickly was captured by Vietnamese villagers and militia.

Thus, at the age of twenty-four, Halyburton became the fortieth American flier taken prisoner in North Vietnam. However, since no fellow aviators on the raid saw a parachute from his plane, it was assumed there were no survivors, and he was classified as killed in action.

Halyburton was transported to the Hoa Lo prison, which ultimately came to be known by the POWs as the “Hanoi Hilton.” It was the first of eight prisons in which he would be held during his long ordeal. While his new book does not dwell excessively on the conditions he and his fellow POWs faced, it does describe how the prisoners were kept in austere conditions, often shackled in leg irons and handcuffs for weeks and months at a time.

When not “locked down,” the captives were subjected to brutal treatment from abusive guards who took great pleasure in their suffering. Most vicious of all were the professional interrogators, to whom the prisoners gave pet names such as Rabbit and Elf. With total disregard for the provisions of the Geneva Convention, these interrogators used various forms of punishment and physical torture to force information and statements from the POWs. Many were forced to kneel on rocks and other sharp objects for hours, even days, on end. By far the most common method of torture was what the POWs came to call the “rope trick,” in which they were bound tightly in painful positions, which often pulled arms out of sockets and left many permanent injuries. For violations of camp rules, punishment routinely was applied, including beatings with rubber straps and countless painful hours in shackles.

Communication of any kind among prisoners was forbidden, but the resourceful POWs maintained contact with one another by various clandestine methods. These included written notes on scraps of stolen paper, the now famous “tap code,” and a POW-devised “mute code” that was used whenever visual contact could be made.

The richness of this small but impactful book comes from the personal stories Halyburton shares about hundreds of fellow prisoners, sixty-three of whom he mentions by name. Particularly touching is the story of his time with cell mate Fred Cherry. The prison officials placed Fred—an injured, African American, Air Force pilot—in a cramped cell with Porter—a white, southern, Navy officer—in the belief that racism would tear the two apart. In reality, the two became the best of friends, bonding through the abuse and neglect inflicted by their captors. The remarkable story of Halyburton and Cherry is told in greater detail in James S. Hirsch’s 2004 book, *Two Souls Indivisible: The Friendship That Saved Two POWs in Vietnam*. For many years this highly recommended book was included in the

CNO Professional Reading Program. In February 2016, Colonel Cherry passed away; he is interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

From 1964 through 1969, most prisoners were kept in solitary confinement or in very small groups, but over time increasing pressure to improve conditions was brought to bear by the U.S. government, as well as by individuals such as H. Ross Perot and by organizations such as the National League of Families of POWs and MIAs in Southeast Asia, which was founded by Sybil Stockdale, the wife of future Naval War College President James Bond Stockdale. Porter's wife, Marty, was very active in the league, serving as the coordinator for the ten southern states. Several events, including the attempted rescue raid by U.S. forces on the Son Tay prison and the death of North Vietnam president Ho Chi Minh in September 1969, also contributed to significant improvement in the POWs' treatment and conditions. From 1970 on, most prisoners were held in large cells (each holding up to forty men) in the Hanoi Hilton. Their conditions were still meager and crowded, but far better than before.

After over ten years of war and nearly five years of negotiations, the Paris Peace Accords finally were signed in January 1973. And so the POWs began to be released on that February date a half century ago.

After his return, Dr. Halyburton became a professor at the Naval War College, serving from 1979 until his retirement in 2006. He now holds professor emeritus status, and he lectures annually at the College to share the lessons learned from his experience.

In the closing pages of his book, Halyburton summarizes his captivity by noting his method of dealing with the roller coaster of emotions he encountered over many years of confinement. He adopted what he called "long-term, nonspecific optimism." He believed that he likely would be freed sometime, and that thereafter "I could survive and lead a meaningful life for at least ten more years, [so] I was prepared to spend the rest of my life in prison if necessary and still feel that my life was not a waste. Such is the power of human adaptation and the urge to find meaning in one's life."

Those who wear the cloth of the nation do so out of a sense of commitment to America's ideals, and all are called upon to make sacrifices to defend those principles. I am convinced that all readers will find inspiration within the two hundred pages of Halyburton's "tapestry," which may help them find greater meaning in their own lives.

JOHN E. JACKSON

