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My Journey Back to the Hanoi Hilton

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A fellow Prisoner of War once said, "There's no such thing as a bad day when you have a door knob on the inside of the door." Those words rang true as Shirley -- my wife -- and I took our first tour of the infamous Hanoi Hilton since I left that dirty, dark, dank place over 30 years ago. Recently, Shirley and I returned from Vietnam and what follows are a few details of our emotional experience.

On February 12, 1973, I left Hanoi with the longest-held American Prisoners of War, like Everett Alvarez. When I left, I doubted I would ever return -- too many horrific memories of torture, pain, and loneliness. When I ejected from my plane in 1966, I broke my back, dislocated my shoulder and broke my right arm in several places. It was these injuries my captors would use to try to push me to the breaking point. It was these injuries that account for my mangled right arm, my crumpled left hand, my stooped posture, and slower gait. How could I return to a land where they tried to break both my body and my spirit?

However, Speaker of the House Denny Hastert (R-Ill.) invited Shirley and me to go as part of an official delegation to visit with the leaders of Vietnam. This would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet with top Vietnamese officials and to press them face-to-face on the whereabouts of over 1,800 Missing In Action from Vietnam. For my friends who didn't make it home, Shirley and I knew we had to go.

Our delegation included a handful of Members of Congress and the Chaplain of the House. All were very aware of the abuse American POWs endured while in captivity. We all anticipated our tour of the Hanoi Hilton, but nothing could prepare us for it.

We flew into Hanoi's airport and the captain let me ride in the jump seat in the cockpit. Memories swept over me and I prayed to God for strength to get through this visit. Only God could get me through seven years in Vietnam.

Only God could get me through this visit back.

Our bus slowly rolled up to the Hanoi Hilton and the next hour and half passed as if in a dream. What used to be my own hell-on earth for nearly seven years has now become a museum housing a shrine detailing the story of how the French mistreated the Vietnamese.

One room on our tour displayed a model of the entire Hanoi Hilton before it was bulldozed -- but for the small portions used to house the current museum.

The model showed the different rooms used to hold the POWs -- the ones we named after Las Vegas hotels, like the Thunderbird.

Nearby a plaque on the wall read: "American pilots suffered no revenge once they were captured and detained. Instead, they were well treated with adequate food, clothing, and shelter according to the provisions of Paris Agreement." We all took note.

In addition, our tour guide, a young, very on-message Vietnamese woman, detailed the very humane treatment of American Prisoners of War. As if reading straight from the Communist Party song-sheet, she noted how well American POWs fared while in captivity. What great meals we enjoyed....How we received excellent medical care. Of course it was all a bunch of lies.

After she spoke, I would describe the way we really were treated.

Our docent then listed all of the horrors of the way the French abused the Vietnamese. My loyal wife, who didn't know if I was dead or alive for the first two years of my captivity, grew madder and madder listening to our guide.

Solitary confinement.

Leg irons.

Piling several people into small cells.

Abuse for no reason.

Starvation and then hours-long interrogations.

And then came the leg-stocks exhibit. Plaster miniature human mannequins reclined with their legs shackled in leg stocks like the pilgrims. The mannequins must have been barely 5 feet tall and even they looked uncomfortable propped up by only their elbows while their feet were held tightly to the ground. Imagine how it felt for a 6'2" American pilot left there for 72 days in a row.

That's when I lost it. That's when the whole group lost it. The look on Shirley's face said it all.

How could people do this to other human beings? How could people survive like that? How could people endure such horrible conditions -- shackled down to a bed?

Shirley and I posed for a picture in front of the mannequin kept in leg stocks. I gave her a gentle hug and tried to muster the spirit to smile.

There wasn't a dry-eye in the place.

After we exited the Hanoi Hilton, our hosts realized I failed to sign the "Guest Book." How ironic. What kind of people would want a former Prisoner of War to sign a guest book? What should one leave in a guest book after being tortured and held there against one's will for nearly seven years?

There were lonely nights when I feared I would die there and now they wanted me to sign a guest book? I relented and wrote something to the effect of back where I was for seven years.

That wasn't important. What was important was that I could go when I wanted to and I had my wife at my side for strength. Believe me, it felt good to return home to America.

It's that same feeling I want to give to those still left behind -- and their families. I won't rest until every American service member is released from his bonds or his remains are brought home. The war is long over, yet 1,800 souls are still out there. Their families want, need and deserve this peace of mind. I will help find them and I will help bring them home. This is my charge and I will see it to completion.

God bless you and God bless America.

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