

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Prisoner of War: A First Person Account

JOHN MCCAIN

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John McCain (b. 1936) spent five and a half years in captivity as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. His first-person account of that terrible ordeal was published in US News & World Report in May 1973. Navy flier McCain was on a bombing mission when he was shot down over Hanoi on October 26, 1967. Despite fractures in his right leg and both arms, he received minimal care and was kept in squalid conditions that he vividly describes in this account. After his return home, he spent eight more years in the Navy before retiring to run for Congress. Elected from Arizona to the US House of Representatives in 1982 and to the US Senate in 1986, McCain ran as the Republican nominee for president in 2008. He is currently serving his fifth term in the Senate.

Few people have had worse war experiences than John McCain. What enabled him to endure his imprisonment? Is he right that “every man has his breaking point”? Is he also right in suggesting that “anybody else in our place would have performed just as well”? What, according to McCain, are the obligations of prisoners of war? Compare McCain’s resolve on returning home with that of Krebs, the protagonist in Hemingway’s story “Soldier’s Home” (below). What accounts for the difference in the ways they approached a return to civilian life? With whom do you identify?

The date was Oct. 26, 1967. I was on my 23rd mission, flying right over the heart of Hanoi in a dive at about 4,500 feet, when a Russian missile the size of a telephone pole came up—the sky was full of them—and blew the right wing off my Skyhawk dive bomber. It went into an inverted, almost straight-down spin.

I pulled the ejection handle, and was knocked unconscious by the force of the ejection—the air speed was about 500 knots. I didn’t realize it at the moment, but I had broken my right leg around the knee, my right arm in three places, and my left arm. I regained consciousness just before I landed by parachute in a lake right in the corner of Hanoi, one they called the Western Lake. My helmet and my oxygen mask had been blown off.

I hit the water and sank to the bottom. I think the lake is about 15 feet deep, maybe 20. I kicked off the bottom. I did not feel any pain at the time, and was able to rise to the surface. I took a breath of air and started sinking again. Of course, I was wearing 50

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pounds, at least, of equipment and gear. I went down and managed to kick up to the surface once more. I couldn't understand why I couldn't use my right leg or my arm. I was in a dazed condition. I went up to the top again and sank back down. This time I couldn't get back to the surface. I was wearing an inflatable life-preserver-type thing that looked like water wings. I reached down with my mouth and got the toggle between my teeth and inflated the preserver and finally floated to the top.

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Some North Vietnamese swam out and pulled me to the side of the lake and immediately started stripping me, which is their standard procedure. Of course, this being in the center of town, a huge crowd of people gathered, and they were all hollering and screaming and cursing and spitting and kicking at me.

When they had most of my clothes off, I felt a twinge in my right knee. I sat up and looked at it, and my right foot was resting next to my left knee, just in a 90-degree position. I said, "My God—my leg!" That seemed to enrage them—I don't know why. One of them slammed a rifle butt down on my shoulder, and smashed it pretty badly. Another stuck a bayonet in my foot. The mob was really getting up-tight. . . .

About this time, a guy came up and started yelling at the crowd to leave me alone. A woman came over and propped me up and held a cup of tea to my lips, and some photographers took some pictures. This quieted the crowd down quite a bit. Pretty soon, they put me on a stretcher, lifted it onto a truck, and took me to Hanoi's main prison. I was taken into a cell and put on the floor. I was still on the stretcher, dressed only in my skivvies, with a blanket over me.

For the next three or four days, I lapsed from conscious to unconsciousness. During this time, I was taken out to interrogation—which we called a "quiz"—several times. That's when I was hit with all sorts of war-criminal charges. This started on the first day. I refused to give them anything except my name, rank, serial number and date of birth. They beat me around a little bit. I was in such bad shape that when they hit me it would knock me unconscious. They kept saying, "You will not receive any medical treatment until you talk."

I didn't believe this. I thought that if I just held out, that they'd take me to the hospital. I was fed small amounts of food by the guard and also allowed to drink some water. I was able to hold the water down, but I kept vomiting the food.

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They wanted military rather than political information at this time. Every time they asked me something, I'd just give my name, rank and serial number and date of birth.

I think it was on the fourth day that two guards came in, instead of one. One of them pulled back the blanket to show the other guard my injury. I looked at my knee. It was about the size, shape and color of a football. I remembered that when I was a flying instructor a fellow had ejected from his plane and broken his thigh. He had gone into shock, the blood had pooled in his leg, and he died, which came as quite a surprise to us—a man dying of a broken leg. Then I realized that a very similar thing was happening to me.

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When I saw it, I said to the guard, "O.K., get the officer." An officer came in after a few minutes. It was the man that we came to know very well as "The Bug." He was a psychotic torturer, one of the worst fiends that we had to deal with. I said, "O.K., I'll give you military information if you will take me to the hospital." He left and came back with a doctor, a guy that we called "Zorba," who was completely incompetent. He squatted down, took my pulse. He did not speak English, but shook his head and jabbered to "The Bug." I asked, "Are you going to take me to the hospital?" "The Bug" replied, "It's too late." I said, "If you take me to the hospital, I'll get well."

"Zorba" took my pulse again, and repeated, "It's too late." They got up and left, and I lapsed into unconsciousness.

Sometime later, "The Bug" came rushing into the room, shouting, "Your father is a big admiral; now we take you to the hospital."

I tell the story to make this point: There were hardly any amputees among the prisoners who came back because the North Vietnamese just would not give medical treatment to someone who was badly injured—they weren't going to waste their time. For one thing, in the transition from the kind of life we lead in America to the filth and dirt and infection, it would be very difficult for a guy to live anyway. In fact, my treatment in the hospital almost killed me. . . .

"They Told Me I'd Never Go Home"

I really didn't know what to think, because I had been having these other interrogations in which I had refused to co-operate. It was not hard because they were not torturing me at

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this time. They just told me I'd never go home and I was going to be tried as a war criminal. That was their constant theme for many months.

Suddenly "The Cat" [the camp commander] said to me, "Do you want to go home?"

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I was astonished, and I tell you frankly that I said that I would have to think about it. I went back to my room, and I thought about it for a long time. At this time I did not have communication with the camp senior ranking officer, so I could get no advice. I was worried whether I could stay alive or not, because I was in rather bad condition. I had been hit with a severe case of dysentery, which kept on for about a year and a half. I was losing weight again.

But I knew that the Code of Conduct says, "You will not accept parole or amnesty," and that "you will not accept special favors." For somebody to go home earlier is a special favor. There's no other way you can cut it.

I went back to him three nights later. He asked again, "Do you want to go home?" I told him "No." He wanted to know why, and I told him the reason. I said that Alvarez [first American captured] should go first, then enlisted men and that kind of stuff.

"The Cat" told me that President Lyndon Johnson had ordered me home. He handed me a letter from my wife, in which she had said, "I wished that you had been one of those three who got to come home." Of course, she had no way to understand the ramifications of this. "The Cat" said that the doctors had told him that I could not live unless I got medical treatment in the United States.

We went through this routine and still I told him "No." Three nights later we went through it all over again. On the morning of the Fourth of July, 1968, which happened to be the same day that my father took over as commander in chief of U.S. Forces in the Pacific, I was led into another quiz room.

"The Rabbit" and "The Cat" were sitting there. I walked in and sat down, and "The Rabbit" said, "Our senior wants to know your final answer."

"My final answer is the same. It's 'No.'"

"That is your final answer?"

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“That is my final answer.”

With this “The Cat,” who was sitting there with a pile of papers in front of him and a pen in his hand, broke the pen in two. Ink spurted all over. He stood up, kicked the chair over behind him, and said, “They taught you too well. They taught you too well”—in perfect English, I might add. He turned, went out and slammed the door, leaving “The Rabbit” and me sitting there. “The Rabbit” said “Now, McCain, it will be very bad for you. Go back to your room.”

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What they wanted, of course, was to send me home at the same time that my father took over as commander in the Pacific. This would have made them look very humane in releasing the injured son of a top U.S. officer. It would also have given them a great lever against my fellow prisoners, because the North Vietnamese were always putting this “class” business on us. They could have said to the others “Look, you poor devils, the son of the man who is running the war has gone home and left you here. No one cares about you ordinary fellows.” I was determined at all times to prevent any exploitation of my father and my family.

There was another consideration for me. Even though I was told I would not have to sign any statements or confessions before I went home, I didn’t believe them. They would have got me right up to that airplane and said, “Now just sign this little statement.” At that point, I doubt that I could have resisted, even though I felt very strong at the time.

But the primary thing I considered was that I had no right to go ahead of men like Alvarez, who had been there three years before I “got killed”—that’s what we say instead of “before I got shot down,” because in a way becoming a prisoner in North Vietnam was like being killed.

About a month and a half later, when the three men who were selected for release had reached America, I was set up for some very severe treatment which lasted for the next year and a half.

One night the guards came to my room and said “The camp commander wants to see you.” This man was a particularly idiotic individual. We called him “Slopehead.”

One thing I should mention here: The camps were set up very similar to their Army. They had a camp commander, who was a military man, basically in charge of the

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maintenance of the camp, the food, etc. Then they had what they called a staff officer—actually a political officer—who was in charge of the interrogations, and provided the propaganda heard on the radio.

We also had a guy in our camp whom we named “The Soft-Soap Fairy.” He was from an important family in North Vietnam. He wore a fancy uniform and was a real sharp cookie, with a dominant position in this camp. “The Soft-Soap Fairy,” who was somewhat effeminate, was the nice guy, and the camp commander—“Slopehead”—was the bad guy. Old “Soft-Soap” would always come in whenever anything went wrong and say, “Oh, I didn’t know they did this to you. All you had to do was co-operate and everything would have been O.K.”

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To get back to the story: They took me out of my room to “Slopehead,” who said, “You have violated all the camp regulations. You’re a black criminal. You must confess your crimes.” I said that I wouldn’t do that, and he asked, “Why are you so disrespectful of guards?” I answered, “Because the guards treat me like an animal.”

When I said that, the guards, who were all in the room—about 10 of them—really laid into me. They bounced me from pillar to post, kicking and laughing and scratching. After a few hours of that, ropes were put on me and I sat that night bound with ropes. Then I was taken to a small room. For punishment they would almost always take you to another room where you didn’t have a mosquito net or a bed or any clothes. For the next four days, I was beaten every two to three hours by different guards. My left arm was broken again and my ribs were cracked.

They wanted a statement saying that I was sorry for the crimes that I had committed against North Vietnamese people and that I was grateful for the treatment that I had received from them. This was the paradox—so many guys were so mistreated to get them to say they were grateful. But this is the Communist way.

I held out for four days. Finally, I reached the lowest point of my 5½ years in North Vietnam. I was at the point of suicide, because I saw that I was reaching the end of my rope.

I said, O.K., I’ll write for them.

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They took me up into one of the interrogation rooms, and for the next 12 hours we wrote and rewrote. The North Vietnamese interrogator, who was pretty stupid, wrote the final confession, and I signed it. It was in their language, and spoke about black crimes, and other generalities. It was unacceptable to them. But I felt just terrible about it. I kept saying to myself, “Oh, God, I really didn’t have any choice.” I had learned what we all learned over there: Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine.

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Then the “gooks” made a very serious mistake, because they let me go back and rest for a couple of weeks. They usually didn’t do that with guys when they had them really busted. I think it concerned them that my arm was broken, and they had messed up my leg. I had been reduced to an animal during this period of beating and torture. My arm was so painful I couldn’t get up off the floor. With the dysentery, it was a very unpleasant time.

Thank God they let me rest for a couple of weeks. Then they called me up again and wanted something else. I don’t remember what it was now—it was some kind of statement. This time I was able to resist. I was able to carry on. They couldn’t “bust” me again.

Prayer: “I Was Sustained in Times of Trial”

I was finding that prayer helped. It wasn’t a question of asking for superhuman strength or for God to strike the North Vietnamese dead. It was asking for moral and physical courage, for guidance and wisdom to do the right thing. I asked for comfort when I was in pain, and sometimes I received relief. I was sustained in many times of trial.

When the pressure was on, you seemed to go one way or the other. Either it was easier for them to break you the next time, or it was harder. In other words, if you are going to make it, you get tougher as time goes by. Part of it is just a transition from our way of life to that way of life. But you get to hate them so bad that it gives you strength...

From that time on it was one round of rough treatment followed by another. Sometimes I got it three or four times a week. Sometimes I’d be off the hook for a few weeks. A lot of it was my own doing, because they realized far better than we did at first the value of communicating with our fellow Americans. When they caught us communicating, they’d take severe reprisals. I was caught a lot of times. One reason was

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because I'm not too smart, and the other reason was because I lived alone. If you live with somebody else you have somebody helping you out, helping you survive.

But I was never going to stop. Communication with your fellow prisoners was of the utmost value—the difference between being able to resist and not being able to resist. You may get some argument from other prisoners on that. A lot depends on the individual. Some men are much more self-sufficient than others.

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Communication primarily served to keep up morale. We would risk getting beat up just to tell a man that one of his friends had gotten a letter from home. But it was also valuable to establish a chain of command in our camps, so our senior officers could give us advice and guidance.

So this was a period of repeated, severe treatment. It lasted until around October of '69. They wanted me to see delegations. There were antiwar groups coming into Hanoi, a lot of foreigners—Cubans, Russians. I don't think we had too many American "peaceniks" that early, although within the next year it got much greater. I refused to see any of them. The propaganda value to them would have been too great, with my dad as commander in the Pacific.

David Dellinger came over. Tom Hayden came over. Three groups of released prisoners, in fact, were let out in custody of the "peace groups." The first ones released went home with one of the Berrigan brothers. The next group was a whole crew. One of them was James Johnson, one of the Fort Hood Three. The wife of the "Ramparts" magazine editor and Rennie Davis were along. Altogether, I think about eight or nine of them were in that outfit. Then a third group followed.*

The North Vietnamese wanted me to meet with all of them, but I was able to avoid it. A lot of times you couldn't face them down, so you had to try to get around them. "Face" is a big thing with these people, you know, and if you get around them so that they could save face, then it was a lot easier.

* *David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, and Rennie Davis were antiwar protesters and members of the Chicago Seven, whose disruption of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago led to charges of conspiracy and incitement. Philip and Daniel Berrigan were Catholic priests and political activists. The Fort Hood Three were three privates from Fort Hood, Texas, who refused to ship out to Vietnam in June 1966. Ramparts was a left-wing political and literary magazine, published from 1962 through 1975.*

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For example, they would beat the hell out of me and say I was going to see a delegation. I'd respond that, O.K. I'd see a delegation, but I would not say anything against my country and I would not say anything about my treatment and if asked, I'd tell them the truth about the conditions I was kept under. They went back and conferred on that and then would say, "You have agreed to see a delegation so we will take you." But they never took me, you see.

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One time, they wanted me to write a message to my fellow prisoners at Christmas. I wrote down:

"To my friends in the camp who I have not been allowed to see or speak to, I hope that your families are well and happy, and I hope that you will be able to write and receive letters in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1949 which has not been allowed to you by our captors. And may God bless you."

They took it but, of course, it was never published. In other words, sometimes it was better to write something that was laudatory to your Government or against them than say, "I won't write at all"—because a lot of times it had to go up through channels, and sometimes you could buy time this way. . . .

Once you become a prisoner of war, then you do not have the right to dissent, because what you do will be harming your country. You are no longer speaking as an individual, you are speaking as a member of the armed forces of the United States, and you owe loyalty to the Commander in Chief, not to your own conscience. Some of my fellow prisoners sang a different tune, but they were a very small minority. I ask myself if they should be prosecuted, and I don't find that easy to answer. It might destroy the very fine image the great majority of us have brought back from that hellhole. Remember, a handful of turncoats after the Korean War made a great majority of Americans think that most of the POW's in conflict were traitors.

If these men are tried, it should not be because they took an antiwar stance, but because they collaborated with the Vietnamese to an extent, and that was harmful to the other American POW's. And there is this to consider: America will have other wars to fight until the Communists give up their doctrine of violent overthrow of our way of life. These men should bear some censure so that in future wars there won't be a precedent for conduct that hurts this country.

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By late January of this year, we knew [the] end of the war was near. I was moved then to the “Plantation.” We were put together in groups by the period when we were shot down. They were getting us ready to return by groups. . . .

There was no special ceremony when we left the camp. The International Control Commission came in and we were permitted to look around the camp. There were a lot of photographers around, but nothing formal. Then we got on the buses and went to Gia Lam Airport. My old friend “The Rabbit” was there. He stood out front and said to us, “When I read your name off, you get on the plane and go home.”

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That was March 15. Up to that moment, I wouldn’t allow myself more than a feeling of cautious hope. We had been peaked up so many times before that I had decided that I wouldn’t get excited until I shook hands with an American in uniform. That happened at Gia Lam, and then I knew it was over. There is no way I can describe how I felt as I walked toward that U.S. Air Force plane.

Now that I’m back, I find a lot of hand-wringing about this country. I don’t buy that. I think America today is a better country than the one I left nearly six years ago.

The North Vietnamese gave us very little except bad news about the U.S. We didn’t find out about the first successful moon shot [in 1969] until it was mentioned in a speech by George McGovern saying that Nixon could put a man on the moon, but he couldn’t put an end to the Vietnam war.

They bombarded us with the news of Martin Luther King’s death and the riots that followed. Information like that poured continuously out of the loud-speakers.

I think America is a better country now because we have been through a sort of purging process, a re-evaluation of ourselves. Now I see more of an appreciation of our way of life. There is more patriotism. The flag is all over the place. I hear new values being stressed—the concern for environment is a case in point.

I’ve received scores of letters from young people, and many of them sent me POW bracelets with my name on it, which they had been wearing. Some were not too sure about the war, but they are strongly patriotic, their values are good, and I think we will find that they are going to grow up to be better Americans than many of us.

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This outpouring on behalf of us who were prisoners of war is staggering, and a little embarrassing because basically we feel that we are just average American Navy, Marine and Air Force pilots who got shot down. Anybody else in our place would have performed just as well.

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My own plans for the future are to remain in the Navy, if I am able to return to flying status. That depends upon whether the corrective surgery on my arms and my leg is successful. If I have to leave the Navy, I hope to serve the Government in some capacity, preferably in Foreign Service for the State Department.

I had a lot of time to think over there, and came to the conclusion that one of the most important things in life—along with a man's family—is to make some contribution to his country.