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EXTRA

Readers' Corner

Messages From John

By ERNEST C. BRACE
May 2, 2008

Under the glaring lights of a circus tent set up on the south lawn of the White House I met John Sidney McCain III face-to-face for the first time. President Richard Nixon had invited the Prisoners of the Vietnam War to dinner.

It was May 24, 1973. Almost five years previously I had met John under harsher circumstances. We had been confined as POWs in solitary confinement in adjacent cells at a camp the prisoners of war had named "The Plantation" in Hanoi, North Vietnam. We talked to each other through a wall for over a year, of family, our capture, girlfriends, troubles we'd been through, and on Sunday we told each other a movie.

John had been shot down over the center of Hanoi by a Soviet surface-to-air missile. Upon ejecting at near the speed of sound from his A4E attack jet, John dislocated his shoulder and broke his arm in several places.

He landed in a lake and would have drowned except that a group of civilians waded into the lake and dragged him ashore. There they proceeded to beat him and at one point stuck him with a bayonet. Soldiers rescued John from the civilian mob and delivered him to Hoa Lo Prison in central Hanoi, where he was thrown into a cell in the part of Hoa Lo the American prisoners had named "Heartbreak Hotel." John had passed in and out of consciousness several times since his capture, and awoke lying on a dirty concrete floor. An American tune was playing over a loudspeaker somewhere. It took a few moments before John realized it was "Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley."

When an interrogator entered the cell John would only reply to his demands with name, rank, serial number and date of birth. The interrogator told him he would die in that cell unless he started answering the questions. John lost track of the days he had been in the small cell. One day the interrogator entered the cell with two other guards and asked John why he had not told them his father was Admiral McCain. Without any further questioning they moved John to the local hospital and gave him medical treatment for his broken bones and puncture wounds. John was heavily sedated and awoke in a body cast.

John was now in solitary confinement because he refused to co-operate with the North Vietnamese efforts to exploit his father's position. His father, Admiral John Sidney McCain II, was Commander in Chief of Naval Forces Europe when John was captured. Since John's capture in 1967 his father had become Commander in Chief of Naval Forces Pacific, (CINCPAC), a much more significant posting considering John's captivity. John was considered a valuable prisoner by the Hanoi Government and they occasionally tried to use him to their propaganda advantage. John refused to cooperate. They had even offered John early release, but he refused because he knew it would not only embarrass his father, but he felt there were other prisoners in much worse shape that should be exchanged before him. John was in solitary for punishment.

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John had cellmates for a while after his release from the hospital. He was still in a body cast and needed help with his bodily functions. Col. Bud Day, USAF (Medal of Honor) [mentioned in Karl Rove's "[Getting to Know John McCain](#)"] was one of John's first cellmates, along with Major Norris Overly USAF. John lost his cellmates because he refused to cooperate with the camp authorities. He would not write or read propaganda for them and refused to see "peace delegations" that asked to see the Admiral's son. As soon as John could function without help the Vietnamese took away his cellmates.

I was in solitary because I was a civilian pilot working under contract to USAID/CIA when captured in Laos. Since I had been captured by North Vietnamese troops in Laos in May 1965 I was kept hidden from other prisoners. I was never listed as a prisoner and never allowed to write home or receive mail or packages. The Vietnamese were not supposed to be in Laos in 1965. The Americans used civilians and Thai Special Forces for counterinsurgency forces in Laos.

My first three years and six months of captivity had been spent in total solitary in a small bamboo cage in a valley near Dien Bien Phu in western Vietnam. The last two years and six months I was confined in stocks, irons and ropes because of four attempted escapes, two from the cage. In August 1966 I made my last attempt to escape. Punishment from that attempt crippled me to the point I could not walk. Two years later, when they took me into Hanoi in October 1968, I was in poor health and could walk only by leaning against a wall or some other support.

I had not seen or heard an American since my capture. I had no idea of what had happened in the war or to what extent the Americans were now involved. During the trip in a Russian truck from Dien Bien Phu into Hanoi I observed road and bridge construction. There was no air activity and I was under the impression the war was over. What I did not know was that President Johnson had gone to limited bombing in the autumn of 1968 in an attempt to get the peace talks in Paris moving again.

I was taken to a camp the prisoners had named the "Plantation."

A rice mat and a change of clothing were on the bed. Rubber-tire sandals were on the floor near the bed. The dim light was from a single bulb dropped by its cord from the ceiling. It must have been about 25 watts at the most. The guards did not enter the room. They slammed the shutters closed and dropped the bar into place. I heard a padlock snap closed. Then a very oriental voice came through the louvers, "Sleep."

I crawled over to the bedboard. Pulling myself up onto the bed I sat and looked around. It was the largest cell I had been in since my capture. I picked up the black pajama-like shirt and trousers and saw that I had a set of underwear or shorts of the same black cotton cloth. The rice mat was new and I rolled it out onto the board. I let the mosquito net down around me and tried to get some sleep. It had been a full day and then some.

I woke to someone opening my louvered window. It was the guard from the night before. He pointed at my bucket and grunted for me to set it outside. I hadn't used the bucket yet and indicated so in broken Vietnamese and Thai. He scowled and slammed the shutters closed.

I could hear a radio playing off in the distance and tried to make out what it was saying. It was some oriental woman speaking English and hard to follow. Then I heard what sounded like the Kingston Trio singing "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" Strange place!

The guard was at the shutters again and handed me a jug of hot water and half a bread roll. I made motions like eating with chopsticks and asked if he had some rice. I was hungry. He scowled and shut the louvers with a bang. I sat on the bed and ate what had been given to me. I could hear other cell doors being opened and closed and then it got quiet in the camp.

I was sitting on the floor with my back against the inside wall when I heard a tapping on the wall behind me. It was the rhythm of "Shave and a haircut" but the "two bits" was missing. The officer had warned me about making noise in the room or tapping on walls. I sat there thinking, "That's nice; there must be an American next door."

The "Shave and a haircut" was tapped again. This time I replied with the "two bits" which seemed the natural thing to do. A rapid series of tapping in some kind of rhythm ensued and I scooted away from the wall thinking that I had been tricked by the guards. There was silence after the tapping stopped. A few minutes later the tapping started again. I did nothing.

After some time a slow, steady thumping started that had no rhythm. I started counting. The thumping stopped and I tried to convert the number of thumps to a letter of the alphabet. The thumping resumed before I got my letter. I then realized I should be saying the alphabet rather than counting. I got "wal" on the last series of thumps. I didn't know what to do. The thumping resumed after some time, and I said the alphabet, and got "out ear to wal." I figured it must mean "put ear to wall" and shuffled along to where the tapping was coming from. I tapped twice on the brick wall with my knuckle as I pressed my ear against the wall.

A voice on the other side, obviously an American, said "If you hear me buddy tap twice."

I tapped twice in reply.

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He got excited then and said he had been trying to contact me all morning, since morning was best while the guards were occupied with the buckets and morning water. He rattled off a couple questions and when I did nothing he slowed down and told me how to reply.

One tap was "no" – two taps was "yes" or "copy" – three taps was "I don't know" – and a rapid series of tapping was "repeat." I tapped twice that I understood.

He told me that his name was John McCain, he was a Navy Lieutenant Commander and had been shot down about a year prior, in 1967. He told me he was talking by wrapping his shirt around his cup and pressing the bottom of the cup against the wall. I tapped twice.

He asked me if I had a cup. I tapped once.

A lot of questions followed, "Are you an American? Are you a Pilot? Are you Navy? Airforce? Army? Civilian?" He got excited again when I replied "yes" to civilian.

"CIA?" he asked.

I tapped "no" and he immediately apologized for asking.

Had I been a prisoner long was the next question. I tapped slowly four times. I Should have tapped three, but did not know how I could get the half in there.

John explained that the "Shave and a haircut" rhythm was the call-up signal for a tap code the prisoners were using. The "two bits" was the go ahead. Since he could use his cup on the wall there was no need to tap, but he would teach me the tap code anyway. A solid thump was a danger signal and meant get away from the wall. Even though we had voice communications I started practicing the tap code.

Put simply, the tap code was to divide the alphabet into five groups of five letters each, dropping the letter "K."

1 2 3 4 5

1 A B C D E

2 F G H I J

3 L M N O P

4 Q R S T U

5 V W X Y Z

Tap vertically down first and then horizontally until you reached the letter you needed. For example, my name Brace would be tapped: B=1-2; R=4-2; A=1-1; C=1-3; E=1-5. Two taps at the end of each word meant you copied, and a "roger roger" – 4-2,4-2 – was usually sent back at the end of the message to indicate you understood. We signed off with a "GBU" for "God Bless You."

A couple days later I was given a cup and communications were wide open. John brought me up to date on the war, what Johnson had done, and the fact Nixon was running for president again. That was the biggest surprise. John had a loudspeaker in his room and heard The Voice of Vietnam with "Hanoi Hannah" every day. John initiated all communications because his cell looked out on the courtyard and he could keep track of the guards through a small nail hole in his door.

The lights were out in the cells during the day and the guards' eyes couldn't adjust to the darkness from the bright outdoors when they threw open the peepholes to check into the cell. A thump on the wall out of nowhere meant that guards were coming into the cell so stay away from the wall. Next to John were two Air Force officers. They communicated with John somewhat, but weren't as thirsty as I was for news. They had a speaker in their room, too.

My cell on the back of the warehouse building turned out to be an excellent place to establish communications with the north end of the camp. A group of officers living three men in one cell did the dishes for the camp. After each evening meal they would come down between the outside wall and the back of the warehouse to get to the washroom area. One would stride out ahead of the two carrying the basket of plates and say a few words to me as he passed by my louvered windows. On their return trip I would answer him as he again distanced himself from the guard escorting the dishwashers.

At other times I could talk to the men in the first stall of the washrooms, after the guard left the area to pick up another prisoner to put into the next washroom. The men in the washroom could clear the washcourt and would cough a warning if the guard was returning. Communications were absolutely forbidden and punishment could be severe; caution was required. I passed news to John about the happenings in the other parts of the camp and John kept me informed of what was happening in the world – according to the Voice of Vietnam anyway.

Occasionally John would get called up to the "Big House." That's what the prisoners named the building where I was taken

the night I arrived in the camp. Sometimes he had news that was not on the speakers in the camp. In September 1968 John had gone through a particularly bad session at the Big House where they had broken his left arm again by bending it beyond its limited mobility. After almost four days of beatings and torture John had signed a "crime confession." In the years to follow in Hanoi I found that most prisoners had been tortured to the extent that many had signed "crime confessions, letters requesting amnesty, or early release, and letters to their buddies not to fly in this cruel and senseless war."

Some had been tortured into reading propaganda over the camp radio. They had tried this on John also, but he screwed it up so bad they could not use the tape they got from John.

The year 1969 passed quickly. John was certain we would be going home this year because they seemed to be bringing in prisoners from the outlying camps. Richard Nixon had won the election, and John felt Nixon would not let us sit there much longer.

In April 1969 I made contact with a Navy Seaman, Douglas Hegdahl, one day out of the louvered window. He was cooking the chopped bamboo and weed mixture they fed the pigs in a large wok over an open fire. The guards thought he was pretty ineffective because he was only about 18, and not an officer, when captured. Hegdahl told me he had fallen off the stern of a Cruiser in the Tonkin Gulf one night when he was dumping garbage. After swimming for the rest of the night he was picked up by a Vietnamese fishing boat. The Vietnamese beat him pretty badly, at first thinking he was a commando trying to swim ashore.

Doug could watch the entry to the washcourt where he was cooking the pig's chow, and I could clear the area back to the left of the window while we talked. A cough meant there was a guard coming.

Doug gave me a lot of news about what was going on in the camp. He explained that the Senior Ranking Officer had given him orders to take early release if it was offered and he would probably be going home in July or August. Doug had memorized some three hundred names of prisoners that were not publicized. Prisoners had been sorted after their capture according to their significance to the North Vietnamese propaganda value. Fully one-half the prisoners were not acknowledge as being alive and were not allowed to write or receive mail.

This did not change until after Doug's release and the Vietnamese turned a list of prisoners over to McGovern to be read at an antiwar rally back home.

Doug would be sure to tell our government that I was alive and in Hanoi. I thought to myself that that would be a great surprise to a lot of people. He asked about John and said to tell him his father was now Commander in Chief of the Pacific. I told him John already knew. A guard came and we had to break off our conversation.

I spent the next hour telling John about the Hegdahl conversation. Of course John had a hundred questions I should have asked Doug, but it was too late. Doug was released that summer and did let the CIA know I was alive and in Hanoi.

My family was warned not to say anything about what they now knew because it might jeopardize my position. My wife, I found out after my release, had remarried. She decided at that time not to tell my four sons that their father was still alive in Hanoi.

There was a communication bust in the building known as the Corn Crib in early fall of 1969. An Air Force pilot, Mel Pollack, and a Navy pilot, Tom Hall, were taken out of the Corn Crib and moved into my old cell behind John. I was moved into the corner cell on the backside of the warehouse. At least this cell had a door. We soon learned we could hold a three way conversation by using our cups in the adjacent corner.

It took about a week to get caught up on family, military careers and shoot-down stories. Then we started playing chess through the wall. We scratched a board on our bedboards and used chips of bricks and pebbles we smuggled back into our room from the washcourt for the pawns. Pieces of toilet paper with characters on them made up the major pieces. John got upset one day when the game was going hot and heavy and told us to cool it for a while or we would be caught. John's warning did not slow us down much.

In December 1969 there was another big communication bust in the camp. The guards found out that everyone knew my name. I was taken up to the Big House and told I must confess my crimes. John had told me to deny, deny, deny, if I was ever caught communicating. To me it was a matter of survival to let the Vietnamese know that I was well known in the camp and that I had talked to Douglas Hegdahl before he left. The interrogator was angry and told me I was to be sent back to the jungle.

Earlier in captivity I would have been beaten severely, but President Ho Chi Minh had died in September 1969 and since his death the treatment had improved.

I was still in solitary four years and six months after my capture. As I was taken back to my cell I thought, "I'll never know what is going on in the jungle." I told John, and the others, what the officer said. They all sympathized of course, but we had no control.

I spent the next week waiting for something to happen. One night they threw open the door to my cell and told me to prepare to move. I rolled up my rice mat and bundled together what clothes I had. Someone coughed out a "GBU" – God bless you – as I was picking up my bundles. I was blindfolded and led into the courtyard on the other side of the warehouse.

I was leaving friends and could hardly hold back tears as they dragged me across the courtyard. They pushed me up into a truck and told me to keep silent. I was up against another prisoner on the floor of the truck. I felt something hit my thigh and then a hand slowly tapped, "MCCAIN, who U." I smiled as I realized I was not being sent back to the jungle after all. I tapped back "EB GBU." Later I was to find that there were four prisoners on that truck leaving the Plantation: John McCain, Swede Larson, Ted Guy and me. Swede tried to join in on the tapping of names, but started his tapping on a guard's leg and received a hard kick for his efforts.

It would be Christmas 1969 in a few days. Little did we know we would see three more Christmases after 1969, still in Hanoi, still in prison.

Mr. Brace is the author of "A Code to Keep," St. Martin's Press, 1988, and Hellgate Press, 2000.

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