

PROFILE OF COURAGE

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Capt. Gerald Coffee joined the Navy in 1957 and spent a total of 25 years in the service.

A Life with Purpose

Determination and focus helped Capt. Gerald Coffee survive seven years as a prisoner of war

BY SARAH ACHENBACH

"Eject! Eject!" Capt. Gerald Coffee screamed to Lt. Robert T. Hanson, the navigator of the RA-5C Vigilante aircraft. The Navy plane, piloted by Coffee, had just been hit by enemy fire during a Feb. 3, 1966, reconnaissance mission off the *USS Kitty Hawk*. Coffee and Hanson had been gathering intelligence against a heavily defended area of North Vietnam.

Not hearing a response from Hanson, Coffee immediately pulled the face curtain on his own ejection seat. Both men were automatically released from the aircraft, which was still speeding across the sky at 680 miles per hour.

The crewmen managed to send a signal on an emergency survival radio beeper before ejecting safely from their burning plane. The aircraft then exploded

and plummeted into the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of the North Vietnamese Nghe An Province. As Coffee and Hanson's parachutes hit the water, enemy boats raced to pick them up. Coffee was captured immediately, and though he reported seeing Hanson nearby when they landed in the water, Coffee never saw him again. (In November 1988, Vietnam returned Hanson's remains to the U.S. government.)

Though only 32, Coffee, who joined the Navy in 1957 after graduating from UCLA with a degree in commercial art, had seen his share of danger. He was one of the first reconnaissance pilots to fly low-level missions over Cuba during the Bay of Pigs Crisis in October 1962. The photos from his mission proved

to the United Nations that Cuba was stockpiling Soviet nuclear missiles, and he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. For the next three years, Coffee was a flight and reconnaissance training instructor assigned to Heavy Reconnaissance Attack Squadron Three in Sanford, Fla., before being deployed to Vietnam in 1966.

For seven years and nine days after he was plucked from the water by his captors, Coffee was held as a prisoner of war and was tortured by the North Vietnamese. Much of his time was spent in solitary confinement. Coffee's first prison cell—a dank, squalid cubicle 6 ½ feet long and barely wider than his body—had a tiny, double-barred window with a view of the prison wall. When he moved, the heavy wooden shackles around his ankles knocked into the small, lidless bucket that served as his bathroom. The tiny space did not prevent him from moving. To pass the hours, Coffee

“walked” several miles each day by taking three steps around the perimeter of his cell, turning with each step.

Any communication with another prisoner meant severe punishment. Using a tap code system based on 25 letters except “K” arranged in five rows of five, Coffee and his fellow POWs—many of whom he would never meet face-to-face—tapped out covert conversations on cell walls. Though there was no formal teaching of the tap code, most new “residents” of POW camps caught on within a matter of days. Through tapping, they comforted and encouraged one another.

“We encouraged and cared for each other. We passed information, learned poetry, even learned languages,” says Coffee. They also relied on humor to bolster spirits. “My first shower was in a dank, converted cell with water dripping down from a rusty pipe,” says Coffee. “Totally dejected, I looked up to let the water splash on my face and saw

scratched on the wall the words: ‘Smile. You’re on Candid Camera.’”

In 1970, the North Vietnamese transferred Coffee to the “Hanoi Hilton,” the infamous Hao Lo prison in downtown Hanoi. There he met fellow POW John McCain, who would later become a U.S. senator and run for president in 2008. Over tapped conversations late into the night, the two men became close friends and were released together on Feb. 12, 1973.

Upon release, Coffee was decorated with the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars, two Purple Hearts, the Vietnam Service Medal with 13 stars and other awards. He served an additional nine years in the Navy before retiring with a total of 25 years of military service. His sense of duty also extended to the political arena. Coffee made two unsuccessful bids for office: first for state office in 2004 and for a U.S. Senate seat in 2006; and he worked for his fellow POW as head of the John McCain 2008 presidential campaign in Hawaii.

Coffee earned a master’s degree in political science from Cal-Berkeley after his release, and the California native, who now lives in Hawaii (a dream he held while in captivity), has forged a new career as a motivational speaker. To survive in captivity, Coffee learned to rely on both a personal creed he developed—faith in yourself, in others, in America and in God—and the POW’s guiding principles of “Return with Honor” and “Unity Over Self.”

Through his speeches and in his autobiography, *Beyond Survival: Building on the Hard Times—A POW’s Inspiring Story* (Coffee Enterprises, 1990), Coffee, now 75, speaks of his POW experience as a metaphor for human survival: “I quit asking God ‘Why me?’ ... and asked him to help me to use this time productively so [the time] is not ... a vacuum in my life,” he says. “After that realization ... every day took on a new meaning because there was purpose.” ■

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