

# Honoring Vietnam veterans

By Alvin Townley

My boyhood heroes carried swords and rode white horses; they flew planes from aircraft carriers; they wore our country's uniform. To me, the grace of Washington or the dash of Patton marked a leader. More recently, I've admired haggard special operators outfitted with equal parts training, technology and mettle.

Today, however, the warriors I respect most wore pajamas and flip-flops. They were captured at war and confined to lonely Southeast Asian cells, barely subsisting on watery soup; some weighed scarcely more than 100 pounds. The greatest leaders I have ever known were manacled, savagely beaten and tortured into submission – again and again – yet they defended their country and their honor with as much ferocity as Americans showed on the beaches of Normandy or in the streets of Fallujah. These prisoners of war just did it for eight straight years.

No American serviceman has served a longer and more brutal deployment than the leaders of America's Vietnam POWs. These men left home in 1964 and 1965, then did not return until 1973, after up to eight years of horrific captivity (imagine commuting to work one morning and not returning for nearly 3,000 days). Sadly, their lessons are in danger



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of becoming lost to generations like mine born after the Vietnam War.

During that long conflict, more than 500 Americans were imprisoned in and near North Vietnam's Hoa Lo Prison – the "Hanoi Hilton" – now most known for housing future Sen. John McCain, who arrived in 1967.

Two years before McCain's arrival, a band of intrepid Americans began organizing resistance inside the prison. Shot down and injured, these aviators had lost everything but their honor and resolve to triumph. They taught us volumes about both.

Even when interrogators began viciously torturing them for false confessions, the POWs remained defiant. Future U.S. Sen. Jeremiah Denton, in a televised interview, challenged his cap-



Alvin Townley, right, with Defiant POWs Bob Shumaker, George Coker, Congressman Sam Johnson, and Jim Mulligan, taken at the Arlington National Cemetery and funeral of former POW, U.S. Senator, and Admiral Jeremiah Denton in July 2014.

tors with boldfaced statements while covertly blinking "t-o-r-t-u-r-e" in Morse code. Men follow leaders willing to take the first punch, and Jerry Denton received a storm of them for his answers.

Likewise, future Medal of Honor recipient Jim Stockdale nearly took his own life to protect the underground communication network that sustained the American captives. Current Congressman Sam Johnson spent 75 days paralyzed by stocks for his general subversion. At terrible personal cost, these men exemplified their unit's creed of "unity over self."

The POW leaders united their men behind the Military Code of Conduct, which forbade surrendering propaganda statements. Yet nobody could stick to the code under

torture. The POW leaders created an ingenious new language – a tap code – that allowed them to send encouragement from cell to cell, helping more than 500 Americans do their best in a dreadful situation. So even when interrogators literally beat and squeezed confessions from the POWs, they'd bounce back and prepare for the next inevitable round, year after year.

Eleven POW leaders proved so effective at inciting resistance that the North Vietnamese evicted them from the Hanoi Hilton and exiled them to a separate dungeon nicknamed Alcatraz. Isolated from the men they once led, the "Alcatraz 11" – Vietnam's own Dirty Dozen – survived inside 4-by-9-foot concrete cells for 23 hours and 50 minutes per day; their latrine was

a rusty bucket. For two years, interrogators and henchmen were their only face-to-face contact. Yet they met each day with hope; they would not feel sorry for themselves or lose faith.

They might have perished in those lonely confines were it not for their wives, who refused to rely on their government and took action themselves. These devoted women ignited the POW-MIA movement and united a bitterly divided nation behind a common promise to our POWs: You will not be forgotten.

They weren't, and in February 1973, the POWs returned exactly as they'd aspired: with honor. America celebrated, and for the first time, truly welcomed home veterans returning from Vietnam.

This Veterans Day



POW leader Jeremiah Denton secretly blinked T-O-R-T-U-R-E in Morse Code during a televised interview in 1966.

marks 50 years since the first Americans entered the Hanoi Hilton. It's especially fitting to remember the men who served the longest single tour of duty in U.S. military history: our Vietnam POWs. They were ensnared by a complicated war and faced a brutal ordeal, but they soldiered on – as did their infantry counterparts in South Vietnam, as the POWs will quickly tell you.

These captive warriors set a shining example that echoes across decades. In particular, the service of the Alcatraz 11 reminds us what the human spirit can endure and what our servicemen and families sacrifice for us, regardless of the war, irrespective of the circumstances. In the past year, three of our greatest POW leaders have passed, and others will follow. It's time our younger and often-entitled generations thank them for teaching us about unity, resilience and true heroism.