

RETURN WITH HONOR

FAITH LIFTED CAREY '64 DURING POW IMPRISONMENT

On 31 August 1967, then-Lieutenant Junior Grade David J. Carey '64, USN, was shot down over North Vietnam by a surface-to-air missile. He was on a mission to strike a railroad bridge inland from the port city of Haiphong. The tail of his A-4 Skyhawk was blown off at 18,000 feet.

Carey, who retired from the Navy as a captain, was captured by the North Vietnamese army and sent to the infamous POW camp the Hanoi Hilton, where he was beaten and tortured. He would spend more than five-and-a-half years as a POW before being released on 14 March 1973 as part of Operation Homecoming.

Captain Carey shared with Shipmate some of his memories from that fateful day in 1967 and the early part of his imprisonment from his Texas home in October 2024. To see a video from that interview, visit <https://tinyurl.com/CaptCareyInterview>.

It was like any other day. We were flying off Yankee Station. We were flying two or three alpha strikes a day. That's all we were doing, big, multi-airplane gaggles on specific targets. That morning, we manned airplanes about 7 a.m. The target was a little railroad bridge inland from Haiphong.

It was the first hop of the day. We were flying three combat missions every two days. People were getting shot down and Air Wing 16 probably had the worst record as far as losses were concerned.

It was surreal. I can very clearly remember flying. We'd have 16 to 18 airplanes jinking around, going for a target. It was like the movies you see of World War II with all the black air puffs from antiaircraft fire and missiles coming through every now and then.

A missile took the tail off my plane. I ejected straight down because the airplane was upside down. I had maybe two swings on the parachute, and landed in the middle of a little Vietnamese village. Nobody was around. I got rid of the parachute and my helmet and started running across rice paddies.

About the middle of the rice paddies, I see one of the airplanes coming back. I'm all excited. All the cool, nonchalant pilot stuff was out the window. I get on the radio and just start babbling. When I ran out of breath, I let off one of the buttons, which allowed an overhead pilot to say, 'You know we cannot come get you.'

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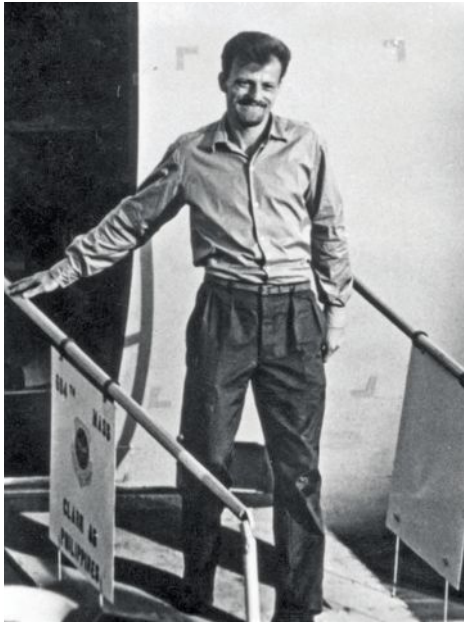


CAPT David J. Carey '64, USN (Ret.), flew the A-4 Skyhawk as a naval aviator during the Vietnam War. He was shot down over North Vietnam on 31 August 1967 and spent more than five-and-a-half years as a POW.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAPT DAVID J. CAREY '64, USN (RET.)

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CAPT David J. Carey '64, USN (Ret.), returned to the U.S. in March 1973 as part of Operation Homecoming for POWs held in Vietnam.



At that point, I couldn't think of anything clever to say. The pilot said, "I will see you when this is over." As I stood out on that rice paddie, it was like I was the only person in the universe. It was just me out there by myself. I wasn't alone very long. Soon, about a million Vietnamese came swarming out and captured me.

They drug me out of the rice paddie and tied me up. Then, they started cutting all my gear off. They took me to Haiphong that day. That night, they took me to Hanoi and that started my five-and-a-half years in Hanoi.

At Hanoi, I had the normal in-processing. They started interrogating, which led to beatings, which led to torture. They wanted to know some stuff. I wanted to tell them name, rank, serial number and date of birth. (The torture would) hurt so bad and the pain was so great that I knew if this kept up, I was going to go crazy.

I didn't want to go crazy. Even in my junior career, I had some itty bitty secrets and if I'm crazy, there's no telling what I'll say. I decided to hold out as long as I possibly could and lie. That's what happened. I lied about everything you

could possibly imagine. The interrogators were just like in the movies, they've got a little notebook and he's scribbling stuff in this notebook as fast as I'm lying.

Finally, they got done with me and they left. By then, I was on the floor and I couldn't get off the floor. My arms wouldn't work. They wouldn't work for weeks. I would eat by wiggling around on the floor and sticking my face in a bowl of rice.

Worse than the physical pain was what was happening in my head. I couldn't pick a subject and think about it. It was like I had no control. Stuff would just flash around inside my head—crazy stuff like the dog I had when I was a kid or the car I had.

What I wanted to think about were the lies I told because I knew they'd be back. Into my head came the first line of Psalm 23. That line kept coming into my head. I discovered that if I would think about that line, "The Lord is my Shepherd," I could think about that line.

I worked on that for days. I had learned it as a kid in Sunday school but it had been years since I'd thought about it. I worked on it and worked on it until finally, after days, I dredged up the whole Psalm 23. Once I had done that, I had control of my mind back.

I certainly don't think that was an accident. The word of God was planted in my mind by my parents' faithfulness so when I would be desperate, it would be there.

Scripture says over and over that God is faithful. He certainly was in that instance. I had my mind back and fortunately for me, at that time in the war, they were shooting guys down so fast, they didn't have time to mess with you.

I was moved from my original cell to another, which gave me my first roommate, Air Force F-105 pilot Tom Norris. We just fell into each other's arms, we're crying. It was so good to see someone.

Then, we started comparing stories and we find out the same thing happened to both of us, which is good. I had been trained name, rank, serial number and date of birth. I had seen every John Wayne movie that had ever been made. I knew how an American fighting man conducted himself and I knew I hadn't done that.

I was really thinking, I guess I won't be able to go home when this is over because they will throw me out of the military at the very least. So, when Tom comes and we start comparing stories, we learned we'd been through the same thing. This is wonderful, because if I'm going to be a man without a country, I've got a friend I can bum around with. We knew we had not been able to do what we were supposed to do.

The most comforting thing during that experience was living with other men who had been through the same processes and issues, knowing we're all in the same boat. ⚓

For more stories of Naval Academy alumni who were Vietnam POWs, please visit <https://issuu.com/shipmate/docs/2023-january-february-shipmate>.