

# Free at Last: Operation Homecoming

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*Forty years ago, Operation Homecoming saw nearly 600 American POWs freed—and began the task of accounting for those still missing.*

Oh, the unsettling stories that former prisoners of the Vietnam War could tell on the 40th anniversary of their release. They survived the POW nightmare. In some cases, barely. As therapy, many of them are now open to recollecting the horrifying ordeal: the brutal interrogations, solitary confinement, paralyzing fear, insufficient nourishment, isolation from loved ones, untreated broken bones and dislocated shoulders and, of course, the torture ending with the most cherished memory of all: freedom.

Starting on Feb. 12, 1973, and continuing until March 29, the North Vietnamese gave up their most prized war trophies, American prisoners of war, one planeload at a time. The first of the C-141s—which became known as “Hanoi Taxis”—was a medical evacuation for the wounded, crippled and sick. The worst cases were carried aboard on stretchers. The passenger lists for the ensuing flights out of Hanoi’s Gia Lam Airport always started with the man who had been imprisoned the longest. First in, first out. When the final freedom flight had touched down at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, 590 men were now former POWs. A German nurse, captured during the Tet Offensive, was the only woman. According to NAM-POWs, Inc., an organization of Vietnam War prisoners, the vast majority were captured after aircraft crashes; almost 500 were pilots and aircrewmen. By service branch, 325 were Air Force, 138 Navy, 77 Army and 26 Marines. There were 25 civilians.

Among their ranks are a number of now notable Americans: Floyd Thompson, the war’s longest-held POW, who was in custody for nine years; Everett Alvarez, the first pilot shot down, in 1964; John McCain, senator and former presidential candidate; James Stockdale, former candidate for vice president; Pete Peterson, who would become the United States’

first postwar ambassador to Vietnam; and Jeremiah Denton Jr., the former senator who famously blinked out the letters T-O-R-T-U-R-E, in Morse code, while being interviewed for a propaganda film. The POW group says seven of their members were Medal of Honor recipients, and 80 percent stayed in uniform after their release.

They were housed in camps and detention facilities with names, bestowed by the prisoners, such as the Plantation, the Zoo, Dog Patch, Alcatraz and Little Vegas. It was at the infamous Hoa Lo Prison, nicknamed the "Hanoi Hilton," where Harold Johnson learned that freedom was at hand in 1973. "There was an assembly in the courtyard," he recalled. "We were standing at attention when one Vietnamese officer spoke in Vietnamese, and then the translator announced the Paris agreement, as to our release. They had guards around us in case we rioted." The announcement began to sink in as the inmates were each given new trousers, shirt and jacket, with a bag to put them in. When Johnson was released on March 4, he was awakened early and dressed in his new clothes. He stuffed his empty bag with personal souvenirs from his cell: a crude bowl, spoon, toothbrush, teapot, Ho Chi Minh sandals and prison garb, most of which he still has.

Larry Spencer spent 2,551 days—nearly seven years—in North Vietnamese prisons, which qualified him for release on day one. "They told us to find a seat on the plane," he recalled. "They had milkshakes for us and there was a big cheer, of course, when we got airborne." Once over the ocean, the pilot announced a surprise. On the right side of the plane, four Air Force jets rocked their wings to acknowledge the Air Force POWs. Then, to the left of the plane, four Navy jets saluted the naval personnel.

At Clark Air Base, each of the men was assigned an officer to help him decompress. The officers had files with family letters and updated photographs, they answered questions about home and escorted the men through debriefings all the way back home. For their first meal, Spencer estimated that 90 percent of the men had breakfast. "In Vietnam, we had four months of cabbage soup, four months of pumpkin soup and four months of spinach

soup. We could imagine having something else, but it's very hard to simulate an American breakfast." Johnson, who was shot down in 1967, remembered a small detail that said so much about his six years in confinement: "It was so exciting to have a room with a door, and a door knob on my side of the door."

The hot showers, banana splits and phone calls home came after grueling marathon peace talks; it took nearly five years of exasperating negotiations between U.S. and Vietnamese representatives to reach a settlement. In the fall of 1972, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger told reporters, "Peace is at hand." The statement was premature. A tentative agreement between the U.S. and North Vietnam was torpedoed by demands made from South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu. In the coming weeks, the talks were near collapse, and finally deadlocked. President Richard Nixon used the word "impasse," and Kissinger lobbied him to unleash the bombers. During an Oval Office tape recording on December 14, Kissinger advocated "bombing the bejesus out of them."

Starting on December 18, an unprecedented bombing campaign, code-named Linebacker II, was launched against targets around Hanoi and the port of Haiphong. Over the next 12 days (with a 24-hour reprieve on Christmas), 3,400 sorties were flown over North Vietnam. Paul Robinson, a POW at the Hanoi Hilton, said he was playing poker when the first planes roared overhead, F-111s at first, and then the B-52 Stratofortresses. "We heard a rumble in the distance, then a little louder and a little louder," he said. "The lights go out and the sirens go on, and the rumble turns into a roar, and the SAMs [surface-to-air missiles] started lifting out of the city. It was a big fireworks demonstration with big orange balls." Robinson recalled how everything was trembling; a door was knocked off its hinges, plaster fell and their homemade Christmas presents tumbled from the vibrating windowsill. "The guards were so scared," he said, "they dug holes in the courtyard and covered themselves with boards."

The nightly bombardment was costly on both sides. Robinson later realized that the exploding orange fireballs were direct hits by SAMs. "On the third night," he said, "I was on my

concrete pallet, and [looking out the window] there was one of those fireballs in the air, and a B-52 wing fluttering down." An analysis of Linebacker II issued by Air University in 1976, made a conservative estimate of 884 SAMs fired at B-52s during the campaign. More than two dozen U.S. aircraft were lost, most of them B-52s. Close to 100 pilots and aircrew were casualties: killed, missing in action or taken as new prisoners.

For the North Vietnamese, the destruction was debilitating. Former POW Spencer described the devastation he saw, while being transferred between prisons: "There was not a building standing. The B-52s had destroyed the infrastructure and industrial areas of Hanoi. The Vietnamese made a smart decision of saying, we're not going to have a country left if we don't get this stopped." The collateral damage in civilian areas was denounced: a Hanoi-area hospital destroyed, foreign embassies damaged and residential neighborhoods hit, with estimates of civilian deaths surpassing 2,000. President Nixon was condemned, at home and abroad, but the "Christmas Bombing" of 1972 was a catalyst for compromise. The stalled Paris peace talks reconvened on Jan. 8, 1973, and a final agreement quickly took shape.

Then, on January 27, four decades ago, the final signing ceremony at the Majestic Hotel in Paris was broadcast live across the United States. It was the master plan for ending America's role in the conflict. There was to be a cease-fire, the release of prisoners of war and the parallel withdrawal of U.S. forces within 60 days, as well as a political road map for South Vietnam. Absent from the formalities were the two key figures behind the negotiations, Henry Kissinger and Hanoi's senior diplomat, Le Duc Tho. After years of meetings, both in public and in secret, the two were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October, which Tho declined to accept.

The delegations were seated at a colossal circular table, with two smaller rectangular tables on either side. Arguing over the shape of the round table had been just as contentious as haggling over the peace pact. For the United States, Secretary of State William Rogers

signed his name 72 times, on four sets of the peace agreement and accompanying protocols. Each delegation got a copy: the United States, South Vietnam, North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government, representing the Viet Cong. The next day's *New York Times* bannered: "Vietnam Peace Pacts Signed; America's Longest War Halts."

Two weeks later, the POWs began streaming out of Hanoi, and in May they were all invited to the White House for a celebration. It would be one of the high points of Richard Nixon's presidency, and a personal triumph that was glorified by his most loyal supporters. After meeting every single POW at the May 24 event, Nixon stepped up to the microphone. "The most difficult decision that I have made since being president was on December 18 of last year," he said to enthusiastic and sustained applause. "I wondered whether anyone in this country supported it. I think that all of us would like to join in a round of applause for the brave men that took those B-52s in and did the job. If they hadn't done it, you wouldn't be here tonight."

Among those cheering was retired Navy Captain Mike McGrath, now the historian for NAM-POWs. He said: "I'd guess 95 percent, or more, think that it [the bombing] was a pivotal moment, and the right thing to do. No, actually 98 percent. There had been a unilateral bombing halt, and we sat there and asked, 'What the hell is going on?' We credit Nixon and the B-52s with getting us released."

As word of the peace agreement and prisoner release spread across Vietnam, a young rural development adviser at Chau Duc, in the Mekong Delta, remembers how South Vietnamese were ecstatic over the news. Ken Quinn, who would later become U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, said: "It's hard to overstate how all of this pent up fear and frustration and living daily with war, suddenly just came pouring out. Usually restrained Vietnamese, and the Americans were caught up in it as well; people arm in arm, dancing in circles. Of course, two years later, these same Vietnamese were climbing on boats trying to get into the open ocean; the last way out of the country."

When the prisoners were freed, most Americans thought that the POW issue was resolved. On the final day of Operation Homecoming, even President Nixon proclaimed, "All of our American POWs are on their way home." Quinn said, "I don't think anyone anticipated it would have been such a long, protracted issue." And now, into the fifth decade since Operation Homecoming, the POW/MIA question remains the most emotional wartime issue still unresolved.

When the Communist Vietnamese gained control of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975, the POW/MIA recovery effort ended abruptly. There were more than 2,500 Americans still unaccounted for throughout the war zone, and people believed some of them were alive. While the country celebrated the return of 591 POWs in 1973, the U.S. government was expecting closer to 700. Were some still being held prisoner? If not, where were their remains? For nearly a decade, the issue faded. The 1993 Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs said it best: "When the war shut down, so too did much of the POW/MIA intelligence operation...(it) had become more of a bureaucratic backwater than an operations center for matters of life and death." The United States had no formal relations with Vietnam, no people on the ground, and the embargo kept out businessmen. Hanoi was consolidating its victory, and Americans were exhausted.

During the mid and late 1970s, there was only modest progress: Civilians, stranded or captured after the fall of Saigon, were released; the remains of three pilots were returned to a House Select Committee; the Leonard Woodcock Commission, appointed by President Jimmy Carter, came back with the remains of 12 more pilots; and there were two smaller repatriations. In 1982 President Ronald Reagan shone a bright light on the issue when he made the POW/MIA mystery the "highest national priority."

"Technical talks" between the United States and Vietnam were held to exchange information and plan investigations. Occasionally, the Vietnamese would suddenly produce new

remains; the Americans knew they had been storing some away to release at opportune times.

There were unofficial efforts to find, and even rescue, POWs. Rambo-style missions were launched into Laos, privately financed activists sent in agents, even the CBS News bureau in Bangkok, where I was bureau chief, had a well-connected Thai staffer whom we'd send to snoop around the Laotian border. A congressman, a senator, a decorated Green Beret, a former presidential candidate, a Hollywood film star; they all believed men were left behind.

The most vocal doubters suspected a government coverup—some still do. All the while, there was marginal, incremental progress on the government-to-government level. Gradually, teams of Americans and Vietnamese conducted joint field investigations. Plane crash sites and suspected graves were exhumed for any personal effects or human evidence that could lead to identification. During one excavation, a search team came face-to-face with a live 500-pound bomb, still attached to the wreckage of a fighter jet. Other teams were shelled by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and stoned by angry villagers west of Da Nang, who bragged, "We have killed Americans."

The emergence of General John Vessey as President Reagan's personal envoy in 1987 took the negotiations to a higher level. As the successes mounted, Vietnam wanted reciprocity: economic aid, an end to the embargo and normal relations.

In 1988 the POW Publicity Fund, a group backed by several MIA families, congressmen and others, offered a \$2.5 million reward: "You make a POW a free man, and we'll make you a rich man." It contributed to fabricated live-sighting reports and a series of fake pictures. In one case, a POW's distraught daughter was convinced her father was photographed with two other prisoners in a grainy black-and-white snapshot. Investigators later determined the picture had been lifted from a 1920s Soviet agriculture magazine.

Businessmen entered the scene in the 1990s, urging the U.S. government to decouple the MIA issue from the trade embargo. Europeans and Asians were getting the best office space, lucrative deals and promising contacts. Slowly, Vietnam began to reemerge, and John Kerry and John McCain saw the progress firsthand, as the Senate Select Committee took its POW/MIA investigation to Vietnam. The senators conducted live-sighting investigations, including a visit to the Ministry of Defense Citadel in Hanoi, Vietnam's "Pentagon." The Vietnamese turned over documents and photographs and allowed reporters to observe open working sessions. There was a side trip to Laos.

The committee released its 1,223-page report in 1993, finding no compelling evidence that POWs were still alive in the old war zone. In Bangkok, an activist said it was a coverup. A former POW called the senators "goons." But the report had bipartisan approval, and six months later President Bill Clinton lifted American opposition to aid to Vietnam from the International Monetary Fund. He also appointed a blue-ribbon panel to examine the future course between the former adversaries.

After three days of talks in Hanoi, the delegation sent by President Clinton was overwhelmed by the unpredictable scene that greeted it in Ho Chi Minh City. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese welcomed back the Americans, lining the streets, waving and saluting. David Givans, with Disabled American Veterans, said, "The only thing missing was the ticker tape." The outpouring was especially moving because the U.S. delegation was representing solidarity over missing American soldiers. It was 18 years late, but it was a homecoming for them, and all the other military men and women who never got the recognition they deserved. The motorcade drove through Cholon, and even made a sentimental pass by the old U.S. Embassy, the iconic symbol of America's Vietnam tragedy. On Feb. 3, 1994, Clinton lifted the trade embargo, and just like everything else about the Vietnam War, that too, was divisive. The following year, however, relations were normalized.

Along the path to reconciliation, the POW/MIA legacy grounded the diplomacy. The accountability mission has advanced in every way imaginable, from its meager postwar beginnings in a small Thailand office to today's Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii, with detachments in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. The unit works globally to account for MIAs as far back as World War II. The Central Identification Lab confirms about six identifications a month. A separate agency, the Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office, provides policy oversight. Combined, the two organizations have more than 500 military and civilian personnel.

Looking back at the prisoner release 40 years ago, JPAC casualty resolution specialist Ron Ward said from his Hanoi office: "Operation Homecoming was one of the most important milestones in the accounting for MIAs. The POWs' return allowed us to assess who on our list of missing was accounted for, and who we still needed to find." Having worked in Hanoi for more than five years, Ward said, "Cooperation is now at a high point." He cites flexibility in field operations, access to archival documents and Vietnam's permission to deploy U.S. Navy hydrographic survey ships to search for underwater losses. Records turned over in 2012 include detailed documents on the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) attack on a secret Air Force radar unit Lima Site 85, in Laos in 1968, and a comprehensive report on the operations of the NVA's Ho Chi Minh Trail unit.

One woman who has spent decades fighting on behalf of POW/MIA families agrees that the quality and work being provided by the Vietnamese has increased greatly. Ann Mills-Griffiths, an MIA sister and board chair for The National League of POW/MIA Families, says, "Laos is a tougher situation, a tougher environment, it's just tougher sledding there." On the Operation Homecoming anniversary, Mills-Griffiths remembers the celebration when they came home. "We were the ones who fought so hard to get them back, more than anybody else." While there may not be any more POWs coming home, her principles remain firm: "Four decades is a long time to continue to maintain an effort. If you send people to

serve, you have an obligation to do your best to get them home, either alive or dead. That's our national obligation."

While there are more than 1,600 Americans still unaccounted for in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, more than 900 MIAs have been recovered, identified and returned to their families for burial since the fighting ended. Mills-Griffiths estimates that the search for lost veterans has a long way to go: "The fullest possible accounting will probably be about a thousand more remains. The rest of them are probably not recoverable. There is no such thing as a full and complete accounting. We were at war."

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