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John McCain's defining commitment to his wartime comrades

Kenneth M. Quinn, Iowa View contributor Published 3:12 a.m. CT Aug. 28, 2018



(Photo: Register file photo)

As a State Department official in the 1990s, I had the privilege of returning to Vietnam with Sen. John McCain as we sought to obtain the fullest possible accounting for those military service members whose fates had not been resolved.

It was there that I witnessed what I considered to be perhaps his most fundamental virtue as McCain fulfilled the bond that had united us in combat — that we would never leave fallen comrades behind.

One of my most poignant memories from that experience is of standing with McCain in the center of Hanoi Truc Bach Lake, where a badly wounded McCain had splashed down 25 years earlier after ejecting from his A-4 aircraft that had been crippled by anti-aircraft fire.

In a special gesture reflecting his now-elevated status, the Vietnamese government had placed a historic marker commemorating that event. Having brought us there, our Vietnamese escorts all stepped back to allow McCain and our small party of Americans a moment alone. As I started translating the Vietnamese words written on the plaque for him, McCain kept looking down, seemingly caught up in the memories of that October day in 1967 that led to his more than five years as a POW, during which he suffered incredibly from the torture that was afflicted upon him.

I was amazed at the equanimity he exhibited now more than two decades later, just as I had been impressed by how calm and even affable he was in now negotiating with the representatives of the Vietnamese government that had imprisoned him. McCain had seemingly put the pain and any resentment he felt about his wartime treatment behind him.

He showed no emotion as I translated the words until I reached the part of the plaque with his name, which read "U.S. Air Force pilot John McCain" was shot down parachuting into the lake. Startled, he looked up with a scowl. I thought the memory of the harsh treatment he had received at the hands of his captors had suddenly come flooding back.

But instead, taking the Lord's name in vain and reflecting the inter-service rivalries that characterize the bond among American military officers, McCain feigned outrage about being identified as an "Air Force pilot." The son of a Naval Admiral and Annapolis graduate, McCain, now smiling broadly, complained about the pain they were causing him now by getting his branch of service wrong.

Congressman, senator and presidential candidate were all titles he would proudly bear, but above them all, McCain always defined himself as a Navy pilot.

That was just one of a series of opportunities I had to interact closely with Sen. McCain from 1990 to 1994 when, with his fellow Vietnam Navy vet John Kerry, he led the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Accounting. In my capacity as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and chair of the Inter-Agency Working Group on the POW/MIA within the executive branch, I spent more than 10 hours testifying under oath before the committee, which also included Sen. Chuck Grassley. I was pleased when McCain and Kerry both complimented me for my initiative that had resulted in our Defense Department personnel having access for the first time to a North Vietnamese.

McCain was intensely interested in our diplomatic strategy for re-establishing normal relations with Vietnam and Cambodia. In his book "Worth the Fighting For," the senator detailed our exchange as he responded to my request for his input to our "Road Map Policy" which was a step-by-step process that led to an improved relationship. For McCain, the critical objectives after POW accounting were human rights, freedom for political prisoners and a democratic election in Cambodia.

Reflecting the connection he and I had on the POW issue and the success I had in obtaining those foreign policy goals he had identified, when I was nominated to be U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, McCain paid me the ultimate compliment by coming to my hearing and introducing me to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It is this type of personal endorsement that can clear away any possible objection to a nominee. It was one of the truly great honors of my life.

We had one last encounter in Phnom Penh in 1996 that perhaps best sums up his deep commitment to his fellow military combatants and our work together. As ambassador, I had created a marble monument on which I had inscribed the names of those service members who had been killed in the last battle of the Indochina War, which took place on the Cambodian island of Koh Tang in May 1975. Now 21 years later, during a visit to that island, I had learned of the incredible heroism and sacrifice of those men, which had not previously been known or recognized. I was determined to correct that omission with this permanent commemoration at our embassy.

When he learned about my project, McCain, who was traveling in Asia, revised his schedule and flew to Cambodia. There at the American embassy, on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 1996, in one last action together, McCain and I unveiled the black marble plaque revealing the names of all of the Marines and Air Force pilots who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country in that last battle.

On the base of that marble monument, there, side by side, are our two names, forever recalling those many joint efforts to fulfill our commitment to never forget nor leave behind our fellow American compatriots from the Vietnam War.

Kenneth M. Quinn is the president of the World Food Prize.



Ambassador Kenneth Quinn,
president, The World Food Prize
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