



Airmen prepare to greet POWs as they arrive home from Vietnam.

# Dinner for the Heroes

By Peter Grier

**POWs from the Vietnam War were recently treated to a celebratory dinner, 40 years after the original that welcomed them home.**

**L**t.j.g. Everett Alvarez Jr. was the first US naval aviator shot down in the Vietnam War. His A-4 Skyhawk was fatally damaged by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire on Aug. 5, 1964, during an attack on coastal targets following the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Flying low and fast, he was fortunate to survive ejection, and as he floundered in the waters of Ha Long Bay with captors approaching, he thought—incongruously—of dinner.

“It was roast beef night on the ship. I said, ‘I’m going to miss roast beef night.’ Honest to God. That was just a fleeting thought,” said Alvarez during a recent appearance at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, Calif.

During his eight-and-a-half years as a North Vietnamese prisoner of war, Alvarez suffered torture and ill treatment and served as a model of stoic survival for the hundreds of

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AP photo



POWs who followed him. He eventually served as deputy administrator of the Veterans Administration in 1982. And in late May, he and his remaining fellow POWs were honored with all the dinner they could handle.

Some 200 Vietnam-era POWs, the vast majority of them pilots downed in the air war over Southeast Asia, reunited for a three-day memorial celebration at the Nixon Museum. They were feted with a flyover, motorcade, and wreath-laying ceremony. But the highlight of the event was a banquet held on the 40th anniversary of the star-studded White House dinner at which President Richard Nixon welcomed them home.

Back then the tide of the Watergate scandal was rising. It was consuming an increasing amount of Nixon's time. For him, the POW dinner was a welcome respite amidst a sea of political troubles.

"Forty years ago, it was my honor to be with you on the South Lawn of the White House for an unforgettable evening which my father recalled was one of the greatest nights of his life, as he hoped it was for you," Tricia Nixon Cox, daughter of the former President, told POWs gathered for the 2013 commemoration.

Many of the POWs, for their part, remember their former Commander-in-Chief fondly. To them, he was not a President who resigned in disgrace but the man who got them out of the "Hanoi Hilton"—and then treated them to a party

that remains the largest in White House history and featured Bob Hope, John Wayne, and other great stars of the era.

"To the man who brought us home due to his strong persistence, fortitude, and courage ... Richard Nixon," toasted retired Air Force Lt. Col. Thomas J. Hanton, president of Nam-POW, the official former-POW organization, at the end of this year's commemorative feast.

US involvement in the Vietnam War was just beginning when Alvarez was hauled out of the sea and moved within days to Hoa Lo prison, later dubbed the Hanoi Hilton.

### Hanoi Propaganda

Over the course of the conflict almost 9,000 US fixed wing aircraft and helicopters were lost in the Southeast Asia area of operations. While some 2,000 pilots and crew were killed in operations, another 500 ejected and ended up in the hands of the enemy. Adding in ground troops, 725 US service personnel were captured and interned by the North Vietnamese and associated forces between 1961 and 1973, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Their treatment was brutal. North Vietnam had signed the Geneva Conventions but regularly tortured and psychologically abused its captives. The North Vietnamese excused these actions in part by claiming that US airmen were committing war crimes by targeting civilians.

"For Hanoi, American POWs served ... obvious political purposes. US 'air pirates' could be displayed not only to dramatize the brutality of US bombing, but to celebrate Vietnam's capacity to shoot down the most advanced aircraft of its superpower enemy. The confessions of American prisoners, most of them compelled by torture, were a staple of Hanoi's propaganda," wrote historian Christian G. Appy in his book, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*.

Those captured in the war's early years had it worst. To this day, Alvarez has little feeling in his fingers. Another famous ex-POW, Sen. John S. McCain III (R-Ariz.), was shot down in 1967 and then beaten for years. Today, McCain cannot raise his arms above his shoulders.

"We never had a pair of shoes, a pair of socks, a bed, an ice cube, an egg, a paper, a pencil, a Bible. We had nothing for six years. They wouldn't even let me have a stick to clean my fingernails," said retired Navy Capt. John Michael McGrath at a discussion of the POW experience hosted by the Nixon Library during the 40th anniversary remembrance.

POWs in particular dreaded the Vietnamese rope tactic. Prison guards would handcuff a POW's hands behind his back and then rotate his arms up over his shoulders until they dislocated.



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***Far left: Capt. William Schwertfeger is greeted at Gia Lam Apt., Hanoi, after release in 1973. Center: Lt. J.g. Everett Alvarez Jr., the first pilot shot down in the Vietnam War, is welcomed home by Adm. Noel Gayler, commander in chief of Pacific Command, and USAF Lt. Gen. William Moore Jr., commander of the 13th Air Force in the Philippines. Left: Col. Robinson Risner waves to the assembled crowd as he steps off the second C-141 that left Hanoi. Below: Newly freed prisoners of war celebrate as their C-141 lifts off from Hanoi. Fifty-four C-141 flights between mid-February and early April would carry almost 600 POWs home.***

"They basically tortured all of us. They broke us. They humiliated us. If you didn't die in torture, you broke, and if you didn't break, you died," said McGrath.

In those circumstances, it was unrealistic to expect the POWs to tell their captors only name, rank, and serial number. In the end, virtually all

gave up something—a list of military missions, perhaps, or a "confession" of crimes.

To most, the feeling that they had betrayed their country was worse than physical torture. Retired Navy Lt. Cdr. Paul E. Galanti, shot down and captured near Vinh, North Vietnam, in 1966, remembered feeling like the "biggest traitor in the history of the United States of America" after breaking under abuse.

Then he sat blindfolded in a jeep next to Air Force pilot Robinson Risner, a Korean War ace and at the time the senior US officer in captivity. Ris-

ner—who became a general officer before retiring—told Galanti they had all been broken. Try and tolerate pain to the point of physical disability, said Risner, and if you break, go back and try it again next time.

"The biggest relief, I think, I've ever had in my life, other than surviving my first night carrier landing," said Galanti at the Nixon Library appearance.

Camaraderie helped POWs survive the experience. They communicated cell-to-cell by tap code, telling life stories to neighbors whose faces they never saw. Alvarez recalled that on Sunday mornings the senior officer would send out a signal and all who wished would

stand and quietly recite the Lord's Prayer. Then they would face east, put their hands over their hearts, and recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

After the death of Ho Chi Minh in late 1969, treatment began to improve. Perhaps the North Vietnamese recognized they were converting no one to communism and the information they were getting from tortured POWs was largely fictional.

Food got better and became more plentiful. Interrogations were less frequent and less brutal. But POW life was still very tough.

Hanton was shot down in June 1972 while flying his F-4 over North Vietnam on a search and rescue mission. He re-



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members his first 10 days in captivity as a time of “intense interrogation.” He was jailed inside a room with 20-foot ceilings, and high up on the wall was a speaker through which his captors broadcast the statements of Jane Fonda and other US anti-war activists, as well as the “confessions” of brutalized US POWs.

“I got sick and tired of listening to this loudspeaker,” said Hanton at the Nixon Library.

So he shimmied up the wall, risking injury, to rip out the speaker wires. Afterward he worried that if the guards found out, he’d be beaten—or worse. Fortunately for him his vandalism wasn’t discovered.

“They never came in while ... the camp radio was on,” he said.

By this time President Nixon was under intense pressure to end US involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Polls showed most Americans had soured on the war and Congress was poised to cut off money for American military activity in Southeast Asia unless Nixon could show real progress toward peace.

There was one point everyone from protestors to the President agreed on: The POWs had to be part of any deal. For America, the Vietnam War would not be over until they came home—not that the US knew who all the POWs were.

North Vietnam had refused to produce a list of Americans held in its prisons. For most of the war they refused to allow POWs to write or receive letters or receive visits from the Red Cross.

“We never knew what the situation was. Family members never knew what the situation was. Many families, many wives, many parents never knew whether

**Above: President Richard Nixon speaks to some 450 former POWs and their guests in a giant tent erected on the South Lawn of the White House at a homecoming dinner for the men on May 24, 1973. It was the largest dinner ever held at the White House. Above right: Navy Cmdr. Paul Schultz (I) and USAF Col. Thomas Moe, both POWs in Vietnam, were part of the gathering. Schultz spent five years in the camps, and Moe more than five. Below: Marine Corps Sgt. John Finch plays taps to honor those who fought and died in the Vietnam War during the anniversary dinner at the Nixon presidential library in Yorba Linda, Calif.**

they were wives or widows or parents of children that had perished,” said former Defense Department Coordinator of POW/MIA Affairs Roger Shields at the Nixon Library symposium.

In October 1972, the US thought it had struck an acceptable deal with the North Vietnamese in Paris peace talks, and National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger announced that “peace is at hand.” But South Vietnam balked and Hanoi dug in its heels against further tweaks.

### Bombers for Peace

With negotiations stalled, Nixon ordered B-52s to pound North Vietnamese territory in the Linebacker II bombing campaign. Hanoi then came back to the table. In January 1973, the parties to the conflict signed the Paris Peace Accords,

calling for the withdrawal of US troops, a cease-fire, and the repatriation of all US POWs.

On Feb. 12, Shields and other US representatives sat waiting in a deserted Hanoi airport. Outside C-141 #66-0177 waited on the tarmac to fly the first planeload of POWs to freedom. Then around the corner of the terminal came camouflaged buses painted in all colors, as if they were “circus buses,” Shields later told Nixon in an Oval Office conversation.

Shields jumped up and walked over. North Vietnamese guards tried to stop him but he pushed them back. He gave the men a thumbs-up signal, and they waved. The first man out was a Navy commander on crutches who told the men to







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“form up.” Then they marched through a gate toward the airplane, looking straight ahead, their heads up.

As soon as the Navy commander passed the gate he threw down his crutches and embraced Shields. “I’m home,” he said. The POWs then boarded the C-141. Destination: Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

“I could have flown back to Clark without use of the airplane. It was the greatest point in my life,” Shields told Nixon that April.

The men cheered as the aircraft lifted off. They cheered again as it cleared the Vietnamese coast.

By this time, they had “broken the ice with all the hand wringers,” said McGrath during the Nixon Library symposium. That meant they had convinced the medical

professionals on board that they weren’t physically damaged or too ill to eat anything but bland food. When they got to Clark they were met with all the steaks, eggs, and ice cream they could eat.

Over three days, McGrath said dentists fixed their broken teeth while the cook fattened them up and tailors produced new uniforms. Then they caught airplanes for the States.

“When I stepped off that airplane, America said, ‘Welcome home,’ and I had a nice clean uniform and my wife and kids were there to meet me,” said Galanti.

At home Nixon was fighting a deepening political crisis. The Watergate burglars were sentenced to jail in March. White House Counsel John W. Dean III had begun to cooperate with prosecutors; Nixon fired him on April 30, the same day he announced the resignations of Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman and Domestic Affairs Assistant John D. Ehrlichman. The Senate Watergate Committee began hearings on May 17.

### It Was Magnificent

Thus for the White House, the release of the POWs was a much-welcome piece of good news in a dark period.

It was entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. who suggested to the President that the White House throw the former prisoners a party. Nixon and First Lady Pat Nixon embraced the idea, pushing for construction of a canopy on the South Lawn to hold a mammoth crowd of more than 1,300 guests, renting china and glassware, and ensuring each of the 126 tables was elegant enough for a State Dinner.

On May 24, Nixon addressed the POWs in a State Department auditorium. They gave him an ovation and he shook the hand of each man. It rained all day, but that night “the dinner was magnificent,” wrote historian Stephen E. Ambrose in his biography of Nixon.

The President greeted the POWs by telling them, “Never has the White House been more proud than it is tonight, because of the guests we have tonight.” The POW Chorus rose to sing the “POW Hymn,” secretly written with a fish bone in Vietnamese prisons by downed Air Force F-105 pilot James Quincy Collins.

The menu was all-American: Seafood Neptune, roast beef, and strawberry mousse. The entertainment was all-American as well, with Jimmy Stewart rounding out the A-list of the 1970s. John Wayne told the POWs, “You’re the best we have

and I’ll ride off into the sunset with you any time.” Actress Joey Heatherton sang on the stage in a glowing white dress. Comedian Phyllis Diller (“the Liz Taylor of the Twilight Zone,” said Hope) invited the POWs to her house for dinner, if they thought they could stand the dirt.

The POWs gave Nixon a plaque inscribed to “Our leader—our comrade—Richard the Lion-Hearted.”

Irving Berlin himself led the crowd in singing “God Bless America.”

In his memoirs Nixon wrote that the dinner was one of the greatest nights in his life. Yet, he personally ended the evening on a gloomy note. After midnight, in the Lincoln Sitting Room, he contemplated the dissonance between his reception by the POWs and the drain of Watergate.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the release of the POWs and the famous White House welcome home dinner. To the Nixon Foundation (jointly operating the Nixon Library with the US government), it seemed right to host a celebration.

The nonprofit Nam-POW already was planning a reunion. The Nixon Foundation offered the library, which includes a room built to duplicate the East Room of the White House, as a venue. Things progressed from there.

“It was a natural development,” says Nixon Foundation spokesman Jonathan Movroydis.

One hundred and eighty-seven former POWs, about one-third of the original group, attended the event. Retired Lt. Gen. Richard Y. Newton III, the Air Force Association’s executive vice president, gave the keynote address. The highlight was dinner on May 24 in the Library’s East Room, with a menu similar to the original.

The POW Chorus sang again, reprising their hymn of 40 years previous. Collins led the group wearing the same uniform he had worn at the White House.

In 1973 the POWs were a unifying force. Everyone in America was looking for something good out of a war that had split the nation, and their homecoming provided it. But of their captivity, the former prisoners said they were just trying to survive as best they could in a difficult situation.

“The guys that were the real heroes are the guys that are not here, the ones that are on that [Vietnam Veterans Memorial] wall, and the ones they haven’t found,” said Hanton. “It’s just an honor to be here.” ■



AP Photo by Joe C. Hong

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