

# LEST WE EVER FORGET

*A moving chronicle reminds the country of what American POWs had to endure during their captivity in North Vietnam*

by MARC PHILLIP YABLONKA

"I SAW YOU WERE WRITING SOMETHING," SAID A man who approached me as the theater lights came up after a showing of the documentary *Return With Honor*. "I hope you include that only 24 people came to see this film."

*Return With Honor* is 102 minutes of memoirs of several of the 462 captured pilots imprisoned in North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Presented by Tom Hanks, the film is the brainchild of documentarians Terry Sanders and Freida Lee Mock of the Santa Monica-based American Film Foundation.

In *Return With Honor*, POW remembrances are juxtaposed against Hanoi's archival footage of their captures and later interrogations. Frame after antiquated frame of black and white images cross the screen, all the more disturbing today. The film bears witness, not only to the treachery of the North Vietnamese, but also to the will of the American flyers to survive their captivity and return to the families and country they loved.

Most were locked away for up to eight years at the notorious Hoa Lo Prison, forever dubbed "The Hanoi Hilton." Today, Hoa Lo Prison is a deserted ghost. Yet it remains literally a city block of 13-foot stone walls, broken bottle glass embedded in them, topped off with high-tension wire. The now-empty cells were then infested with rats; in each tiny cell was a one-bed board with concrete supports, while rusted leg irons permanently protruded from the crumbling cement walls.

The pilot who suffered the longest at The Hanoi Hilton (almost nine years) was Ev Alvarez, who holds the distinction of being the first airman shot down by the North Vietnamese on Aug. 4, 1964. As the first, Alvarez today feels that neither he nor his captors knew what to make of his situation in the beginning. "In the initial days it was an experience for me and them. I don't believe they really knew what to do. They would ask, 'Why don't you answer our questions?' I would say, 'I'm a POW. According to the Geneva Convention, I'm not supposed to.' They would tell me 'You're not a POW. There's no war.' " Soon that would change. He was told by his interrogator "You are in my country now. Do you really think someone from your country is going to come in here and represent you?"

Taunts like that were tolerable, but the beatings were another matter. Said 1st Lt. Leroy Stutz (USAF Ret.),

"I was the toughest fighter pilot in the world; John Wayne and Superman rolled into one. I found out real fast how weak I was. The pain may have cleansed me. But, by God, it hurt when my shoulders rotated in their sockets and I was hanging there. I bled. I prayed. I screamed and when I screamed, all they did was pick up a dirty rag and stick it in my mouth. The thing that affected me the most was [thinking] 'God, I don't want to die here and nobody ever know.' "

Stutz and the others often had to withstand the "Vietnamese Rope Trick," in which a rope was tied about their necks and arms while their hands were bound behind backs. If a POW refused to confess war crimes, interrogators yanked the rope excruciatingly tight behind his back. They would rotate his arms back and forth until his shoulders dislocated.

"We were tortured to give them something," added Jeremiah Denton, who became a U.S. senator from Alabama after Vietnam. "But we didn't give them anything. We made them torture us again. We gave them as little as we could the next time. The idea was to return with honor."

To the Vietnamese, the POWs were an extension of the anti-war movement. "The Vietnamese people know we can't compete on the battlefield," interrogator Bien Quach told Jim Stockdale. "But that's not what wins wars; it's national will. When

the American people get the idea of what this war is about, they will lose interest. We will win it on the streets of New York. You and your fellow POWs will help them understand. You will be their teachers." That was a distinction the POWs refused.

They withstood attempts at coercion by developing a survivalist mentality accompanied by an alphabetic code that included tapping on walls and blinking Morse code with their eyelids before the world's press when they knew footage would be aired at home.

According to filmmakers Sanders and Mock, it was Ho Chi Minh's intention to brutalize the pilots. After his death in 1969, though, the POWs' treatment improved. But it was not enough to make up for what they endured and still live with today. Hopefully, more than 24 people will never forget that. ★

Marc Phillip Yablonka, a freelance writer residing in Burbank, Calif., has been a frequent contributor to the pages of *THE NATIONAL AMVET* since 1994.



Sobering Footage: A scene from *Return With Honor*.