



James Vincent Di Bernardo 1st Lt, USMC

Unit: Armed Forces Television Network - Hue Detachment
Date of Capture: 05 February 1968
Repatriated on 3 Mar 73
Died in November 2009

The Account of His Capture

A 16 hour battle was raging as I, the officer in charge of the Armed Forces Radio and TV station [in Hue], and my men tried to stave off the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. Finally after an encounter with several Viet Cong, others appeared and set fire to the house. I was shot in the arm by enemy small arms fire but shot my way out and ran to a rice paddy. About 50 North Vietnamese pursued me and with additional wounds from grenade shrapnel I soon became a guest of the North Vietnamese. I was slapped around a bit by one North Vietnamese and another took my glasses and smashed them on the ground. Later the soldiers poured hot iodine on my wounds bound my arms and fed me rice and some bones either cat or rat. Then began the long 55 day trek through the jungles of South Vietnam. Carrying 40 pound sacks of rice on our backs through the rain and with torn feet the hardships of the trail were so much that we found that the Communists did not harass us unnecessarily. There was no way to escape on the march though as a guard was constantly in attendance, besides with no glasses I could not see ten feet.

Later my men and I were placed aboard trucks and transported for the 11 night journey over the Ho Chi Minh Trail to a jungle camp in a southern province of North Vietnam. When we arrived two of us were put in solitary confinement with our feet in stocks. I then met the interrogator for the first time. He spoke English extremely well, French fluently, and was well versed in American slang. He had the ability without using physical force to put the fear of God into one by just saying, "We won't kill you. We'll just make you wish you were dead." One of their favorite methods was to hold a gun to a prisoner's head. But they were not after military information in these sessions, they were after my mind. It began there in the jungle camp in the closet, my solitary confinement room, and it didn't end until I left the "Little Vegas" complex in the Hanoi Hilton on March 5 1973. During one interrogation, they mentioned the NFL to me; I thought they meant the National Football League. I was to learn quite a lot about those initials - the

National Front of Liberation.

At one point an 18 year old Army trooper, who was paralyzed in his feet and legs, ate a tube of toothpaste. The North Vietnamese demanded an apology. I helped write that letter, saying that the man was sorry but that if he had more to eat he would be less likely to eat toothpaste. This infuriated them and they put the "culprit" on bread and water and refused to give him toothpaste for three months.

One of my most trying times was a three week stint, fourteen hours a day, on a seven inch square stool. They wanted me to make a statement about the anti-war demonstrators. I held out as long as I could. After three years of this type of interrogation they finally changed their "brainwashing technique."

How exciting it was to come home, and what excitement to learn that my wife had given birth to twins shortly after my capture. They were 4 when I saw them for the first time and I had not even known that I had two new additions to the family. Sharen had been pregnant before I left for Vietnam in October 1967 and one of the first questions I asked my old friend and escort, Second Lieutenant Tom Kingry, was what she had, a boy or a girl? Handing me two cigars, he replied, "She had twins, two girls, Susan and Joy and they're doing fine."



God Bless you all!

James Di Bernado retired from the United States Marine Corps as a Major. He and his wife Shen reside in Temecula, California.

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A HERO LOOKS BACK

Temecula resident Jim Di Bernardo, a POW in Vietnam, has lost his idealistic view of the war. by Joe Vargo The Press-Enterprise TEMECULA CA

Jim Di Bernardo's shooting war came to an end 32 years ago today.

It was the height of the Tet offensive, the communist invasion of South Vietnam that helped shift American public opinion against U.S. involvement in the war. Di Bernardo, a Marine lieutenant, was captured during savage fighting around the former imperial capital of Hue.

What followed was five years of isolation, mental and physical mistreatment and repeated attempts by communist interrogators to brainwash him. Di Bernardo was held in a string of North Vietnamese prisons, including the notorious "Hanoi Hilton," where Republican presidential hopeful John McCain also was a prisoner.

His war became a personal struggle to survive each day.

Di Bernardo helped organize communications among prisoners, passing notes of encouragement to injured and demoralized Americans and confounding enemy attempts to uncover and destroy the network.

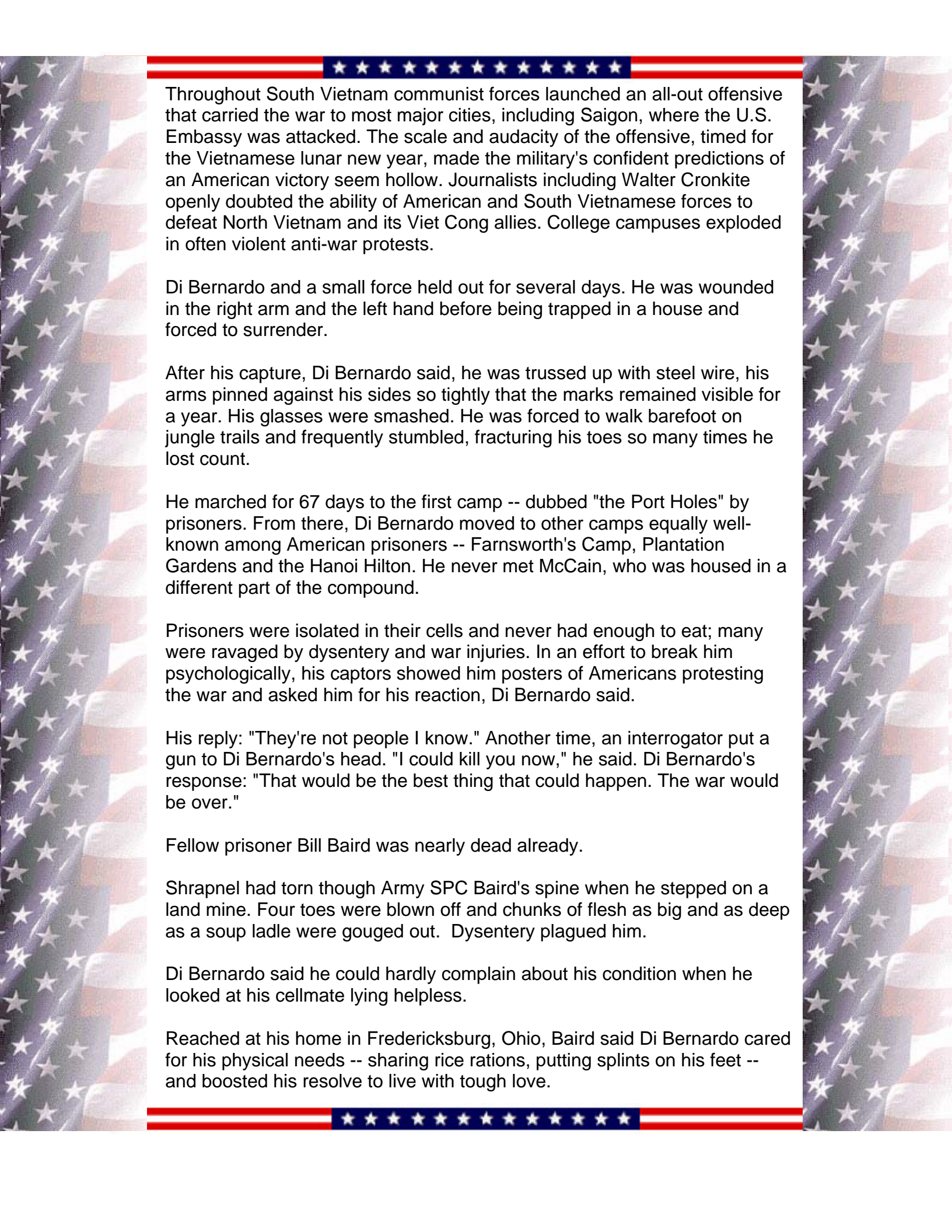
Confined in the same cell with an American mangled by a land mine, Di Bernardo's daily care and pep talks are credited with keeping the man alive. The years have changed Di Bernardo's perspective on the war.

"When I went to Vietnam, I believed we were there to save the South Vietnamese people from oppression and aggression," said Di Bernardo, 65, an insurance agent in Temecula. "Now, my thoughts are that we backed all the wrong people and caused a lot of misery for the Vietnamese and for ourselves."

Di Bernardo arrived in Hue in October 1967 to run an Armed Forces Vietnam Network station.

Rumors of an enemy attack on Hue began to circulate in late January 1968. Di Bernardo discounted them. A Marine division was just a few miles away and the Army's vaunted First Air Cavalry Division was also in the area. But mortar and rocket attacks told Di Bernardo that the war had arrived in his front yard.

"It was like watching a movie and we had front-row seats," Di Bernardo said. "Our aircraft came in at treetop levels to bomb and strafe buildings directly behind us. We were shot at by American gunships, who mistook us for the enemy. We were tear-gassed. We had no gas masks."

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Throughout South Vietnam communist forces launched an all-out offensive that carried the war to most major cities, including Saigon, where the U.S. Embassy was attacked. The scale and audacity of the offensive, timed for the Vietnamese lunar new year, made the military's confident predictions of an American victory seem hollow. Journalists including Walter Cronkite openly doubted the ability of American and South Vietnamese forces to defeat North Vietnam and its Viet Cong allies. College campuses exploded in often violent anti-war protests.

Di Bernardo and a small force held out for several days. He was wounded in the right arm and the left hand before being trapped in a house and forced to surrender.

After his capture, Di Bernardo said, he was trussed up with steel wire, his arms pinned against his sides so tightly that the marks remained visible for a year. His glasses were smashed. He was forced to walk barefoot on jungle trails and frequently stumbled, fracturing his toes so many times he lost count.

He marched for 67 days to the first camp -- dubbed "the Port Holes" by prisoners. From there, Di Bernardo moved to other camps equally well-known among American prisoners -- Farnsworth's Camp, Plantation Gardens and the Hanoi Hilton. He never met McCain, who was housed in a different part of the compound.

Prisoners were isolated in their cells and never had enough to eat; many were ravaged by dysentery and war injuries. In an effort to break him psychologically, his captors showed him posters of Americans protesting the war and asked him for his reaction, Di Bernardo said.

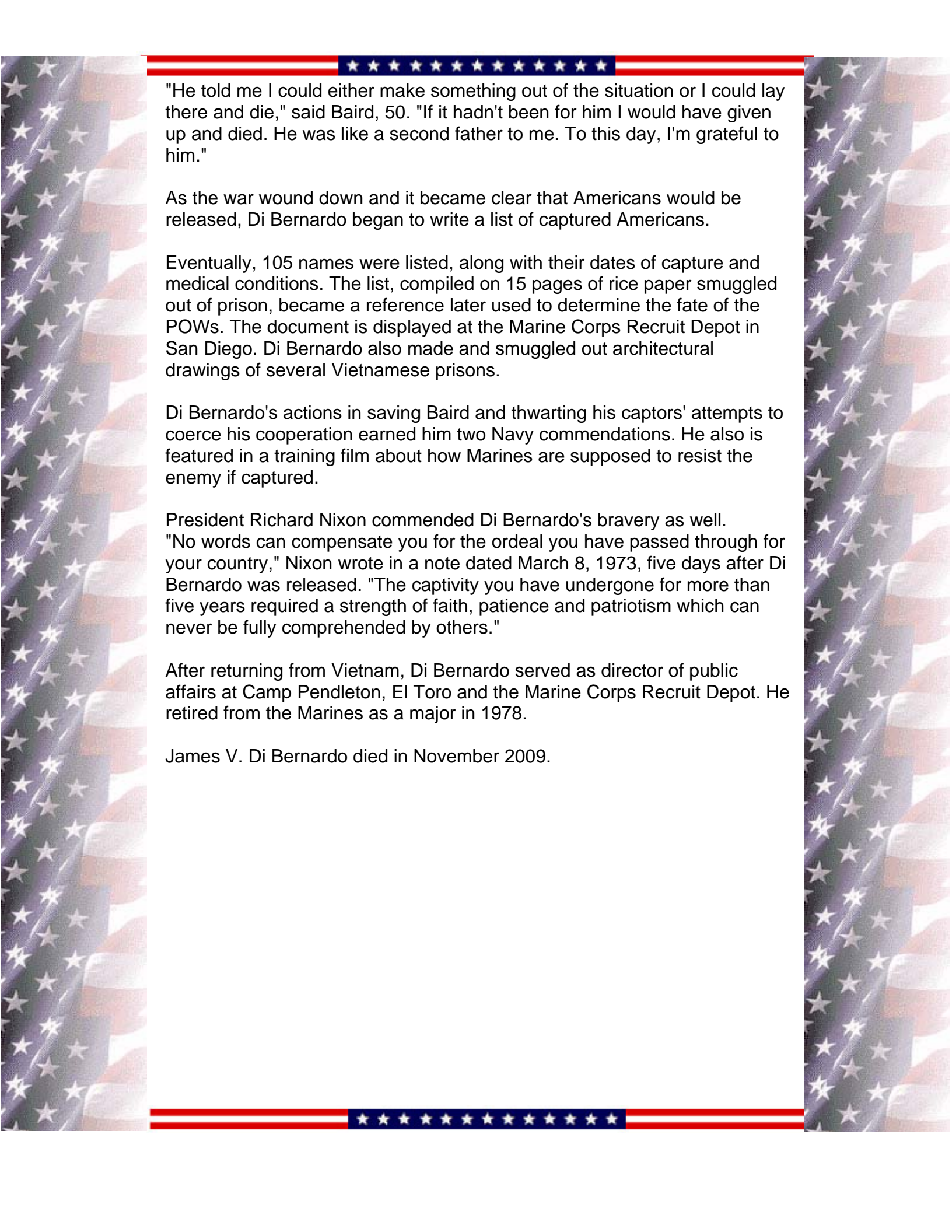
His reply: "They're not people I know." Another time, an interrogator put a gun to Di Bernardo's head. "I could kill you now," he said. Di Bernardo's response: "That would be the best thing that could happen. The war would be over."

Fellow prisoner Bill Baird was nearly dead already.

Shrapnel had torn through Army SPC Baird's spine when he stepped on a land mine. Four toes were blown off and chunks of flesh as big and as deep as a soup ladle were gouged out. Dysentery plagued him.

Di Bernardo said he could hardly complain about his condition when he looked at his cellmate lying helpless.

Reached at his home in Fredericksburg, Ohio, Baird said Di Bernardo cared for his physical needs -- sharing rice rations, putting splints on his feet -- and boosted his resolve to live with tough love.

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"He told me I could either make something out of the situation or I could lay there and die," said Baird, 50. "If it hadn't been for him I would have given up and died. He was like a second father to me. To this day, I'm grateful to him."

As the war wound down and it became clear that Americans would be released, Di Bernardo began to write a list of captured Americans.

Eventually, 105 names were listed, along with their dates of capture and medical conditions. The list, compiled on 15 pages of rice paper smuggled out of prison, became a reference later used to determine the fate of the POWs. The document is displayed at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. Di Bernardo also made and smuggled out architectural drawings of several Vietnamese prisons.

Di Bernardo's actions in saving Baird and thwarting his captors' attempts to coerce his cooperation earned him two Navy commendations. He also is featured in a training film about how Marines are supposed to resist the enemy if captured.

President Richard Nixon commended Di Bernardo's bravery as well. "No words can compensate you for the ordeal you have passed through for your country," Nixon wrote in a note dated March 8, 1973, five days after Di Bernardo was released. "The captivity you have undergone for more than five years required a strength of faith, patience and patriotism which can never be fully comprehended by others."

After returning from Vietnam, Di Bernardo served as director of public affairs at Camp Pendleton, El Toro and the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. He retired from the Marines as a major in 1978.

James V. Di Bernardo died in November 2009.