

Harker, David Army POW

[00:00:17.53] DAVID HARKER: I finished high school and got an associate degree from Bluefield College, went to Virginia Tech. I was there, had academic problems, and my 2-S status changed. I had to sit out a quarter. We were on a quarter system in those days. And so I came back. And the paper mill where I worked, Mead Corporation, took me back early as part-time labor. But I came home one day, and I had my greeting. So I became a draftee.

[00:00:42.46] I'm one of seven children, Jack and Louise Harker met in Columbia, South Carolina, where my father got his electrical engineering degree at the University of South Carolina. She's a little country girl. But they ended up in Lynchburg just after World War II. In fact, I was born in Lynchburg. I was a third of the children; already had an older brother, older sister.

[00:01:04.24] We opened and closed the church. My parents were very faithful, strong Christians, not only in attending church, but in the way they lived their lives and how they looked out for other people. Looked after the children first, loved, and nurtured us. So I came up in a really good environment-- suburbia, just outside of the Lynchburg, Virginia. I went to a county school. Close-knit community. And just came up in the '50s. And families were together. And like I said, I think of the little street we were on, and everybody seemed to go to church on Sunday. And just good values.

[00:01:41.23] And anyway, here I end up in the Army and quite an experience. My mother had two brothers-- three brothers, and they all served. Two in the Navy and one with the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks. And he never did really see any-- he was supposed to, I guess, be involved in the invasion, but the war ended. Anyway-- and the other two were in the Navy-- on troop transport, one, and the other on an LSD.

[00:02:10.54] DAVID HARKER: Well, once I got to Virginia Tech-- in Bluefield, there from '64 to '65, '66-- I ended up at Tech in the fall of '66-- the war really was starting to gear up. I had a good friend from Bluefield College and from my hometown I went to church with, Steve Neeson. Steve had a television set. We were sharing this floor-- these four floors. First two floors were just the Corps of Cadets, and up above were civilians. But he had a TV, and he'd every night have Walter Cronkite on. And it was starting to heat up and--

[00:02:49.00] My first impression, I remember, was in the high school library at Bluefield High School, looking at TIME magazine and a Buddhist monk burning himself. And of course, that made-- whoow, I mean, that makes an impression on you.

[00:02:59.14] MARK FRANKLIN: Made an impression. Sure.

[00:02:59.95] DAVID HARKER: And I didn't give it a whole lot more thought than that, but-- And I think in those days, the prevailing thought was, if the government is doing it, it's right. And that's kind of was my thought when I went in the military.

[00:03:17.01] DAVID HARKER: Was there for nine weeks, finished my basic training, and flew from Raleigh-Durham down to New Orleans; took a bus up to Leesville, Louisiana at Fort Polk, home of infantry training for Vietnam, so-- Different atmosphere than college campus, but you had a strong sense-- it was developed among all the draftees and enlistees from all over the country.

[00:03:44.74] At college, I pretty much-- my core friends were people from my hometown or-- they were Virginians. And here I was thrown in with people from Philadelphia; Pennsylvania; and Detroit, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois. And off the farms of Georgia. In fact, some of the men went on to advanced training from Bragg down to Polk, so got to know them more.

[00:04:07.83] DAVID HARKER: Real structured, of course, and up-- everything was by the book-- and run or double time; and come back, clean the barracks, get everything spick-and-span; make the bunk, get it tight as you can; and then off to the chow line. Had a company size mess hall. And, of course, we had KP. That was fun. I always tried to sign up first so I could get outside guy. I liked working and-- be outside guy.

[00:04:35.13] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure.

[00:04:35.49] DAVID HARKER: I like the great outdoors. But training exposed me to another race of people. I grew up in the segregated South. And most of the cadre at Bragg were black Americans. And I've never felt like I had any prejudice. But here I am, I'm thrown in, and they were really well trained.

[00:04:59.91] They were good, and they understood where we were going. And they concentrated on it, and they instilled that in us-- you've got to be on your toes. You've got to take everything in. They're not just training you just for the fun of it. It all has some meaning. And the rote-- and I thought this, three years of college is-- but yeah, I understood later what they were talking about.

[00:05:27.99] DAVID HARKER: Got drafted June 1, 1967. Went to Roanoke, Virginia, the induction center. Took the oath of office. Took the oath there to uphold the Constitution. And then drove from there, from Greens-- from there down to Fort Bragg.

[00:05:45.09] When we trained-- your training-- and, of course, in the back of your mind, I guess you're thinking, well, I'll probably end up in Vietnam. I mean, it's heating up even more. They're committing more troops. But it wasn't till we got to Fort Polk in the middle of the afternoon, on a Sunday afternoon-- had flown from Raleigh-Durham, took a bus ride.

[00:06:08.16] And here we are. Things were quiet on post, take us into this reception area. And the thing-- by then, I knew rank. I didn't when I went in. And now I realize, we got a Spec-4 up here; rather than a major, some officer greeting us. And he said, well, this is your training for Vietnam and you all will get orders for Vietnam. And it just kind of hits you. You knew about it. But once somebody standing there telling you, well, this is our preparation, and we are going-- again, you had some knowledge, but when someone says it--

[00:06:44.19] So when I left there, they cut orders to the 9th Infantry Division. I trained, as the 1-1-H, an 11H, recoilless rifle. And when I got to Vietnam, I became 11 Bravo like everybody else. But we had visions, those of us who trained on the recoilless rifle, of riding around on the back of a Jeep with the 9th Infantry Division somewhere in a secure area like Saigon or somewhere. Instead, I got orders for the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, which I knew nothing about.

[00:07:17.86] And so I eventually joined D Company, 3rd of the 21st, 196th Light Infantry Brigade. And we were part of the Americal Division, the 23rd Infantry. And they were stationed-- brigade headquarters were at Chu Lai. That's where they were. So we came to 90th Replacement and took a C-130. Made a pass. And they said, well, they're under attack. There's some mortars coming in, so we've got to make a pass around. So they landed the next go around.

[00:07:48.15] I got in Vietnam November the 15th and was held at 90th Replacement about a week. In fact, had Thanksgiving there. I still have the Thanksgiving-- my wife can't believe it. She said, this thing's-- that sounds like a feast. I said, well, it was pretty-- concrete floor, pretty Spartan conditions, weren't as bad as where we got to later. But I said, they had a great meal laid out for us-- turkey and all the trimmings. And anyway, they had a menu printed up, and I still have it at home.

[00:08:19.27] DAVID HARKER: The heat was oppressive. But see, we had landed in Guam after a night flight from California, and refueled in Hawaii, and then flew all the way over the Pacific in darkness. And we landed just as the sun was coming up in Guam. And we got off the aircraft, and-- but in Vietnam that's-- it's not just the heat. I don't remember the odor in Guam. But in Vietnam there was just an odor. I don't know how to describe it, but just--

[00:08:50.86] That was interesting because here we have infantry guys or guys rotating, and some of them-- I'm sure infantry-- they're going to get on this commercial airline, and we're getting off. And they said, here's my replacement, there's my replacement. And they were jabbing us about how-- and then they said, hey, hope you make it back. Good luck.

[00:09:11.32] And we got on the bus and went down to the 90th Replacement. So as we're driving down this road from Bien Hoa airstrip, you just see these-- I had not been in a Third World country, but welcome-- with, of course, baggage on their shoulders and on their backs. And you don't see a lot of cars, but I see bicycles.

[00:09:34.19] And we passed these little mini villages and this just rude, crude craftsmanship you can see. They're building a building. And I say, brick mason wouldn't be doing that, but you just-- and then I got to see more of it once I got to my unit and got out of the firebase where I worked, because we worked in a real remote area in the Que Son/Hiep Duc area in Quang Nam Province up in I Corps.

[00:10:07.35] When we got to Chu Lai, they had a little refresher course for infantry called the Charger Brigade, and it was just a little makeshift training camp. And so we were just at brigade. I got assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry-- 3rd of the 21st-- and there was 2nd of the 1st. We all trained there together, and--

[00:10:28.71] So I wasn't there but a few nights. And then took a deuce-and-a-half load of us up to Tam Ky up on Highway-- up Highway 1 out of Chu Lai-- 15, 20-minute drive. And they had a little staging area there where the helicopters came and picked us up and flew us out the firebase, about 15 or 20 miles west of where we were.

[00:10:50.55] When we got to Tam Ky, we were right in the middle of the civilian population, a lot of little kids. I remember just the children. And you're thinking, well, it's school time. And to see a little four-year-old kid smoking a cigarette, that's really-- [CHUCKLES] it's like, what? And they were just real curious, and we talked to them. Some of them did know a little English, a little Pidgin English. And they did have school, they said.

[00:11:19.31] DAVID HARKER: How we operated, the 3rd of the 21st, was one company-- there were four companies-- pulled perimeter for the artillery on the firebase, and-- the three companies out in the field-- doing search and destroy, moving about 1,000, 1,500 meters a day, doing ambushes, whatever, company-sized operations

[00:11:42.32] would every four days get resupplied. Helicopters would bring in C-rations and Mermite cans of hot food. So we got a hot meal every four days if you were lucky. If you got socked in, you had to make C-rations last longer. But B Company had gotten some bad food. It had sat somewhere we found out later, turkey. They came crawling up. And I mean, they were just heaving.

[00:12:04.01] So anyway, they replaced us. And we walked off the firebase that night, down past artillery pieces and down off the hillside and into the villages. And so the whole month of December, my company was in Que Son Valley, just north of that firebase. And the Hiep Duc Valley was just almost straight west of that firebase.

[00:12:37.78] And so that's where the 2nd of the 1st was. We were the Que Son, we called it Happy Valley. And I found out later the Marines operated in that area too. 101st had been in there because we saw a Screaming Eagle magazine. The 196th had been down in Tay Ninh Province and had moved up north to I Corps sometime in the fall of '67, just before I came in country. So they hadn't been there and operating there long.

[00:13:07.37] DAVID HARKER: In country, I was with my unit 30-- maybe 38, 40 days before I got captured.

[00:13:15.05] MARK FRANKLIN: Is that-- OK, we'll get to that.

[00:13:16.46] DAVID HARKER: And it's interesting because in that time, I can go back and tell you about George Sehi who was killed the day we were ambushed. He was my platoon sergeant. And he was acting. They were getting ready to promote him. And he was from California, from Los Angeles. His father had a sporting goods store there, as I recall him telling about it, in the Watts area, and didn't get burned out during the riots.

[00:13:41.18] And just-- good kid. And he had been in country probably seven or eight months. And he had just come back from R&R. He took R&R to Hawaii, and you're not-- he jumped a

plane and went stateside and met his family. And he was just starting to get pictures back from that.

[00:14:00.56] A man, Griffin, that trained with me at Bragg and Fort Polk, was killed the day I was captured. From down in Georgia, and I don't know where. Just a typical country guy. And big guy. Big guy. And just quiet guy, but did his duty. And every-- one of the guys-- one of those people everybody liked. I can't think of anybody we didn't like. We were all a pretty tight-knit group, Everybody with good personalities, pretty congenial. We got along really well.

[00:14:36.89] My first lieutenant, Frank Sieverts, loved horses. And he was in horse country up in Albemarle County, and we talked a little bit about that. And he was killed the day I was captured. He was my platoon leader.

[00:14:50.39] And my commanding officer was Roland Belcher, a black American. And I remember, at the end of December, we'd been out in the valley. They picked us up, and we did an air assault in to the beaches just east of Tam Ky. And then we got on deuce-and-a-halves and went back down for in-country R&R, stand-down. And we were supposed to be there, I think, about six or seven days. And about the third day, they called us back because there was a lot of action. We were getting hit pretty hard, so they brought us back out on Chinooks.

[00:15:29.84] But while we were there in the day area, we didn't have our weapons, we didn't have to pull guard-- if you're out in the field, hey, somebody's in. And another thing I didn't mention, we were understrength. Infantry line companies have 200 or so men. We had 85, 86 men in my line.

[00:15:45.62] MARK FRANKLIN: In the company?

[00:15:46.46] DAVID HARKER: Yes--

[00:15:47.06] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:15:47.32] DAVID HARKER: --we did. We did. So pulling-- you got a squad over here. You got four or five men. So you're going to pull guard two hours. Wake somebody up, they're going to pull two, and you might pull another because you're in a position, and you don't want to get overrun.

[00:16:03.27] Captain Belcher called us into the day room. And he said, guys-- he said, I'm really proud of us being here, of what we're doing. He said, something really strikes me is, we were down in Tay Ninh Province when they had the general elections back in September. The first time they held an election. And we provided security for that to happen. He said, just think about that.

[00:16:24.47] I thought, wow. Here he is talking to the troops. And generally, he's off with headquarters people, and you're getting communication on the radio. But here he was telling us we're about-- one of the reasons we're there, for these people to be able to make some decisions

on their own and have some individual liberties, and, of course, voting being the most important. So he gave a little pep talk, and he got killed the day I was captured.

[00:16:58.69] DAVID HARKER: Hadn't made any contact. We'd seen some movement, but never had any engagements, really. And we were pulled back after this in-country R&R. Got on Chinooks about four or five of them,, and it was still dark. And we landed in Que Son Valley. And we humped that day.

[00:17:21.37] And the sun had come out. During December, it was overcast. And during the rainy season, at night, it was maybe in the 50s. So it was a little cooler. Then in the daytime, it would warm up. But it was just misty, overcast, low ceiling. And like I said, sometimes helicopters couldn't get in. One time, we went about six or seven days, and we started getting food from the Vietnamese villagers.

[00:17:44.56] And we got up back up on firebase before nightfall. And all we knew was there had been some activity. And that night, I went back to a position where I had been previously, the first part of December, up on Firebase Central.

[00:18:01.12] And around dusk, Company C, 2nd of the 1st, got hit. And we watched the fire fight, the tracer rounds. Saw helicopter gunships come in, and they shot flares all night and then dropped them. And artillery was going all night. They had the guns going all night.

[00:18:25.18] The next day, we came off of the firebase right straight down. It was a pretty-- in fact, one guy broke his leg on the way down-- it was pretty rough terrain. He got medevaced out. We got picked up in one of the ships. There were about five or six guys on it, full combat gear. And it couldn't lift off the ground. It was a weak ship. So they had to get a couple of guys off, and they took off.

[00:18:49.32] In fact, these Hueys, these slicks they put us in, the pilots apparently were afraid of getting hit, getting a lot of fire. And so they dropped us-- they hovered about 10 feet, and the door gunners were kicking us out onto the ground.

[00:19:05.79] [LAUGHTER]

[00:19:06.79] So-- and we weren't under fire. It was a quiet area. But we got to a position where the attack had taken place, and C Company had just been pretty much annihilated. I don't know all the details, but another company or two had already-- because they'd already stacked up dead Vietnamese.

[00:19:28.36] But we came through, and we could-- there were still some dead Americans there, and you could-- the stench of dead bodies that are already started to decay, I mean, in that heat, extreme heat. And I just remember seeing a bush hat. And I could just imagine the guy taking a break. They'd set their perimeter up, took his steel pot off and put his bush hat on. And there was part of his head lying there in the bush hat. And you could almost get a picture of them with their perimeter. And I think the Vietnamese were already in these spider holes and came up and hit them, not only from outside, but hit them from inside.

[00:20:09.16] Frank Anton and his crew got shot down. Three of them were taken prisoner, and the co-pilot managed to escape and evade and got back to friendlies. But they told us later in the POW camp that they rolled in, and they wanted both flanks marked, and there was only one, so they couldn't put fire in because they didn't want to hit their own people.

[00:20:30.38] So they rolled, and that's when they got hit and went down. So the helicopter was there with the tail boom up in the air. He auto rotated and hit the rice paddy, stopped him in the thing. And they were hanging upside down in the gunship. They got out.

[00:20:44.83] That was the area. And that night we dug in, we thought we were going to get hit, there and here. We'd had reports the whole month of December that two or three regiments of them out there. And you're walking around and you're thinking, well, what are they talking about? Where are they?

[00:21:00.88] Guerilla warfare, I wasn't well trained in-- well, I knew, but didn't know till later. And we didn't get hit that night, and we started moving the next day. And they got a tracker team in looking for the helicopter crew. They were missing in action, and they knew they'd been taken. And so we operated.

[00:21:23.17] But on the 8th of January, we got up, and we had formed a task force of some type. I think B Company, 2nd and 1st was there, us, and another company. And I'm just a private first class, so I don't know a lot except I'm carrying a weapon and when I am called on and I'm supposed to fight.

[00:21:45.46] But on 8th, we got on line with B company and swept down through the valley, a big open area. We're sweeping down through the valley, men on line, chest to chest, shoulder to shoulder. And we're going down through, and we don't make any contact. But it's around noontime, and we've moved-- I don't know how far we've moved.

[00:22:10.84] It's a pretty big area we're covering. And river on one side, mountains on the other. And on the other side of the river is another mountain or rolling hills. But pretty big mountain range to our right that separates Hiep Duc from the Que Son Valley, two valleys, that were pretty big infiltration routes, I believe, for the North Vietnamese.

[00:22:33.76] But when we saw the dead, they had on-- we knew they were NVA. They were not Viet Cong. They didn't have the black, traditional-- they had green uniforms on. Some of them have pith helmets. And they had AK-47s, if we could find any. In general, after the battle, they policed their own and got out with the weapons. And didn't want to leave the dead, but they did, sometimes in a hurry.

[00:22:57.05] But we started to break for lunch. And B Company, we lost contact with them. I don't remember where they went. But I remember our company is getting ready to cross, I think, the O Lau River and set up a perimeter. And we spot some movement, and we fire on it.

[00:23:15.94] And I don't know why, but they decided not to call artillery on them. And I found out later that the Vietnamese that had hit C Company had pulled back into the mountains. And

intelligence knew they were back in the area, and had gotten-- had not gotten to our company. I don't know what the protocol was, but it had not gotten to us that they were back in the area, and they already had the ambush set up.

[00:23:39.86] And so we stopped firing and crossed the river to set up a perimeter. And a helicopter-- and it had been sunny, but it now-- it was socked in. It was raining a little bit. And a helicopter brought us some resupplies. And it took some ground fire.

[00:23:56.50] And so the old man got on the horn, Captain Belcher, and he said-- he told each platoon leader he wanted just a few men from each platoon to go out and search for this person. You could hear the pop-pop of the carbine. And so we went looking for a man with a carbine. And there were about 20 of us.

[00:24:16.60] And I tell people I'm not from Tennessee. I've never volunteered for anything. But I didn't have much of an appetite. I hadn't got used to the weather and eating C-rations. I just ate a little bit. And so I was through eating. The other guys were still eating. And so I grabbed my M16 and went off with these guys.

[00:24:36.43] And we had Lieutenant Sieverts. Sieverts was with us and Lieutenant Brown from another platoon. Like I said, about 20 of us all together. I don't remember whether we had a machine gun. I think we're just mainly M16s and M79s.

[00:24:51.43] And we could hear the pop-pop. It was still calling to us, and we couldn't tell where it was coming from. So we went back in the village that we just left on the other side of the river. And we did work fire and movement, lay down a base of fire and move forward.

[00:25:05.71] And we knew civilians were in there, but they had gotten shelter and none of them were hit. And we threw some grenades in, and we went in the village. Nobody there. The villagers forgot to tell us they're back on the other side of the river.

[00:25:16.84] And the decision was made we're going to go into this village on the other side of the river where we had just come from. I don't know why we didn't go into that first. But we're going to go into that village and do the same thing, fire and movement. And by that time, Captain Belcher had joined us. He had his RTO with him. Of course, we had our forward observer and his RTO.

[00:25:37.69] So the last I saw-- he had a little staging area there. So we were going to leave five men as rear support. We don't know where they are. And we got a CP over here, leave five men as rear support, 15 or so of us get on line and go into this village and see if we could ferret them out, find out what's going on, see where the enemy might be.

[00:26:00.98] And with that, he crossed-- he had his rain suit on, I remember, his M16, his RTO right behind him and a forward observer. I was the last man in a file of men. And the last I saw Belcher, he was running point which-- he should have stayed there and been in command, had his command post. And he was that gung ho.

[00:26:22.06] And I'm in the middle of O Lau River. It's during the rainy season, and the current's pretty swift. The river's up to my waist. And I'm just getting along, trying not to lose my footing and let the current catch me. And I hear the distinct sound of a mortar going down the tube. And I hear it hit the bottom and come out-- whistle out.

[00:26:42.98] And I said-- your hackles go up, I mean, I've been in combat, but I knew-- it's just instinctive. I knew we were under attack. And they walked those mortars and pushed those guys right into the ambush they had set up. And they killed Captain Belcher, Frank Sieverts, and Sehi, Griffin, Rodriguez. I don't know all the names of the guys.

[00:27:08.18] But they killed all but about six people. My first sergeant was able to pull back off the battlefield. When I got across the river-- there was a creek that came in to the river right there. And there was a big creek bank, about 5 feet or so, and it offered protection. And I joined five other men who had been able to pull back off, get away from that withering fire and out of the field of fire.

[00:27:33.20] And so we became a fighting force. And they came up. It seemed like they came up out of the ground. They were coming down on us. We were shooting, and there was a machine gun emplacement over behind us of about four men. And their gun jammed up. And the next thing we looked, and they were gone. We'd been calling to them. They killed our RTO, so we had no radio contact.

[00:28:01.61] By default, Sergeant Williams became the commander of this small unit. Had been in Korea, fortunately; had seen combat; had just earned a Silver Star down with a mechanized unit. I found this out later. And Top was 41 years old, and he became the commanding officer.

[00:28:22.25] We eventually were able to break contact with them some way. I think-- all I can do is speculate, that they-- I think they had orders first to take prisoners. I believe that if-- because they took a lot of casualties, eventually getting us, and that's not how they operated. And then the POW camp I ended up in, it started growing. And they took prisoners, infantry guys, from the Marines from other areas. So that makes me think that they had orders, so-- get some Americans.

[00:28:55.85] So we broke contact even though they had overwhelming numbers. We had no artillery. We couldn't call in close-in, direct fire. Rather than going back and join the five guys, Top said, we ought to low crawl and get back, shorten the distance because there's a lot of open rice paddy between us and our CP. So if we moved up this creek, that shortened the distance to where our CP was. And we started working our way back to our CP.

[00:29:20.60] We had to go up over the rice-- the creek bank leveled out at some point. And they were in the tree lines, and they spotted us. And they moved their automatic weapons. By the time about the third man went up and over this rice paddy dike, they had started concentrating their fire on us. And so we started doing fire and movement again. We started-- they knew where we were, so we started firing back at them and no longer were we hidden.

[00:29:44.75] And it was me and Michael Oliver. Top went up and over. And he yelled out. He said, the next man comes up over this rice paddy dike-- this creek bank-- he said, you have got to get down quick. He said, the fire is heavy.

[00:29:56.33] So Michael Oliver is there. I'm there. Ollie's from Tennessee. Again, a country kid, 6'2" or so. He lumbered around, pretty skinny guy. He loved ham, bean-- lima beans, ham and limas.

[00:30:11.72] And I just remember him having an ashen look on his face. And he decided he's going next. He'd been in country eight months. He had an M79. Top had an M79. One of the M16s had jammed up right after we got hit.

[00:30:26.33] Vince Coughlin, who had taken training with me, from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania-- I tried to kick the operating rod handle. He had one with a catch on. Some of the others didn't. He had-- I tried to kick that catch. Of course, it was loaded and locked. Anyway, we couldn't. So we only had five-- two M79s, three M16s.

[00:30:44.15] So Ollie goes up and over, and he gets shot. He gets riddled with fire. And Top yells down. He said, hold your position, Harker. And he starts yelling. He said, take it easy, Ollie. He said, I know you're hit, I'm hit too. He had already taken a round through his left hand. He already-- hadn't said a word, so it went on through and just shattered his hand. And he tried to keep Ollie from going into shock. And Ollie started calling for his mother, and then he died. And Top yelled down. He said, just, hey-- and he yelled to the guys behind him.

[00:31:21.02] And we were at different locations. One guy had a pretty good vantage point. He got up on a rice paddy dike, this tiered rice paddy dike. And he could see the tree line where they were. And he'd yell, you got somebody coming on your right front about 15 meters away. Top, with his wounded hand and without having to get up and expose himself, would shoot that M79. And Francis Eugene Cannon, PFC Cannon, said, hey, you missed. And he would adjust with a Kentucky windage. And then Top would put it on automatic and fire.

[00:31:50.33] And anyway, I tell people I was lying there. I'm the most forward man. There they are in the tree line. They're coming at us. And I just remember, I'm going to die. I'm 22 years old, and I'm going to die. There's no way I'm going to make it out of this. It's over.

[00:32:06.56] And a verse of scripture-- I grew up in a church, remember-- learned memory verses-- "To live is Christ, to die is gain," started going through my head. "To live is Christ, to die is gain." I said, hey, we believe in eternity. Here it is. And so I calmed down and said, hey. And my next thought was, I hope I get hit in the head. I'm gone quick. Pretty selfish thought, but

[00:32:30.47] anyway, so we fought like that. And again, they tried to come up-- in fact, one time during the day, I think, Mark, we held off maybe three hours. And you say, three hours?

[00:32:42.70] MARK FRANKLIN: With five men?

[00:32:44.29] DAVID HARKER: Yeah.

[00:32:45.21] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:32:45.41] DAVID HARKER: And again, they had orders, I'm sure, to take people. Maybe I'm wrong, but I remember it was just after lunch and it was just a little before dark before they got us. And the sun went down around 5:00. So I'm figuring in 1 o'clock to-- but I don't know-- two hours anyway, we were engaged. But they could have overrun us, shot every one of us, and killed us. I mean, they owned the battlefield.

[00:33:07.85] During the day, somebody said, oh, here come friendlies. Here come friendlies. And then they-- oh, no. They started shooting. It was the enemy. They were coming up. They had gotten behind them. So they were around, and they were maneuvering around. The five men in rear support, I'll go ahead and tell them-- I saw them later at a reunion in 1990. They all made it. One of them got-- some of them got shot pretty bad. But they were eventually able to hold off, and they made it out.

[00:33:29.32] MARK FRANKLIN: They made it out. Wow.

[00:33:30.41] DAVID HARKER: They made it out. It's later on in the day, there were lulls, and then they're coming. OK? One time I saw a helicopter at about 2,000 feet with the Red Cross, medevac ship, coming down to get us. Well, it took intense fire. It was gone. I'm thinking, well, if they know our location, why can't they call fire in here?

[00:33:52.94] And then here comes the Phantom. I'm lying here in this creep bank. They're about 30 meters away. And I see it release 100-pound bomb-- 50, 100-pound bomb, and it's coming end over end. And so I'm down, very much so. And it hit, and it made one more pass. And I see it again. So somebody had our coordinates.

[00:34:20.66] Vince Coughlin-- I'm getting ahead of myself again-- the weapon was not operating. He played dead. He said they were interested in his Seiko watch. They almost pulled his arm-- his hand-- wrist off, getting the Seiko watch. Didn't check his pulse. He had pulled some dead Americans over him. And he said they left him. He made it back.

[00:34:43.55] When I got back years later, I'm at Valley Forge. Don't know what happened to Coughlin. Last I knew Coughlin was alive. They were taking prisoners, he's not a prisoner, so he must have died-- he and Booker. I knew Ollie had died.

[00:34:56.72] And I come back after a day of medical examinations on the little ward where I'm living, a little living area, and there's Vince Coughlin. He told me when we started talking about it. He said that bomb hit and threw about 15, 20 of them up in the air. He said it hit right in the middle of them, a group of them. But anyway, close in support really is important for infantry people.

[00:35:21.29] So anyway, it's quiet-- again, time is moving slowly, but it's, like I said, been a while. And I hear a Vietnamese voice. And the tonal sounds and the pitch, you could-- and I do a 90 and got up on my elbow. I'm in the prone position, up on my elbows with an M16. And there's Top, standing up with his hands up, no steel pot on.

[00:35:52.37] He said during the day a bullet hit and just ripped his steel pot off the plastic web piece just like a can opener. So he took it off. And during the day his M79 exploded. And so he grabbed Ollie's and used Ollie's M79, used all his basic load of ammunition and Ollie's too.

[00:36:13.64] And anyway, he knows I'm down there, and he said he's trying to divert the guy away from me. Well, the guy was standing right behind him. I mean, I could almost reach out and touch him there, about to there. And, of course if I pull the trigger, the guy's dead.

[00:36:26.57] I did something an infantry Soldier is not supposed to do-- I thought. If I shoot him, somebody is covering, and they're going to just drop Top right there. There's got to be-- and I'm just-- if I have any regret in life, that's one. But that's what I did. I lay back down, and he was hoping they wouldn't see me so I could under darkness

[00:36:52.74] crawl down to the river and back to friendlies. And that's how true Soldiers think. They're looking out. And anyway, I'm down, and I hear somebody yelling. And there's a rifleman right on top of me almost. And he's already out of tree line. When I stood up-- I try to bury my M16 so they couldn't have that. I'm standing up, and he's got me.

[00:37:21.63] And as I stand up, there are two riflemen already bent over one of their dead who had gotten from here to that bookcase from here. There's a little, just a little rise in the creek. And the guy got to us. I guess Top had dropped him, or we just shot him. I didn't even know he was there. And these two guys, I hadn't even see them until I stood up and there they were. And they came over, took my backpack off of me.

[00:37:48.34] DAVID HARKER: And then they went around policing the area, these three riflemen that had me. And a guy came out of a tree line with a .45 on, no rifle. Assumed he was an officer, and he was my captor. They put him in charge of me, and they went about getting weapons off their dead and munitions, food, whatever. They were scrounging.

[00:38:12.43] And this man was ahead of me. I was going to tell you how they controlled the battlefield. I'm his captive, and instead of being in front of him, I'm behind him, just a step or two. And training kicked in-- escape as soon after capture as possible. Well, I'm desperate. I'm thinking, where the hell are they taking me? Now, I've been trained. They don't take prisoners. They kill people. And in my mind, I said, they're going to kill me. So here I'm-- they're going to kill me. So escape as soon after-- I'm close to friendlies.

[00:38:40.90] Boom, I've got him. I've got his arms pinned to his side. I got my hand over his mouth. And he's got a bayonet in a scabbard and his .45. The bayonet's handy-- I could stab him, no noise of a gun report. So as soon as I dropped my hand, he started screaming. I can't get the bayonet out of the scabbard. I can't-- it's pulling. And I do in the struggle.

[00:39:10.06] And in my mind, I don't know how long this takes, just a matter of seconds. In my mind, there's a trail there we'd been on earlier. It's a little open creek, and I'm pretty fast with the combat boots. In those conditions, I don't know how fast I can get to that trail and not get shot.

[00:39:24.76] But anyway, I get the .45, it's American issue, taken off an American. And I know how to-- I put it up to his head. He, in the meantime, has gotten his bayonet out. He had reached around behind me and stabbed me in the back. I'm still-- before I wheeled away from him, and I put the gun up to his head and pulled the trigger.

[00:39:43.27] And it's not loaded. It's not-- and, of course, I know you pull the operating rod handle to chamber a round. But when I look up, it looks like a whole North Vietnamese army. They're standing on these rice paddy dike with weapons. And so my punishment was they took my boots. So I walked to my first POW camp without combat boots, barefooted. [CHUCKLES] And we got duck-winged that night.

[00:40:05.22] But anyway, they take me back into this tree line, and American artillery starts coming in. And they put me down in a little hole they've got there that they've dug out, that they've been using to fight from. And I'm thinking I'm going to die from our own artillery. It's going just cave in on me and bury me in this dirt, and nobody's going to find me.

[00:40:25.09] And when the barrage is over, they grabbed me and on up the trail we go. And again, I don't know how many of them had me then. There were three or four of them; one-- some behind, they were riflemen. And they moved me down this trail back to where the command post is, away from our CP. We're going west, CP was back east, so--

[00:40:48.04] Now I was smelling dead bodies, and I think they've got a common grave and they're going to shoot me. For about 30 to 60 days, I'm in this mindset that they're not going to-- my mother tells a story, Mark, about me sitting in our kitchen when I was on 30-day leave between the end of my training at Fort Polk and shipping to Vietnam. And one day, I was sitting there and eating breakfast and talking to her. And she said I said, Mom, I'll be home in a pine box, or I'll be home in a year. They don't take prisoners. They do not-- that was just instilled in me so much with the training-- they don't take prisoners.

[00:41:24.19] Anyway, I'm thinking they're going to shoot me, and they don't. But they take me. And by that time, it's dark. It's dark. And there's a French, old French house there, an old French plantation house. Most of these village huts are just grass, stucco, mud floor-- dirt floors, just poor, impoverished people, just backwards. And they are going the rice in the paddies. And anyways, it's backbreaking work. I felt so sorry for the people once we started operating around there, but--

[00:41:56.65] and they've got-- and they're coming and going. I mean, I don't know how many are there. I'd guess at least a regiment. I mean-- and they're moving. They're coming and going. They've got commo wire strung out. I'm thinking, well, this ragtag outfit-- I thought these people are pretty good at this.

[00:42:13.12] DAVID HARKER: Here are the four of us together, Top, Cannon-- they've gotten Cannon. I didn't know they got him, but he's there too. And then there's another kid there, and I don't-- I'd seen him earlier. Didn't found out till later-- Strickland, James Strickland, PFC. He was in the initial assault. He was out in the open rice paddy, and he said they were dropping like flies. He didn't get hit right away. And he said, what they taught us in basic training was true. We

should have gotten on line, I mean, concentrated our fire-- and the tactics they taught. He said, instead guys just instinctively went down in the prone position.

[00:42:47.15] And he said they were getting chewed up behind these rice paddy dikes. He said bullets were just coming right through them. He said a round exploded next to him, and he went out. When he woke up, he was being dragged with commo wire around his neck off the battlefield. He said, they were just dragging him and choking him to death. And he's trying to grab the wire and keep them-- anyway, so he had been captured early on and already taken to this spot.

[00:43:13.07] And so there were four of us. And they said im lang, which meant be quiet, shut up. And so they told us not to say anything. I don't remember whether an interpreter had come around us. They did say, surrender, no kill; surrender, no kill. All of them knew that. Surrender, no kill.

[00:43:34.30] But anyway, eventually, I was brought out. Top had already been interrogated. He said, don't say anything, Harker. He said, I didn't say anything, didn't tell them anything. And so name, rank, service number, and date of birth. So here I am. Guy speaks broken English, what is your unit? What is your unit? I said, unit, like on a stove? What are you talking about? So I'm trying-- and then I get wise with him, or-- and I don't know he knows that, but he stops. He looks up at them and says something to them and they all started laughing. I figured he's telling them, this SOB doesn't say anything, we just shoot him right here. And they thought that was funny. I don't know what--

[00:44:12.53] So here we are, and I told him name, rank, service number, date of birth. And they were in a hurry and get us off the battlefield and away from the area, so we started moving. And that's when they duck-winged us. They duck-winged me because I tried to escape. They put your arms behind you.

[00:44:29.78] MARK FRANKLIN: Then?

[00:44:30.10] DAVID HARKER: And then you from there to there. And the commo wire is just a--

[00:44:34.51] MARK FRANKLIN: It's very thin wire.

[00:44:35.77] DAVID HARKER: --very thin wire. And they had it so tight that it cut off the circulation.

[00:44:40.12] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh, my.

[00:44:40.59] DAVID HARKER: My arms swelled about three times the normal-- in fact, I thought I was going to lose all feeling there for the rest of my life. It was so tight. In fact, some of the guys along the trail tried to loosen them. Strickland did. He had the use of both of his hands. Top only had one hand. Top was behind me, and then Strickland and Cannon. Cannon was wounded pretty badly. He had taken some shrapnel from a mortar round. Top had his hand

shot. And when he died, he still had a piece of shrapnel that was oozing pus months later, seven months later.

[00:45:14.33] So they tied us together with the commo wire. So it's pretty slippery. I'm in bare feet. It's the rainy season, and these mud trails-- my feet would just go out when I get to an embankment. And I'm jerking Top, killing him. So we finally came up with a plan.

[00:45:30.13] When we get to an embankment, boom, we all get on our-- just slide down like a sliding board. And when we get to creeks, I'm in just excruciating pain. I want some water, and it's raining. And when we get the creek and I'd bend down and started drinking water out of it, that seems to help relieve some of the pain. And they'd yell at me.

[00:45:49.36] But we went through some artillery barrages at night. They said di mau len, go very quickly, and we went very quickly. But when artillery would come in, we'd get down. They said, oh, no, no, don't worry about that. And trees falling around. They're moving on through it, just-- I mean, you have to give them a lot of credit. They were really determined. They had a cause, and they believed in it, and they fought for it.

[00:46:15.43] So they moved us at night, all night long. And they had little signals. They'd come to some like hedgerows, and there'd be some signals like whistling or something. And then somebody would come out of the brush and come join them. And they were getting their information or their instructions, and they finally put us in an underground holding area.

[00:46:38.74] It was a wooden-- it was underground, it was wooden. It had some bars on it. Put us down in there, and we could barely-- I mean, we-- maybe they could stand up a little bit. We had to squinch down in there, and we were just lying almost on our side. And then towards morning, they let us out and they loosened my commo wire from around me, and I almost kissed the guy. Oh my. And they walked us all that day. Walked us another day down all these trails.

[00:47:14.10]

[00:47:17.53] DAVID HARKER: I think it was about a ten day walk before we got to that camp. But on about the fourth day, we stopped in a village. And we were going farther west. I mean, we were going all west towards the Laotian border, and spent the night in some villages. And artillery is coming in from time to time.

[00:47:35.69] But they interrogated us again. And this time, they take us out separately, the four of us sitting there. And they gave a little medical treatment. Top's wound by then was just infested with maggots. And the guy stood back and poured something in it and wrapped it up. But that was about the best medical treatment we got. Maybe a medic who was trained much better I'm sure could have done a better job. And same with Cannon.

[00:48:04.15] And in fact, they really apologized. They didn't want to eat with us because we were eating rice, balls of rice that they'd give us. And the maggots resembled them. They said, it stinks, don't even sit near us. We said, hey, we're all in this thing together, and we ate rice with them even though the putrid smell of their wounds was overwhelming almost.

[00:48:23.20] But they took us out. And this time-- took to a little hut, had a little bamboo table about that size. And the man who came in had to be probably in his 40s. He probably-- and he had some French blood in him, Vietnamese. And Bay was the interpreter. We saw Bay later, listened to Bay. And he spoke pretty good English.

[00:48:45.73] And the first thing the man did was took his-- he had American issue .45 and laid it up on the bamboo table. And that made it pretty clear right away that he had the power of life and death over us. He wanted answers to his questions. So I parried with him, only give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. And he wasn't-- really, he's getting madder. He's got a scar across his face. I figure, well, he's probably seen a lot of combat himself against the French who fought the Viet Minh, I'm sure.

[00:49:11.59] And he's got a little kid with a Mauser rifle with the fixed bayonet on. He's standing there, and he looks like he's a high school kid. And I'm figuring, well, if I don't give the answers, they're going to take me out and shoot me. And if they put the blindfolds on me, maybe I'll tell them.

[00:49:31.90] Top told me later, he finally said, OK-- he'd come back with, well, I'm in the 1st Cav. I mean, he was with the 1st Cavalry Division. He still had his patch on. He's just been assigned to our unit. They said, you're not in the 1st Cavalry. You're in 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

[00:49:50.14] And finally he got to me because he started asking about the family. And I hadn't thought-- I didn't give myself a luxury of thinking-- I mean, I'm here in this situation. I'm-- the here and now is where I am. How we're going to get-- what are we going to do next? Is there any way out? And you're looking, you're hoping a helicopter comes over, and they rescue you.

[00:50:08.80] But you're not thinking of family. And once you started doing that, I mean, oh. Well, how did you get here? What kind of plane did you fly on? So they started getting away from military things. And I thought, well, maybe this wouldn't hurt. We came on a civilian airline.

[00:50:26.11] But anyway, I never gave any information. By that time you knew-- they knew more than I knew, a little PFC like me. But that was the really big interrogation, and it takes-- people don't understand, it takes a lot. With a rifle it takes a lot of courage, but sometimes without the rifle, it takes even more courage. And we found that out living in that POW camp. To be able to fight them without any weapons, just our mind and our words. And to not give in--

[00:50:58.00]

[00:51:02.16] DAVID HARKER: Hal Kushner was the only physician captured in the war, as I mentioned earlier. And Top was well read-- I mean, Doc was well read. And Kushner told us about Korean POWs. He was well read on those. And that they used a tactic where they break down your morale, self-criticism meetings. So he told us about that. Guess what? I mean, weeks later, here they come. And right away, when they started asking the questions and he goes, tell

what's good about you and tell what's good about your fellow prisoner, oh, no, no, no, no. They probably--

[00:51:35.74] so Kushner had already told us about self-criticism meetings and don't get caught in that trap and don't turn on each other. So there's a lot of fighting internally. It takes a lot because you want to be left alone. I mean, you're barely living in this POW camp that I end up in, just eking out a living.

[00:51:54.88] It's the most horrendous conditions. You get very little food, no medicine hardly, infectious diseases, all of us get malaria, men start dying. And then on top of that, you got our H&I fire coming in camp, and you got a B-52 eventually coming about a klick away, and you don't want it any closer. So you're going to die, not just from natural causes from bad conditions, but from your own artillery and the airplane fire.

[00:52:25.31] But anyway, so they moved us along the trail. And we got to this camp, and we hooked up the last day before we got to camp-- we'd been walking forever through these rocky creek banks. And direction, I don't know whether they were trying to confuse us on direction and all, but we're getting farther and farther back into their territory.

[00:52:45.11] And it's interesting, we never do see any infantry people. Did not see them in the POW camp. The only time we saw infantry people is when they moved us from Vietnam through Laos up to North Vietnam. We passed battalions every day on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

[00:53:02.15] But anyway, didn't see infantry people. No. So they had a system. I guess they kept us-- but we hooked up with the pilots. We finally-- there's Anton and there's Robert Lewis, his crew chief and door gunner, and Jim Pfister, another door gunner. And when we see them, they look a whole lot better shape than us.

[00:53:24.20] And, of course, in our minds, by this time, we're thinking, these people, can we trust them? They're Americans, but have they already turned them over? It's funny how you start thinking. You get suspicious, and paranoid. And they said they had the same thoughts about us. I said, well, we looked pretty bad. How'd you have those thoughts? Because we were combat beaten, wounded.

[00:53:44.33] Anyway, so we walked and got to this prison camp, and it was just a hole in the jungle. Well, it wasn't a hole in the jungle. The canopy-- it was triple canopy-- there was barely any sunlight in it. And we got to the camp, and Kushner was already there. He had been captured about the 4th of December. And this is around-- I was captured the 8th-- 10th-- this is the middle to end of January, 20th or so.

[00:54:09.59] But he's there. There's a man named Earl Clyde Weatherman, a Marine, who escaped from a brig. He's living with them. He's reported to be a crossover. And then Agosto and Ortiz, one's a Marine, one's Army, Puerto Ricans, drafted as you know as nationals. And they'd been captured up-- one of them up around Da Nang. And then Captain Eisenbraun had already died. And then Russ Grissett, 1st Force Recon Marine. He'd been captured the longest and been held the longest of any of the prisoners.

[00:54:45.48] We learned about Bobby Garwood, a crossover American Marine, a driver, drove a jeep for one of the commanding officers up in Da Nang, been taken prisoner. He had already crossed over, and he was not in camp at the time. He was-- had become a traitor. He was living with them and accepted favor with them and was against the American cause in more ways than one. Just saying it, he was already taking actions. He learned the language. And he eventually was found carrying a weapon. And he bragged about what he did for them.

[00:55:22.61] And the next day they released Agosto and Ortiz as a show of solidarity with Puerto Ricans. So we learned then-- in fact, they had just released the Vietnamese prisoners out of that camp. We passed them on the trail. And our guards bragged, you be progressive, you can be free. What the heck do you know about progressive? How'd they get-- what'd they do? And so they released Agosto and Ortiz.

[00:55:47.15] And they had banners up. I mean, here we are in the middle of the jungle in just Spartan conditions, and they had a little banner. They've got bamboo benches and all and a makeshift classroom. And there something says, criminals of war. We were COWs.

[00:56:04.73] And we did not want to see that. We had uniforms, and we were-- and they considered us criminals of war, which we knew meant they can go out and shoot you anytime they wanted, had no obligations. And we tried to make it clear. Of course, that was just a tactic they used to brow beat us. And so they got released, and we moved that camp just a day later for security reasons. And off we went to another camp.

[00:56:28.82]

[00:56:32.62] DAVID HARKER: We were at a camp back in the western part of Quang Nam Province up in the mountains. Just thick jungle undergrowth and canopy and bamboo, lots of bamboo, and tropical plants. Just-- they found a location. There had to be water, usually a mountain stream, so there was a source of water. And usually a lot of overgrowth so they'd be hidden from spotter planes.

[00:57:01.78] But the camp itself was just made out of bamboo, whatever, and elephant grass for the roof, in fact, to make thatch. And they were very ingenious. They were very good at building bamboo huts without a hammer or nails. You carve out a piece at the joints and put a peg through it, and then you have ties to tie it up.

[00:57:24.59] But anyway, the perimeter of the camp was a bed of Punji stakes, honed down pieces of bamboo, sharp as razor blades. One of the Vietnamese prisoners escaped one night. He went through and pulled up the bamboo, and he grazed-- cut himself and left a blood trail. And they hunted him down, and the Montagnards speared him to death.

[00:57:46.91] The other thing was, of course, the location. We were back in a really remote area. We don't know direction. We don't know where American bases are or anything. Of course you think of escape. That's what you're-- escape, you've got to do that. It can't be helped. And then our weakening condition from lack of food. So there are a lot of things against us.

[00:58:12.67] But they also had armed guards just outside this enclosed compound with the Punji stakes. And they did a head count every 15 minutes. Oh yeah, they came through. Now, we were sleeping on a bamboo bed in this camp that I told you, our first camp. We were there a little over a year. So we were there the longest we were at any camp of the three years we stayed there in the jungles.

[00:58:42.17] Now, Russ Grissett, I told you, had been captured in '66. He had been captured two years already, so he was the longest held, and so he'd been in other camps. He had tried to escape previously and been recaptured, he and Captain Eisenbraun. And then Captain Eisenbraun broke his ribs or fell and hurt himself and eventually died. So he had already been buried. And these are the original three-- Garwood, Captain Eisenbraun, and Lance Corporal Grissett. And so he was one of the originals still left in that camp. One had crossed over, one had died.

[00:59:21.25] But anyway, in this camp-- it was up-- just up off a creek bed-- with the joints cut out, they become conduits for water. So we ran a water line. They showed us how to do that. We provided the labor. Tied them together, made sticks together, and just-- like a little trough brought it in. When it would get rainy or wind would blow over, we had to do the repair jobs. Pretty simple. But it brought water into the camp.

[00:59:44.26] And it was up on a hillside, a lot of bamboo trees and bamboo groves inside the compound. We had at first one hut, probably 20 feet long. And that camp-- as I said, Kushner was there, and Weatherman was there living with him, Grissett was there, and then the two Puerto Ricans had been released.

[01:00:05.49] With my group, my band of guys, we added to the population-- the three helicopter people and the four of us-- so we added seven more. And then eventually, there were 19 of us.

[01:00:17.19] That the camp grew is why I think they had orders to take prisoners from around in the surrounding area and part of the Tet Offensive they were bringing guys. And then when I got north, there were more guys captured at Hue and different-- so the Tet Offensive brought a lot of-- and what I told you earlier, American pilots made up the majority of people repatriated-- American prisoners repatriated at the end of the war, 640 some of us. Only about 150 were captured in the south, and most of those captured in that time frame that I was captured in. So they did guerrilla tactics. You don't take people because it slows you down. You shoot them. So we were fortunate, I guess if I look it that way, to have been taken prisoner.

[01:00:59.49] Our compound was in this little enclosed area with Punji stakes around it on the creek bank. They had a hut or two where the guards stayed, and women-- there were two women, one had a child. And she pretty much served as our camp nurse, and she also was a pack rat for us. She carried heavy loads of wood. They always bragged she could carry more than us, and she sure could. She was serving the cause. She had her son there. We figured her husband was off fighting.

[01:01:30.24] An older woman we called Mama-san, she looked like she was in her 90s, she probably was in her 50s, and she kind of was the camp cook. And anyway, we learned our camp personnel. And we had names for them. Slime was one of the camp commanders, and he

eventually left. And NVA was another one. He came and relieved Slime. Our interpreter Mr. Home was there, and we got another one eventually.

[01:01:53.71] So we had the camp personnel and then our group. But we had South Vietnamese prisoners. They were kept separate from us in a different compound, and-- except one location, they were kept in a compound with us. And there were three of them.

[01:02:08.38] MARK FRANKLIN: Why do you think they were kept separate?

[01:02:10.93] DAVID HARKER: I guess they could provide-- they spoke English, so they could provide more information on how to get around and how to get-- one of them, Lay Den Quy, was Vietnamese Marine. And he had escaped three times, and he almost made it back, he said, one time. And they caught him at some checkpoint, and they brought the three of them-- two of the men he was with back-- shot one of them, released one, and kept him prisoner. But he had tried to escape before. And they did provide-- because they spoke Vietnamese and English, so they were good interpreters for us.

[01:02:51.98] DAVID HARKER: So camp life generally was get up at 6:00 in the morning, cook food before the sun came up, so the smoke-- and they had an ingenious way of keeping smoke from filtering up through the canopy to be spotted by spotter planes, the OV-10s, the L-19s. And anyway-- oh, there was a hearth, dug in the ground; sun dried, baked earth became a stove to set the pots down in. And then a tunnel off of that, it went probably 50, 70 meters covered with bamboo and covered with dirt. And it was-- drew like a chimney and underground. And so the smoke would filter up off of that.

[01:03:40.88] But at nighttime, you didn't want to have a fire because they would see that. So you know, always, you have to think, hey, you're an enemy. [CHUCKLES] But you would like to see a helicopter come because then you wouldn't be an enemy. You hoped they wouldn't see you as one.

[01:03:57.05] So we cooked. We got a ration of rice, about a cup, a can of uncooked rice, a meal, not Uncle Ben's white, enriched, vitamin-enriched rice. It was old, red weevil-infested, rat-infested, been cached, and so the rats had gotten in and it had a lot of dung in it, a lot of weevils in it, had got into it.

[01:04:21.74] So we always said, it's best to eat in the dark so you don't get any surprises. We washed it the best we could. But then the volume of it got reduced. But we had probably a small coffee cup per meal of rice. If it hadn't been for the manioc that the Montagnards around us grew, we'd all have died because the diet was not enough to keep us going.

[01:04:42.98] But the Montagnards in the surrounding area, the mountain people, minority race of Vietnamese-- different tribes of them-- they were the home guard. But they also cultivated manioc. They were even poorer than the peasants in the rural areas of Vietnam. They had even less to eat and more primitive conditions. The kids were just naked, had extended stomachs, Women were bare breast, men had loin cloths and carried spears. They looked like the American Indian maybe. But they lived in villages around.

[01:05:13.49] And again, they cultivated this Third World staple, the cassava root, manioc. It's a long fibrous root. In fact, they make tapioca out of it, so it had some food value. Got a thick pink skin on it. But you have to get it up out of the ground, and that's hard when you're weak. We'd walk 10 or 12 miles to gather these roots, those of us who were able. They got-- in this population, we got wounded men, we had men that mentally just hadn't adjusted and can't make themselves do, and then those of us who-- just pretty motivated to get out and have the strength.

[01:05:52.01] I was probably one of the smallest, and I was able to carry a 60-pound bag of roots, 70-pound bag of roots on my back. In fact, I could carry quite a bit just by sheer determination almost. I realized that was maybe my only way of getting out. But we had other men who were workers too and eventually died.

[01:06:07.88] So we'd get up. We'd eat that little bit of rice and the manioc. And then the night before, we had to let them know if we were going. Three days a week usually, we went on a manioc run to get the-- khoai mi is the Vietnamese word. We'd go get the khoai mi, three or four of us. Each one had a guard, so depending if we wanted four people to go and they only had three guards, we could only send three people. We had to let them know who was going the night before. Harker's going, Grissett's going, McMillan's going, whoever's going.

[01:06:42.41] And so we'd put the basket on. Or the next day, they'd bring the baskets down. And then the little knife we used, a rude, hooked-beak knife. They weren't sharp, they were as dull as they could be, but at least we could cut things with them. They'd bring those and put them in our basket. And off we'd go.

[01:07:00.61] And then we'd get to the fields. It was pretty rough terrain we walked over. We had Vietnamese sandals. I was going to bring my sandals to show you, and I couldn't find them. I used to have them. I'd show them to kids. It's a good show-and-tell piece. I brought the sandals. I was given those sometime in the latter part of '68. I didn't have my boots until then. And then I learned how to walk in sandals.

[01:07:22.33] And we would-- we'd send a crew out to gather wood because we did our own cooking. And generally, those who weren't working were there in the compound. Now, you've got to understand, here we are the first few months-- January, February, March-- people were coming in camp, so there's activity going on.

[01:07:38.41] Still boredom if you just sit there all day long, nothing to do except talk and meet new guys. You haven't gotten tired of the same old stories over and over. And new guys coming in, what's going on out in the world? We called it the world, freedom. And what's going on? What's new? And how's-- how are the Americans doing? They'd bring in word about the Tet Offensive.

[01:08:01.09] But anyway, the squalid conditions really became worse because we all had loose stools as you can imagine. We all-- I mean, and we were going sometimes frequently. And so at nighttime, it seemed to be the worst. So you wake up in the morning, and there's defecation everywhere. I mean--

[01:08:20.87] MARK FRANKLIN: So there wasn't a slit trench or anything like that, that you all used? Or cat holes? Or--

[01:08:25.24] DAVID HARKER: We had a place dug in the ground, a latrine dug in the ground covered with bamboo with a little opening in it. And we tried to get to that, but-- they had lanterns. And you have to say bau cau. You have to yell to let the guard know you're moving so you don't get shot. And so some guys may not make it, so it's a mess.

[01:08:45.61] And then we have people that-- and then we start getting a skin disease called dau gai, which means sick skin in Vietnamese. And it just-- we were getting pustules all over our hands, getting crusted hands, and we were just itching. And I don't know if it's a bug we got. Kushner said what it is. And then we started getting edema-- poor diet, no protein-- and feet are swelling up. My first sergeant, his came up and pushed his diaphragm up in, but Kushner said, you can't have any salt. We had a rock salt that they gave us to season our rice with.

[01:09:22.69] And we also-- in addition to the rice, a little bit of rice and the cassava, which made the bulk of our diet, they tried to get us out to forage for food around. And that never really worked good. But we had nuoc mam, which is a staple of Vietnamese, it's a rotten fish sauce. The fish-- sardine size-- put them in briny rock salt and let them ferment in these earthen jars. They said Nha Trang had a-- I never had been there, but they talked about the nuoc mam factory at Nha Trang. I never had seen it. I guess the villages where I was going had it. But anyway, what we'd do, we'd boil that down, and it provided a little protein. We got a ration of that a day. And so they put that over the rice just to salt it and make it a little fish taste.

[01:10:08.14] And so that's what we-- just survival. It became a matter of survival and the strong trying to help the weak. We had to. We got a political course in July. Ho An Ho, a high-ranking political cadre came. Tall guy, had a lot of French in him, spoke the King's English. And at the end of the course-- it's pretty interesting. Their 4,000 years of struggle against outside aggressions-- aggression including US imperialist aggression. And told us about their war for nationalism, and Uncle Ho, they revered, and all their struggles.

[01:10:47.47] Did not use the word ARVN. They'll kill you. They'll take you out. Oh, they go crazy if you use any-- and they call us neocolonialists. We were picking up the mess of the French colonialism, a new type of colonialism. Yes, and it's all one way. Oh my.

[01:11:06.61] And Top was getting down and just getting in pretty bad shape, and they just humiliated him in front of us. In fact, Garwood took part in it. And here's what he did-- he played us. He'd come down, hey, I'm your good buddy. And some of the guys-- I said, the guy's a snake. Don't touch it, he'll bite you.

[01:11:25.15] I didn't have anything. I just-- and we had a guy eventually brought there, a Medal of Honor recipient, William David Porte, P-O-R-T-E, from Pennsylvania. He had been wounded pretty badly. He ended up in our camp. They took him to a field hospital, one of their field hospitals. And there, he said, they went out and hunted monkey, so he had protein. He was eating meat every day. And they were giving him some medicine, maybe even some antibiotics. And he had healed up. When he got to our camp, he just went downhill and died.

[01:11:51.01] But one day, Grissett came through, and I was sitting on the bamboo bed there, talking to Porte. And he called him a damn-- he said, you damn traitor. [CHUCKLES] Nobody-- because we were friends-- I mean, it's like calling the guard--

[01:12:04.42] MARK FRANKLIN: Because of who he was.

[01:12:05.79] DAVID HARKER: --an SOB. Yeah. And we thought, he's going to go back. And Bill didn't care. He didn't care. I said, hooray for you.

[01:12:12.91]

[01:12:16.82] DAVID HARKER: We started to kind of go downhill, I mean, physically. Top's getting bad. Top died September of '68. He succumbs to his wounds. He died second. Cannon died first. He was one of those stoic guys that never-- he had that stuff that was hurting him. Every night, he'd sit up against a bamboo pole just to relieve his pain. He couldn't sleep. Loved cigarettes, so we gave him-- they gave us a little ration of tobacco and the guys shared with him when they ran out. And you've got to understand, that's a treasured thing. If you're a smoker, if you get-- oh, man, they go crazy because they've run out.

[01:12:56.43] But anyway, Cannon died. And I woke up one morning, and he wasn't on the bed. I felt down, and he'd fallen down on the floor. And he had gone-- we put him up on the bed, and he died. He had not gotten much treatment for his wounds. And they brought down some white cotton clothes-- we called them pajamas, but they were traditional clothing-- loose, flowing-- fitting clothes-- to bury him in.

[01:13:20.63] In an act of defiance, Kushner said, hell, you didn't take care of him when he was alive. You don't give him anything when he's dead. We're going to take care of it. They kind of backed up. Generally, they didn't. They were on top of you. You don't get by with that. And they realized that's a pretty sensitive area with these people, I guess. They didn't really care about our feelings. But for some reason, they backed up.

[01:13:41.60] And we buried him. They did make a bamboo casket because they knew how. And we took him down. And those of us-- I helped dig the grave. And those of us, the able-bodied-- and you can't-- with a little small entrenching tool, you can't get too far down in the ground. We got him. We buried him.

[01:13:58.82] And then we buried Top next. And then we buried Bob Sherman. And we buried William David Porte. And then in November of '68, we buried-- so with-- we buried Edwin Russell Grissett, 1st Force Recon Marine.

[01:14:16.97] And then January the 4th, Fred Burns died. He was a Marine Pfc, youngest guy, he was 18 when he was captured. He was 19 when we buried him. From Brentwood, Long Island. And he'd been with a night patrol. And we figured he fell asleep and a patrol got him and-- but we never did know how Fred--

[01:14:34.28] Fred was a good Catholic kid, smart kid, just good as gold. He should not been in the military. He should have gone-- he could have gone to Notre Dame and been a scholar, but he wanted to prove his manhood, we think, and help this country. And we buried him with this Catholic Missal. And so we buried six people within just a three or four-month period.

[01:14:57.31]

[01:15:01.20] DAVID HARKER: Fred just never could-- he just never could get adjusted. And maybe Kushner-- I think Kushner knows, or he may have had some malady. Maybe he did have some infection, but then he just faded away.

[01:15:16.26] And they generally not only lost mental faculties, but-- well, Fred did, but physical too. So they became incontinent. We had to just baby them, and that became the plan. Kushner could not practice medicine. And so he became our nurse. And he became our wealth of knowledge because he knew what was going on. He could tell us, even though he didn't have medicine. But he did intervene one time on our behalf.

[01:15:44.22] And Ho An Ho was there. And we started getting dysentery, not mucus in our stool and loose stools. We had dysentery, and he knew it. He could see-- he said, without a microscope, he could see pus, and he knew. And he went up and got an audience with Ho and said, if you don't give us some antibiotic here, if you don't get something real quick, all of us are going to die. You won't have any bargaining power, no prisoners.

[01:16:10.62] And he apparently convinced him because Chloromycetin-- the only time we saw an antibiotic-- came into camp. And we talked about group and how we looked out-- nursed each other in the final hours, comforted each other, said a prayer when we buried people. But here we took another step of courage because they dispensed medicine to people that didn't have-- well, we didn't know-- they'd given us antibiotic, hey.

[01:16:38.82] And Kushner got us together. He said, guys. He said, some of you have medicine. I can tell you who you are. I'll tell you. And you don't have it, and the others do. And they may not have enough to knock out with what they've been given. Let me be the pharmacist. Let me hold the medicine. And they gave it to him, and he dispensed it.

[01:16:57.91] I don't recall anybody dying from dysentery. It seemed like we eradicated it. It was gone with it. So that's the only time we really-- our only medicine was quinine, large doses of quinine will eventually knock out malaria. We had to tighten-- everybody got malaria. It was a type of malaria that you'd spike a fever, be talking out of your head, then you'd get the chills, and nausea came with it. Oh my.

[01:17:23.83] We had some men-- and we had five black prisoners among the group, and none of them succumbed. They all survived. But some of them, it's just remarkable-- they would get malaria, have it for 30 days, and they looked the same. A white guy would get it, a Caucasian guy, and they-- they're down to skin and bone. And Kushner always said that had something to do genetically with how they grew up.

[01:17:50.10]

[01:17:54.45] DAVID HARKER: Four men out of five were from the rural South. James Alexander Daly, a PFC with the 196th, captured a few weeks after me, was from Brooklyn, New York. He was the only one not from the rural South. So he had a different experience growing up. And that's interesting.

[01:18:10.74] But all those men, they offered them special favor. They tried to play the race card, and they never did. And you've got to understand, we were in horrible conditions. Any little thing you can get, extra food or whatever, and they did not because they were loyal. And even though they've not been treated right and they were treated as second-class citizens, not allowed in the front of the bus, all those things that went with the way blacks were treated--

[01:18:40.89] MARK FRANKLIN: But they stayed true.

[01:18:42.06] DAVID HARKER: --they stayed true, yes, and I admire them. In fact, the whole group of us-- I just never saw a better group of men. They rose to the occasion. And we just-- we were trained a little bit in E&E, escape and evasion. But nothing would have prepared us. Nothing at all.

[01:19:01.74] And we played the Code of Conduct to the best-- they did press us for information. And eventually, we all as a group said, hey, it's bad enough. We don't take-- the enemy'll take somebody out and shoot them. We will sign statements. And it was a general consensus.

[01:19:19.14] And they brought us paper. We write something like-- well, something innocuous. We probably shouldn't be in a war. Maybe it is an unjust war. And they didn't like that. So they eventually wrote something out-- Americans are killing innocent people. We put our name on it. But again, we agreed-- and we knew it was contrary. But the Uniform Code of Military Justice, though, we didn't-- we knew that line.

[01:19:45.51] And we-- see, we didn't have any rank either. Top was probably the ranking man-- sergeant first class, well steeped in the military and leadership ability. Kushner was from the Medical Corps. Anton's a warrant, flies helicopters, so-- but we did maintain-- it was interesting, because when we got north, we started getting orders and we started saluting. Hey, it's different here.

[01:20:12.23]

[01:20:17.41] DAVID HARKER: Weatherman claimed to be a crossover. He said he escaped from the brig in Da Nang, had a Vietnamese wife. He stole a jeep, riding down the road, and here come the Viet Cong. He said, hey, I've just got a jeep for you. I'm a Chieu Hoi. And he said he did that because he wanted the advantage of escaping once he got a chance. Now, I don't know why he let them get him, but he could have stepped on the gas.

[01:20:39.22] But anyway, in this prison camp, he was living with them. But he came up, and he said, I'm going to make my bird-- a euphemism for escape-- I'm going to make my bird someday.

And he said, I'm going to have their complete trust. But he would steal food and bring it up to us. Well, Garwood, when he came to camp, started stealing food and brought it to us, but he wanted part of it. He'd get-- Weatherman never wanted any bit of it. He had enough to eat where he was.

[01:21:03.52] And one day, early April '68, they were on one of these runs. He's getting roots for the kitchen because he's living with them. And they said, on the trail-- I wasn't with them that day. Hammond was with them and Daly and Zawtocky. Anyway, they get to the field. The guards break security. They go to the Montagnard village close by and leave Tan, one of the guards there. And Weatherman says, we're making that bird. And they said, you can't. It's broad daylight. Where are you going? What are you going to do? Just leave, that's how compulsive he was. He was a wild guy. He really-- Weatherman was out there somewhere, just a nice kid, but he just--

[01:21:49.16] So he went down to Tan, and he had a Vietnamese name. And he said-- he told him he wanted some water. When Tan reached around to get his canteen of water, he grabbed his weapon and start beating him with the stock and beat him senseless. The Vietnamese-speaking prisoners told us later that Tan never recovered. He was pretty much just a mental basket case. He never came back in camp. That's how bad he beat him.

[01:22:13.04] He and Hammond took off. The other three said, we can't go. We're going to get killed. And they sat in the field. And eventually, the guards came from a village. I don't know whether Tan got to them. But anyway, Weatherman and Hammond took off and were eventually run down in the bush, they said by a little five-year-old kid-- came crawling in like a dog-- they were in some thick underbrush-- and found them. They could hear them all around. They had summoned them by beating the bamboo drums, and all the Montagnards had come together. Again, they were the home guard security, even more-- another level of security for them to keep prisoners inside.

[01:22:51.20] And Hammond said they laid the weapon down, walked out, stood up. And a Montagnard was there and shot Weathermen right between the eyes with a--

[01:23:00.87] MARK FRANKLIN: Killed him?

[01:23:01.30] DAVID HARKER: --killed him dead. He fell over. Hammond said the guy, bolt action, put another round in, and click. It misfired, so Hammond took off. And by that time, our guards were in this manhunt. And they came running. And a Montagnard shot Hammond through the leg, clean wound. It never did get infected. Went inside-- went in one side, came out the other. They were getting ready to shoot him, and the guards pulled him off. And he said all of them got their licks. They took him through all the Montagnard villages, spread-eagled him, and even down to the littlest kid got a whack at and beat him. He came back and got put in stocks.

[01:23:38.78] And Hammond was one of the last ones to die in a prison camp in March 1970. He and Zawtocky were captured together. They were in a Civilian Action Group with the Marines, and they had a pretty fierce firefight. The PFs that were with them ran and left them fighting. And anyway, they were overwhelmed and got captured.

[01:24:03.17] But here, you're burying two strong Marines, fierce fighters, and contributors, labor for us. They started fading away. And that's when-- people always ask, did you ever give up? No, I never thought-- but I got scared because I thought, damn, they're tough, and they're dying. And they died. I walked away from Zawtock's grave thinking, whoa. And I thought-- and I had a little doubt whether I was going to make it then. There was little doubt then.

[01:24:37.42] DAVID HARKER: Daly was captured with a Gideon testament. That was in March of '68. We didn't see that till December. And Ho, Mr. Ho brought it down. So this book has something to do with your holiday. You can select something, and we will approve it. But he forgot to get it back. We hid it in the thatched roof. And we had a Gideon testament to read.

[01:25:00.10] But I already had my faith. I could quote scripture, but that-- I tell people I had a closer relationship with God than I ever had in my life. Just that-- he was my strength and my belief. But it's funny how my faith was kind of superficial. Now, here it's put to the test-- you've got to love your enemy. [CHUCKLES]

[01:25:23.92] And I saw the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, the commies, as different. You can't help it. Don't believe in that system of government. It's too controlling and tyrannical. But it was more of a nationalist movement that people won't admit, and that's one of the things-- I think we got involved in a war when should have let them take care of their own affairs. But the events just went that way. The French were allowed at the end of World War II to come back in, shouldn't have been allowed in because they didn't really fight against the Japanese. They capitulated.

[01:26:04.69] And again, just the spiritual part of me, those beliefs, to love other people, take care of other people. But I saw it-- I saw it even among non-Christians. I tell people-- that was-- in this camp-- survival instinct. I'm going to survive. You get the majority-- if you kill one of the camp's chickens, you've taken the risk, then you get all the chicken if you want. You don't have to share it with anybody.

[01:26:30.65] And so the guy that did it at first, give me two legs, and you can share the rest of it. Give me the whole breast or whatever. So he's taken what he wants out of it, which is more, because he's taken the risk till later, threw it to pot and everybody-- it's the lion's share. I called it the lion's share. So if you stole rice, took the risk of stealing rice from them and you got caught-- and so when you brought the rice down, you could cook it up and eat it yourself. But then later, everybody threw it in the pot together. It wasn't, hey, I'm out. It's we're all in this together.

[01:27:01.46] It's just amazing, the altruism that came about just through osmosis. Here it just developed. And again, even among, like I said, people that don't have the-- don't have the basic, I'm sure, Christian beliefs, but-- so that-- and I don't know. Maybe being one of seven children trained me.

[01:27:25.00] [LAUGHTER]

[01:27:26.70] I knew how to scrounge around and make my way, and

[01:27:29.66] where my role was, my part. But-- and I was a hard worker. I grew up with a good work ethic, to earn money. I never got allowance. I never knew what an allowance was. So I started shoveling chicken coops for George Russell, World War II vet. And I was about 13 and carried newspapers. And like I said, I worked at a paper mill and earned enough money to pay my own tuition, so-- and-- but guys that had work ethics, that had faith, and they did not make it. So I don't know.

[01:28:00.90]

[01:28:05.53] DAVID HARKER: When Ho was there at the end, he said, what can you do to help us? We said, hey, we can't do anything to help you. We're American fighting men, man. And eventually-- and then he tried to get us to turn on each other, and we didn't. And then they started self-criticism meetings. And so that, we fought them on that. We did not give in to that.

[01:28:26.50] And again, that took a lot of strength. Again, you just-- hey, just leave us alone, but when-- that's why when they said we were going north, I told the guys, I don't want to go north. They're going to have me-- drill me every day. I'm going to be between the loud speakers, and I've got to confess to be progressive and a good commie.

[01:28:43.63] That treatment changed, they said, around end of '69 when the National League of Families came about. And the families start saying, hey, what's going on here? And before then, the military thought they'd just be silent on the issue, give families help with a casualty-- so my family had a casualty assistance officer. He would say from time to time, we've heard David-- when the Puerto Ricans came out, that's the first time they knew I was not missing in action, but I was a prisoner of war.

[01:29:11.71] They released three Americans in the fall of 1969, about September 1969-- Willie Watkins. And they let Jim Strickland go, who was captured with me. He was released. And Coy Tinsley, who had just been captured a few months, had a shoulder wound and still was in good shape. They didn't hold him but a few months. And I think they wanted to show the world-- the world wasn't looking, but they thought they were-- that he had gotten good medical treatment. Well, he hadn't been there long enough to go downhill, and his wound was a clean wound. But they released him.

[01:29:49.42] And anyway, my parents were told there were three guys-- been released. They got word that David was still alive in this POW camp. But they were reading the paper one day, and they see Kushner's wife, Valerie, has been to visit one of these guys at the Army hospital down at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. They said, well, if she can do it-- the Army didn't tell us we could do it, but she did it. We can do it too, so--

[01:30:12.97] [LAUGHTER]

[01:30:13.79] --the act of defiance. Again, you're thinking, why didn't the military say we're going set up a meeting? But who knows?

[01:30:20.33] But-- so they went down, and Strickland was home on leave. And they found out at the base. So they rode down, knew he lived in Dunn, North Carolina. They pulled up to some service station and said, we're looking for James Strickland. And they said, oh, yeah, he's a POW, just got released. He lives just down the road. And he was having a family reunion.

[01:30:37.34] So he was there in the middle of all the family. And they said, hey. And he went out and talked to them and they came in, told them how things were. And they said when they left, going out to the car, he came out, told them bye. He said, let me tell you, if anybody makes it out, David will make it out. So he gave them some reassurance that I probably would make it. But they never got word from then until my name came out in January 1973 on the list. And that was the last word they got. So I didn't have any communication with them the whole time. And they did have that casualty assistance officer.

[01:31:10.62]

[01:31:14.51] DAVID HARKER: It was February 1971. It was a two month-- we got there April 1st. Two months to the day. They got us prepared. Had-- there were still 12 of us living. And they were doing six-man groups. I was in the first group.

[01:31:30.83] By that time you learned to travel light, so you got rid of-- course, I hadn't accumulated-- I mean, I at least had another pair of clothes from somebody who had died, or they had brought some more clothes to us. So we traveled very light, and they did put provisions in our packs. Because the first six days before we got to Trung Son Mountain range that separates Laos and Vietnam, we had to cook our own food, the group we were with.

[01:31:54.05] Heading up my group was a Lieutenant Luc, North Vietnamese soldier who was going home for R&R, maybe. And he told us about fighting against the French-- I mean, Americans, in the Plain of Jars in 1961 or '62. So he was a combatant. And it's interesting, he had more empathy with us and looked out for us more than any other. He was an infantry guy. And he made sure our rations were higher.

[01:32:20.96] And on the trail, here there's six of us, and our entourage, we've got an interpreter with us, and him. And anyway, once we get into Laos, it's a different system. There, you don't need any provisions because their way stations, I called them, they had these places set up in like 20 mile intervals where they were manned by North Vietnamese civilians, soldiers.

[01:32:54.08] They had commo wire set up, so they were getting telegraphs. We could hear the telegraph messages coming in. It was basically just a makeshift camp, dug out, so soldiers infiltrating, bamboo poles strung across these dug-out squares.

[01:33:18.50] So the battalions of North Vietnamese hook a hammock on that so they're below ground in case artillery comes in they're not going to get killed by the concussion. Sleeping in the hammocks. We slept above ground. So it's that-- huts where these people were staying. We stayed out-- slept out in the open because we just stayed overnight. And then big vats for cooking rice.

[01:33:42.44] Had to contend some with airstrikes. We got ready to cross the river, the Mekong River, and it was pretty dry. But it had a spotter on one side and one on the other, and they'd holler what it was. And they told us at some point they planned to put us on trucks, but they were putting the airstrikes in, so--

[01:34:03.38] but it took probably 60 days. We did stop one time for a little respite, we got a little rest, maybe a few days, and mainly it was just walking. And like I said, one way station to the next. We passed battalions of North Vietnamese troops. And once they saw me, the Americans, they-- we started getting rifle butts. And of course, we saw Laotians, interesting people. They had little bazaars set up along the road. They had a lot of tattoos on, and they have very colorful material they were selling.

[01:34:33.86] But yeah, we consisted of six Americans, our guide, an interpreter, and refugees, and I guess some soldiers going back. But mostly-- the majority of people were people coming south, soldiers.

[01:34:48.74]

[01:34:53.66] DAVID HARKER: Took us through a moon crater. I mean, it had been bombed to no man's land. And we were on the back of this truck, and you could see the anti-aircraft emplacements and then American jets coming around. And I remember we started singing [CHUCKLES] the "Star-Spangled Banner," the group of us. And they tell us to im, to be quiet, shut up. And we kept singing.

[01:35:17.39] But once we got-- we got to a little place called Vinh, a little village there. The houses there were a little more conventional type houses that were built of wood rather than stucco, even the one they kept us in that night. And they had pictures of ancestors.

[01:35:31.82] But they put us in irons that night, and we never had had those before. And they said, hey, welcome to North Vietnam. And we said, well, we've never had shackles on. But they-- we-- and then we got on a train, a small-gauge train. It was about a 15-hour ride from Vinh to Hanoi. And they took us off a truck, blindfolded us, took us off the boxcar. But on the boxcar, we traveled with South Vietnamese troops that had surrendered at Lam Son 719, this excursion of South Vietnamese over on Highway 9 into Laos.

[01:36:06.23]

[01:36:10.45] DAVID HARKER: They were like they were on holiday. Here we were, we've been captured all these times. And we-- well, I did, I kind of resented it, here they are. This is no picnic, what we've been through. And they didn't look battle worn to me. I'm a critic, I guess. I'll just tell you.

[01:36:27.91] I saw Jim Webb, who was a Marine, and I told him I didn't think that the Vietnamese fought like their brothers did. And he took exception, so there's another viewpoint that they fought pretty good. But I just never saw-- I never thought the South Vietnamese took

the fight like they should have. We armed them. We trained them. We came in and fought with them, and I don't know.

[01:36:48.70] Of course, there's a lot going on there with the political part of it. It just-- it never was unified. But unfortunately, they should have been able to hold their own. And they wanted to. They didn't want the system that was forced on them.

[01:37:03.55] I have a Vietnamese that's painting a '75 pickup I have now. I talked to him the other day and asked him if he'd been back recently. And he said it's hard to understand. He was a lieutenant in the army and fled when the communists took over. And he said his wife had just been to visit her family, but he would never go back, he said. He said, just too many bad memories. And he said, people think everything's OK there. But he said the communists still control, and they control your family and the food. And so anyway--

[01:37:31.61]

[01:37:34.81] DAVID HARKER: April of '71 to March of '73, almost two years. I was in the second group that got released. We had a warehouse. I don't know what-- it was 15 by 12 feet, seven men, pretty small, confined area, had waste buckets that somebody emptied every morning for-- didn't have any flush toilets there. Only running water was a cistern they had, and they'd take us there once a day usually, except on Sunday, we were confined all day.

[01:38:06.58] There it was just boredom. We didn't have to worry about disease. And they did have a little more medicine. We have-- but we didn't have to worry about American artillery and bombing till later. It was just sitting there, hearing the same old stories, day in, day out.

[01:38:22.51] We did learn the communication code, and we started getting messages in the tops of our waste cans. And there was a chain of command. I told you, we worked our own chain of command. We didn't have a real command person there in the south to kind of lead us.

[01:38:39.51] Our ration of food was much better. And it consisted of a French loaf of bread. It was pumpkin soup for about six months and cabbage soup for about the other six months. And interspersed, we had some canned meat from downtown. It was the People's Republic, so we had a little protein in our diet. So we all-- I think we all gained a little bit of weight. But just, again, the boredom of sitting in that cell, not the movement that we had in the south, even though it was restricted. We couldn't get to friendlies.

[01:39:12.01] They had not been bombing since '68. In '71 around-- just after we got there, they started bombing, the fast movers, the Phantoms, the little small loads, 100, 200-pound bombs. And that was interesting because we'd hear the sirens, and it gave us something to think about and do, a little entertainment. They start bombing them. And invariably, after the all clear siren sounded, some American jockey would come back on the treetops and scare the hell out of them. They were already out of their spider holes, or wherever they had been, safe places. And he'd come back through there.

[01:39:51.40] And then around the fall of that year, of '72, they opened up the prison camp I was in. When we got there, it's only the people in your cell and no other Americans here. And again, we had communication. They'd break it down and punish people for it.

[01:40:09.61] And they started a group of guys that started taking special favors and started voluntarily going along with them and writing antiwar statements. And we called them PCs, the Peace Committee. And they just were being disloyal. And so we were asked to join them, the cell I was in. And they opened up the door and said we could-- and we said, we're not going to be seen with them. We got punished for that.

[01:40:41.39] But anyway, they opened up and said, hey. And they gave us books. They cut the door open. We had two double thick doors, and they opened-- they cut windows out so we could see out and let the other prisoners out. And we got a TIME magazine that said peace is at hand. We said, hey, I guess the war is about over. And then they slammed the door shut a few weeks later.

[01:41:03.70] And they started B-52 bombing, the Linebacker II. And they started bombing-- the saturation bombing with B-52s, which they should have done at the beginning of the war-- it's more effective than the fast movers. And they started psychological effect too. They'd start probably around 9 o'clock at night and go all night long, wave after wave. And the first night-- I mean, they're coming in and--

[01:41:29.04] I have a good friend in Lynchburg, Dave Young, and he was part of that. He said they had a set pattern, and they figured it out. And they started putting the SAM missiles up and shot down a bunch of them the next-- second or third night.

[01:41:40.51] But we were cheering for them. In fact, after the first night, they came into our cell, and we got concrete about that thick. They gave us a pick axe, and they said we could dig a hole. We dug a hole, but we never did-- I don't remember whether we got down in it. So we'd have a little shelter.

[01:41:56.77] And then several nights later, they back a deuce-and-a-half up to the door and put us in the back of that and covered us with a tarp and said, if you move, civilians see you, they're going to drag you out to kill you. And we thought by this time-- it's just peaks and valleys. Maybe war is going to be over with Nixon in '69. Our ration in the south improved, then it went down. Then the peace talks had dragged on, but it's another blow to us. Hey, peace is at hand. And now, we're locked back up and they're bombing.

[01:42:28.84] And really, I remember thinking-- and maybe there was some scuttlebutt-- that World War III is going to break out here. The Chinese are coming in, and we're going to have a war on our hands. So I thought they were taking us north, they were taking us to the Chinese border. And they took us a few blocks over to the Hoa Lo jail, the Hanoi Hilton, where they kept the pilots. And so I stayed there the last two months, was kept there.

[01:42:53.30] And you had talked-- we were talking a little bit, and I don't think we got it all about Radio Hanoi. That was broadcast. The interpreter brought it down every day. I mean, they

wiped the US Army out, according to their English propaganda broadcast, every day. So one day when the guard left-- I mean, the interpreter left-- it was rainy, rain coming down-- we switched over, and we found Voice of America.

[01:43:19.82] And it's just hard to explain. Here you are, you don't have any contact with your family. you're in a hell hole, and here you can hear the truth. People don't understand. Americans don't appreciate what they have, I don't think, sometimes. They've got this great country, and fighting with each other when we ought to be-- follow the example.

[01:43:44.39] The model was that POW camp. And like I told you earlier, never a greater bunch of people. We pulled together, we looked out for each other, and we came through it with flying colors. And except the one exception-- Bobby Garwood.

[01:44:01.79] But then the camp commander came in. They stopped the bombing. We were there at Hoa Lo. And we already had word that there was a peace agreement signed. But according to the peace agreement, the camp commander had to tell us. So he brought us out as a group, told us what we already knew. And they're going to-- part of the agreement was to release prisoners, to exchange prisoners. And so I was in the second group, and there's a little story there.

[01:44:26.48]

[01:44:30.18] DAVID HARKER: We heard the big doors on Hoa Lo open up and knew the group left. We could hear them. We figured they left. And a few days later, they came and got my group. I don't remember who all was in it, but maybe 100 of us or more. Put us in a holding cell, gave us Western type clothes instead of the loose flowing-- in fact, we had some clownish look in prison, red-striped prison uniforms that they gave us. So they gave us Western clothes, pants. They gave us a little handbag to carry and a windbreaker. And so we're sitting there. We've changed our clothes. We wait. And noontime rolls around and they bring food. We said, why are you bringing food? We're going home today. They said, oh, no, peace agreement has been broken. You're not going home today. So

[01:45:19.32] my group got delayed a couple more days, so they hashed out some problems. But you can't imagine when they opened up Hoa Lo jail, all these Vietnamese are right on top of you, all the civilians. And they're just gawking. I can see they want to see the Americans. And they put us on a bus. And when we walked down through town, you could see where they bombed out. I mean, they did a job on all of their military installations, the railroad tracks that were taking troops.

[01:45:47.94] I think it was very effective bombing. Again, if they'd done it at the beginning-- but I wasn't making that decision. But we saw the hangars, and we came around the hangars and saw that C-141 with the wings down on the ground. I mean, your heart jumps up in your throat. And we're going to finally get released. And so we got off of the-- out of the vehicles. And there was a one-star general there, and a table set up. And the names were read, and we'd go up and salute him. And so you felt like, hey, I'm back in the military again.

[01:46:21.00] And getting up on the back-- back ramp was down and there were Air Force personnel helping us up. And when we broke airspace, we left North Vietnamese airspace, the pilot told us, and a big cheer went up. But you don't know what to expect because, you know, the antiwar movement and you're in darkness, so you don't know exactly what's going on.

[01:46:42.49] But here, we thought, they're going to be throwing rocks at us. And we landed there in the Philippines, at Clark. And I mean, the military dependents' families were out. And they had signs-- I mean, it was like whoa-- and cheered us.

[01:47:04.26] And when we got off the plane, the ranking man could make a few remarks. And the entourage was there-- ranking people and President Marcos and his wife were there. And we went down the line. When we got to Hawaii in the middle of the night, it was the same thing.

[01:47:20.85] I was there in the Philippines probably two or three nights just undergoing some examinations. The first good news I heard was everybody in my family was alive after five and 1/2 years. So that was good news. And then I got to talk to my mother. And I tell people, she sounded like a country bumpkin. She sounded like a hick. I hadn't heard her voice in years--

[01:47:41.82] [LAUGHTER]

[01:47:42.42] --and her southern accent. But I got to talk with my family. But when we got to Andrews Air Force Base, they had an open microphone. So they said, hey, anybody wants to-- so I felt obligated, and I just thanked everybody for coming and welcoming us back. It was a great welcome, something that all the returning Vietnam Soldiers should have gotten and didn't get.

[01:48:11.61] But I think we signified the end of the war. It was over, so the jubilation there. Plus, we'd been in the news, and people knew that we had undergone some really rough times. So it was jubilation everywhere. When I got back to my hometown, there were about 10,000 people waiting. And a private airline flew me in. I had no idea when I saw it. I was overwhelmed, and they gave me the keys to a 1973 Corvette that I'm having restored right now, so--

[01:48:43.05] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:48:43.41] DAVID HARKER: Yeah. Got the hero's welcome, and just-- but we assimilated back into life. In fact, I went back to college and got my degree. And somewhere along the line, someone told me that Joe Anzaldua was going to finish OCS. So my father and I got in the car and went up, and that was a good time. And he got back into the swing of things. And most of the prisoners did. I think there were a few-- there were a couple of suicides right after we got home, and they called us back in. But they were amazed at how sound we were mentally. But after you've endured that, hey, you've got to be crazy or pretty strong, so--

[01:49:24.27]

[01:49:28.70] DAVID HARKER: It changed my outlook, my Christian beliefs. And like I said, that's tough-- loving your enemy, to overcome evil with good. It's just-- and, of course, I

understand my faith is separate from my citizenship, my American heritage. The government is secular. And bringing those two together, I just--

[01:49:56.69] I think one thing that I've learned is the government's not always right. I think when I grew up, the government was always right, their decisions were right. They made a lot of bad decisions. And then the policy they had there became bad strategy for the military. The military could have won the war, but it became a limited war.

[01:50:17.33] And I always believed that they have the good of everybody at heart when they make decisions. They make some bad ones sometimes, but they always have-- and that's where they need to know these cultures and these people and know if you go in militarily, how are you going to solve this issue militarily? And we don't always do that.

[01:50:38.09] But I just think-- personally, I realize life's pretty short. I saw it, saw men die, young men die. And you've got to take care of the other person. And I think that's a good-- feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison. Matthew 25. Christ. So he taught his disciples, look out for each other, but look out for everybody else too, kind of put yourself last.

[01:51:03.44] And my parents instilled that in me. I look back at their life, and they not only went to church and-- but they lived that. They took in my grandfather when they had seven kids and didn't have room for him. They took in other people along the way. And my mother always had a plate set if I brought anybody home. So they always-- and I think I learned from that experience. I saw guys do that, kind of deny themselves and look out for the other man.

[01:51:34.74] So anyway, church has been-- and faith's been a big part of my life. It was, but I don't know whether it would have been if had not been for Vietnam. And my kids came up in church. And to me, faith is all important in life. And in the end, there'll be an accounting, and that's what I believe. And I hope I can measure up.

[01:51:56.11] But then when I look at government, I think we've got the greatest one in the world. But as we go along, we've been more infighting, and there's more division, almost like 1861. And we don't need that. We need to appreciate everything that we have. And America is materially, scientifically, medically-- we have everything we need, and we don't need to be fighting among ourselves. We need to be sharing that.

[01:52:24.34] And we do. We have good programs. I know mission groups. I've got a man from our church who is doing surgery right now in Zambia, and it's really hard conditions. And to me, that's where it lies with Americans, looking out for other people.

[01:52:40.70] And school groups, I get to talk to them a lot. And to me, it's ancient history. But think of ways you can use your education besides to go make a million dollars as a medical doctor. Hey, maybe you can find some medical mission work to do. I mean, not that it isn't good to make money. But there are other ways you can be of service. And you get an engineering degree.

[01:53:06.75] I mean, these developed countries-- unless we bring them into the 20th century-- we've tried for years to-- and my mother always asked me that. She said, why are they hungry? Why aren't they living in modern day? I said, I don't know. There's just a lot of cultural, religious, a lot of other issues that hold them down. But we always try. That's, to me, that missionary zeal, so--

[01:53:27.00] And I tell the kids, I said, if you don't get a college degree, be a mechanic. But appreciate what you have, enjoy the freedoms that you have. But don't forget the other person. They're there. And there's somebody down and out, needs your help. But Americans, again, have a heart, I guess it's the fabric of who we are.