

LEISURE & ARTS

TV: For Vietnam POWs, Captivity With Dignity

Beatings Were Commonplace, but These Soldiers Kept the Faith; Modern Stations of the Cross

By BARBARA D. PHILLIPS

THANKS TO "The American Experience," television viewers tonight have another chance to see "Return With Honor," the documentary about American POWs in Vietnam that my colleague Joe Morgenstern, during the film's big-screen release last year, called "inspiring in the extreme." It is a chance that should be grasped as tightly as the two dozen former POWs we meet in the film held on to their honor under conditions designed to break even the most steely will.

These were fighter pilots, men who were trained to react in a controlled manner under pressure. But they also reveled in the freedom of the skies and their status as aviators. And in seconds their lives came crashing down.

Ron Bliss, who was a POW for 6½ years, recounts those early moments, on Sept. 4, 1966: "And so there I was, this very proud and vainglorious fighter pilot, the peacock of the services, walking down a dirt road on the outskirts of Hanoi barefoot in my skivvies and a T-shirt with a hole cut right where my navel was, and I thought, you know, I really look good here, don't I?" His friend Tom McNish was shot down the same day. "That first day," Mr. McNish says, "I went through the same thing that everybody did. I got stoned and spit on as I walked through little villages and . . . that evening they had a big convocation . . . and threw rocks at me and yelled and screamed." Kevin McManus remembers that after his June 30, 1967 capture, even "the little kids would come up and put little slivers of bamboo into you."

The words of these men, long free from their bonds, are harrowing enough. But we also see the pain of Lts. Bliss and McNish and many of the other POWs we meet here. The footage of these prisoners being paraded through hostile North Vietnamese crowds brings to mind nothing so much as the annual staging of the Stations of the Cross in some Roman Catholic countries. But this footage is no re-creation done well after the fact—it was filmed at the time by the North Vietnamese and comes to us from Vietnam's Ministry of Culture and Information, which allowed the filmmakers, Freida Lee Mock and Terry Sanders, access to its archives.

Capture was only the start of the horrors. Lt. Everett Alvarez was the first member of his family to finish high

school, the first to go to college—and also the first pilot shot down and caught by the North Vietnamese, in the Gulf of Tonkin on Aug. 4, 1964. As he began 8½ years of captivity, he quickly learned that, according to the North Vietnamese, the Geneva Conventions did not apply. "You're not a prisoner of war. There's no war. There are no diplomatic relations between your country and my country," Lt. Alvarez was told. "We consider you a criminal. A war criminal."

For many years, beatings, tortures and isolation were common at the Hanoi Hilton and other prisons. "Beatings are easy," Lt. McManus tells us, at least on this scale of horrors. "For at that point where your body can't take it anymore, it just shuts down and you go unconscious. So, I mean, there's very little a person truthfully can do to you by beating you. But the ropes were—they were scary because . . . you'd been put in a position whereby if you did something, you'd choke yourself."

"I put out the word: 'Roll back, bounce back,'" says Jeremiah Denton, a POW for seven years, seven months. "You could be tortured to give something, but then you just don't lie back and continue to give them things. . . . You make them torture you again and again and give them as little as you can the next time," he explains. Dave Burroughs says, "They wanted propaganda. They wanted us to denounce our leaders. They wanted us to denounce capitalism. They wanted us to praise Ho Chi Minh." And Vin Quak Vin, North Vietnam's propaganda expert, told James Stockdale that "we're going to win this war on the streets of New York." . . . We would be sort of a branch of the American antiwar movement. That's what they had in mind."

The POWs were brought news of antiwar demonstrations and the like. But, says Lt. Bliss, "all we had left in our immediate world out there was each other. All we had were our reputations. We were being tortured to say far less than what senators and congressmen were saying on the House and Senate floor, as they have a right to. What they played for us after a while for propaganda were speeches by politicians. They didn't have to make up anything." The wife of Tom Madison, one of several spouses interviewed, says that because of the negative climate on the home front, she and her son kept quiet about her husband's POW status. She didn't want the other kids to tease her boy or taunt him.

But while 11 POWs caved in and took early release ahead of sick, wounded and longer-held captives and then made it worse by claiming that they had been treated very well (the 12th was sent home with the blessings of his comrades and the



Lt. Comdr. Robert Shumaker of the U.S. Navy was captured by North Vietnamese soldiers on Feb. 11, 1965. He and other POWs tell their stories in 'Return With Honor.'

names of 256 aviators he had committed to memory), the majority held as firm as it could under the circumstances.

"You get isolated," Mr. Bliss says. "That's when the trouble begins. You have to communicate at virtually any cost. If you get caught and tortured a little while, that's just the overhead."

The men used a tap code. They spoke through walls. "People swept in code. They shoveled in code. Flashed pans across halls in code," says former POW George Day. To keep himself mentally engaged, Lt. Comdr. Bob Shumaker—an engineer—built a house in his head. Lt. John "Mike" McGrath used the blood from his boils to paint a picture—"a big, beautiful stag." He was determined that one day he

would depict what he saw in prison—and all the drawings in "Return With Honor" were made by Lt. McGrath in the month after his release.

Immediately after Ho Chi Minh's death in 1969, torture as a general rule stopped, though the Geneva Conventions were never honored. And eventually, after an unsuccessful raid by American commandos, several POWs were taken from solitary confinement and grouped together. The motto their senior leaders decided on was "Return With Honor."

The men reinforced each other's resolve and held classes in Spanish and Russian, international relations and quantum physics. They had "evenings at the mov-

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Comedy and Camp in 'Rinaldo'

By HEIDI WALESON

New York

THE NEW YORK CITY OPERA has embraced Handel in recent years, bringing such once-neglected works as "Xerxes," "Partenope" and "Ariodante" before an appreciative public. "Acis and Galatea," staged last summer at Glimmerglass, will appear in the spring, but on Halloween, the company unveiled its season blockbuster, "Rinaldo," which was created to showcase two important young singers, countertenor David Daniels and soprano Christine Goerke.

"Rinaldo" (1711) was Handel's first opera for London, cobbled together in a few weeks out of the odds and ends of earlier

works. Its libretto by Giacomo Rossi is on the thin side, but the opera is stuffed with spectacular music. (New fans can have it at home now, too: Decca has just released a fine recording starring Mr. Daniels.)

Onstage, an army of Crusaders is busy besieging Jerusalem, hoping to win it back for Christianity from the Moslem Saracens. Inside the city, the sorceress Armida (Ms. Goerke) has a plan to help her lover and comrade-in-arms Argante (Denis Sedov), the Saracen commander. She steals Almirena (Lisa Saffer), who is the daughter of the Christian commander Goffredo (Daniel Taylor), and the beloved of Rinaldo (Mr. Daniels), the Christian knight who is his army's biggest asset.

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