



Doug Birkey:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Doug Birkey. It's really my honor to host this panel today. I'm the Executive Director of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies. And I just want to say this upfront, when we talk about service and everything, nobody knows what that means better than Colonel Ellis. I mean, honor, integrity, and determination at a level few of us will understand. He earned his wings in the summer of 1966 and Colonel Ellis almost immediately found himself assigned to fly the F-4 in Vietnam in the 39th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Da Nang Air Base in South Vietnam.

He completed 68 missions, 53 of them over North Vietnam. And I don't think I need to remind anyone in this audience the dangers involved with those missions. In that era, North Vietnam was one of the most heavily defended regions on the planet. The density of AAA and SAMs was second to none. A rival defense is found in the heart of the Soviet Union. On November 7th, 1967, Colonel Ellis was shot down and captured. He would spend the next five years as prisoner of war. Ladies and gentlemen, those years involved unspeakable challenges and hardships. Through tremendous fortitude and grit, Colonel Ellis survived and was repatriated in March of 1973. He continued to serve, including multiple flying assignments and leadership positions. He retired on February 1st, 1990 after 25 years of service. He now engages around the nation as a leadership coach, speaker, and author. Ladies and gentlemen, let's offer a warm introduction to Colonel Ellis. Sir.

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. Well, it's great to be here. I've been around Air Force and Air Force Association, now the Air, Space & Cyber group. It's just great to be here with you. The common thing that we all share is this whole interest in aviation, the Air Force, and space. And so whenever you have a common thing in mind that you share with others, it's very powerful. And I'm going to tell you that about our story as POWs. And as POWs, we have three more sitting here on the front row. Here's Rob Certain, right here, Mike Brazelton, Tom Hanton. And our youngest member, Tom Kirk, is 95, he may be here in a little bit, but he's here at the event, we had lunch together today. So it's very exciting to be here.

I'm standing at the podium. I'm going to stay here for a little bit, but maybe they have a hand mic that they can bring over in a little bit. I was thinking I was going to be wearing a lapel mic, but I got caught up. Today, I want to share with you all... Here he is, Colonel Tom Kirk, a man who flew fighters in the Korean War and the Vietnam War and was there with us for five years. And it's just great to be with Tom and his wife Anna. So glad y'all are here.

Well, today I'm going to share some things that happened in the war and some lessons learned that we can all use every day. Now, I'll be 80 in less than 30 days, but I'll tell you, I'm still learning. I'm still learning. And I want to encourage you. So many of you all are still in our Air Force or are in our Air Force, and I want to encourage you to always be learning. The more you know, the more professional you're going to be, the more successful you're going to be, but also the more you'll know that you don't know, and you're going to be humble. And when you can be both confident and humble, that is powerful. As fighter pilots, it took us a while locked up in those jails and being tortured until we really got humble, but we got there. We had time to get there, so here we go.

Well, I have written stories and I know that many of you have read the Leading with Honor book on the left. That came out, it was on the Chief's reading list in 2012, 2013. And then Engaged with Honor, I know some of y'all are into that. The recent one that just came out is a totally different one, Captured by Love: Inspiring True Romance Stories from Vietnam POWs. We have 20 stories of long-term POWs in there, and they're about wonderful things about what happened in the POW camp, what the wives are



doing back home, and then about romance and great marriages after we came home. So I think you'll enjoy those.

Now today I'm going to start out by showing you what happened 50 years ago as we came home. This is March the 14th. I'm in the third big group being released at the end of the war. I know that Tom Kirk was in that group and Mike Brazelton who had already come out a couple or three weeks earlier. But here we are. In fact, that's me smoking a cigar and Tom Kirk right behind me, and he's sitting right here today keeping his eye on me. But they offered us cigars and hugs. They had a couple of nurses, females, we hadn't seen females in a long time, and we got hugs. We spent two days at Clark Air Base in the hospital. We got a physical, a haircut, a uniform. And now, we just got off the bus, we're about to get on the 141 and come back to the United States and our families.

But there was this wonderful crowd there to see us off. They had been there to meet us, and this was totally unexpected. We're at Clark Air Base, a huge air base then in the Philippines. And so they're all there to say goodbye, and we went over to say goodbye to them and all these little girls wanted to give me a hug. And I hadn't seen a woman in five and a half years. And man, I was glad to be hugged.

Now on that flight back, we refueled in Hawaii in the middle of the night. And my old DO, Colonel "Boots" Blesse, who was an ace in the Korean War, was there. He was a two-star commander there. And he met us in the middle of the night and we got a nice thing around our neck that we wore home.

Now I want to jump forward 50 years. We just had our 50th anniversary out at the Nixon Library. And this is Mo Baker on the right, a 105 pilot for five and a half, six years. Mo Baker. Now Mo Baker there is only 91 years old, okay? And Mo and I are headed out. Our wives are with us, but we stepped over and took that picture. That's in Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. We're about to fly to California and go to the 50th anniversary reunion of the POWs. It's at the Nixon Library because President Nixon invited us all to come to the White House for a big dinner on May 24th, 1973, we'd all been released.

Well, the White House wasn't big enough to handle all that, so they put up this huge tent on the White House grounds, and I'm going to come back to that later. But we still go for the 40th anniversary and the 50th anniversary to the Nixon Library. And so here is the president of AFA, General "Orville" Wright and Lee Ellis there just on the first day we're going into the Nixon Library to be at the 50th reunion out there.

Now this is a picture of the POWs there for the 50th anniversary. And this was taken on May 24th, 50 years later from May 24th that we went to the White House in 1973. Now, I just wanted to mention a couple of the couples in there. This is Gene Smith. Now Jean was a 105 pilot. I lived with Gene Smith for several years and was locked up in the same cell. He was the president of AFA from 1994 to '96 and chairman of the board from '96 to '98. And his love story is in this book here. I think you'll enjoy that. He's quite a guy. He's the only person I know that's probably more emotional and louder than me and talks more than me. So we're good friends.

And there's Mo and Honey Baker. Now Mo came home and his wife said, "I'm out of here." And when he came home, he met a widow, a fighter pilot widow, and that's Honey. And a few months later he proposed and they got married and they've been married almost 50 years now, 49 years. So they were at the 50th reunion also. Talented folks. Mo Baker has four DFCs and four Silver Stars. How many people do you ever heard of having that decorated?

Okay, well, Smitty Harris, he's the one that brought the tap code in. Now, Smitty was not able to come to our reunion, the 50th reunion, because he injured his back. He's 94. And Louise had two children, two little girls, and she was eight months pregnant when he got captured. And he was a POW for almost eight years. Incredible guy, incredible couple. Their story's also in the book.

Now with that in mind, I wanted to tell you that growing up in the '50s and '60s was a unique era. I plowed mules on the farm in Georgia. I drove trucks. I started driving when I was 11 years old. I fed the



pigs, all that kind of stuff. But within five years of plowing mules, I was flying supersonic jets. What a wonderful era. I'm so glad I was born in the '50s. And that right-hand picture's at George Air Force Base, which is about 35 miles east of Edwards, and about a hundred miles south of China Lake, where Top Gun was filmed. And one time we got in a dogfight with some guys from what were later the Top Gun folks up there, and we got low on fuel. We were pumping that F-4 fuel in there and got low, and we just landed and got some more fuel and so we could make sure we made it back home. But that was a great time. I enjoyed it.

Combat training, 23 years old, going to war. But I'm just doing what I always wanted to do, believing in myself. I get to Da Nang, I take this picture there because I wanted to send one to all my girlfriends so they'd be thinking about me, and mom and dad too.

But the header here is "Know Yourself." Ladies and gentlemen, there's probably nothing more important than knowing yourself, the good, the bad, and the ugly about yourself. You've got to be able to be confident and humble and vulnerable. Because when we were locked up with fellow POWs, or when you have been tortured, you got real humble after a while. But what we learned was that we had to believe in ourselves and we had to believe in each other and encourage each other, and that made all the difference in the world. Being honest about who you are.

Now, so many people grow up... I had one cellmate that was an orphan who was adopted and didn't have a father. His mother adopted eight kids. He never grew up with a father, and he was one of only two that remained unfaithful to our country in a POW situation. He collaborated with the enemy. Being healthy to believe in yourself, letting your kids know, letting your people in your organization know that you care about them, that they are important and valuable is so important for building somebody's inner confidence.

Well, I knew myself pretty well, but on the 53rd combat mission, I got blown out of the sky, airplane blew up, and two weeks later I get to Hanoi. This is a prison built by the French in the 1890s. It was a French colony back then. 14 feet high walls, 4 feet thick, broken wine bottle shards of glass on top, electrical wires on top. Nobody ever escaped from that prison. We lived at that time in what we called Little Vegas. You have to name things. And see the Thunderbird up there with cells there. And then the Mint solitary confinement all the way around. Golden Nugget was kind of a transition area. The Tet Room down there on the bottom right was interrogation room. The Knobby Rooms weren't in that part of the camp, but they were torture rooms in another part of the Hanoi Hilton.

Now, what we had to do was we had to find out how to communicate. And one guy came up under one of my cell one day and told me about the tap code. And sure enough, that became very, very important for us. And I'll mention that again later. But at that point, we couldn't tap on the walls because we didn't have any adjacent walls. We were so isolated from the other cells. So I did push the cover back on the window. There was a rattan cover on it, and I pushed it over until I could see into the courtyard, and I see across over there to that other cell.

Now, this guy right here was my senior ranking officer after a while, and we fired the other one who was collaborating with the enemy, and he took over. And now what a great mentor he was for me. He was very courageous, a person of great character. And I can't tell you how much it means when you're in a POW camp and you have a leader who's tough and courageous and a person of great character. I wanted to be like him, except there were a few things about him that... He did not accept not being perfect, for instance, sometimes if he thought he was right. But he's just a great guy. He's 86 years old, be 87 in December. He's the champion of his golf course for the seniors now. So he's a tough guy.

But I lived with him for five years. So we've been home for a couple or three years and one day his wife walked up to me... He was married for a couple of years and had a 9-month-old daughter, 10-month-old



daughter when he was captured. And she said, "Lee Ellis, I want you to know I've lived with Ken Fisher longer than you have." I said, "Good," but he was a good roommate.

Now, communication was essential. And I started to talk about that a minute ago because I wanted to talk about pushing that rattan cover over my window back and seeing into that Golden Nugget cell right there. And the guy that was in there had been on the cover of TIME magazine in the spring of '65. He'd been shot down and rescued. Now, this was an ace in the Korean War. He was the most famous fighter pilot in the Air Force in the '60s, okay? He had flown the New York to Paris Flight 25th anniversary, set a new world's record in flight time from New York to Paris. Robbie Risner, Colonel Risner, his emblem is out at the Air Force Academy. If you've been out there, you've seen it.

Well, he was the senior ranking officer in the camp at that time, and he was just a great leader and a great example for all of us. And here's what he said to all of us. He passed the word, simply clarified what's expected. As a leader, you got to clarify what's expected. "I'm in charge and here's what I want you to do. Be a good American; live by the code of conduct. Take torture up to the point of physical or mental permanent damage, and then no more. Go ahead and give in. Give as little as possible. Bounce back and get ready because they're going to come after you again. Stay united through communications. Pray every day. Go home proud. Return with honor." And that became our real motto. Now, it started out "Resist, survive, return with honor." And then over the years, we had resisted and survived for years, and finally it just became "Return with honor." But at that point he just shared that part of it.

But I want to emphasize the word communications there. Communications were forbidden, but we would risk our lives to communicate with each other. I have a blog every month and I have a five or six minute video, and this month it's on communications. If you go to leadingwithhonor.com, you can see it there.

Now, Smitty Harris, I mentioned earlier, is the one that brought the tap code in. The tap code is a five by five Matrix. A is one one, B is one two. I'm sure y'all probably all have read about this. The key thing is to know you got to have a missing letter. There's 26 letters in the alphabet, and five by five is 25 blocks. It was K. I assumed at first it was Z, but found out six weeks later that "No, that's why some of your words have been falling apart." And sure enough, that worked really good then.

You got to communicate to clarify, and this is tapping on the walls in the Hanoi Hilton, guy's alone tapping on those walls. But you also got to communicate to connect with people's hearts and to collaborate and plan your "What's going on?" and "How are we going to do this?" and "You're important here. I'm so glad you're on my team." I've been very successful as a leader in the Air Force and own my own company, leadership training, consulting, coaching company, because I have people that make me look good. They're very different from me in a lot of cases, but I let them know how much I appreciate them because I wouldn't be who I am without them. Okay? I can't do it all. So connecting with people's heart is so important.

General Brown, General CQ brown, our chief of staff, in a conversation on a podcast I have on our website, General CQ brown says, "When I walk out of my office in the Pentagon, I have to remind myself, 'CQ, if you meet somebody in the hallway, you smile and say, 'Good morning.''"

That's powerful. When somebody smiles at you and says, "Good morning," they're showing they care about you, you are important, you're valued. That's so powerful because every human being wants to be valued and to feel important. And you have that power with your teammates, and if you're a leader, with your people. And at home, by the way, you got to do that at home too.

One guy and his cellmate, one afternoon, they moved to a place where there were no walls touching their little building. And so what they did was they figured out how to communicate with a hand code. A, B, C, D, E. And man, this would fly. And it was silent. If you could see somebody in another building



over there, you could say, "T-D." And by the way, we invented shortcuts a long time before cell phones, folks. "T-D, W-E, G-O-T, L-T-R-S." Silent, quick. It was amazing what we could do there.

So now the two people who brought these two communications in, that guy was a first lieutenant and the other guy was Smitty Harris, who was a captain. Young people have great ideas. You better listen to them. Listen to your younger people. And that's what the generals was saying this morning. A lot was saying about you got to listen to people. A lot of the best ideas come up from the bottom. You're working strategy up here, they're working down there with the stuff. They know the best solution to fix this problem. Listen.

Okay, now the POWs were all men, but back home the women were doing some great work. They were told to keep quiet and not to publicize, not to talk about being in the media type of thing with people. And so they had to be quiet for a while. And finally by late '68, they said, "No, this is not working. The communists of the North Vietnam have signed the Geneva Conventions on treatment of POWs, and they need to be demanded that they abide by it." And so they started putting pressure in our country, and our government, with the Nixon administration changed that policy. And then they went worldwide, putting pressure on people. And the people in the United States put pressure on the communists about that.

Well, this is James Bond's lady. That's James Bond, Sybil Stockdale. Here's the rest of the story. That picture was blurred because she's sitting in the White House talking to President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger about, "We don't end this war without bringing our POWs home." And they listened. So these women, mainly starting with the wives and families. My mom got involved. She got this... And my mom was a speaker. She's a school teacher, but she became a speaker, spoke to Rotary Club, had these people writing letters to the Paris Embassy demanding the communists treat us in accordance with the Geneva Accords.

More than a thousand people were wearing a bracelet with my name on it and shoot-down date. All of us. We had more than a thousand people wearing a bracelet with our name on it, thinking about us, praying for us every day. We didn't know that, but we knew the treatment changed because they stopped the torture in the fall of 1969 when Ho Chi Minh died. And we had time to recover before we came home.

Those big cells... After the Son Tay raid, we went back to the Hanoi Hilton into cells where Vietnamese prisoners had been that were about 1,800 to 2,000 square feet. And there was 55 guys in there in my cell, in this room 3 right there to start with. And then we went down to about 52. And we were there almost two years in that cell. Half of us went to the Chinese border in '72 when the bombing started again.

But can you imagine being locked up in a cell with 52 strong-minded fighter pilots and aircrew members for about two years, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, no walls. You learn to live with people. And only twice did one guy ever yell at another guy, and both times they apologized before we went to bed. It's amazing when people, you learn to accept them for who they are, and they accept you for who you are, and you learn... You couldn't fake it there. Everything bad and ugly about you is going to come out in that cell when you're locked up 24 hours a day. And we learn to accept ourselves and to work on ourselves, but learn to accept others and let that be good. By the way, that's one of the reasons that we've all had great marriages since we came home. And that's why I wrote a book about it.

Bounce back, be resilient. This is the March 14th group, 1967. You see John McCain there. You see me on the right side there with a mustache. I had the March mustache, Air Force people, March mustache, March 14th, 1973. You know what I'm talking about? General Rand and I grew a March mustache a few years ago. And that's Colonel Tom Kirk standing right there in front of me.



May '73, we get on that airplane, we headed back. That's Ken Fisher on the left, my buddy, me in the middle, and John McCain on the right. We came back, and I said, we refueled in Hawaii on the way home. Mom and dad did such a great job. I was so proud of them. Dinner that night. Went back to my hometown. They had a great parade. POWs were welcomed home. Veterans from the war in Vietnam were generally spit on or told not to wear their uniform or they would be spit on, some of them even attacked, because of the anti-war group.

The Air Force said, "You want to go back to work?" And I said, "Flying?" And they said, "Yes." I said, "Yep." So I went to San Antonio to Randolph Air Force Base. I got checked out in the T-38 and had a great flying career. I ended up as the flying squadron commander of the 560th IP squadron at Randolph, that squadron right there.

So people said, "How did you do it?" Well, you must believe, and we had faith. Faith and belief was so important. Faith in God was very important. We had guys talk about jumping out of an airplane and they hadn't been to church in years and hadn't read the Bible in years or whatever. They looked up and as they're coming down, they checked their parachute. "I got a good shoot. Now, Lord, I'm so sorry I hadn't talked to you in a long time." Guys would pray for hours every day. If you read some of the books, guys would pray for hours every day because they knew that they weren't in control. God was in control. And that became so important for us. Faith in ourselves and each other, faith in our families, faith in our country, and faith that we could and would return with honor. That became our belief.

Earlier today at lunch, we had several guys ask, "How do you account for your resilience?" And they said, "You have to believe in yourself. You have to decide, I can do this. I'm going to do it for one more day, one more week, one more month, one more year." And that's what we had to do. So to kind of think about some resilience lessons, I think you've got to believe in yourself, believe in your purpose, believe in your mission, believe in your team.

And I call the 7 C's. Now, these are not the seven seas of the ocean. These are the 7 C's of leadership and really just life. Character, you got to guide and protect it. We have a model now with seven items that you can go to our website and download. Commitment. You've got to be committed, whether you're in a marriage or you're in the military, you got to be committed. It's the only way you can be successful. Culture, mission and people. Clarity. Communications. You got to over-communicate. Connection. You got to be bonded with your teammates, okay? And community. You got to have a community. This is a community today, and that's why we're all so happy being here together, because we're all one community.

Well, brotherhood was healing for us. Connected at the heart made such a difference in the whole world out there. You got to be completely honest with each other. You have to be authentic about who you are. You can't pretend. People are going to see what you are. You got to be honest about who you are and be humble. And you got to be in that brotherhood. You got to form a brotherhood, young people. You got to stay connected. Why do we have so much problems with suicide today? One problem is people are on their phone. You're not connected with somebody's heart on your phone very well. But when you're connected with them face-to-face, it's much easier.

So POWs came home with a much lower PTSD rate than the combat veterans from the South, even though we'd been tortured and away and locked up all those years, our PTSD rate is much lower. And we're outliving our peers. Our average age now is 87, and I'm the second-youngest guy that was there more than five years.

Well, I was single and I came home and I dated lots of girls for about a year. And then I met Mary. Here's Mary. This is at our 40th Nixon anniversary. And here is Smitty Harris. I mentioned a minute ago, Smitty and Louise, they were at the 40th. They were going to come to the 50th, but his back hurt. He's 94 as I mentioned, but still doing well.



We have a bookmark for all of you today, so please make sure you get one before you leave. And go to powromance.com. There's 20 stories in there. And what the women did is really highlighted in there. What the men did about the POW stories is in there. And of course, we talk about Tony Orlando & Dawn singing Yellow Ribbon. Y'all are too young to know what that is, but you check it out and you'll love it. And I think you'll see there were three groups: the married who stayed married, the married who were divorced when they came home, and the single guys. And by the way, these books, just go to shop AFA and the bookstore in there and you'll see it there for their website, everything.

Now I think it's time for us to do questions.

Doug Birkey:

Sir, thanks very much. It's tremendous to hear that.

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Doug Birkey:

Ladies and gentlemen, colonel Ellis has agreed to take questions. We've got mics up here in front, if you'd like to step up and offer any. And I'd like to take the prerogative here of hosting. Sir, you went from graduating, getting your wings, flying combat, and getting shot down all within a year. How did you handle that learning curve? I mean, some people are looking for the gear handle in that span of time.

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

Well, I would say that I was just a fighter pilot, but the truth is, we were doing things we love to do. And it's easy when it's something you love to do. It's easy to get so totally committed and engaged in it. And if you're going to go to war and use it, you know that you better know it. The one thing that was so amazing was knowing when to eject, making that decision. There were two F-4 crews at George Air Force Base that killed both of them because they hit the ground in training. And the wing commander had a big call for all the pilots and got us in there, and he was just screaming and yelling. And I thought, "Well, he's got a good point here. I'm going to remember, I'm going to not hesitate to make a decision to eject when the time comes." And if I'd have stayed in that airplane another second or second and a half, I would've been dead.

So just thinking about who I was and the training that we had, the training we had was really good. And even the training we had in SERE school was really, really helpful too. All those things. But the bottom line was I had great leadership that enabled me to do that.

Doug Birkey:

Yeah. Another question somebody asked me to pass on to you, sir. You listen to the secretary this morning and it's China, China, China. We haven't had to think about that sort of threat in many, many decades at that level, and the risks the Airmen in this room are likely going to encounter. What are pieces of advice you'd offer? I mean, you were a Cold Warrior, you went to Vietnam. There was tremendous danger and risk. This generation's looking at it, and we really haven't had to since the end of the Cold War in some regards at that level. Thoughts and advice to pass on?

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):



We don't know what's going to happen, okay? But we do know that the more we prepare... And it was so great to hear the generals in here talking this morning about pushing things down and let those people down there that are going to do the work decide what's the best way to get this done. That was really tremendous. But you've got to do the best you can at what you're doing and believe that that's going to be the solution to the problem. And then if the problem comes up, you're still going to have to be doing the best you can to solve the problem.

But we don't know what's going to happen out there. We just got to prepare and be dedicated to it. And so I just encourage you to be dedicated and pretend as though or think of it as, "If it ever happens, I'm going to be ready to the best of my ability. And all of my team, we're going to be a team and we're going to be ready to go. And we'll have the courage." It takes courage and commitment to do it, you got to have the courage and commitment. If you don't have commitment, you're not going to make it. You got to be committed and you have to reinforce that on a daily basis.

Doug Birkey:

What did you learn about yourself? I mean, you were tested in ways that almost all of us in this room can't even imagine. What did you really experience with self-discovery in some of those challenges?

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

Well, the thing that I still remember the best as far as that impacted me the most, I'd been a POW for about three or four months. In the first couple of months, I would have nightmares of being in a hand-to-hand combat while shooting bullets with a M16 or M14 or whatever at the enemy. And they were shooting at me with their AK-47s. And then I'd run out of bullets, and they would run out of bullets, and we'd be in a hand-to-hand combat. And about the time one of them has got a knife and about to kill me, I'd wake up. And then I got over that.

And then I had a dream one night. I was in the ninth grade science class. This really happened. It didn't happen, but it should have happened. In the ninth grade science class. My teacher, Ms. Jordan, came over and was standing there beside me, and all the kids are in the class. She puts her hand on my shoulder. And I went by Leon in high school. She said, "Leon, you could be a good student if you just do your homework." And the next day I could not get over that. And I kept thinking about it and I decided I will always do my homework.

And now I've written six books. If you told my mother I had written a chapter for a book, she'd say, "Oh, I wish he had," but she wouldn't believe it, and my teachers. Because I was smart enough to get by. I was the worst student who ever graduated from University of Georgia in four years, the worst student. Okay? I didn't study much. But in ROTC, I was a distinguished graduate, because I loved it and I studied it. But after the war, I came home and I made a commitment to study and to do my homework and to always be prepared.

Doug Birkey:

That's terrific.

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

In everything, not just my flying, but everything.

Doug Birkey:

Question from the audience, please?



Audience:

Hi sir. My name's Kimberly Huth. I'm a retired Airman, but my new role now is to take care of our community. Can you hear me okay?

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

I don't hear very well, so he'll interpret, if you could-

Audience:

That's okay. I'm Kimberly Huth. I'm from St. Clair County in Illinois, outside of Scott Air Force Base. I'm a retired Airman, so my role is no longer to prepare for war, but my role now is to prepare the communities. I saw the picture of you and your parents at the table. What might we learn from them? Because if we go to war, it's going to look different. What can I learn from your parents sitting at that table that can help me talk to my community about what might they expect if we do go to war, without being a prepper?

Doug Birkey:

Yes. Sir, how do we help prepare our communities for the challenges we might face with a future conflict, especially the families and how they engage in their communities?

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

I think the most important thing that you can do in any situation is to let people know you care about them and listen to them. You don't have to tell them what to do. You may have to help them solve some problems, but at their request. But I think just letting people know they're valued and important is the most important point. That's the starting point. And from there, maybe you have community things that you can help them feel will contribute to their success and to contribute to their dealing with the situation.

When the League of Wives formed and then it became the National League of POW/MIA Families, their connection really helped them endure those years that we were there. Being connected to somebody who's been through this before, going through this kind of thing, that's what's so important to really help deal with any situation, but especially emotional type situations. When I was in a cell, locked up with a guy who'd been there two years longer than me and had been tortured many more times than me, what can I complain about? And he's smiling and having a good day. I'm going to smile and have a good day too. Someday we're going to get out of here.

Doug Birkey:

Yeah. Sir, we've got another question from the audience.

Audience:

Yes, sir. Staff Sergeant Martina Nielsen from Robins Air Force Base, 78th OSS. Sir, so I have a question for all of you, or the POWs. I know that there's been jokes and we enjoy hearing your stories, but were you allotted any time to process what happened to you and given any resources to cope and actually deal with your trauma basically?

Doug Birkey:



Sir, how did you deal with the trauma and the stress when you got back home? Did the service give you time and space and resources to deal with that?

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

Well, this is what's so amazing. When we went in that big cell, we knew... Most everybody in there was a college graduate. And I mean, there were some brilliant people in there. But we all knew that, having gone through torture and isolation, being away from our families, not getting a letter for two or three years, that if we went home, in those days, we'd be a mess. And so we had to work every day to get healthier, healthier, healthier. And being connected in that big cell was like a blessing. Being locked up with 52 guys for almost two years was the greatest blessing we could have ever had, because we had to learn to live with each other. We had to be authentic about who we were. We could talk about anything. There was always somebody who suffered more than you right over there, right over here. And they cared about you. And that was so healing that we came home healthy and almost... Very little stress when we came home.

The biggest stress I had... Now, I wasn't married, so I didn't have to worry about my wife and kids. But the biggest stress I had was when I went to the store to buy some breakfast cereal. I was out on my own after I left my parents back in the Air Force. And, "Oh my gosh, there's 36 kinds of cereal. What the hell do I buy?" Those kinds of decisions about what to pick. We didn't have to make any decisions like that for years. So making those kinds of decisions. And finally I said, "I'm just going to try it. If I don't like it, I won't buy it again, not going to change my world." And when I go out to dinner, I just order something, and I pick out something and order it. If I don't like it, I won't ever order it again. It's not a big deal, okay?

So I think we came home so healthy because of what the people back home did. The wives and families and the American people put pressure on the communists about our treatment. And when Ho Chi Minh, their founder and CEO, president, died, the new leadership came in. It took them about three or four weeks to get installed, and they called in the camp commanders and said, "No more torture." And there was occasionally torture and beatings, but not every day, totally different environment. It was live and let live. And we had over three years to get healthy. And we've been healthy. We love our lives, we love our families.

I'll close out here with one final statement. We were at a reunion in San Antonio probably six or seven or eight years ago. We're sitting around a table. General Chuck Boyd, he's the only one of us that made four stars. I lived with Chuck for a couple of years, wonderful guy. And five or six other guys, all old guys. I was the youngest guy at the table. And one of them said, "You know guys, I never volunteered to be a POW, but I wouldn't change a thing." And every person agreed with him. We didn't want our families to have to go through that. But we didn't have a choice. And we came home better men because of our suffering.

One of my cellmates, a Marine, used to look over at me a lot of nights and say, "Lee, remember, pain purifies. Pain purifies." And there's a lot of truth in that. Don't volunteer to suffer, but in your suffering be true to who you are, to be true to who you're committed to be. And that's the best you can do, and trust that God is going to be helping you come out the other side a better person. And I think that's true.

I want to close out with one last video. I think I meant to play it a while ago, but it's right after the questions. Next one. Okay. This is right after our 40th reunion 10 years ago. And I was on ABC News with Diane Sawyer with two other POWs. And this is the way it closed out. One of our POW cellmates had written a hymn and they sang it at the White House in May the 24th, 1973. And most of these guys had never lived together. Some of them haven't. And they met and sang and practiced in the hotel men's room that afternoon, and now they're going to sing it tonight. So go ahead, run it.



Video:

In prison they wrote down songs about America on toilet paper. They hid it from the Vietnamese. And 40 years ago they sang one of them written in prison. It is called "The POW Prayer," about honor and freedom and home.

(singing)

Oh God, to thee we raise our prayer and sing

From within these foreign prison walls.

Give us strength to withstand

all the harm that the hand

of our enemy captor can do.

We pledge unswerving faith and loyalty

to our cause, America, and Thee.

Amen.

Doug Birkey:

Sir, it's been our honor to spend this time with you. Thank you so much.