

“Lessons from Vietnam: 50 Years Later”

Ken Goss:

Good afternoon.

For 40 years, it has been my privilege to speak to you at AFA events most often as the voice of AFA. When I say Airmen, Guardians, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 2023 Air and Space Forces Association Warfare Symposium. Usually you hear me from the production table on the side with my colleagues from GPI, but today I'm privileged to be on the stage to introduce a panel who will talk about Vietnam, 50 years later.

These legendary Airmen will share with you about their experiences and their memories. Before I turn it over to the moderator, however, I want to take a point of personal privilege to talk about one of the panelists. Back when I was AFA Director of Government Relations, Lieutenant Colonel Gene Smith, in the first chair here, was the president and chairman of the Air Force Association at that time. During his tenure, he accompanied me to Capitol Hill many times where we worked much legislation of importance to our air force, our Airmen, and our families. Gene was a dynamic spokesperson for all of you. He delivered results through his personal contacts and his passionate case statements for support. Thank you, Gene.

Now please give a warm welcome to your panel moderator, Colonel John Gallemore.

Col. John Gallemore:

I don't know why they clapped for me. They should be clapping for you.

Lt. Col. Gene Smith, USAF (Ret.):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Col. John Gallemore:

So General Allvin, CMSAF, General Wright, General Raaberg, General Skoch, thank you so much for allowing me the opportunity to share the stage with really what I'll call and I think you'll all agree, three true American heroes. Now before we move into the formalities, sir, I'm not sure who signed and approved the flight schedule, but I'm going to point out the fact that you have a University of Georgia Bulldog, a Mississippi State Bulldog, a raging Cajun from southwestern Louisiana and a Aggie all on the stage with microphones at the same time with clearance to engage. So I'm fairly certain we have busted our acceptable level of risk. So with that being said to my left are two former prisoners of war and the last serving American ace in our active duty military.

The scheme of maneuver for today is fairly simple. Each of these fine gentlemen will talk about eight to 10 minutes. They'll tell you their experiences and their stories and then from there we'll try to get through a few questions realizing that we don't have a whole lot of time. We've got about 40 minutes. I know that most of y'all are familiar with these three gentlemen, but let me just fill you in on a few quick facts. So Lieutenant Colonel Gene Smith. Immediately to my left, he grew up in Mark Mississippi. As I alluded to, he attended Mississippi State University where my daughter's going to go this fall. He said he is going to take good care of her. He currently lives in West Point, Mississippi there at the old Waverly Golf Course and for those who've ever been there, it's a fantastic place to play golf. And his beautiful wife Lynn is up here in the front row just as stage left in a tennis today,

Colonel Smith started his flying career as a radar intercept officer in the F-101 Voodoo. He subsequently attended UPT and was off to fly the F-102 Delta Dagger and then the 105 Thunder chief, aka the thud.

On his 33rd combat mission, and as he'll say his 32nd and a half combat mission, he was shot down, captured, and then remained in the infamous Hanoi Hilton for five and a half years. He was repatriated alongside Lee Smith who was just to his left on the 14th of March 1973.

So we're closing in on 50 years on both of their repatriations and he continued his distinguished Air Force career along the way, earning two silver stars, a distinguished flying cross with Valor, a bronze star with Valor, a Purple Heart as well as a POW medal and a whole host of other awards along the way. He finished his career at 14th flying training wing there at Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi and also served and has already been referenced as both the president and then the chairman of the board for the Airspace Forces Association.

Colonel Gene Smith. Sir, hold on one second. I got one more. I got two more intros to do.

Lt. Col. Gene Smith, USAF (Ret.):

You're cutting into my time.

Col. John Gallemore:

We're good. We still got 36 and a half minutes. To Colonel Smith's left is Colonel Chuck DeBellevue. Excuse me... At the end is Colonel Chuck DeBellevue. So Colonel DeBellevue grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana. As I referenced earlier, he went to the artist formally known as Southwestern Louisiana. Now the University of Louisiana Lafayette as a raging Cajun. He currently lives in Edmond, Oklahoma and is married to his wife Sally, who is also in attendance there right next to Lynn in the front row. Colonel DeBellevue started his career as a weapon systems officer in the mighty F-4 Phantom. Following a quick stint at Seymour Johnson, he was off to Udorn Royal Thai Air Base in November of 1971.

During his combat deployment to Southeast Asia, he flew 220 combat missions and is credited with six air-to-air victories. Colonel DeBellevue came back, continued his distinguished career, retiring with 30 years of service and again retired as the last American ace to serve on active duty. Along the way here into Air Force Cross three silver stars, six distinguished flying crosses and 18 air metals. He continues to volunteer and speak around the world and was honored with earning the congressional medal gold medal in 2015. Colonel Chuck DeBellevue.

Bracketed by Colonel DeBellevue and Colonel Smith is Colonel Lee Ellis. Colonel Ellis grew up in Commerce, Georgia, university of Georgia Bulldog lives in Atlanta and is married to his wife Mary. Colonel Ellis started his flying career in the F-4 Phantom and was shortly thereafter deployed to Da Nang Air Base. He was shot down on his sixty-eighth mission, captured and remained in captivity for over five and a half years and was repatriated alongside Colonel Smith on 14th March 1973 and continued his illustrious career with 25 years of service back where it all began, at his alma mater, the University of Georgia. He earned two silver stars, the Bronze Star with Valor, the Purple Heart and the prisoner of war medal. Colonel Ellis is a nationally recognized speaker and publicist. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you three true American heroes. Colonel Smith, the clock's counting.

Lt. Col. Gene Smith, USAF (Ret.):

Clock's on.

Is this thing on? Good. I think it is. Well one, let me tell you how good it makes me feel to look out here and see all you Airmen and Guardians and just people that believe in the United States and support our military and support our Air force. Orville, you and your staff have done a wonderful job. I've got 10 minutes to tell you what it was like to fly combat in Southeast Asia in 105 and be a POW that I was for five and a half years.

I was flying deuces in Germany in late 1966, having a great time. I had my own wine Keller down on a muzzle where I could buy Trenton Heimer Rosenberg Spate laser for a dollar and 15 cents and it was good as any sauvignon blanc I can get in the United States today. When I came back from a ski trip with my family and this friend of mine walked up to me and says, you better hold on you and I have got a 105 assignment to Southeast Asia. And I absolutely didn't want to fly that airplane, but we very rapidly got out of USAF, Europe and on en route.

Fortunately I got Nellis and not McConnell and I started my checkout in a 105. I very quickly found out that airplane was really not what I thought it was. It was one of the fastest airplanes, if not the fastest airplane below 10,000 feet in the world. I learned that and how stable it was. One day early on in my checkout, I was coming back from the Indian Springs gunnery range where we did when I was looking around and learning to fly the airplane and I was four and the flight lead had us probably at 200 feet and we were smoking down into the Vegas Valley. And I noticed shock waves bending upon the wings of their airplanes and I said, "Holy smokes, how fast are we going?" And I took a glance at the air speed indicator 0.95 and it was just like sitting in that chair right there.

Plus I had about an inch of throttle left and I thought to myself, if I'm going to war, this is the airplane I want to do it in. Well, we quickly checked out, learned no tactics that they were doing in Southeast Asia. We ask and ask and ask, said they'll teach them to you when you get over there. And I got to Southeast Asia in July of 1967. I didn't even get my bags set down Takhli Lee before I was taken up on a familiarization ride and three other guys were along, too, in their airplanes and we were shown the pod formation that we would fly going north. That's how quick it happened and we didn't even know what the pod formation was. I flew five missions in the lower root pack and then I went north on my first mission. I could spend 30 minutes telling you about that mission.

But quickly it refueled out over the Gulf of Tonkin was my flight of four and three other flights of four and we were the third flight. Our target was the Bach Gang bridge on the Northeast railroad going out of Hanoi. Three minutes before we got to the target,, still a long ways down, 30 miles plus the sky turned black with flack. Now I says, "Oh shucks," really loudly. And about that time the Weasels had not made a call of Sam's, but about that time a SA-2 two went by me so close I could read the Russian writing on it and it scared the snot out of me among other things.

And then we got the call to get an echelon to roll in and a guy right in front of me got hit and it was just a big torch in my windscreen as I'm following my flight lead down and stuff going by me." And I said, that guy never got out of that airplane. We didn't hear a beeper or see a shoot or anything." He came out on the same airplane I did after being captured by the Chinese.

Well, things went pretty rapidly after that. I made flight lead. They made me a flight lead. I don't know whether I made it or not. After about the 10th mission or so and we started flying missions north. Every mission was 16 airplanes with a flight of four Weasel. From the first part of September up until the middle of October, not very many of the targets we hit were worth hitting. We lost some airplanes on those. In fact, in my class, the first guy we lost was on his third mission in the southern part of North Vietnam where he ran into the ground on a third strayfen pass on a suspected truck park.

And we all asked ourselves the question, is life worth that? And the answer is no. Things went along pretty good and in the middle of October things started heating up with some better targets. On the afternoon of October the 24th, 1967, we walked... I was scheduled that afternoon and we walked in and we'd had a target change from the one we had planned for. And it was the target was Fu Kin Air Base, which was the last MiG base other than Giam downtown Hanoi that we had not hit. Man, you're talking about the heartbeat going up and getting excited. We were excited. I was supposed to lead the first bomb flight, but a young friend of mine he's still around, he actually followed me to Columbus when we

went there. He said he wanted that flight and I flew the wing commander's wing. We absolutely obliterated Fu Kin. But another wing, two Navy wings hit it right after I did and then another 105 wing. And we just were really excited because we felt like we had finally accomplished something in the war. The next morning the wing was scheduled to hit it again. That's when we lost the second guy in my class. Ray Renning was shot down and he came out on the same airplane I did. He was a POW and we were scheduled to hit it that afternoon, but they changed it and we did not. We were scheduled to hit it the next morning. We did not. We were scheduled to hit it the afternoon of October the 25th and the target was changed and I was to lead the last flight that day, Wildcat flight. And the target was changed to the Doma Bridge. In fact, I was a soft in the tower when my number three man called me. He said, "Gene, we've had a target change".

I said, "Well go ahead and plan it and I'll be over there as soon as I get loose." He said, "Man, you probably want to be over there." So he said, "Do you know what the number of the target was this morning?" I said, "Yep." He said, "Double it. JCS 1200, the Doma Bridge." We were pretty well jacked up after the mission briefing and we went up to have lunch and my number four man looked at us and shook his head and says, "You guys aren't going to make it through a hundred." And I said, "Oh yeah, we will do that." We took off that day and beautiful afternoon, shot a few SAMs after us, but I rolled in as the fourth flight. I had carefully briefed the guys. I said, "I don't give a damn where your piper is, but you pickled at 9,000 feet. Don't try to do any maneuvering at all."

Guess who exceeded the 9,000 feet? Me. And when I pulled off the target, my airplane got hit. I felt it, hit it, and then instantly the airplane tumbled and I later find out it just pitched up and then went into an uncontrollable tumble. My thought in the airplane was, I'm not going to die in this son of a bitch. And I could not... I had a hard time getting my hands to the ejection seat handle, but finally I did squeeze the trigger and everything worked automatically and now I'm floating down over Hanoi. Hit the ground. There were a million people, no, it probably was only about a thousand around me and they instantly were on me, Vietnamese with an AK 47, ripped a burst through me and two bullets went through my left leg, came out the inside, didn't hit the artery or the femur or I wouldn't be here talking to you today.

Had a big hole in my right leg where I could see the shin bone that I got must have gotten getting out of the airplane. And then they undressed me with a machete and off we went to the Hilton. You have all read about all of the things that they did to you. And I said, "I can get through this, I can get through this." And after about an hour of being left in the Knobby room, I think it was later called, these three Vietnamese officers with a big dude came in and I got up and stood up and saluted them and they pointed to a low stool in front of a table and I went over and started my interrogations. You've all read about those. But the first you could... The code of conduct says name, rank, serial number, date of birth and nothing else but that.

Well, I gave them that and the next question, what kind of an airplane? I said, "I can't tell you that." And then I got tied up in the ball so small, I looked at spots on my body I had never seen before and finally they left the room and I said, "I'll pass out." Well, I didn't. It was the most intense pain I've ever received. When they came back in, they asked me that question again and I refused again. And I said, "This is the most stupid thing you're ever doing, Smitty, is to not tell them what kind of airplane you have. 16 of them just rolled in right down the street." So when they came back asked for the third time, I told them. Then how many? Well, I didn't answer. This just went on for a long time.

And finally I said, "I have got to figure out a way to get this." So I started up making up stuff but answering questions. I spent about five to seven days... I never knew exactly how long and this question and answer period. And the hardest thing for me to get over when I got out was realizing that I had broken the code of conduct and that I would be forever ashamed. And I found out later that there was

an awful lot of guys that did the same thing and they started doing it. The code of conduct has since been changed.

We spent five and a half years and that's the hardest part to understand about our conditions is how long it was, the horrible indefiniteness of it all. Lee says, "Gene, you got to talk about resiliency." That's a buzzword I think in the air force now is resiliency. Well, let me tell you something about resiliency. You can't teach resiliency. I don't think you can teach some of the factors in the equation, but you learn resiliency. You learn resiliency as a child. You learn resiliency when you're in high school, in college, you learn resiliency in your first days in the military, I hope.

But the way we got through that was faith to me, faith in God, faith in your country, faith in your family that they would always be there for you. Faith in your fellow POWs. That's how we got through there. That was a resilience that got through there. And finally in December of 1972, we finally, our country finally figured out air power. Air power is the equation that brings it to the knees. I know I probably only got 10 seconds left but I'm going to tell their story.

During Linebacker II, Ross Perot, who's been such an integral part, was such an integral part of our POWs for years. He kept a guy that was a PhD at Florida State in Paris to monitor the talks. The name was Harris. Dr. Jack Harris I think was his first name. And he told someone that one of the significant negotiators told him during Linebacker II says, we have two choices as a country. We can either negotiate seriously or we can commit national suicide.

That is our air power. And that got us out of North Vietnam. The most beautiful flag I've ever seen, I've ever seen in my life was on the tail of a C-141 that pulled up in Giam and took me, Lee Ellis, John McCain, Chuck Rice, and a whole list of others that were in that group. I shall always be grateful. I shall always be grateful to my nation. I shall always be grateful to the Air Force for the wonderful life I've headed.

And one of the things I made a commitment to when I was in North Vietnam is I will never stand on the sidelines again. I would be involved in the fight and since then I have, I'm getting in my elder years, but I still got a little kick in me. So I will try to do that. God bless to each one of you and don't ever forget that you are a citizen of the United States of America and you are a part of the United States of America's Air Force. Thank you.

Col. John Gallemore:

I'm glad I don't have to follow that speech. But I will hand it over to the last serving American ace on active duty. Colonel DeBellevue, floor is yours. You could sit, take the podium, your world.

Col. Charles B. DeBellevue, USAF (Ret.):

You know, as a former nav. We did okay.

Lt. Col. Gene Smith, USAF (Ret.):

We did.

Col. Charles B. DeBellevue, USAF (Ret.):

The Phantom in the MiG 21 sounds like a nice movie. It would've been better had we been better trained, but we weren't allowed to fly against anything else but an F-4. You don't learn much doing that. Next slide. Flew with the triple nickel squadron in the five 55th Tack Fighter squadron. That's all? We had 39 MiG kills. 20 from Rolling Thunder, another 19 from Linebacker. That's over three squadrons of enemy airplanes. That's quite a score. Next... French Indochina... The French didn't... Nobody liked the

French over there, but that's where the target, where Vietnam was. Hanoi was 285 miles from Udorn as the crow flies. Never flew that way, but that's how far it was. So every time you went into Hanoi, you had to have enough gas left to fly almost 300 miles. That sets your thinking about how you're going to fight. Next slide.

The Phantom and the MiG 21. What allowed me to go into Hanoi every day? You had to have the right mindset, the focus. It was discipline. Of course we were a military organization and discipline what it was all about. It was integrity. Your word is your bond. If you tell somebody you're going to do something, do it. If you can't do it, tell them because otherwise somebody may die. Could be you. Teamwork, it is a team sport. It's not just you. It is all of us together that make the force what it is. Training, the old adage that you're going to fight like you trained is true. So make sure the training is good. Next slide.

The team, we had two guys in the F-4. We were married up. We flew with the same eight guys for about eight to 10 weeks. It was amazing what we didn't have to say in the air. Everybody knew which way we were going. We were always going in. We were always close with the enemy. But the team was more than that. Steve and I have Reggie Taylor between us, Staff Sergeant. He could do amazing things with 463, the airplane with all the stars on it. He got the engines heated up. They would detune the engines to make them last longer. Well on the D model F-4, the engines were screwdriver controlled. He had the screwdriver. It took us about four rides to get to where the bur engines were burning at max CGT. You could not catch the airplane. Tech Sargent Ames and his weapons load crew, they kept the missiles picked up. The Ames seven had a bad rep, they got rid of that. We used to fire two missiles to get one kill. We quit wasting a missile. They made it happen. Next slide.

This is my map that I drew. 50 something years ago, 50 years ago, it's a bullseye map of Hanoi. It's got asmet and DME rings on it. That's how we navigated up there. The Mickey Mouse ears you see, that's the SAM rings. If you're inside those rings at a medium altitude, 12 to 14,000 feet, the SAM radar surface steering, missile radars can see you. So you're in harm's way. Somebody asked me, "How much time did you spend inside the cockpit?" About 85% of the time. How much time did you spend outside the cockpit? About 85% of the time. I'm not sure what I did with the other 15%, but I'm sure I used that up, too. On the 8th of July, we were the egress cap. We were the rear guard. As the strikes are coming out of Hanoi, we're going in to make sure nobody follows them out.

Two strikers call out with fire lights. In our squadron, in our flights, if you, your airplane is falling apart, all you had to say is lead RTB. RTB, return to base. We didn't care what was wrong with the airplane, we couldn't fix it anyway. We would head out. These two guys, I hate to say it, but they were from Ubon, I think, were making a lot of noise. Get the saw ready, got a firelight, get the... North Vietnamese had more radios that monitor our freaks than we did. So we started heading east. The MiGs were northeast of Hanoi, then east, then southeast. We ended up in a valley southwest of Hanoi. When disco, our version of AWAC, the controller called out Paula, which was our call sign, you're merged. Which meant on his scope everybody was in the same radar bin. He was now useless and we didn't see anybody.

The F-4 leaves a telltale smoke trail unless you're in burner. So we were heading northeast, we were weaving to make sure nobody got behind us. And after two minutes we hadn't seen anybody. We turned southwest and as soon as we rolled out southwest, I picked up a black fly speck on a white cloud, 11 o'clock. Fights on. Our signal to the flight that we were getting ready to fight was when we blew the tanks off the airplane, went to full after burner and catch me if you can.

We ended up line abreast with the MiG 21 going opposite directions from us. It was a brand new shiny MiG 21. He turned away from us in a level turn. If an American ended flying that airplane, he turned into us. But he turned away. He was the bait. That tactic only works if you haven't read his book, which we

had. The F-4 is not an F-16. It is not a 9G airplane. If you read the F-4 book, it's an eight and a half G airplane. If you don't read the book, it's a 12G airplane.

And the way to get the airplane turned around is to roll it up to 135 degrees a bank, full after burner, 500 knots, put the stick in your lap and 17 seconds later you come through at 500 knots. So we did that. Well, we started it. We rolled up and waited and here comes the number two MiG. The shooter turns away from us to follow his buddy. The MiG 21 is a delta wing airplane. It bleeds air speed in the level hard turn. So instead of having to go all the way around the turn, we cut the turn. Ended up 6,000 feet in trail with the MiG. Locked onto the mig. It's an analog radar and analog missiles. It takes two seconds for the radar to have good data. Another two seconds for the missiles to be programmed. Four seconds. That's 12 eternities I guarantee you.

Launched the first missile, immediately committed the second missile to follow. That first missile went through the airplane, cut it in two, burned both ends. The second missile went through the fireball. At that point we unloaded to get our air speed back. Tommy Feesel, our number four called out that he's on him, came back into the fight. We're now 4,000 feet from the other MiG, half missile. First time I saw the missile was an exited wing tip area. I think the missile motor was still burning when it hit him. Cut him in two and burned both ends.

We found out later that this was a green bandit. Green bandit was an ace. We color coded everything. Red, white and blue. 17, 19, 21. They wouldn't commit, the other MiGs that were up there. Next, go back two slides. This is Fu Kin Air Base. MiG 21 is on final. We've just slowed down from 650. Who in the hell would... They told us to go orbit Fu Kin. Nobody in his right mind would do that. Yet, there we were. That MiG died. Our element lead got him. We had no gun on the airplane. And 10 minutes later we got two MiG 18s that were pruned to defense for Hanoi. So the flight got three kills. The most dangerous part of all of our missions was the air show. And if you've seen the Thunderbirds, they put on a great show. They practice. We would talk about it on the tanker.

The next war we fight. It'll be you people prosecuting the war. It's attitude, it's love of country, love of family, love of God, knowing that you're the very best at what you do and freedom is in your hands. I appreciate everything you're doing. You're wearing the cloth of this country. It means an awful lot. May God bless you and God bless the United States to the earth.

Col. John Gallemore:

Colonel Ellis, take us home. The floor is yours.

Col. Lee Ellis, USAF (Ret.):

Great. My wife will tell you I never mind talking. So I have to learn to listen a lot at home though. Well, it's great to be with you all. We're all honored to be here and to be able to share these stories with you. I've known Gene for a long time. As a matter of fact, I lived in the same cell with Gene for more than a year and a half. So I saw him 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we know each other well. That was an amazing experience in those cells, and I'm going to tell you about that in a minute, but I had a couple slides. Yeah, thank you.

I wanted to show you a couple of pictures and let me back up. Here we go. Okay. This was me, a kid who always wanted to fly. I grew up plowing mules on a farm in Georgia, but I would look at... This was during the Korean War and I'd look up and see those airplanes overhead and I said, that's me following this mule at his six o'clock is not me. And so three days after I graduated from... I finished University of Georgia, I went straight to Valdosta. 53 weeks later I got my wings and the assignment said F-4 Phantom Pipeline, Southeast Asia. 50% of the class, 67A, which we graduated in '66, got the same assignment. F-4

Phantom Pipeline, Southeast Asia. Well, we went to Georgia Air Force Base and got some training. But on the way we went through Survival School and it was like the second or third group out at Fairchild.

And out there I met this guy right here, a guy named Lance Sijan. And we got to be buddies and well, we circulated the ladies quite a bit. And we played golf together as we got down to George and we had a lot of fun together. Part of the time we roomed together. We went to war together. When we got to the Philippines and we're going to Jungle Survival School, they said everybody going to eighth Fighter wing at Ubon stand up. Sijan and Ellis, you're going to Da Nang. Your orders have been changed. We both went. I went down on the 7th of November. Lance went down two days after me. I put this slide in here because I want you all to hear about him. You know Who he is. He's only Air Force Academy guy to receive the medal of honor. But Lance Sijan was an incredible person.

He was athletic. He was good-looking. He was tough and he was kind. I believe that if Lance hadn't been shot down, he probably could have been chief of staff of the Air Force. He was a great leader, a great person, a healthy person. And I just always like to think about Lance as a great example of the person that we all want to be as we wear our uniform. Well, in that cell in the Hanoi Hilton, when I first got there a couple of weeks after I was captured, it was six and a half by seven feet. Okay, that's like a bathroom and a gas station down in Texas or Georgia or somewhere. Three other guys in there. There are four of us in there. And this photo is from Hill Air Force Space Museum. Right outside the gate, if you go there, it's exactly the same size as our cells were in the Hanoi Hilton, the ones in the heartbreaks, you got well... Las Little Vegas section where we first went.

And I was in there with three other guys for the first eight months. The headline there says, stay positive. Sometimes it's hard to stay positive, but you got to bounce back. You've got to believe that a better day is coming. You got to believe you're going to get through this. And that's so important. And resilience, it's important everywhere. And the good thing was we had some cellmates that one day if one person's down, the other person can say, man, we're going to make it. Someday we're going to walk out of here. Encouragement by your teammates is very, very important.

Well, we had some great leaders up there and these three guys were all O5's, two lady commanders and one lieutenant colonel. The one on the right over here, Commander Stockdale, the Medal of Honor, courageous, reserved, quiet, tough guy. A results throw in guy, a mission focused guy. On the left you got Commander Denton, a more outgoing political who ran for senator in one and after he came home. A relationship, people, okay? In the middle, Colonel Reisner, some of both 40% of the population wired to be like the right side results mission focused, 40% wired to be like the left side, people focused. So think of General Brown over here on the right and General Robin Ran on the left. Okay?

And they're both great. You can be a general, you can be an animal, you can be a CEO no matter which way you're wired, but you have to learn to adapt and do some of that other side, too. Well these guys did and they were so... Their character was so great, their commitment, their courage as they set a great example for us. They got there two years before Gene and I got there and they had been through hell.

They spent more than four years in solitary confinement and they bounced back and bounced back. And when you feel like you are having a tough time, and you can look across the room and see a guy like Smitty Harris who... Guy's been there was a total there of eight years. But Smitty got there before these guys did who's been through hell and somebody's been through tougher than you have. It makes it a lot easier to stay positive and bounce back and be resilient.

They had great confidence and great humility. But one thing they did was they clarified, took the code of conduct and clarified it for our situation. And here's what they said, I'm in charge. Roger said, and here's what I want you to do. Be a good American, resist up to the point of mental and physical damage. Go ahead and give in. Of course, first of all, follow the code of conduct. Do your best. Resist and be ready to bounce back because they can make you give in and they won't let you die. They will torture you to the

point where you will have to give in and they won't let you die. So you got to be smart enough to be able to offset what they want. Don't give them what they want.

And that's what we did. Bounce back to resist again. Stay united through communications. And of course they told us we couldn't communicate with anybody, but we did. Pray every day. Go home proud would turn with honor. So simple but so powerful for our culture. As a leader, you need to build your culture, clarify your culture over and over again. So everybody knows the culture. Joe Brown is doing a great job of trying to push that culture perspective all the way to the lowest levels in today's Air Force. I think that's really wise. Well, we did stay connected. We tapped on the walls. Those walls are about 16 inches thick. We're trying to communicate. We're going to stay connected because you've got to stay connected. The key to resilience is don't be alone.

We had to collaborate. We had to come up with ways to defeat the enemy and offset them. We had to support each other. You can't let somebody who's alone be alone. You got to get to them. We would risk our lives to get to somebody in solitary confinement and say, man, we're proud of you. We're not going home without you. Hang in there, one more day. And so we did.

Well, the women back home, the wives especially and families, but the women, the wives, they were told to keep quiet. The military didn't know what to do with MIA wives. They were told to keep quiet. And they did for a couple years and then they said, "No more. You got to do something for our men because they're not following the Geneva conventions on treatment of POWs."

Well, you see that civil Stockdale on the left. She started the group in San Diego, the group of wives and Phyllis Skelani on the right, she had the group in Virginia. But they were all across the country. And these wives stood up and changed the policy of the US government and changed the policy of the communist government by putting pressure on them internationally so that when Ho Chi Minh died in September 1969, as quick as they could decide who the next leaders were going to be and they got in power, they stopped the torture day to day. Occasionally there was a little bit, but for the most part, the torture stopped and we changed to a live and let live policy. And that's why we were able to come home so healthy. The women changed our lives. It's amazing what they did. Well, we bounce back and bounce back. Hallelujah. Yes.

I'm going to tell you a little bit more about that as I close out here in a minute. We bounce back, we bounce back, we bounce back. And this is my day, March 14th. And Gene Smith is just in a group right in front of me. He's right in front of us. And that's Tom Kirk who mentioned. Tom's 94, he still goes to the gym. And that's me back there on the right. It was a great day. We came home, spent two days in Clark Air Base. We got a physical, got a uniform, called home. We flew back and I landed at Maxwell Air Force Base because you went to the nearest regional hospital to your family and we refueled in Honolulu or in Hickam on the way home.

I've had a great life. But at many reunions I kept hearing the wives of the POWs talk about their romance and their love and all. And so a couple years ago I said, "Somebody's got to write a book about this 'cause Hollywood couldn't write a movie with this wild stories." So I put together with a romance writer. We put together 20 stories of POWs who were there five to eight years. Two of them were married and stayed there eight years as POWs. And they came home and they're still married. One of the wives passed away last year, but many of them were married more than 60 years. I was a single guy and I date a lot of girls. When I came home and finally I met Mary the right one. And we've been married 48 years. So those stories here and there, you can go to your online to powromance.com and see the book. It'll be out in May. Go check it out. Thanks so much. Glad to be with you all. God bless.

Col. John Gallemore:

I have 40 seconds to ensure this is not a no stepper and I pass my first moderator mission. So I think it's going to be a no stepper. Colonel Smith, colonel DeBellevue, colonel Ellis, thank you for your true dedication and your service to your country. I can't think of three individuals who truly epitomize, duty, honor, and country. I don't think anybody in this room can relate to the experiences that each of you endured during your remarkable careers. If there's four things that I could take away from this would be discipline, resilience, perseverance, and teamwork. Because you can't do it alone. Thank you for your perspectives and thank you for your sacrifices and I am glad that good Americans like you did and will continue to swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. Thank you very much. God bless.

Ken Goss:

Ladies and gentlemen, the next session will begin momentarily. Please remain in your seats.