

Alvarez Jr., Everett Navy

[00:00:19.15] EVERETT ALVAREZ: I was born in California-- Salinas, California, Lettuce capital of the world at the time, in December of 1937. I guess you might say I was a Depression-era baby. Raised in Salinas except for a while during World War II, when my parents moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where my father worked in the shipyards.

[00:01:00.02] But I graduated-- we went back to Salinas and after the World War II, went through high school, went through two years of junior college, and then I went up to the University of Santa Clara, graduated in 1960 with a degree in electrical engineering.

[00:01:23.54] And then 18 days later I came in into the aviation cadet program-- aviation officer candidate program where they were bringing us in-- bringing people in with four-year degrees which were followed by a 16-week pre-flight training. And then-- at the end of which we were commissioned. And then started actual flight training. And that's when I earned my wings, in November '61, as a naval aviator.

[00:02:12.95] I was flying A-4s. I was on my second cruise off the USS Constellation in August of 1964 when-- on the 5th of August I was in the very first raids into North Vietnam at the time. The event was known as the Tonkin Gulf Incident. And I found myself, a young lieutenant JG, involved.

[00:02:51.80] And unfortunately, I managed to put my airplane in the path of something that caused my airplane to catch fire. And everything started to come apart. And I found myself in a situation where I had to just eject in order-- because there was no alternative really.

[00:03:16.76] I was very low. We were flying very fast when I was hit. And I was very, very fortunate to survive the ejection.

[00:03:30.83] I recall the moment that I went out of the airplane. I sort of greyed out, but I recall immediately I felt a tug on my parachute because it opened up, and then almost immediately I was in the water. That's how close it was. So when I got rid of my parachute and my helmet, I looked around and I was surrounded by Vietnamese fishing boats. I was just off the coast and in what is now known as beautiful Ha Long Bay, which is now one of the tourist capitals-- or tourist sites in that part of the world.

[00:04:23.07] And so I was immediately captured, taken aboard a fishing boat by what really were militia people, they all were heavily armed, and then turned over to the navy-- the Vietnamese navy, who in turn took me into shore. And thus began my career as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

[00:04:57.97] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the war before you decided to enter the military?

[00:05:03.38] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, there was no war when I joined. I joined in 1960. And we were relatively-- it was peacetime. Korea had ended in '54. We had gone through a draw

down in the military. I came in and-- 1960. It wasn't until '62, the Cuban Missile Crisis, that we began to get a sense of things that might be happening. But that was in this part of the world.

[00:05:42.78] Then on my first cruise, when we were out in the Western Pacific and '63, I remember that we were being asked if any of us wanted to become forward air observers in South Vietnam, working with the South Vietnamese Army. And at that time we had advisers in there.

[00:06:10.38] And we could get a sense that things were starting to pick up in terms of traffic, infiltration from the north into the south. there was the incident in the Saigon River, the time when one of our carriers, the USS Card, which was basically a transport of equipment and airplanes, was blown up in the harbor. That was probably April, May of '64.

[00:06:50.43] There were continual reports of North Vietnamese vessels-- vessels coming down at night. There was more activity in terms of naval ships, our US naval ships doing-- working along the coast up around North the north part of Vietnam. Things were just picking up. And so in August of '64 is when we had that incident-- that incident which resulted in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which really gave President Johnson at that time the authority to start introducing troops and take action.

[00:07:31.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, what led you in 1960 to join the military?

[00:07:41.11] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, I always had a desire to fly. We-- growing up in Salinas there was a old World War II airbase that was converted to a crop dusting-- basically, a lot of agriculture around there. And I used to go out-- little kids, we'd run out there and play in these old crop dusters, these Stearmans, bi-wing, that-- they were cannibalized. But we did-- we just spent a lot of time out there. I actually got my first airplane ride with a family friend, took me up in a little Piper Cub and I just--

[00:08:27.41] JOE GALLOWAY: So it's the of flying more than anything else?

[00:08:29.96] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, it was just the sense of wanting to try it. And then when I actually flew commercial from San Francisco to New York, when I was being recruited as an electrical engineer, before I graduated they flew me first class on a 707, United, at the time. And I tell you, that was an experience. And then at the university we were in the glide path at Moffett Field, the jets coming in all the time. And I'd look up and say, that be neat.

[00:09:12.24] My senior year I also had a chance to take the exam. And I found it-- it's something that I wanted to do because it seemed to be a challenge. I remember all these kids that were older and we were growing up that would go and take an exam to be a naval cadet, and almost all of them flunked. They come back with, well, I failed the written part, well, I failed the eye test, well, I failed this.

[00:09:39.00] And these guys were all athletes and student leaders, and what have you. So I thought, I wonder how I would fare. So I went and took the test my senior year in college. And

there were about 55 college seniors taking it. And at the end of the first day I was the only one left.

[00:10:00.33] And so I had an opportunity that-- I said, gosh-- I was single, young, and with an opportunity to do something that if I didn't take it I would probably regret it the rest of my life, always thinking, gee, I wish I had done it. And I also said, I can always come back after five years, that was the enlistment period at the time, including training-- I could always come back and be an engineer. But having the ability to be a Navy carrier pilot seemed like a dream that could come true.

[00:10:49.08] My first cruise was in 1963, and I had just turned 25, came back at the-- in nine months returned from that first cruise. We were-- it was the maiden voyage of the USS Constellation to WESTPAC, Western Pacific. And in the interim I was married. And then we left again in May of '64. And three months later, I found myself-- we found ourselves sitting there in the-- what was later known as Yankee Station.

[00:11:36.32] Things were just developing at the time. We were flying missions over Laos primarily off of our ship, escorting photo-reconnaissance planes who would go up and down the Ho Chi Minh trail to take photographs of what was being moved down from North Vietnam, through Laos, to the south of Vietnam at the time. And we happened to be there when everything busted loose with the Tonkin Gulf event.

[00:12:18.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, you were on a brand new carrier, what was your living conditions like?

[00:12:24.82] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Life on the carrier was actually pretty plush because these were the new Forrestal class carriers. We had done some training during the-- when I was in flight training I actually spent some time on the old World War II-- called a 27 Charlie. They were the old Ticonderoga, the Bon Homme Richard, the Antietam. And they were very crowded, especially the junior officer's quarters were pretty crowded.

[00:12:57.62] So when we got aboard the Constellation it was bigger. Each-- we had-- two of us shared a state room, officers would share staterooms, things of that nature. It was big. I could really move out. And flying aboard the Constellation was-- it seemed like we were flying aboard a football field rather than a postage stamp, you might say. It was quite different.

[00:13:30.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe some of the actions you participated in before your capture?

[00:13:37.28] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, actually as I indicated, prior to August '64 we were basically limited to flying escort of the photo planes over the Ho Chi Minh trail, and even up to the Plain des Jarres. All of this was in Laos at the time. We were not-- we were prohibited from flying over North Vietnam at the time. And so we had to be careful about that.

[00:14:07.77] But the-- as the action started-- what prompted the Tonkin Gulf was on the-- August the 2nd, which was three days before I was shot down. One of our naval reconnaissance

destroyers doing electrical reconnaissance work up and down the coast of North Vietnam was actually attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. And there were photographs of that. I mean, you could actually see it.

[00:14:39.24] In retaliation the CINCPAC told them to get back up there because we were attacked in international waters is what it was. And we were joined by-- the Maddox was joined by the Turner Joy. And the two destroyers went up, staying in international waters, which we recognize as 12 miles off, but I believe the Vietnamese government, North Vietnamese, felt that 50 miles was more like it, and that we were intruding.

[00:15:12.00] So on the night of August the 4th, we had just pulled out of Hong Kong on our ship, and we got the notice that we were moving quite rapidly towards Yankee Station. There was another ship out on it, the Ticonderoga that was on Yankee Station, and they were launching planes. And they called for assistance. They wanted-- they launched three A-4s from the Constellation. And I was one of the three A-4s.

[00:15:50.88] When we got up over the-- where all of the activity was taking place, the two destroyers, the Maddox and the Turner Joy, were calling out torpedoes that were being fired at them from various positions surrounding them. And so the air commander in charge from-- that was flying overhead, and it was pitch black; it was stormy, rainy, thunderstorms; I mean, it was just black and we couldn't see anything, called for-- if anybody had flares.

[00:16:29.40] Well, it so happened that I was carrying flares for my three. We had actually first time prior to this deployment, practiced dropping night flares out over the Southern California desert. And so we had a little bit of practice and knowledge how it did. So I was dispatched to come on down. And our-- we usually dropped these at an altitude of 1500 feet, and then they would drift down.

[00:17:01.77] Well, when I got down to 1500 feet, I could see I was still in the soup, and so I was trying to gauge where the ships were because I couldn't see anything below me. And where all the activity was going on, all of this torpedoes firing and torpedo bearings were being called by the two destroyers. There were planes flying around in the soup there from of the planes that were from the Ticonderoga. And we all had our lights out. We didn't want to be seen by the torpedo boats who might fire.

[00:17:42.45] So I couldn't see anything. And I dropped a flare. And I could see that I was still in the soup. So I dropped down at about 1100, 1200 feet. I could tell I was at the base of the overcast. And then I dropped one.

[00:17:59.72] And the air commander, who happened to be the commander off of the Ticonderoga, his name was Admiral-- later it was Admiral Stockdale. At that time it was-- he was the commander of the air group off of the Ticonderoga, Jim Stockdale.

[00:18:16.80] And so he basically said-- called and said, got it. Move on back down to the south a bit. I did. I came down. It was still pitch black, but not in the clouds. And then I pickled one. And I heard him say, good.

[00:18:32.57] And then I just circled that position and I kept pickling. And I surrounded that position. And I could see the flares floating down, but only about 1000 foot before they hit the water.

[00:18:44.33] But I could see enough to-- we could see that-- we could see our two destroyers out there, bobbing back and forth. And the water was rough. It was thunderstorms in the area. And I looked hard and I was-- I couldn't see anything else.

[00:18:59.09] And so-- by the way, at this time my fuel was low. We were low state, means I had to get back-- get back up. And so I basically climbed back. And I had dropped all my flares. And then they had other planes come down and-- to see if they could shoot at or shoot at what were flashes, gun flashes. It was very chaotic, not quite sure-- quite clear what was going on.

[00:19:28.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you see any enemy patrol boats?

[00:19:31.15] EVERETT ALVAREZ: I saw no patrol boats. I thought I could see some like tracks, but in-- on the periphery of the lit up area, but it was all, like I say, very dark and black out there. And so if there had been any out there, all they had to do was fire and then they'd be out of sight, and just go. And I thought I saw something like U-shaped tracks. But I couldn't tell very well. It could have been from the destroyers themselves as they were turning, and avoiding torpedoes, and all this.

[00:20:05.66] But I had to get back up. And I found myself in a heck of a thunderstorm. And I came out at about 40,000 feet and back to the ship pretty much low state. And we had enough fuel to make one pass. Those are always-- pucker factors. But night landings, stormy nights, what have you.

[00:20:33.87] But I came aboard, and the others followed suit. And when we all landed, we went down and we were asked, we were told we had to be debriefed by the Admiral. Admiral-- the task group commander at the time. And we basically said we saw nothing besides our two ships, which was quite bewildering but the reports were coming in.

[00:21:08.60] So he thanked us, excused us. And I remember going back. By this time it was about 2:00 in the morning. And I went back and went to bed. And the next thing I remember is the phone in my stateroom ringing. And I answered the phone, and they said, you're flying a mission. Come on down and get ready. So I did and--

[00:21:38.68] JOE GALLOWAY: And that was the mission?

[00:21:40.10] EVERETT ALVAREZ: That was the mission, retaliation for what happened to our two destroyers. And so it turned out that day there were strikes all up and down the coast. The planes from the Ticonderoga were hitting from up-- all up and down the coast from the DMZ up to about Vinh. And the planes from our ship were hitting from around Haiphong and north, and these were the torpedo boat bases.

[00:22:20.78] I went down and I was briefing. And many times while we were flying missions over Laos we'd brief and then cancel, brief and then cancel. This time the air group commander came in. I remember it was about-- local time there was about 11:15 AM. And the air group commander for our ship walked in and he said this time we're not canceling, this is a go.

[00:22:51.65] President Johnson had just went on the air to announce that we were attacking North Vietnam. And I later learned that-- well, being the 12 hours difference it was 11:00 PM when he went on TV to announce we were doing that. He didn't want to hold off because he didn't want to lose the public, who after midnight they'd probably all be gone to sleep.

[00:23:17.87] And so it was 11:00 AM there. And yeah, we were launching the-- they were attacking, but they were-- all the planes from the Ticonderoga were on their way. We didn't launch until 2:00 PM from our ship. And so the element of surprise was gone.

[00:23:45.11] We briefed using some high altitude aerial photos. And the best we could determine from intelligence was, well, these were photos of the bay where the torpedo boat base was located at Hon Gai, which is right near the beautiful Ha Long Bay, which is okay.

[00:24:11.15] And so-- and they said, you might see some anti-aircraft fire. Look for ships along here. There were some coal yards and there were some docks that were-- where they had some coal, where they would ship coal. So that's about all of the intelligence that we had at the time.

[00:24:38.40] And at 1400 we launched-- 2:00 PM-- which was almost three hours after President Johnson announced it. We had to fly at altitude to get there, because it was a two-hour flight there, two-hour flight back; pretty much pressing our fuel capacity.

[00:25:03.92] And so when we arrived about 4:00 PM local time, I was flying wing on the squadron X-- the executive officer, and the rest of the planes were held back. And we went in to see what we could see. And there they were lined up, all these torpedo boats. And I heard him say, oh, my God. Shoot.

[00:25:31.74] And he pulled off. And I managed to maneuver and fire my rocket pod at the torpedo boats and then as we pulled off, the whole area around the docks, the hills, just opened up. It was just total black pop-pop-pop of flak. And, whoa, where'd this come from?

[00:26:00.53] So we pulled off. And the others followed in and did pretty good work. As they pulled out, the XO who had not fired went back in to fire his weapons at the torpedo boats. And so-- being a good wingman-- if you've ever seen Top Gun, Tom Cruise, I must stick with my wingman, I will not leave my wingman. I had this drummed into my head also, and so I automatically went in with him.

[00:26:35.48] But since I had fired my weapons, all I had left was 20 millimeters. And so I flipped on my machine gun, 20 millimeters, and as he pulled off I strafed. And there was-- we were doing pretty good work. There were a bunch of torpedo boats that were all in flames. And then there was a bigger ship, and I pretty much splattered the deck of that thing, and pulled off.

[00:27:04.10] But I can tell you that going back in, the place was just heavily defended. I mean, tracers, backer-- tracers coming-- you can see the tracers coming at you, but you can't see the other ones. But you know that they were just flying by me and flak all over the place.

[00:27:23.81] And I was-- Joe, amazingly, as we were going in and-- the first time, and all the way up, I kept thinking to myself, good God. We're going to war. This is war. I mean, we're going to go in and hit a base

[00:27:48.05] And I thought to myself, this is war. And I remembered my knees shaking. It was all of that apprehension and what have you. And then once I went in, and everything started firing at me, et cetera, it was-- and thereafter, it was-- every act-- every action I took with regard to flipping switches and this and that, it was just sort of rote, it was sort of like mechanically, oh, I've got to do this smooth. I didn't feel any apprehension. I wasn't nervous. I wasn't-- my knees were not shaking. It was just all motion and smoothness, especially when the tracers were coming by me.

[00:28:40.07] And it wasn't until I was hit that-- poof, just a big poof-- smoke-- immediate smoke and like I say, I was flying very low almost skimming the treetops. And I was joining up with my wingman. And he was low, and I was lower than he was. And when I was hit my first thought was, oh, God, I better pull up and get some altitude.

[00:29:13.45] But immediately the smoke was coming out, every warning light I had came on, fire, emergency, what have you. And it seems like everything was slow. I just couldn't move fast enough. I was automatically pulling this and pulling that; dropping my emergency generator. And if you're-- everything I could think of; jettisoning my tanks, my centerline fuel tank, I jettisoned that, and hitting the key, the mic, and almost simultaneously saying, hey, I've been hit.

[00:30:00.67] And the XO said, where are you? And I said, I'm right behind you. And so as I pulled back to climb, to get altitude I noticed-- I mean, it was just-- I couldn't control it. And I felt that there was a lot of smoke and I'm probably on fire here.

[00:30:22.48] And I felt that the wing, my wing had-- must have been this one-- my starboard wing because all of a sudden I just felt a sickening roll. And I said, I got to get out of here. And I keyed the mic and I tried to fight, it and I said, I'm getting out. And I'll see you later guys.

[00:30:50.23] But like I said, it seems like I was just smooth, and I couldn't do it. It seemed like everything went into slow motion. And the sickening thing was that it just rolled to the right, and I couldn't fight it. And my-- and so I figured if I can't fight it, maybe I can roll it all the way over and then eject going up.

[00:31:12.29] And so I tried that and went about-- this way, and then it started to come back down. And I said-- and by this time my nose was dropping and I figured. I had no idea how high I was. I know that I wasn't that high. And I said to myself, If I stay with this, I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to live. I better get out now. Maybe I'll have a few broken bones or a bunch of-- whatever, but maybe I'll live. And so I pulled the ejection seat curtain overhead I went out and it was-- I can say--

[00:31:46.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you pointing up or down?

[00:31:47.92] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, I think I was like this.

[00:31:49.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Sideways.

[00:31:51.26] EVERETT ALVAREZ: The nose had dropped, I know that. And I figured, oh, God. And I didn't know if I-- how high I was. When I went out it just-- like I say, I was going max-- I had the throttle all the way forward. And that airplane, without external stores, tanks or anything like that could really move out, and I'd say close to 500 knots.

[00:32:20.98] And so when I went out it was like a blast hit me. And I'm just totally helpless; my arms were flailing, my legs were flailing. And like I said, I was gray-- graying out. This was almost immediately, and I felt the small pop, which was the drogue chute. And then immediately the big pop, and almost immediately I was in the water.

[00:32:50.24] So when I managed to-- my fear at that point was to not have the chute pull me down, so I disconnected my straps and the chute was-- I was able to get the chute away from me. And I took my hard hat off to-- because the oxygen mask I had was still attached. And so I just took the whole thing off. And I started to look around, and I started to think, oh my God-- I made it. I'm alive, and I'm in the water.

[00:33:27.37] Once I realized that I was okay-- that I was alive, and then I started to have other thoughts. I remember immediately saying, oh God, my poor wife, my mom, what are they got to do? Because I thought for sure I was going to die if they caught me. So I started to swim. I started to swim, but I had my seat back still attached. And I started to-- and I noticed the boats were all around me, they were moving around.

[00:34:04.04] And I saw these big outcroppings, these beautiful things that come out of the water, these big rock formations that tourists will go and visit and see. And I wanted to get to one of those and hide, but the tide kept pulling me back towards the base.

[00:34:22.10] And the next thing I know they were--

[00:34:26.81] JOE GALLOWAY: They were shooting at you.

[00:34:27.72] EVERETT ALVAREZ: They were shooting at me. And I first noticed it was-- something grazed my elbow. And then as they got closer, they fired again, and I looked-- and this time, they were a lot closer, it was just around me. And I figured they were just warning shots.

[00:34:45.56] And so I figured well, okay, what do I do now? And they could kill me. They could shoot me if I did-- and oh, by the way, when I got rid of my hard hat, I remember thinking that if they saw I was armed they would probably shoot-- shoot me. We used to carry these .38s. And I took my .38 and I let it go in the water. Don't ask me why I did that. But it seemed like-- automatically I thought-- the thoughts going through.

[00:35:18.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you were the first aviator shot down?

[00:35:22.86] EVERETT ALVAREZ: I was the first aviator shot down over North Vietnam in that war.

[00:35:27.10] JOE GALLOWAY: In that war. And I believe there was maybe one Army guy who was captured before you?

[00:35:35.11] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Oh, Joe, there were a number of Army guys that were captured in '62, '63. They were advisers, they were Green Berets. They were captured in the south. But they either escaped, or they were set free, or they just never came out, they never made it.

[00:35:58.63] But there was one fellow who was captured in February of '64, six months before I was captured, and he was held-- well, I'm not sure-- it never was clear. And he came out when we all came out, when the war was over in 1973.

[00:36:16.48] JOE GALLOWAY: From '64 to '73, that sounds like nine years.

[00:36:21.85] EVERETT ALVAREZ: 8 and 1/2 for me, nine years for him.

[00:36:25.88] JOE GALLOWAY: 8 and 1/2 for you. That's a substantial portion of your life.

[00:36:32.61] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, especially if you're 26 years old, and you're enjoying life to the hilt. And they're locked up for 8 and 1/2 years I would say, yeah, it's a hell of a maturing process.

[00:36:50.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about the actual physical capturing of you and your first few days in captivity.

[00:37:00.58] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Well, like I say, they surrounded me, the fishing boats. And next thing I know they pull up alongside me. They all had rifles, and one fellow had a revolver on this one little boat. There was another boat behind me, and there was a fellow there with a hand grenade, ready to pull the pin. And I looked at him and I said, no, don't do that.

[00:37:24.25] Anyway, so they threw a noose around my neck, pulled me up, and then took-- they tied my hands. And then they wrapped me up-- pulled me aboard. As they pulled me aboard, they wrapped me up and took my shoes and my gear-- took my shoes off. And then I heard-- then I heard them yelling to another person, and it turns out it was the North Vietnamese torpedo boat came up-- came out and pulled alongside.

[00:37:59.77] I don't know how he missed this one, but this guy was not hit at all. And they transferred me from that boat to the torpedo boat. And then they had me wrapped up-- tied up. They had all my gear, took my gear off me, shoes and everything. And it was there that there was a-- they started questioning me.

[00:38:26.11] And I didn't know what they were saying; they were speaking Vietnamese. And then they had my gear, my ID card, and they were talking to me. And I-- don't ask me why Joe, but I started talking to them in Spanish. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it was just-- it was crazy. My thoughts were just somewhat destroyed.

[00:38:58.44] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your physical condition at this point?

[00:39:00.13] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Physical condition-- I was very stiff. I was very stiff and flailing. Flailing-- and I later learned I had a compression fracture up here from the ejection itself. But-- and those are like hairline fractures on the spine.

[00:39:21.82] No, I-- and then they took me back to the base where we had just bombed. And I remember they covered me with a tarp, but I kept trying to look out. And I remember looking at the faces of the young sailors. They were all armed with AK-47s, and they were looking around. And one guy looked at me and saw me; he goes, see, see. And I tried to look out. All I could see was smoke around. I didn't see-- they covered me up with that--

[00:39:57.98] The next thing I know they pulled in to a dock. And then they got me up and walked me off into the buildings, where I sat for a day. The shock-- I would say the shock was just gradually wearing off. And then when it was after dark they took me to a local prison. They put me in the back of a Jeep, and took me to a local prison. And that's when they had an English-speaking--

[00:40:31.17] JOE GALLOWAY: This is in Haiphong?

[00:40:32.38] EVERETT ALVAREZ: No, this was a local Hon Gai there. And they put me in there. And there was a fellow that they had who could speak some English, once they realized I was an American from my ID card. It seems like they just really had no idea who had bombed them or why.

[00:40:55.58] But so I-- they put me in a cell. And there were two other Vietnamese in there. And it was just a plank, and then they had these leg irons, and they put me in leg irons. And next thing I know I just-- just collapsed and fell backwards. Out.

[00:41:17.43] I woke up. It was daylight. The two guys, one of them spoke English, and he said-- they were taking me to quiz. And that's when I really felt the strain, I could barely move my legs and my arms. But that-- over time that healed. And then I was out there in the local prison. And they took me to another location, and moved me around.

[00:41:52.15] And then a week later, after I was shot down, they put me in the back of a vehicle, and an officer accompanied me, and took me to Hanoi, where I was the first American guest of what we later named the Hanoi Hilton. Right downtown Hanoi.

[00:42:16.70] JOE GALLOWAY: You were the only prisoner?

[00:42:19.27] EVERETT ALVAREZ: I was the only American.

[00:42:20.51] JOE GALLOWAY: The only American.

[00:42:21.43] EVERETT ALVAREZ: But that was a very full prison.

[00:42:23.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Full of Vietnamese.

[00:42:24.87] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Vietnamese. Vietnamese men and women. Thieves, like they used to tell me. They're murderers, prostitutes. Well, that was a very busy place. And they had me in there. And I underwent six-- about four months of interrogation.

[00:42:55.14] JOE GALLOWAY: In that first year, 16 months, how many letters from home did you get? How many packages from the Red Cross?

[00:43:05.67] EVERETT ALVAREZ: No, I had-- in the first two, three months, I received at the most about three or four letters and one Red Cross package.

[00:43:20.18] JOE GALLOWAY: That was it?

[00:43:21.11] EVERETT ALVAREZ: That was it. And then after I refused to help them, that was cut-- everything was cut off. And I-- it must have been-- it must have been '69 that I started getting letters again. And they started allowing us to have small packages or items. But that was maybe once a year even though our families would send stuff once a month, we would not see it.

[00:43:59.30] JOE GALLOWAY: You just never saw it.

[00:44:00.18] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Never saw it. And I think it was when the-- at '68, '69 when the League of Families was formed and started putting pressure on the North Vietnamese up at the Paris peace talks that we started seeing some results of that.

[00:44:18.26] It was a very difficult time for me because I had no communication. I was-- I did receive a couple of letters from my wife and family through the Red Cross. They did let me have it-- have some, but I was cut--.

[00:44:40.89] The interrogation was not brutal; not physically-- well, I was sick. I had diarrhea and dysentery almost-- quite a bit. And they would give me some of these medications. And mostly from the food.

[00:44:57.88] The food was putrid and hard. I don't know why they would give me that. But-- then one day they changed the diet, and they brought in food from the restaurant. And it was French, and-- the French had been there for years, and it was very-- it was edible.

[00:45:22.94] And after about-- well, after, like I say, after four months, they figured they had achieved all they could get, everything that I had, out of me. And I-- I fabricated like crazy. I figured, well, they must know of some things. For example, they did have all the local magazines and newspapers from home, with my family, about my family.

[00:45:50.53] I mean, this was US News, Time, Newsweek; and they had all these issues. They had my San Jose Mercury News. They had the San Francisco Examiner. Really? Oh, yeah, they had them there. Here, look. Here I was, name, rank, service number, date of birth. That was it.

[00:46:10.17] Because I was a POW; I was a prisoner of war. But then they said, well, no, there's no war. There's no declaration of war. You're not a POW. Do you know what you are? You're a criminal. You come in here and bomb and kill and all that. And you have to go through a trial. And that's when they first-- that was the first thing.

[00:46:34.64] But if you are a good person, and you-- you make amends and all this or that. So we'll see how-- that's why the interrogation started. So I went through quite a bit of that for quite a while.

[00:46:54.45] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you finally get some company of American sort?

[00:46:58.40] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Six months later. I had them convinced I really didn't know anything up until then. I was just a young lieutenant JG. And they finally said, yeah, you don't have any big secrets. You don't know anything. You're just a young JG.

[00:47:13.91] I mean, I tried-- for weeks I tried to explain my primary duty on the ship was to tend the popcorn machine. And if you don't think that caused a lot of quizzical-- describe popcorn, and on, and on.

[00:47:35.01] So then after the first Christmas there, where I was offered release-- and I couldn't do it. I just wouldn't give them what they wanted. I figured, well, I'll be here-- who knows how long I'll be here? But then February, early February, we started interaction again.

[00:47:55.65] And Bob Shumaker was shot down. He was the second guy. And I knew about this when they brought in stuff and they said, we have some documents from the plane we shot down. And I looked at it, and it was a F-8. It was weapons settings and stuff. And I figured, oh, man. This time the war has started.

[00:48:19.42] I said-- I told them I didn't know anything. I don't know what that means. Well, you must help us. And I said, no, I cannot help you. I mean, there's no way I was going to collaborate with these guys.

[00:48:32.91] And so that's when the restaurant food stopped. That's when they moved me to a tiny cell. They pretty much left me alone physically, but I was-- there was no mail, nothing. Nothing. And so that was from February till September '65.

[00:49:07.81] Now in the interim I would know that there were Americans in there because I could see them bringing in food on a tray, but it was just a like-- some kind of a broth. It was some kind of stuff. It wasn't the stuff I had before. And I would count-- I could count-- I could look out and I could count the trays they were bringing.

[00:49:33.09] And then they would bring me mine and go somewhere else. So we had others. And then one day I was looking at the bottom, and I noticed on the bottom there somebody had written in a charcoal, burnt matchstick, or scratched-- and I put my name on it. A few days later, like, hi. Hi, EA.

[00:49:53.88] The count is Navy 7, Air Force 7. Whoa-- Navy and Air Force tide. No, what they were telling me, there were seven Navy POWs and seven Air Force POWs. So that was like about beginning of September. And so I knew there were people around me.

[00:50:16.65] They were-- so I let the guard know they were Americans-- Americans. So when the guards knew that I knew, that's when they pulled me out. September 18th of '65, put me in a Jeep, and put three of the other fellows, and I remember that. We drove out to another camp that we later called the Briarpatch. No electricity, no running-- no tap water.

[00:50:46.00] There was just a well and-- out in the countryside. And the first 15 guys shot down were out there for a couple of months. Then they moved us to another camp in Hanoi. But that was the first time I was with Americans, September 18th '65.

[00:51:08.38] JOE GALLOWAY: What's the first time you got to talk to one of them?

[00:51:11.51] EVERETT ALVAREZ: September 18th--

[00:51:13.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Right then and there.

[00:51:14.16] EVERETT ALVAREZ: 1965. Yeah, and we talked so much that they told us to keep quiet; don't talk. It was one of these-- they were always-- don't talk. But we ignored-- I ignored them. I was talking to this fellow Larry Guarino. He was wide-eyed. And he was talking to me-- how I'm crazy, and this and that.

[00:51:30.30] And so they pulled me out of there into another cell. So I stayed by myself, but I could communicate with the others. And over the wall there was another quad-- another building that had some POWs over there. And we could talk over the wall.

[00:51:46.93] But it was-- yeah, 13 months.

[00:51:50.22] JOE GALLOWAY: He brought you up to date on what was going on in America, and-- By then the war was really underway.

[00:51:59.10] EVERETT ALVAREZ: By then the war was under way. And-- gradually, yeah, the first thing I learned was the tap code, so we could tap on the wall and communicate. And then when they moved us from there to another camp, they were bringing in more POWs, more prisoners.

[00:52:17.40] And in '65, November of '65, they threw in-- they brought a young Air Force lieutenant, first lieutenant. And he came in my cell, and-- Tom Barrett. That was my first cellmate. So Thanksgiving of '65 I had my first cellmate.

[00:52:48.54] The years went on. And we started-- they started the-- to get physically tough beginning of '66, end of '65. And it was all that they wanted to break us down. And it was a process where they would break us down and then use us for propaganda if they could.

[00:53:12.70] And they would have us to write stuff, tape stuff. And you resisted that as much as possible. You could not let yourself willingly be used because they would then use you as a tool.

[00:53:28.63] And then the Hanoi March, July 6, 1966. They took 52 American POWs and they marched us through the streets of Hanoi. Then beat the hell out of us. When I was-- I was--

[00:53:46.69] JOE GALLOWAY: People were throwing things?

[00:53:47.98] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Oh, they were throwing things; bottles, shoes. They were coming up-- we had guards alongside, but as we got going down and people got worked up, they started-- more-- they were more to protect us from the people-- keeping the mob away.

[00:54:04.73] And I remember I was tied-- we were in pairs, and we were tied to each other, our wrists marching along. And I was marching-- I was tied to Risner, Robbie Risner. And we were not the first two, we were the third couple in front, but they were-- I mean, I could not see everything they were doing to Robbie or myself, just constant blows and whacks.

[00:54:31.82] But I could-- I was-- I remember looking at the guys ahead of us, up front. They were getting the hell beat out of them by the people, even some of the officers, because they wanted us to bow to the people and we didn't want to bow. And so they just-- I mean, they pulled our hair, knocking the hell out of us.

[00:54:57.38] So it's a miracle that nobody was killed that night, at that event. We wound up in a stadium. I don't remember how-- if I looked on the map today I probably could not tell you which one. But it looked to be a soccer stadium.

[00:55:17.33] It had big gates. And once we were able to get through that-- those doors-- when they would open the doors, the mobs outside-- and fight your way-- you had to actually fight your way through the crowd to get in there. And they would have the gates open a little bit, close them, let us in.

[00:55:36.89] We were all-- I thought for sure that somebody was going to get-- people would not make it. But we were very fortunate. That's when the bad stuff started, after that. I would-- the torture sessions for propaganda, to get you to-- to break you. As they would say, we want to make sure that you no longer have the will to ever resist us or come back to fight us again.

[00:56:07.08] And so it was a battle. It was a battle of wills, and physical. We lost guys. We lost guys. But I can tell you that-- and that went on for months.

[00:56:24.57] We developed a code. We had our guidance from our-- Risner and Stockdale. Resist to the best of your ability, but come back to fight again.

[00:56:40.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, they recognize that you can only go so far with that.

[00:56:45.48] EVERETT ALVAREZ: But it's all subjective, Joe. Some guys never came back. I mean, just-- the guidance was don't cause irreparable damage to your mind or your body. And, well, how do you know what that point is? When you're getting banged around on your knob, and what have you.

[00:57:07.23] I mean, I looked at it this way-- it's like playing football. In those days we didn't have-- we had just the helmet, nothing on your face. And it was-- growing up, it was just-- that was the manly thing to do. And you'd come and you'd have broken noses, you'd have black eyes, you're all cut and bruised. But that was part of the game.

[00:57:33.55] This was no-- no different in the sense that once they start beating you, I mean, it just-- after a while you feel numb to the pain. You just-- and then the torture sessions were just-- was harder because they had all the time in the world. And they could work this.

[00:57:53.61] And, I mean, they told us, we-- we know how to make you suffer. And sometimes you'd wish they'd kill you, but they weren't going to let you get killed-- they weren't going to try to kill you. They were going to just push you and make it hurt.

[00:58:10.65] JOE GALLOWAY: They were not seeking particular information? They were seeking to break you will-- break your will--

[00:58:18.17] EVERETT ALVAREZ: And become a propaganda tool; make tapes and what have you. And there were-- it was-- these were not pleasant times because you never knew when they were going to-- when it was your turn again. And after a while you learned to fear-- you're laying in your cell, and you hear the guards coming.

[00:58:41.58] And you hear the jangle of the keys. And you heard-- and you would say, oh, shit. Here he comes. And, is it going to be me or not? And when-- what-- you could hear him lock-- open the doors.

[00:58:53.52] But when you heard it was somebody else's door, you went, whew, that poor guy. You know, then when they pull you-- when it was your door, your throat just dropped.

[00:59:13.16] Oh, Joe, there were many moments that stand out. I mean, I could talk all day I'm sure. I wrote a book. And when we finished the transcript-- I had a ghostwriter-- this was 1988, the manuscript was that-- yay thick. And then when we sold it to the publisher, he told me to cut it down to one third that size.

[00:59:38.72] So all this other stuff didn't appear in the book and the book did pretty well. But all that other stuff is just-- I go-- and I have to be selective about what I want to talk about. It all depends on what the audience wants; if it's for entertainment; if it's educational; if it's leadership courses; whatever it is. I mean, so many things that apply to-- lessons. Some of the things you can learn.

[01:00:06.06] JOE GALLOWAY: This is an effort-- what we're doing here is trying to reach the younger generations coming along. Junior high, high school.

[01:00:14.92] EVERETT ALVAREZ: We-- well, I'll tell you-- with the audience that you're talking about-- that's what-- I go out and I talk to young kids, high school or college level. I used to do more, but I just-- I'm limited. The important thing was to talk about leadership; to talk about organizational; to talk about things that are really important.

[01:00:47.45] When you find yourself in a situation as we found ourselves-- our integrity, individual integrity; your values, your values not just as a human being, but as an American and as a military fighting man; these were all key ingredients to our survival.

[01:01:17.72] Our interdependence on each other; tapping, using that tap code where you tap on the wall, keeping each other's spirits going; keeping each other aware of what's happening, so when it's your turn to go out you have an idea of what you're going to have to face, understanding that they're out to break you, and they're going to use physical torture.

[01:01:46.49] But if you're an American, and if you're a person of character, it's something that you're going to have to understand. What we have to understand is that we're going to have to face pain and take pain because we have no alternative. We can't just willingly give ourselves-- that's not what we're made of; that's not what patriotism and values--

[01:02:12.19] JOE GALLOWAY: You mentioned two leaders, Jim Stockdale and Robbie Risner.

[01:02:17.39] EVERETT ALVAREZ: Robbie Risner and Jim Stockdale were outstanding individuals who happened to be there as senior officers. And we have-- we all went through training. We have our code of conduct, of being-- but nothing prepares you for the real thing.

[01:02:35.78] I mean, you have just general training in the background. I would say to you that is-- what these fellows did was recognize the situation, recognize the guidance that was needed, and proved to be tremendous leaders as the senior officers, so that we could survive on a day to day basis. How to behave, how to handle ourselves, how to-- we had-- and it's all built on keeping each other together as a group.

[01:03:16.91] We used to have-- our motto, our creed was-- return with honor. Our honor was the key. And that encompasses everything I just told you; the reputation, the integrity, our patriotism, our loyal-- our belief in God, our faith. Everything is just--

[01:03:39.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever despair? Did you ever come to believe you wouldn't be released?

[01:03:46.95] EVERETT ALVAREZ: There were times when I felt pretty low and I just didn't know if I was going to make it through that day or not. But generally speaking, it was-- the level of optimism that we could-- if we could get through the illnesses; if we could get through the torture sessions; if we could have a chance to take care of ourselves in whatever it was, sickness

or whatever-- we could make it. And so to answer your question, I would-- despair was rare. I always felt, no matter how long, we're going to make it.

[01:04:38.10] Well, there are many days where as we look back-- here we are in a miserable situation. I mean, we were with-- our legs are in leg irons; our arms are in-- our hands are in handcuffs behind our back; on a-- strapped down to a bed, being punished for something as we were for about a week, three of us in our cell.

[01:05:09.46] And where you have to maneuver your body so that you can position it over the bowl so we could relieve ourselves. And then after working hard to get yourself in a position to let go, and you miss the whole damn thing. And laugh, and just laugh, it was like this is-- nobody would ever believe if I would describe what was happening right now. Nobody. And we'd laugh, and that happened quite a few times.

[01:05:51.03] Coming home, long overdue, 8 and 1/2 years later, the war was over. The treaty was signed-- the truce was signed. And we were coming home. Getting on that C-141 and having that feeling that you had descended into the dungeons, and you have met the-- you've met the dragon, and you've-- and you've won, you come home.

[01:06:41.22] I remember that as we were getting ready to leave the camps, there was a big courtyard in the middle of the Hanoi Hilton. And the Vietnamese had set up a tent. And they were calling people in. So they called me in, and I walked in.

[01:07:00.89] And here's about five officers sitting there, and these guys were either camp commanders or officers that I had not seen. Some of them I had not seen in years, and they go, oh-- and of course, my Vietnamese-- we all had a Vietnamese name. Mine was Ao Alvarez; Ao means shirt in Vietnamese. Everybody else had their own names.

[01:07:31.59] The officers looked-- oh, Ao, you look-- you look well. Like, thanks. No, thanks to you. 8 and 1/2 years later they're saying, Ao. And they said something very interesting to me because all the time that they were interrogating me and sort of-- not brainwashing me, but really indoctrinating, they used to say, how-- they spent hours talking about how they fought the French in the French Indochina War. And they defeated the French.

[01:08:12.70] And they had-- they worked with French POWs, and they defeated them. And we will defeat you. And so I remember that they used to tell us that all the time. They used to tell me that.

[01:08:25.69] So it went something like this, the officer, he said, you Americans are different than the French. I mean, POWs. He said, we defeated the French. You Americans are different. And what he was referring to was the fact that they could never break our communications; they could never-- no matter what they did, they could never break our organization, covert organization, our structure, which is what kept us going. And I thought to myself, that's probably the best compliment I could ever get from those guys.

[01:09:16.81] JOE GALLOWAY: To get a compliment from them.

[01:09:19.19] EVERETT ALVAREZ: To have-- to have them say that. Yeah.

[01:09:32.86] When I finally got back 8 and 1/2 years later, I had found out already that I was no longer married. She had remarried and had a family. It took a while for that to-- and I found that out about a year before we came out. And so I'd say that year it took a while for the-- for that-- for me to get over that.

[01:10:00.82] Thanks to the help of the guys that kept me-- kept my spirits up. I remember one day I was thinking, I'm alive. I'm still alive, and I'm going to come out of this alive. I can-- and I think I'll be a monk-- at some abbey somewhere. Then after a week or so I says, no, I don't think I want to do that.

[01:10:33.13] I started planning trips-- so I started doing this. And then by the time I came home, we got on the plane and we came home, I was raring to go. I mean, family was my mom, my dad, my sisters. Well, that's another story. My sister was antiwar, very public. Didn't help me-- it help me much, to say the least.

[01:10:59.06] But they-- I felt good about it. I was looking forward to it. I was-- and then when I got off the plane here in the States, and got to the hospitals, and I started looking at all the nurses, all these things, I said, God can you imagine, I was gonna-- for a while, I thought I might be a monk. No.

[01:11:21.76] So I-- getting back into society, getting back into the culture, getting back to life was exciting, it was fun, it was new. And I would say that one of the things that we were not-- none of us, especially me, I was not prepared, was all the-- being in the limelight and the notoriety. I mean, all of a sudden, here I am in the media, under the lights. I mean, me?

[01:11:59.80] You got your sports, you got your actors, you got your entertainers. That's not me. But I learned gradually that I was not going to get away from it, and so I learned to adapt to it. And I made-- I made many mistakes in trying to deal with this life. And it took a while, but I'm comfortable now interviewing, or going before an audience, or talking, or having stories written.

[01:12:39.04] Even to this day, coming up on-- this interview is being done under the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. Well, this August, six months from-- less than six months is 50 years from the day I was shot down. JOE GALLOWAY: That's incredible. EVERETT ALVAREZ: And here I am.

[01:13:01.18] First of all, I never thought I'd live this long, coming out. While I was there, live to be 76? Forget it, not me.

[01:13:10.86] JOE GALLOWAY: You and me too.

[01:13:18.51] EVERETT ALVAREZ: I'm exceedingly lucky. God's watched over me. And so I've had a good life. I still am busy doing things. I'm able to work with veterans for a lot, help other guys. I always help with families. Somebody will always call me about this or that because

I had been at the Veterans Administration, I had a post there for a number of years. And I've always felt like I wanted to give back in one way or another.

[01:14:00.14] JOE GALLOWAY: What would you-- if you had one thing, one lesson to distill from this horrific experience to give to a new generation or a new generation 50 years from now, what would that be?

[01:14:18.68] EVERETT ALVAREZ: I think that no matter what you experience in life, it's not always easy to do the right thing. Having the ability to recognize what's right from wrong in how you conduct your life or how you treat others or what you do, there's a moral right versus a moral wrong to it. And too many times in our society, people don't know the difference.

[01:14:52.37] But if you will focus on whatever it is you do to do the right thing, okay, that takes character. That is not always easy. You will have lived with honor. And quirky as it may seem, if you look back, you will-- and if you follow-- follow that way of thinking, you will have lived with honor. And that-- that is a hell of an asset because people will respect you no matter what.

[01:15:50.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears, and 8 and 1/2 years?

[01:16:02.46] EVERETT ALVAREZ: In my case, I definitely feel that I took away more than I invested in blood, sweat, tears. We always-- we had a saying while we were there, it's a hell of a learning experience, and everybody should be POW. And I'd say, yeah, but don't get carried away with this.

[01:16:30.21] One day is-- one or two days is all you need because it's a humbling experience. And also, I mean, no matter whether you were in war and you were enlisted, or you were an aviator, or you're-- whatever it is, if you're in a position where all of a sudden you've lost your freedom as an individual; you've lost your freedom, your ability to do what you want to do; your ability to enjoy what you have is stripped away from you; that's a bitter, bitter experience.

[01:17:19.51] And when we came back-- and you come back from that experience, recognizing that you've had that stripped, it-- you really recognize that freedom is so sweet. Real freedom. And people who have never lost it can't fathom what I mean-- cannot understand-- will not-- will never understand that.

[01:17:53.51] Now, people in this country, especially as rich and as-- as rich and plentiful as we are, just don't have a sense of how sweet the freedom we have is.

[01:18:07.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Commander, thank you.