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JOHN FER INTERVIEW
JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS
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JOHN FER
POW, McCain's Cellmate
October 30, 2017
Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 2 hours 58 Minutes

START TC:
QT: 01;00;00;00

QT: 01;00;00;07

CREW:

Ok. Mark one.

QT: 01;00;06;02

CREW:

Here's your cell phone (Inaudible) out of the way.

QT: 01;00;08;14

TITLE

On getting shot down in Vietnam

QT: 01;00;14;23

JOHN FER:

It was on my 54th mission over North Vietnam that I was shot down. And I was flying as I always flew, an electronic counter measures mission supporting strike aircraft. For instance, airplanes like John's strikes, where we could jam the enemy radar that was guiding anti-aircraft artillery or surfaced air missiles so that they couldn't pick up the strike aircraft and launch their weapon systems after them. So I was jamming—I was jamming and we're also doing a little bit of electronic reconnaissance and picking up unusual signals, signals perhaps that identified as site of some importance that we hadn't included on our—on our order of battle charts.

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QT: 01;01;06;10

JOHN FER:

And on this 54th mission I had just finished the end bound leg going from west to east when the North Vietnamese launched four missiles at the airplane. We had flown over a site that was not charted—we didn't know it was there, it was a mobile site and most likely had been moved there under our flight path overnight. When they moved it there we didn't know it was there, flew over the top of it—it was like shooting fish in a barrel, really. We couldn't get away and I turned into a bank when I was warned of it initially but it was too late.

QT: 01;01;45;18

JOHN FER:

And one missile of the four did slight damage and then the third one actually impacted the airplane and killed three of my crew members in the back end, the ones that do all the electronic heavy lifting for instance and we call them Ravens, electronic warfare officers. Killed three of them right off the bat, one of them ejected and became a POW with me and the navigator and I both ejected and became POW's as well. So there were three of us that actually successfully escaped from the airplane.

QT: 01;02;20;04

TITLE

The mission on the flight that was shot down

QT: 01;02;24;10

JOHN FER:

So on this airplane I was the pilot and I had a navigator sitting just off to the side behind me. I was flying the airplane, that was my responsibility to fly the preplanned orbit pattern. And while I was flying this orbit pattern, the fellas in the back end—the four officers in the back end were doing electronic surveillance if you want to call that. They were what we call cutting signals from the ground when they got a threat signal, either over their headset or on the scope that they had in the back end on their equipment.

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QT: 01;03;06;11

JOHN FER:

They would either jam it or if it wasn't a threat they would log it on the chart, just to confirm that it was there. Or if it was a new site then they'd put that on the chart and the location and then when we went back after the mission we would brief that to the intelligence people and they would include that in their next briefing for the next crew that flew up there. The bottom line is I was flying a reconnaissance as well as jamming radar signals in support of strikes.

QT: 01;03;33;18

TITLE

The day they were shot down

QT: 01;03;38;05

JOHN FER:

This was—as I recall this was a Sunday. This was a Sunday, the fourth of February 1967.

QT: 01;03;46;20

TITLE

The view from the sky and the threats below

QT: 01;03;50;17

JOHN FER:

Right. From the sky it was mountainous, it was in the area of Hanoi but we were north of Hanoi out of the threat of surfaced air missiles. They were our biggest threat—surfaced air missiles were our biggest threat because we were pretty much out of range of the anti-aircraft artillery, the AAA. So it was the missiles which had a very, very high effective altitude and it had a circular range that could be lethal if we got inside of that range, close to the defended areas. And you might recall too that Hanoi was in the history of aerial warfare, the most heavily defended target area in history.

QT: 01;04;41;14

TITLE

The crash and his capture

QT: 01;04;46;05

JOHN FER:

It came as a complete surprise to me. In other words, when those missiles exploded and destroyed the airplane and forced me to eject from the airplane came as a complete surprise because our flight path was supposed to be planned so that we stayed outside of those lethal surface air missile rings. By flying over one of them however, we negated any of that insurance and we got shot down. So I was shocked into a really out of—in a sense out of complacency because I was very comfortable doing what I had done 53 times before. And on this 54th mission boom, boom, boom, the explosion of the missiles destroyed the airplane—couldn't fly it anymore. I had to get out of it so I ejected from the airplane after the navigator ejected. And I came down and landed in my parachute but I was pretty well banged up by the shrapnel and also ejecting from the airplane.

QT: 01;05;56;02

JOHN FER:

Something had gone haywire with the equipment, in the sense that the ejection seat did not fully move to the aft position. And so when I went through the overhead hatch, I went through and got shredded sort of like a head of lettuce. I got my flight suit ripped significantly, I had lacerations on my body, a very severe one on my knee. And so when I went out of the airplane at that altitude in my haste I forgot to pull down my visor, which was both a sun visor and a visor to protect your eyes from the air stream, the slip stream if you have to eject. And when that happened the slip stream at 450 knots hit me right square in the eyes and I was immediately blinded. I couldn't see a darn thing and so I tumbled through the sky and eventually I got down I would estimate probably somewhere around 20,000 feet—18,000 feet and I pulled the rip cord and I deployed the parachute and I came down very near a village.

QT: 01;07;07;00

JOHN FER:

And when I got down on the ground I got out of my parachute harness and that sort of thing. I kept my survival vest on, which had a minimal amount of equipment with it. And I bandaged my lacerations and took some sulfur tablets out of my first aid kit to, I thought prevent some infection if that should happen, and I started to evade. I run up the hill and I reached a point where there were brambles and underbrush and entanglements from the foliage and I couldn't go any further. So I thought I've got to find a place to hide so I looked around and I found a very small banana palm—it was only about I'd say nine inches in diameter. And so I was dressed in an olive green or olive drab flight suit, which blended in with the surrounding foliage and so I squeezed in behind this.

QT: 01;08;05;02

JOHN FER:

You can see I'm wider than nine inches but I squeezed in and was very quiet behind this palm, banana palm. It was five or ten minutes, the villagers from nearby came with their dogs. Came rushing up the hill and believe it or not I couldn't believe it, they ran right by me because I looked like I was part of the palm tree I guess, the banana palm. They reached the same obstacles that I had reached, the undergrowth, the brambles, the vines, that sort of stuff. And I heard them stop and I ominously felt them all stop, turn around and look back down the hill from where they'd come and from where I had come to my location. Then all heck broke loose. Dogs barked. People screaming and hollering and they surrounded me and they pointed their ancient looking rifle. They were carrying sickles that the local people used for harvesting rice and they had those as weapons. And so they—they pounced on me so to speak.

QT: 01;09;22;07

JOHN FER:

Not with any violence or anything, but just surrounded me. Grabbed my .38 and pointed that at me. I look back on it now and I think I did something very stupid in my shocked state. I reached out, I reached out to the one villager that was pointing my .38, my Smith and Wesson, at me, right in the middle of my breast bone, so to speak here. And I reached out and I pushed it away. I

said, don't—in English, I said, "Don't point that at me. It might go off." And of course, I'm in a state of shock and I'm a little bit disoriented and all that sort of stuff. And so he did! He pointed it away from me and he stripped me from all my clothes. Took my flight suit, took my wallet, my identification card, and my Geneva Convention card. And took my boots, left me in my socks, and in bloody underwear. I had one of those tank tops that I wore over there because of the heat, and I had a pair of boxer shorts on, just covered with blood from—from the shrapnel wounds.

QT: 01;10;32;22

JOHN FER:

At this point—at this point, I didn't know where that blood came from, because I did not see the disintegration of the side of the airplane. I didn't see the disintegration of anything that would leave me to believe that the airplane had been that severely damaged. And so, when I went out of the airplane I went out thinking that it had been hit by missiles, but I didn't know that I was wounded as well. And, later on, I found out in prison that the navigator—the navigator received shrapnel wounds too. And, of course, it killed three guys in the back end 'cause the missile actually impacted them. So there I am now, on the ground, surrounded by the villagers and the long day's night begins. I marched off through rice paddies, along the periphery of rice paddies. Lined by peasants, very curious peasants. Non-committal. They weren't angry. They weren't rushing at me like, unfortunately, some other pilots had been physically abused. They just watched me being escorted along the path, in my shorts and in my tank top.

QT: 01;11;57;06

JOHN FER:

And, believe it or not, I couldn't believe this but, a young lady dressed in a military uniform came rushing up, obviously been notified that this pilot was injured, came rushing up and bandaged all of my wounds. Put a nice pad on my knee that was badly lacerated. And then another young military guy came out of the crowd, as I'm walking along, and took my picture. I remember saying to myself, sort of sardonically you might say or cynically, whatever, I said, "It's probably a Japanese camera, too." (Laughs) But anyway, took my picture. And then somebody else, because I looked rather embarrassing with just shorts and a tank top on, came out of the crowd and gave me a pair of trousers. Sort of knee length—knee length trousers that Asian folks wear

when they work in the rice paddies and things like that so there I was. I marched off to the village.

QT: 01;03;03;03

JOHN FER:

There was a political rally that the commi—that the village commissar conducted. He marched me out in front of all the assembled people from that village and said something in Vietnamese and shook his fist and pointed at me, and then the crowd responded with a lot of, we always used to say, humorously, "Hura, hura, hura, hura," because we couldn't understand their language, so that's what it sounded like. Came back in my direction and then I was taken back in the village headman's house. Sat there and I waited for the army to show up and they threw me in the back end of kind of a vehicle about the size of one of our Hummers, but military and I rode the rest of the time into the Hanoi Hilton, all night. And this was all—this was the night of the 4th. This was the night of the 4th.

QT: 01;13;51;03

TITLE

Arriving at the Hanoi Hilton, processing and interrogation

QT: 01;13;55;14

JOHN FER:

It was—first of all, I was blindfolded from the time I got in to the vehicle until I arrived in the interrogation room. I was blindfolded so I didn't see, and it was night, it was dark, so I didn't see a lot. And so when we got outside the prison camp, it was before reveille, so to speak, nobody had been awakened yet. I heard this clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, which I was going to be familiar with for the next six years, and that was the reveille sign—sound. And so, when that happened, the gates were opened and they drove us through into the area of the Hilton, and off-loaded me and took me to a room that resided in an area we called New Guy Village, because it was sort of an in-processing center. So, they brought me into New Guy Village and into a room, it was about 20 by 20 feet in size, and it had lumpy walls. We called it the Knobby Walled Room. It was an interrogation room.

QT: 01;15;10;13

JOHN FER:

Virtually soundproof from outside. And there was a desk in front with an old lamp sitting on it, something like a 1930's lamp that we would see in the United States, and a small stool in front of the table. And I had been standing there for oh, five, six minutes or so, and, finally, the interrogator came in. Very knowledgeable guy. We nicknamed him—and I'm still standing. Knowledgeable and we called him The Eagle. Came in with a big folder, loaded with charts, loaded with aviation checklists, things related to strike missions and things like that. And he came in and he started, first of all, you know, "What is your name?" I gave him name. "What's your rank?" Rank, gave him that. And, "How old are you?"

QT: 01;16;06;14

JOHN FER:

Ya know, I gave him my age. I figured, well, it's not exactly like date of birth, like you're required to give according to Geneva Convention rules, but, eh, I guess, 29's okay. See I was real suspicious. I did not ever want to do anything that would embarrass my family name. My father raised my brother and I very strictly. And my mom too. Very strictly. "Never, ever, ever," he said, "bring shame on the name of the Fer family. Don't you ever do it or I'll kick you up between your shoulder blades if you do that." And so, I grew up with a very regimented code of discipline and ethical behavior and things like that, because my father was a fire captain. He's well known in town. If it ever got out that his son had done something embarrassing, it would have come right back home to roost, and he would have been very upset.

QT: 01;17;04;08

JOHN FER:

So, I was always suspicious of anything that the Communists would ask me that was out of the ordinary. And silly as it may seem, "How old are you?" wasn't according to date of birth. In other words, he asked me for my name, my rank, my service number - he got my service number - and date of birth. And, instead of that, specifically, he said, "How old are you?" And I thought it was a trick question. I was a little bit still in shock and a little disoriented, and I told him I'm 29 years old, okay, and then we moved on. And he said, "Now, what are the targets going to be after Tet?" As you know, Tet is the lunar New Year over there. And Lyndon Johnson always used to halt the bombing over

the north, particularly in the Hanoi area, during our Christmas holidays through New Year's, or the lunar New Year, their Tet celebration, in North Vietnam.

QT: 01;18;05;10

JOHN FER:

And so I got shot down on the front edge of time that just preci—was a prelim to Tet, and so he was anticipating another bombing halt. And so, the Eagle said, "What are the targets going to be after Tet?" And of course, even though I helped to disseminate target information to other air crews; we called it breaking the frags, fragmentary orders—even though I helped do that, I was on those teams, those frag teams, I never knew in anticipation of that what the targets would be, because the ones that we supported were all what we called JCS targets. Specifically designed, picked, and executed by executive order of the president of the United States down through the chain of command. So I had no idea what those were. They were very high priority targets. So what are the targets going to be after Tet? I said, "I don't know". Then he proceeded to use his torture methods to try to get information out of me. And I resisted it twice. I resisted it twice.

QT: 01;19;23;00

JOHN FER:

And finally when I got out of the ropes when they tied us up into ropes for the torture and all that sort of thing, when I got out of the ropes the second time the pain had built up so greatly with cutting off my circulation. The handcuffs were very tight, cutting into the tendons and all that sort of stuff. I made up targets. I just made up information for them. But I made it so simple that as we're instructed, I wouldn't forget and get caught in a lie. Because when you're in a beaten down state with this severe interrogation and you lie about it, then the interrogator's smart enough to come back a second time, ask you the same questions. Maybe days later. Hours later. Whatever it happens to be and say, "You told us this, when the facts are these".

QT: 01;20;15;21

JOHN FER:

Now the facts may be distorted. They may be fabricated. But now he's preying on my pain and my feeling of alienation from America and my crew members and all that stuff, and all the other things that go with getting shot

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down, that now I'm going to say, "Okay. Here's the truth." Then I'll spill the beans. Once you open that door, then you become susceptible to exploitation for a lot of things, including ultimately propaganda, signing war crimes confessions. In Korea it was germ warfare. That never arose in North Vietnam, but bombing civilian targets would have come up, ya know, and that sort of thing.

QT: 01;21;04;00

JOHN FER:

So when I was pushed off that position of name, rank, service number, date of birth, I made up those answers to the targets after Tet. And—and so he bought it. He bought my answers. Then he moved on to the next one and said—he said, "When are the B-52s going to come to Thailand?" because they were a devastating weapon and scared the daylights out of the ground troops. You couldn't hear a B-52 coming. You couldn't see the bombs falling until they were on top of your head. They just plowed the terrain up something fierce, including the military targets that they were after. So I mean the 11 Days of Christmas when they bombed Hanoi is a perfect example of the devastation they could—that they could do. But up to that point they weren't bombing Hanoi.

QT: 01;21;57;22

JOHN FER:

But anyway, he wanted to know when the B-52s were coming, because it would have been a shorter flight from U-Tapao in the Gulf of Thailand to Hanoi and back, or north Vietnam and back, than it was from Guam to Hanoi or the north Vietnam area, north of the DMZ, and then back to Guam again. That was an important question. I just made up an answer. I said, "Six months from now", so he wrote it down. He wrote down six months. There's no way he could prove it, and there was no way I could prove it because I wasn't privy to all that information, ok?

QT: 01;22;36;08

JOHN FER:

And then—then he got on to other lesser important military information that he wanted. I lied and I distorted and I twisted information so that it sounded credible. But I didn't give him any information, because ya know, as a captain, like I said, I broke the frags but I didn't select the targets and I wasn't at SAC headquarters to know when the B-52s would move to Thailand, so I was able to dance around that.

QT: 01;23;12;15

TITLE

On torture, techniques and coping strategies

QT: 01;23;17;20

JOHN FER:

Getting tortured, we called it either the bar and strap or the bar and ropes treatment. And that has to do with, do you want me to demonstrate just (Cross talk) here?

QT: 01;23;31;14

JOHN FER:

That has to do with putting my arms with my wrists opposed behind my back, and fastened with handcuffs. Now the handcuffs they used were those not flexible handcuffs that are connected with a chain like you see in the cop movies, the cops and robbers movies. But they were like miniature stocks. They're hinged on one end and they open up and you put your wrists in here, and then they clamp it down and they put a screw in there to keep it closed. Well you don't fasten with your wrists in a normal extended position. That you do is you turn the wrists behind and they're opposed, which puts additional stress on your forearms and your elbows. Then what we did was he tied, for me on this occasion he used a strap about 12 feet long and three-quarters of an inch wide. Now, later occasions when I went through the same routine and they used a rope.

QT: 01;24;34;20

JOHN FER:

But they took the strap and they tied it to the handcuffs between my wrists. Then they laced that strap back and forth between my wrists and my

forearms all the way up past my elbows, up to my shoulders, and as the guard was doing this, the guy we called, I called him the monkey man because he was a very unattractive guy. Anyway, pushed me over on my side, so I have my legs extended out, away from my body. My wrists and arms are behind me. I'm on my side. Each time he laced that strap, he placed his, he wore tennis shoes. What we would call tennis shoes. They placed his tennis shoe on my arms and pulled and pulled and pulled and laced it again and pulled and pulled, until my arms are virtually parallel to one another and touching. Ok?

QT: 01;25;43;05

JOHN FER:

And at the same time, the lacing goes in and out of your limbs. You're cutting off the circulation. Now, I was an athlete. I ran track and cross country, and I played football, so physical exertion and the getting knocked around, or the extending of your stamina through long distance running, it didn't bother me. That was one of the things, I was in good shape. But cutting off the circulation to your arms and your wrists, the handcuffs cutting into your—not only the bones but the nerves and the tendons in your wrists, was very, very painful. And so when he had this lacing completed, then he took the running—what we called the running in, ya know, the loose end of a strap, over my shoulder and pulled it down toward my ankles, pushing down on my upper body to get my nose to virtually touch the tile floor. Then once he got me in that position, he wrapped the rest of the strap around my ankles and cinched it up. Ok?

QT: 01;27;00;14

JOHN FER:

And then these two guys, the interrogator and the monkey man, the torturer, just got up and left the room. While all of this is going on, the reflections in my mind are, "How can one human being treat another human being with such brutality?" To this day I remember those thoughts going through my mind. It's one of those bizarre things that, when you're in a very stressful situation, they come up. They come up, like the idea sometimes you've heard where—about the time people look like they're going to die, their entire life flashes before their eyes.

QT: 01;27;52;17

JOHN FER:

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Well it wasn't my entire life. It was the moment—it was the moment that was causing me great pain, and thinking, "How in the world can one person treat another this way?" And I'll tell you the bottom line, what the bottom line is. All the time I was in the Air Force and going through training for survival and evasion, escape, and all that sort of stuff, resistance, avoiding giving sensitive military information, certainly propaganda, stuff like that. All of that I was basing on the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War that says you can't do that. So when I got shot down, I was flying—I was landing in an environment, a culture, that didn't believe in that stuff. In fact, the North Vietnamese, like all communist countries, took exception to what's known as Article 85, which says, "We consider you to be a criminal, subject to war crimes trials, you are not entitled to the treatment under the rules of the Geneva Convention of 1949.

QT: 01;29;12;11

JOHN FER:

So it came as a horrible shock to me that that was happening. So that's where that—how can one person treat another one that way? I had to—I had to over the years then become accustomed and talking to other POWs, tapping on the wall, I had to become accustomed to what the brutality was that was facing me. 'Cause there weren't going—there wasn't going to be a free lunch here. You know, there wasn't going to be, "After we interrogate you, we're going to put you in the big compound—and you can move around with the rest of the POWs, because they're really tough too, and you were really tough, and you resisted us." Ok? They don't—they didn't play that game. And they took a page out of the playbook of the Chinese communists in the Korean War.

QT: 01;29;59;11

JOHN FER:

I mean these people like worked hand in glove, really, in terms of philosophy and how to treat people. So, when these guys got up and left, the pain started building, building, building, building, building. Circulation was stopped. Throbbing became horrible, so I screamed and hollered and I said, "Okay, okay, okay, I'll tell you." So, when they came back in the room again, they untied me, I staggered to my feet, and I swear to this day, the first thing that came into my mind was, "Fer, you're a wimp. You gave up too soon." I prided myself in being real tough. I was a John Wayne guy! I Was a John Wayne guy. I

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always won. Ya know, I always—I always overcame the evil that John Wayne overcame, because goodness triumphs evil. And I said, "You quit. You gave up too soon. You disappointed yourself."

QT: 01;30;59;13

JOHN FER:

So The Eagle, he comes back in the room after they untied me, he sits down there. And the monkey man's sittin' off—standing off to the side. He says, "Okay." Then he asked me another sensitive question, a military question which was classified. And I thought, "Ugh." I bit my lip. I said, "I can't tell you that." Bingo, right back into the straps again. Same thing, except this time when the pain got great and I shouted, "Okay, I'll tell you." They didn't come back in right away. I sensed that they were saying, "We're going to let that guy stew just a little bit longer so that he knows we're serious."

QT: 01;31;42;09

JOHN FER:

So when they came back in again after I'd hollered, then I started fabricating more and more and more answers to their questions. You know, dancing around things and making hypotheticals and all that sort of—he wrote it all down. They write everything down. They have a dossier on every POW. When they left my room occasionally, and I was seated on this stool, they would go off, I know, and talk to my navigator and the one guy in the back end that escaped, crosschecking what I told them with what they told them. Because when they came back, they would ask me a question, which only the crew would know. Things like what goes on in the squadron activities and things like that.

QT: 01;32;37;07

JOHN FER:

Let me give you an example. The ravens, the back end guys, the electronic guys, they were a breed of their own. They had a sense of humor that was different than what pilots and navigators would have. So whenever the flight crew schedule came out, and it was written in grease pencil on the board, one of the crews in the back end would always have a fourth or third crew member written in, "Lieutenant Muggs." Well, if you remember Lieutenant Muggs was old Dave Garraway's pet chimp. Remember when he did the Today show or whatever, the Tonight Show, whatever it was. He always had

this monkey that he was playing around with. That was Lieutenant Muggs. J. Fred Muggs. And so they always used to put him in there. Nobody knew who Muggs was, but the Ravens, they got a big chuckle out of it.

QT: 01;33;33;00

JOHN FER:

The interrogators came in, in one of their exchanges between my crewmembers and said, "Who is Lieutenant Muggs?" and I thought, "Oh boy, they've been talking. Now I've got to make it." I said, "Well I don't really know for sure. I had coffee with him one time at The Officer's Club, but I didn't know him much because he was one of those guys in the back end and they have their own world. They deal with their own business." And so he wrote it down and then we moved on to something else. But when they go back and forth in the rooms like that, they're crosschecking stories and things like that to see— radio frequencies and all that stuff. So you can't really make up too many radio frequencies, because they'll crosscheck it with some of the other crewmembers.

QT: 01;34;16;12

JOHN FER:

And that's one of the problems with for instance, when John McCain got shot down. It was just John McCain that they had the source of information. For me, they had a source from me, however dubious it might be, then they'll have the navigator who was injured also, like I was. And the raven in the back end that survived. So you know, they got three guys they can play against each other, so anyway. So that was in the first day of my violent, violent interrogation. After that, there were interrogations having to do with my own biography, which I fabricated—family information. And other propaganda, potentially propaganda, useful information, stuff like that, you know. And that was the rest—that was always the follow-on. Once they got you beat down, now they're going to take advantage of the propaganda aspect, because we can get you. We can manipulate you now. So I had to fight that real hard. I really did. Yeah.

QT: 01;35;14;13

TITLE

Communication, memorizing names of those captured or killed, meeting McCain and other survival techniques

QT: 01;35;19;21

JOHN FER:

As with every single POW in North Vietnam that we knew about, either actually having sighted another POW or got the name, it always came through the tapping on the wall. Communication was the key to our survival and resistance. So, when we got contact, or we heard about somebody getting shot down—for instance, a POW who you would get in contact with who knew of another missing in action or pilot that was shot down, would bring that information in. Not only would you have him, but you would have the names he brought with him. Says, "Hey, you know Charlie from our squadron was hit by a surface to air missile and he's being carried missing in action or killed in action." or something like that. So he'd bring that information. You'd have his information and we'd tap on the wall and we would memorize all of those names.

QT: 01;36;28;08

JOHN FER:

Now the system I use—the system I use, and I had 300—at the end of the war, I had 350 names that I had memorized. And I reviewed them every single day. I'd start out with the As, then the Bs, then the Cs, all the way to the last one, Charlie Zuhowsky. I'll ne—you can't forget Charlie. So you never drop a name. You'd be—if I was in a room with another POW or a couple of POWs like when I started out, there were—my first roommates after 102 days was three other officers. And they say, "We gotta start memorizing names. I'll give you the A's today. You memorize the A's." Then the B's, the C's, the D's. You'd pace back and forth in these cells, and you'd start out with the A's and B's, in your mind.

QT: 01;37;24;13

JOHN FER:

And then you'd come across and say, "Uh oh, I only have 220," at this point, "220 names. I need 222." And then your cellmate might say, "Well, did you get all your A's?" You'd say, "Yeah, I got all my A's." Because you know how many A's you had. You go B's, C's. Then he'd say, "Well, what about your M's?" You'd say, "I only got so many M's." He says, "No, you've dropped one.

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Give me your M's." And so between the two of us or the three of us, whatever, you'd go through all the last names that started with an M. "Aha, that's it! Moore, Moore! That's the one, that's the one." And we knew them by service. And all those names were in our memory banks.

QT: 01;38;10;21

JOHN FER:

A lot of them were killed in action, but they were names that we carried with us because we didn't want to have a situation like in Korea in the Korean War, where the communists would attempt to hold back POWs and not release them, ok, even though they wanted to be released. So, we wanted to, when we got out, when we were debriefed in the intelligence debriefing, say, "These are the names I memorized." and you'd go all the way down through there.

QT: 01;38;43;02

JOHN FER:

Now when the war got close to being ended and we all moved into the big rooms, then we saw face-to-face most of the people we had on our list, so we could eliminate duplicates. Smith might be S-M-I-T-H or S-M-Y-T-H, so we'd drop the S-M-Y-T-H because that was an English spelling. So we could—but it sounded—it sounded—Smith sounded the same, ok? So March of '71 after we had established communications throughout the camp and we had the Son Tay raid, we all moved back into what we called Camp Unity, which was part of the greater complex of the Hanoi Hilton. It's actually on the other side of the wall, the same complex. Now when I—I had—so I had John McCain's name from tapping on the wall. And then the actual visual of John took place in March of '71 when we went out to a place called Skid Row, which was I'd say about five to seven miles outside of Hanoi.

QT: 01;40;06;14

JOHN FER:

And it was a very small camp and there were 36 of us that moved out there. Now, John in his book talks about the bad actors, the tough nuts, being scooped up by North Vietnamese authorities. Camp authorities. Put together and moved to Skid Row. Now, I'd be the first to admit, I'm not the toughest guy in the world. What blessing was I due that I got thrown in with all these really great guys, tough resistors? There was McCain. There was Bud Day,

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Medal of Honor winner. Leo Thorsness, who was my cell mate initially at Skid Row. Medal of honor winner.

QT: 01;40;50;05

JOHN FER:

I had naval officers, and of course we had air force officers out there as well. An Air Force Academy graduate two years junior to me was another one of my first time cell mates out there at Skid Row. Then after a while when the flooding started in the delta during the latter part of '71, they moved us all back into what we called HBH. Heartbreak Hotel, ok? That was a bad place. They threw five of us or more, or if there was a three-man cell or a two-man cell they'd put four, twice the number, in the same cell. I had to sleep on the floor, and the other guys would sleep in the two bunks, for instance. Or if it was just a solitary cell, one guy would sleep on the bunk and the other two guys or whatever would sleep on the floor. So they moved us there when the flooding took place in the delta.

QT: 01;41;51;00

JOHN FER:

After that was over, only 20 of us were selected to move back to Skid Row. John and Bud Day, Leo Thorsness, and me, and some other guys who moved back out to Skid Row. So I stayed with John there, and we talked very frequently. We called it hanging on the bars. We lived in the backside of this cellblock, where the front side faced the courtyard, open windows. On the backside we had open barred windows, and we'd talk down the way. It's where I learned a lot of things like the address that read at John Kennedy's inauguration, the poem If, by Rudyard Kipling. A lot of different—Id Victus. We thrived on memory exercises of literature and that's—I got a lot of it from John. The historical perspective.

QT: 01;43;00;08

JOHN FER:

Some of the discussions were contentious. Guys had ideas about the origins of American democracy and whether or not—for instance, whether or not we were a Christian nation. That got a really big play on the backside of that cellblock. These two guys got intoss a real discussion. They were in separate cells so they couldn't throw fists. But it was that sort of stuff, a real exchange. They'd try to shut us up, the Vietnamese were always trying to shut us up,

keep from communicating. But who pays attention? We got away with it. Then when they'd walk to go patrol the other side of the prison camp, of Skid Row, we'd start talking again. Then they'd come back and they'd start talking.

QT: 01;43;48;12

JOHN FER:

So—you could always tap across the wall. Either longitudinally, pass it on down the line, or just across to the cell behind you where another guy was living. We stayed there probably until the latter part of '71. Then the 20 of us moved back into the same room. Bud Day was our senior ranking officer. We moved back into Camp Unity. I stayed on and off with John. Same room or adjacent rooms, whatever. Mostly the same room, because we were both chaplains in the room, and we were both on a communications team. For instance, if you want to communicate with the senior ranking officers who lived across the courtyard from us, maybe about 75 yards away. You couldn't tap to them. They were in a separate building.

QT: 01;44;50;00

JOHN FER:

So I used to climb up in those big barred windows in the room, I showed you pictures of that. I'd climb up there and I'd put a black sock on my hand. I would flash morse code to Robbie Reisner, Robinson Reisner, who was in solitary confinement on the other side of the camp. I'd flash morse code to him. And Robbie had a little flag he made, a homemade toilet paper flag on a piece of bamboo. He'd do, two of them yes, one no. Then he'd send messages back. Policy. Things that would come up that he would get from other senior ranking officers in that cell block, also living alone. He'd flash it to me, and I would talk to the guy that's at my foot below the big window, because I'm about six or eight feet up. Climb on his shoulders and get into the window. Then the window frame itself is white washed, so the black sock shows up nicely.

QT: 01;45;55;08

JOHN FER:

And so I'd tell him what the message was from Robbie. And then he would tell John McCain what the message was. John, through the morse code of A, B, C, etc. like that, we called it our mute code. It's not exactly a mute code but it's

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something visual that we could use. We would transmit it to the diagonal cell, room, whatever it happened to be. Because they could stand up and we could look over the top of the cell and see them. Now, something that's really humorous is that McCain's not very tall.

QT: 01;46;38;22

JOHN FER:

He's not very tall. We had another guy that was at least six foot three who could stand, who could stand and just give the mute code. My guy below me would tell him, he'd just do this. John was so immersed in communications and so involved in the formal administration you might say, or the command structure involved in it, because he was privy to stuff I didn't know about. Through the mail. Through packages. Things like that. Anyway, he was so involved, he was intent on being the point man.

QT: 01;47;23;00

JOHN FER:

So he would jump up and down trying to get the message, and Orson, our marine friend, good friend of John's, he'd say, "I'll take care of it". John ran off and got two of his blankets, and borrowed probably somebody else's blanket, and folded them up so that they were about that thick, and raised him about a foot and a half, another 18 inches, off of the bed pedestal which we slept on so that he could be taller than Orson and he could communicate. It was incredible. I thought, "This is hilarious".

QT: 01;47;59;03

JOHN FER:

It's hilarious how he grasped on this need to be involved in the command of this organization and contribute to it. He was the guy that ultimately got the information from my footman, so to speak and then he transmitted it to the other rooms. And that other room would use the mute code to go to another cellblock because it was sort of in a symmetrical design at Unity where you could see by looking through these barred windows at the next one.

QT: 01;48;38;22

TITLE

Communication was a lifeline for the POWs

QT: 01;48;43;07

JOHN FER:

Communications'—ya know, I guess the Latin word is the 'sine qua non' of our existence. I mean it was the reason. Now, I wanna qualify it for myself because my entire life I was a guy that was perfectly comfortable doing activities and staying within myself. Long distance running is a one-man show. The building model airplanes, building model cars for competition, and all that stuff, that's a one-man operation. So I was very comfortable growing up going down to our what we called the shack at home, the barbecue shack and making model airplanes, building model cars, reading. I was very comfortable with that.

QT: 01;49;37;21

JOHN FER:

Now, that's not to say that I didn't fulfill an obligation in the military in the strategic sense of communicating, passing names, passing information, acting on the communications team, things like that. Because I did, it was very important. But like some guys when they lived in solitary confinement they were lost, they were lost. They were gregarious people. I wasn't a gregarious guy. Like I say, I was comfortable having activities mental—I prayed a lot too. That's another thing I had a really sincere deep prayer li—excuse me—before I came—before I got shot down. So, I was comfortable with that. But that's right. John is right that communication was aimed at creating, developing, and sustaining the organization, which was the resistance body.

QT: 01;50;36;14

TITLE

Faith, the depth of McCain, and the leaders that arose from that adversity

QT: 01;50;41;23

JOHN FER:

When Bud Day was our SRO, we came back—Senior Ranking Officer—when we came back from skid row and the 20 of us were put in that one room, and

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Bud says, "Hey, we gotta have formalized church services." Now that gets into an area where some guys might say well I was an atheist or I was agnostic or something like that, nobody was forced. Nobody was forced every Sunday to attend church services. But we had church services.

QT: 01;51;04;18

JOHN FER:

We had a guy that was in charge of the choir and it would write the music from memory because he had a dance band at one time. He assembled small choir to sing. So Bud says, "Okay we need chaplains. How about we break it up and we have for the four weeks of the month we'll have a chaplain for every Sunday?" John was a chaplain. I always referred to him as The Reverend Pastor. He was The Reverend Pastor, that was our nickname back and forth. He called me San Pedro. I was from San Pedro, California. It was an old naval port years and years ago when all that sort of stuff so ya know, it was kind of a catchword for him.

QT: 01;51;46;20

JOHN FER:

So I was San Pedro and I was a chaplain. John was a chaplain. Then we had two other guys. The one I can think of was Jim Sehorn. But I don't know who the fourth guy was, I can't remember. But John again, in his humor, in his humor— and it'll come out the more you talk to him—in his humor, Sehorn, Jim Sehorn he nicknamed—I was San Pedro. He was The Reverend Pastor. Jim Sehorn was Ocean Bugle. Ocean Bugle, when I heard it I thought this guy's incredible. He could tell a joke—it's like the one I told you about who's gonna play him in the movie version of his biography. And ya know, he says it's gonna be Arnold Schwarzenegger, and his kids say, no, no, no Danny DeVito! He's—he's—and he laughed in the interview, you know, he's chuckling and laughing.

QT: 01;52;45;16

JOHN FER:

I think—I think the beauty about John is that—I really do; I think that the depth that John is that—it doesn't come out to people that don't really know him. He can laugh at himself. He can be humorous with his past life. He talks about different things that happened to him that—not worth going into right now—but gives me the understanding, the depth, and the breadth of who

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John McCain really is. Ya know, the title of his book I think that we talked about earlier, *Worth Fighting For*. I think that's a thesis for John McCain. That's a thesis statement for John McCain.

QT: 01;53;28;12

JOHN FER:

And I can give examples of what it means to me in that sense, in the contemporary sense that I've observed in recent years, that others—unfortunately, others don't recognize. Others don't recognize. And I think—I believe that when he came back from his illness, his diagnosis, you remember he went straight to the floor of the Senate and he gave a speech. And in the speech he encapsulated what he told me is most important for a leader. Now we were talking about military at the time, but I always picked his brains for information because I was very impressed with him, very impressed.

QT: 01;54;15;06

JOHN FER:

I mean, a guy that comes from a long lineage of American patriots. Not to the point where you don't remember that before his grandfather and his father there was a long line of those associated with the McCain heritage that contributed to this country. But what he told me when we had these talks—when we had these serious talks and we'd walk around this perimeter of this room. I would ask him about leadership in the military in particular. But it goes to what I heard him say on the Senate floor. Which, present company probably accepted because you probably listened, you're doing a biography, a documentary of him. But probably what most other people did not see beneath the words that he spoke. And that is, he said, "John, it's the mission and the men."

QT: 01;55;22;22

JOHN FER:

Now that's before we had females in combat. The mission and the men. Ok? You don't exclude the men, or those you lead, but you got to keep upper notes in the mission. And that goes for the title of his book, *Worth Fighting For*. Because he said, he told me, the most important thing for a leader to remember is that you must serve a cause greater than your own self-interest. And in that speech on the floor of the Senate that's what he was telling me. As I say, I think it was lost on most people because they were focused on the

Obamacare thing and all the other peripheral healthcare things. But what he told me was, "Hey John, I haven't changed. Nothing, nothing is different. I'm still serving a cause greater than my own self-interest."

QT: 01;56;22;03

JOHN FER:

And he's taken a lot of gas. He has taken a lot of gas. But you have to get—I think it's what I saw in prison and what I shared with him. You know there's that old expression, misery loves company? Well we had a lot of misery, and I really loved his company because it was always a bright spot. His sense of humor when we had entertainment nights on Friday and Saturday night he'd talk about great authors, great history. One of the favorites I use to like to listen to was Mahan. He use to talk about Sea Power, influence on history. He use to talk about E. B. Potter who was the great—and my other cell mates who went to the naval academy would talk about E. B. Potter who was one of their history professor, a well-known authority of history. All of these things he could share with me, and I took 'em all in. I took 'em all in.

QT: 01;57;20;19

JOHN FER:

And I think he—Bud Day and I were sitting down one day, and I told Bud I said, "ya know, I've been reading some of this"—because of my eyes I faked like I couldn't see very well because the slipstream hit me in the eyes. When the Vietnamese captured me, my eyes were black red. I mean they were just black. And I faked bad eyesight because I didn't wanna be forced to read propaganda over the radio or write propaganda. So I faked my blindness. So I would surreptitiously sneak in the corner of these cells of these rooms, and I would read some of their propaganda pamphlets because they were interesting.

QT: 01;58;03;21

JOHN FER:

They'd give me some insight on what their mentality was like. I told Bud Day one time— I believe I shared it with John too—I said, "You know Phan Van Dong, Ho Chi Minh, and General Giap,"—The big three leaders of North Vietnam, "all underwent great trial. They all were persecuted by the French. A lot of times they went into exile. They went into guerrilla warfare." He says, "But look what happened? They rose to the occasion where their time came,

and they became the leaders of North Vietnam, communist North Vietnam." I said, "I believe in this prison camp, there are people that are gonna do the same thing. They're gonna do the same thing."

QT: 01;58;52;12

JOHN FER:

Peterson became a congressman, and then the first ambassador to North Vietnam, or to Vietnam. John did tremendous work beginning with his naval legislative work, then his work in the congress, both in the house and in the senate. Sam Johnson, in the house. Sam Johnson, I lived—Sam Johnson is the first POW I ever got in contact with. I was really beaten down. I was—they put me in a big room by myself. I hadn't heard a sound the whole time I was there. I didn't even know if there's anymore Americans there. Everything was quiet. It was deathly quiet.

QT: 01;59;35;20

JOHN FER:

One night, and I'm pacing back and forth. And I measured the outside of this big room. And I walked a mile every day, barefooted, 'cause they didn't give me any sandals. I heard these voices out the back, out this big window. I thought to myself, "Those sound like American voices." I pushed a small chair, or a small table up against the back wall. There was one of those great big, barred windows on the back wall. And I climbed up there and the voice kept talking. I said, "Who's there? Who is that?" They all shut up, because underneath is where the guards patrolled.

QT: 02;00;15;08

JOHN FER:

They had a path between the wall and the cellblock. I said, "Who's there?" Sam comes back with a question, says, "Who are you?" I says, "I'm John Fer." He said, "Were you shot down?" And I thought that's kind of a crazy question. I said, "Yes." "When?" "Fourth of February." And then Sam comes back to me, I thought it another crazy question. He says, "This year?" I said, "Yeah." Sam had got shot down in 1965, so he's trying to put this thing in perspective. There's the first guy, within a month or so, he's ever talked to, that ya know, just arrived. He said, "Do you know the code?" And it was a tap

code. And I had seen it on the table, down in the interrogation room, when I very first showed up. I just snapped at it. I says, "Ah. Yes." He says, "Then, get on the wall."

QT: 02;01;13;05

JOHN FER:

So I went over to the wall. I picked up my bar of soap, and a rusty nail that I found on the floor, cause this place was dirty. I put my ear up against the wall and he goes, dah-di-di-dah-di. Dah-di-di-dah-di. And then out the window he says, "That's shave and a haircut. If you understand and you can tap and communicate, go, two bits." He says, "Let's try it. Dah-di-di-dah-di." And I went back, "Two bits." Shave and a haircut. Two bits. So I put my ear up against there. I had my bar of soap, and I had my nail. And he started very slowly, tapping to me, information. First question, besides biography stuff, shot down airplane, that stuff. First question after that.

QT: 02;02;00;19

JOHN FER:

How did SMU do in football last year? He was SMU graduate from Texas. And I at that time was following USC when I was outside, cause I went to USC for a few years, and the Air force academy. I didn't care about anybody else. And I thought, how am I gonna tell Sam that I'm not interested in SMU, so I tap back real slowly, I don't know, which was an honest answer. So that's how we got in chat. And then we go back to my original thesis that greatness is gonna come out of some of those guys. Sam, John. Bud Day became a lawyer that fought on our behalf and he plead cases before the Supreme Court. Not many people can do that. And then, we had Leo Thorsness, Medal of Honor, Bud Day, Medal of Honor. I mean, you know, the—Peterson was the ambassador to Vietnam, the first one. He was a congressman from Florida. So ya know, I mean, it's true. The crucible—the Vietnamese used to say, the Crucible of Fire. Well, that's true. That's how you develop character.

QT: 02;03;11;10

JOHN FER:

That's how you develop resilience, you know, stick-to-itiveness, which was my model airplane slogan. Stick-to-itiveness. Never quit building a model airplane. Just put it aside. Finish it up and fly it. If it crashes, so what. Buy

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another one and build another one. And so, that sort of thing. Everett Alvarez became the deputy administrator of Veterans Affairs. An attorney, great attorney. A lot of good things came out of those experiences by these guys, 'cause they were very special people. I mean here's a—For Everett—for instance, Everett, and John for the same way. John for his terrible, physical condition when he was captured. Doggone near died. Alvarez, first guy shot down, been there since 1964. Ni—never lost heart. Never lost his faith in his country, or his fellow POW's.

QT: 02;04;12;01

JOHN FER:

So you know, my point being, the reason we see what John and other's have done is because they have the resilience, the strength, the intestinal fortitude if you want to call it that, the guts to survive adversity and to rise above it all. And Robbie Reisner. General Reisner, who was brutally, brutally, brutally tortured, 'cause he appeared on the cover of Time Magazine during the air strikes against North Vietnam. One of my cellmates. One of my cellmates, one of my first cellmates, a naval officer said when—'cause he had communicated with Reisner, he said that Reisner told him, when they were communicating, the interrogator when they found out who he was say, "Ah. Reisner. We have been waiting for you."

QT: 02;05;11;10

JOHN FER:

And you know, ROTC instructor always said, before I went to the academy, "Don't get your face in the press at all. Name, picture, nothing, because if combat comes in and you get captured, they're gonna exploit you." And they beat Reisner badly. They beat badly. The one thing I remember that I carried away from that experience of talking to Reisner was that, if you get beat down and you're suffering pain, deprivation, you're alone by yourself. Bounce back and win the next round. And that was the story of his life in Hanoi. Bounce back and win the next round.

QT: 02;05;53;18

TITLE

The tap code

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QT: 02;05;57;15

JOHN FER:

I did a little bit of research on it after the fact, but when I got shot down, I didn't know anything about the tap code. But some of the guys, I think Smitty Harris, who came into the prison system, is the one who brought the tap code in. And it's a five letter by five-letter matrix. Okay? In the upper left corner of this matrix is the letter A. You go across the first row. A, B, C, D, and then E. And then you go down subsequent, horizontal rows, beginning with F, L, Q, V, and ending with the last letter Z in the right, lower corner of the last row of the last column.

QT: 02;06;54;07

JOHN FER:

So you have to—in the alphabet that we use in our language, well we got 26 letters. So you have to drop out some letter, such that you can have a five by five matrix, and tap words or abbreviations of words, when you want to communicate. What we dropped out was the letter K. Okay? We dropped out the letter K. And then, when I was in the interrogation room on my first day, and I looked on the top of that table, I saw written, in very precise letters, printing, all POW's learn this code. Didn't mean anything to me with that statement. Down below it, it had the five by five matrix of letters, as I described them to you. Off to the right, it had C equals K. Still didn't mean anything to me. Okay?

QT: 02;08;04;20

JOHN FER:

When I learned how to tap from Sam Johnson, that first tap from Sam Johnson that first month or so I was there, what I learned was that a c and k are interchangeable depending on the context of the message. Now let me give you a funny story which is true. When we had big shuffles from one camp to another or within the camp, the Vietnamese loved to keep us off balance, keep us in the dark. So they shuffled POW's around. You might have a different cellmate or roommates next month that you didn't have today, okay? And they shuffled around. Now, they usually kept the toughest guys isolated, okay?

QT: 02;08;57;10

JOHN FER:

Now, when I came down and I started communicating and I let people know I was faking my bad eyesight, and for the reasons, I moved into one of these rooms that was the result of a shuffle. I moved in with a naval officer, JB Bacanie, rest his soul, he's passed away. But JB came in and said to me, this was at the place we called the Zoo Annex. It's a separate part of the zoo itself, it was a brutal place. The annex not so bad. But anyway, JB came into the room. I started seeing the ranking officer and he said, "John" he said, "How are your eyes?" I said, "They're fine."

QT: 02;09;44;09

JOHN FER:

He said, "I got a message when I was over in the zoo that you're going blind. The message came over Fer faces blindness." I said, "No" I said, "Remember, c is interchangeable with k. What the message said Fer fakes blindness." So we all had a great laugh. So the bottom line to my point is that you can abbreviate and you could hyphenate and all that other stuff, you learned to do that when you tapped on the wall. But you had to be careful on how you selected your letters if you had an interchange of c's and k's and things like that. And—and so with the five by five matrix—with the five by five matrix, after I came home I did a little research on it and the origin of that from where I can determine, is what they call the Polybius square. Now, Polybius wrote that same matrix but he used Greek letters, okay? And it was with the use of lanterns in the night. Flashing lanterns in the night in a certain patterns, that he could, or the people that used this code, could transmit the messages.

QT: 02;11;16;00

JOHN FER:

Now Koestler, if I'm pronouncing his right—name right, Koestler, John mentions it in one of his books. Koestler wrote *Darkness At Noon*. It was about life in the Gulag in Soviet Union. They used the same type of tapping matrix by banging on pipes that connected the various cells. So it has a long, my point being it has a long history of use by people incarcerated. So when Smitty Harris brought it in, he taught to everybody, and whoever was in that interrogation room before me, wrote it on the table. All POW's were in, it could've very well could've been Smitty, I don't know. But all the people that came though that room and were tortured, and he brought that in and then

wrote it down on the, or somebody brought it in and wrote it on that table. So that's how I filed it away in my mind.

QT: 02;12;12;09

JOHN FER:

Now something you need to remember, too, when you're in an isolated condition—you're living in solitary confinement or even a small room, everything matters. Sometimes the antagonisms can grow out of proportion and you argue with guys or you have the disagreements but you always come back to a congenial level together and get along. 'Cause you can't exist in a small room in small confinements in an unhappy state. Because you're all there for a particular reason. And that is to resist exploitation by the Vietnamese communists. North Vietnamese communists, okay?

QT: 02;12;54;00

JOHN FER:

So when you communicate you gotta be open to passing messages and you gotta relay and use a common wall, I don't know whether you're familiar—if you put your ear up to that wall behind you there, and somebody is down there near the door on the same common wall, you can tap a message. And that'll be picked up by that person down there. And if you go on the inner wall of this room here, tap to somebody down there, if it's a connecting surface between the two of you, you can hear the messages that way. So we use the tap code first of all to communicate with the five by five and it has a long history.

QT: 02;13;41;07

JOHN FER:

You can also use the same basic five by five matrix and all this is a picture in your mind. All of these letters are pictures and you remember, the way you remember it is, when you're tapping on the wall or you're communicating with that code, a-f-l-q-v, a-f-l-q-v, while you're tapping, a-f-l-q-v, while you're listening, a-f-l-q-v, because a-f-l-q-v is the first letter of every horizontal row, okay? So you know after a is b, c, d, and e is the end of it but you picture all of this stuff in your mind but you keep your framework alive by remembering a-f-l-q-v, a-f-l-q-v. Ok? And of course z is the last one in the right corner.

QT: 02;14;25;00

JOHN FER:

Now, what you can also do is use a broom and sometimes POW's were taken out of their cell to wash or sweep the sidewalk. They would take these old bamboo brooms, they're made out of bamboo slivers and bound together. Very old ancient variety of broom. And you would sweep, sweep, sweep, sweep, sweep, sweep, sweep, sweep, and you'd send messages that way. You didn't have to worry about tapping on the wall to a restricted audience. You could tap it through the whole, or sweep it through the whole camp. I'll tell ya, in that camp, things were so quiet, so quiet because communication was severely punished so people did it surreptitiously.

QT: 02;15;16;14

JOHN FER:

I moved into a place called the snake pit when I was in solitary confinement again. And why they put me in the snake pit between two of the hardest core resistors I'll never know. They usually put you with people who were a little soft in the resistance regime and hoping that they would drag you down just a little bit, cause you to lose faith or whatever, okay. Make you easy to get along with. The hard core guys they kept separated. So when I moved into the snake pit, or the mint as we called it, the—ya know, all the cell blocks in the Hanoi Hilton were named after casinos in Las Vegas. I don't know whether you knew that, okay. So this was the mint, but some people called it the snake pit because it was way isolated from everybody else.

QT: 02;16;07;07

JOHN FER:

You walked in to a separate room which was totally isolated and then in that room there were three parallel solitary confinement cells, very, very small. Smaller than other solitary confinement cells and on my right was Jeremiah Denton, and on my left was Jim Mulligan. And I used to say we got three Catholics in a row here. These guys—these Vietnamese can't survive this. They'll never survive this. We got 'em where we want 'em. Those two guys were very, very, hard line tough resistors. Jerry shot down '65. Jim Mulligan shot down at '67, before I was. And they were communicators.

QT: 02;16;44;21

JOHN FER:

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I mean, they were communicators—they'd been tortured and beaten and abused for communicating, ya know, for years. And they put me between the two of 'em, well they weren't gonna soften me up because I got two of the toughest guys in the world. So we got along famously. One of the way we communicated was we talk under the door where there was a crack between the floor, the concrete floor and the door. My job mainly because I was a junior captain, I guess. Two navy guys, they're rank conscious, anyway, I would look to see if I could see a shadow under the crack of the door out near where a guard would try to come into the cell block and catch us communicating. They loved to catch you communicating. Cause that meant they'd throw you in leg irons or even worse, okay?

QT: 02;17;35;00

JOHN FER:

So I used to clear but I could also communicate and those two guys would talk to one another from the outer two cells. We'd communicate that way and then of course, if I saw a shadow coming I'd go boom boom. One great big boom on the side of the wall and that'd say shut up. Then Jerry and Jim would tap to each other on the common wall at the end of our cells. So they had a common wall. The cells were perpendicular and so they could communicate and if I wanted to listen to 'em, I could put my ear up there and I could hear what they were saying as well. And they could communicate down the whole length of the wall, which was the outside wall conducting all the rooms.

QT: 02;18;23;11

JOHN FER:

And you knew who was in that room, because you'd tap and you'd get the lineup. So and so's in this room, so and so's in that room. And as long as you had a common wall, you could send a message a long way. And you could use a nail. Sometimes your knuckle would get really raw from tapping on there, and that's what most guys used. But if you had a nail or a piece of wood, a hard piece of wood, you could tap on that wall and it would carry further, because it would echo further down that wall.

QT: 02;18;55;12

JOHN FER:

And a wall was only about a brick width in thickness, so you could communicate that way. But the basis of all of that stuff was the five by five

matrix of the Polybius code, I call it. And Smitty Harris brought it in, and you didn't—ya couldn't—ya didn't want to draw up notes, that's the obvious, that they knew where you would drop a note, they could check the cracks and any place that you went, say to clean the waste bucket, okay, you wouldn't want to leave a note in a place that was obvious. So the guards would come through, they always checked it. Guards always checked wherever they put POWs before, for instance to wash dishes, or to empty waste buckets. They'd always check it first to see if there was any communication evidence, and then you'd go in and do your stuff, then when you left they'd check again.

QT: 02;19;48;12

JOHN FER:

As an example, when I was in that great big room and I heard Sam talking, I established communication. After I'd been there about, oh, probably four weeks, they took me out for my first shave, and that's when I got a good idea what my eyes looked like. Because they gave me a piece of broken mirror and a sliver of soap. It wasn't even as good as ivory soap. And you know how crummy ivory soap is, it's not like Dove or it's not like all these other exotic soaps. But it was a piece of white soap, and I'm supposed to lather up with this thing. And I walk into this stall that's just about directly across this room I'm living in, and where Sam's living, and the rest of the guys, Smitty Harris. I walk into the stall, it's narrow, and at the end there's this concrete sink, and it's filled with water.

QT: 02;20;43;22

JOHN FER:

The guards already filled a spigot, he filled it up with water. He told me to bring my drinking cup, which is about 16 ounces. Ok? You've seen that, it's a green—green—you may have seen that, it's a green cup. I've got a picture of it, I'll show it to you later. But, in that packet there. But anyway, it was a gift from the North Koreans. It's one of those solidarity-type messages, you know, against the imperialist Americans and all that routine, whatever it is. But anyway, so I went into the cell. And I hacked through my beard, and by this time it's big, hacked through it and I cut myself, this that and the other—boy, there's no—this is no way to lead a life, ya know, blah blah, et cetera, et cetera and as far as—And I'm supposed to bathe. But with a 16-ounce cup, I mean I dip it and pour—you know, I did as best I could, I rinsed off a little bit and that sort of thing, my feet. And then I got a bright idea. I said, "You

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know? I haven't had contact with any of my crewmembers. I wonder if they're here."

QT: 02;21;46;11

JOHN FER:

I said, "The best way I can do that is I'll leave a message." So on the floor, just like everything else there, it's dirty, there's a piece of brick, red brick. So I took my red brick, piece of red brick, I wasn't even stealthy about the whole thing. I went over to the wall, and I wrote, Muggs. M-U-G-G-S, Muggs. Meaning J. Fred Muggs. I said, "Ah, if my navigator's here, or if that electronic warfare officer is here, Muggs was always on their flight crew, you know, fictitious. They'll know Fer's here, or maybe whoever else got shot down, is here. Because we came from the same environment, you know."

QT: 02;22;35;00

JOHN FER:

So I wrote it on there. Guard comes, opens the rickety old wooden door, takes me back to my big room where I'm living. I hadn't been—I'd just put my stuff down, I hadn't been there five minutes, and he comes back and swings open one of the big wooden doors, and goes like this. And he says, "Put on your long sleeve clothes," these are my Sunday go to meeting stuff, you know, the long magenta striped purple trousers and shirt. And he takes me over for an interview with the guy we call the Soft Soap Fairy. Soft Soap Fairy, extremely effeminate, chain smoker. He could be very mean, but he took me over and they said, "Fôt!" My name was "Foot" because you can't translate Fer into a Vietnamese word, so they made up a name for me, F-Ô-T, and there's a little carrot on the top, like a tent over the O, Fôt. Okay?

QT: 02;23;42;18

JOHN FER:

Now, a friend of mine, Barry Bridger, Barry Bridger, had a Vietnamese name, Cầu. Because Cầu in Vietnamese means bridge, okay? So his was transliterated, okay, mine couldn't so it's Fôt. So the fairy brings me in there and I'm standing there and he goes, "Fôt!" He says, "You were communicating," I said, "What? "You were communicating. With whom were you communicating?"

QT: 02;24;12;03

JOHN FER:

I said, "I don't understand." "You wrote Muggs on the wall." I said "Oh!" And I explained who J. Fred Muggs was, and that in my childhood, I sort of slipped it a little bit, I said, in my childhood, we all used to watch the East side Kids with Leo Gorsey and Hunts Haul and all those guys, the Bowery Boys. We used to watch it and Leo Gorsey's name was Muggsy McGennis. I say, "So we used to call each other 'Hey you, Muggsy! Hey Muggs! Muggs!'"

QT: 02;24;50;01

JOHN FER:

So I write down I said, "It's like Kilroy." I said, "It's just like Kilroy." I didn't use the word of it, but an explanation, like Kilroy was here in the second World War. You'd write it everywhere. I said, "I write Muggs all the time. We call each other Muggs." So the fairy looked at me and he said, "Okay." So I went back to my cell and nothing happened. Nothing happened. I don't know whether because of the new guy or the explanation was adequate or whatever. But my—I go back to my original lesson, pointing out that before I went in to the shower stall, the guard looked at everything.

QT: 02;25;26;11

JOHN FER:

He looked at the walls. And now as I remember, they were clean. I mean, there were no marks on it or anything like that. I went in and ol' smart aleck Fer, you know, he's going to communicate with his crew members, he writes Muggs on there and goes back to his room. The guard comes back in again and he get—and then he goes in and he says, "Hey Soft Soap Fairy," he says, "Fer wrote a communications note on the wall." And of course ya know, that's what it was and I—ya know, surreptitiously, so that's how I gave him that explanation. He bought off on it. But I learned that if you're going to communicate, don't use note drops and don't write on the wall or the floor or anything like that, like you're going to leave a message. And don't—guys at first, when they got shot down, they would scratch something on the underside of the plates or the waste bucket, under the lid of the waste bucket or under bottom of the waste bucket, which is about that tall. You know, and that sort of thing, trying to send a message.

QT: 02;26;24;15

JOHN FER:

There's a story that—I don't know if you want to include this—there's a story that somebody sent out a message that—Bob shoemaker I think, said, one time he scribbled on a waste bucket: "Welcome to the Hanoi Hilton." And something seemed to think that's how Hua Lo, which is the Vietnamese name for that prison got its name, Hanoi Hilton, he had—that Bob Shoemaker made it up. But anyway. Anyway. So long story short.

QT: 02;26;58;02

TITLE

A typical day in camp, staff positions, academic days and other ways the POWs kept busy

QT: 02;27;03;17

JOHN FER:

Probably, Skid Row has average days, but they were always kind of days that were short on much activity in the sense that you got out and mixed with other POWs. Ours was mostly talking out the cells through the bars to the guys down the way. Okay? 'Cause right in front of us was a wall. There was a wall separating the camp from—I think it was a big manor house or something like that. I could see a crest on this building. But you could only get a little bit of it, so you can't tell. But, a typical day would have been when we move back from there to what we call "Camp Unity."

QT: 02;27;58;15

JOHN FER:

And—and—and you know, if there's any sort of beauty, any sort of enhancement to existence in a relationship among the people that lived within it, it would have been when the 20 of us moved back in the same room. John, Leo Thorsness, myself, Bud Day. I think the late Moon Mullen was in there, naval officer. We all moved in there together. And that seemed to be a—that seemed to gel our relationships I think. It certainly did with John for me. And from this standpoint, the senior rank—Bud Day, the senior ranking officer established a military organization of a command structure at the top,

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ok. Then his staff positions would be the morale welfare and recreation officer, the health and hygiene officer, something like that, the supply officer.

QT: 02;29;11;12

JOHN FER:

Now McCain—now I don't remember—I don't remember if he had anything to do other than the chaplaincy. He was a chaplain, and also in charge of entertainment, as part of the morale welfare and entertainment, ok, and recreation I mean. He was entertainment. And Fridays and Saturdays—no, so Monday through Thursdays generally were academic days. I mean we had—we had—and the beauty of it is that we had experts in every single field you could name. I mean, Nelson(?) Tanner was an automotive expert. He could teach you how to rebuild an engine. Jack Rollins, a naval officer, he used to be a meat cutter, and so he'd take the big sheets of toilet paper before we tore them up and made them useful as toilet paper, and he'd fix them on the wall. He'd hang them on the wall, and he'd—with homemade ink, which was you're probably familiar.

QT: 02;30;16;15

JOHN FER:

Homemade ink is cigarette ashes and water. And if we had some sugar available, we'd mix sugar in there for a binder. And he'd draw pictures of cows, pigs, livestock that you would—and then he'd draw the various cuts of the meat. He'd give a class like that. Neals would do one. My old instructor at the Air Force Academy, believe it or not, talk about small world, was the aeronautics and aerodynamics instructor at the Air Force Academy. So he would teach lessons in aero and stuff like that. Ok. John, getting back to John, John would teach literature, and he'd tell movies and also occasionally geography too. And I would tell movies. We all had our favorites. Mine were always—my favorites were always the John Wayne movies, so I would talk about John Wayne movies.

QT: 02;31;12;14

JOHN FER:

But John had a vast scope of knowledge in that he'd talk about movies that were classics built on classic novels. He'd talk about Ring Lardner, he talked about another Broadway writer. He wrote Guys and Dolls. But anyway, he'd tell these various—these various stories about history, about entertainment

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and things like that. And the church services were the Sunday efforts on his part. He'd write a homily. He'd have scripture. I would do the same. As an example, what I would do being Catholic—and back in those days, we didn't read The Bible as avidly and as much as the Baptists did.

QT: 02;32;29;05

JOHN FER:

So, Jim Seahorn, old ocean bugle, the other chaplain, was Baptist. So what I would do, and I remember one very vividly, my Easter Sunday 1972 homily, was about the resurrection. And one day, one day God in His good time will roll away the stone in front of our burial here, as POWs and we'll go home. We'll be resurrected. I remember that very well, because I patterned it on there. But I said, "Seahorn," I said, "Jim, I can give the homilies, it's no problem. But I need some scriptural readings.

QT: 02;33;12;08

JOHN FER:

Give me an Old Testament reading, and I want a New Testament reading, too. Can you remember any of that?" And by gosh, he sure did. I copied it all down. He dictated, I copied it down. So I used my toilet paper with my homemade ink on it and all that and I read the scripture and then I gave my homily on the resurrection, and how one day we were going to rejoice about our own resurrection. But John's were probably better planned than mine were. Probably deeper in a theological sense. I think he had a good grasp. He had a good mind. He's got a good mind. And he was able to draw parallels and things like that.

QT: 02;34;02;03

TITLE

Christmas at the Hanoi Hilton

QT: 02;34;06;19

JOHN FER:

First of all, it was a big propaganda day for the Vietnamese. We had our special meal on Christmas. You'd get a leg and a turkey thigh. You'd get a salad of carrots and some greens, half of a beer; a Vietnamese beer, and you get some hard candy. And it was something else on the plate there. I don't know if it was potatoes or what it was, but anyway, you'd get their special meal.

QT: 02;34;38;11

JOHN FER:

That was their propaganda thing. And we—we'd—we would have a Secret Santa. We'd draw names, and we would then create a gift of something. It didn't have to be tangible, but it could be an expression of something due when we were all released, and then "I would give to you, or I'd make available to you." Could be one of the guys could say, "I'm going to cook you a homemade Italian meal." Ya know, if that was your choice. And you would do that. So we'd take the names and we'd draw the names, we'd draw names.

QT: 02;35;21;00

JOHN FER:

And then we would either give the gift, or we would announce to that person whose name we had what—what the gift was. Now, I became known as a cake baker. And what you did was, save up the instant Kool-Aid that some of the guys got in packages—Incidentally, I never got a package the whole time I was there. I think the reason was I refused to sign a propaganda statement saying, back in '68 when the peace talks were just starting to germinate, that due to the lenient and humane treatment of the Vietnam people, I am allowed to receive this package.

QT: 02;36;09;01

JOHN FER:

Well, Hayden Lockhart and I went out there individually, when we were confronted with that receipt and we just gave them the finger. I said, "Forget it. I'm not writing a propaganda receipt for you after all the misery that you've put me through here. It's not worth it." So they took the package back. I never saw it, actually. I've got the wrapper downstairs, incidentally, because it came back to my dad. He kept sending packages, but I never got any of them. And I—the same thing for mail. I only got four letters the whole time I

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was there and that was in the middle of 1970, ok? So a lot of other people were treated the same way.

QT:02;36;48;10

JOHN FER:

Ya know, betwixt and between. But anyway, in the packages, some people would get instant Kool-Aid. So, being a cake baker, I would ask them if I could have that instant Kool-Aid. And I would take the bread that we got for a certain meal, and anticipating when the celebration would be, I would take the insides out of the bread, the dough, add water to it, and then I would knead it together, and it'd be like cake dough, and lay it out on a piece of clean—I'd say toilet paper, but it was as good as we could get paper. Lay it out, and then I would take and add, if it was going to be colored dough, then add a colored bit of Kool-Aid and knead it in there.

QT: 02;37;42;02

JOHN FER:

And then smooth it out and smooth it out and make a homemade candle and stick it in there—use a piece of bamboo or something like that. If it was a birthday or something like that. And toward the end when we were getting some sugar in the room, with the Kool-Aid, I would mix that up with a little bit of water, and smear that on the top and make a frosting out of it. And, so, then we'd cut it up and we'd celebrate it. At Christmas time, I'd decorate it with something maybe a little patch of green if we had green Kool-Aid, something like that. Ya know, holly leaves or something like that. Red if you had—so you'd squirrel away all this stuff. You'd save it for a rainy day. And to make it sweet, to make it sweet, we receive saccharin tablets if you didn't have sugar. We had saccharin tablets. You'd—ya know, you'd dissolve those in water, and you can mix that in with the bread dough. But it was all from homemade ingredients.

QT: 02;38;47;15

TITLE

McCain and A Christmas Carol

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QT: 02;38;51;17

JOHN FER:

There was a time when he was—when he played Scrooge, during that—I don't know whether you're familiar with that or not, A Christmas Carol. But one season, amongst ourselves we put on A Christmas Carol and John was Scrooge and I was Bob Cratchet. Tiny Tim was the big, tall marine guy, Orson Swindle I told you about. Anyway, we went through this whole thing of Christmas. I think we focused on Christmas future. And Jackie Fellows was Tiny Tim and he took all his clothes off and just put a diaper on. So he was Tiny Tim. He's since passed away, but Fellows was Tiny Tim and John had pork-chop whiskers and I think we had some cotton available.

QT: 02;40;05;04

JOHN FER:

But, anyway, he played Scrooge and we come on the graveyard scene, we come on the graveyard scene where Christmas past or Christmas future is bringing John and showing him what the future's like. And, of course, John has got his bad leg and he's hobbling along and hobbling along, and he climbs up on the pedestal that we slept on, so everybody could see. It had to be raised up because it was the only place that we could perform this thing. And for the gravestone, for the gravestone, we had one of the waste buckets, okay? And the lid was on it as I recall. And Christmas future says, "Scrooge, this is what's going to happen to you. This is what's going to happen to you. I want you to take that lid, I want you to take that lid, and tell me what does it say?"

QT: 02;41;12;14

JOHN FER:

And he says, "Bowl." Instead of Scrooge. Bowl meaning bucket. Shit bucket. And everybody just cracked up and laughed and all that and, of course, McCain thought that was hilarious. But it's a—he had a sense of humor in that sense that he never got—I don't think I ever saw him roast in the whole time I was there.

QT: 02;41;36;00

TITLE

McCain as a POW

QT: 02;41;41;20

JOHN FER:

You know when we were at Skid Row was the time I would see him talk—I would see or hear him talk back. I don't, in my mind, I don't think there was a wrong—a long-running diatribe between him and the guards that I observed at Skid Row. Now, some of the times, I was on the other side of the cell block, so I didn't know what was going on where he was. So it could've been that he was giving him a ration of crap. I don't know. But I know when the guard came down and said, "No talk. No talk. No talk." John would give him a four-letter word or something like that, ya know, to scare him off. "F-off. Get out of—I'm going to talk. I don't care how loud it sounds to you. I'm going to talk. I'm going to communicate." And it was that sort of thing.

QT: 02;42;43;16

JOHN FER:

But I don't remember a long-running angry diatribe that he kept up with the guards. I'd see—occasionally, I could remember some of it, but not—in other words I think he was, to me, I think he was a good example. I think he was a good example of a naval officer, American, doing what was expected of him. And he'd get pushed into a corner and his fuse might be a little short some days, for whatever reason. We all had good days and bad days. And he would lash out, something like that. But I don't think I recall just a long-running feud during the time I lived with him at Skid Row.

QT: 02;43;43;23

JOHN FER:

Now, when we went in the big rooms, he was not the senior ranking officer and he didn't deal much directly because we were not supposed to break the chain of command. He didn't deal so directly with the interrogators or the guards. He might have come head-to-head with the interrogators when he was called out for what we called a quiz, something like that. But none of us ever knew what went on in a quiz room except that the person probably behaved honestly and honorably. And you know, didn't spill the beans and

our secrets and all that sort of stuff. But what he told them and how angry he was in the quiz room, was something I wasn't a witness to.

QT: 02;44;31;18

TITLE

Hanoi Hannah and POW humor

QT: 02;44;36;11

JOHN FER:

Hanoi Hannah was a nickname that—and I don't remember who, but somebody gave to the female broadcaster. Something akin to Tokyo Rose or Axis Sally in the Second World War. But there were actually—there were actually three commentators on the radio. One was Tu Lune. I remember this name. The other was Chi Mi and then there was some guy we nicknamed Captain Queer, ok? Because he had an exceptionally feminine sounding to his voice. And the women always dominated him. Two Lune and Chi MI.

QT: 02;45;24;14

JOHN FER:

I don't know if Rochelle's here, I ought to talk about the derogatory—you could put paper in your ears if you want to. I thought it was funny, one of the guys, and I'm not sure it was John, but he said, "Did you hear—did you hear about the wedding that took place among the broadcasters?" Pham Van Dong, he was the Prime Minister or the Premier. Premier Pham Van Dong. He was just below Ho Chi Minh. "Pham Van Dong married Chi Mi. Did you hear about that?" "No, no, no." "Yeah. And they had a child called Chew Mi Dong." Yeah.

QT: 02;46;27;02

JOHN FER:

It could've been John, I don't know, but when I heard it, I just, I feel on my side just aching laughing. But you see, my whole point in mentioning it is that guys never lost their sense of humor. They never let—and the—the Christmas Carol was another example with John, Beau. And I forgot to say the Christmas future says, "McCain." And he didn't call him Scrooge, it was

"McCain, you **(Expletive)** What does it say in that bucket or that gravestone?" And he says, "Bowl." And that's what—that was the funny part.

QT: 02;47;09;19

TITLE

Deciphering the propaganda broadcast, *The Voice of Vietnam*

QT: 02;47;14;00

JOHN FER:

So you know the speakers boxes—the speakers themselves were only about five inches or six inches in diameter. The sound sometimes was not really good. Lots of times there would be static, but most of the time you could hear. They were in a little box. And they would come on at six o'clock in the morning and a rebroadcast of the same thing at eight o'clock at night.

QT: 02;47;43;17

JOHN FER:

And they were—the propaganda broadcast on *The Voice of Vietnam*, that's what this was, *The Voice of Vietnam*, were aimed at the troops down South mostly. The Americans down South to discourage them, to shame them into—with anti-Americanism at home, things like that and a war demonstrations to quit fighting against the fraternal Vietnamese people so to speak.

QT: 02;48;09;13

JOHN FER:

You know, when these broadcasts would come up—and we would listen at eight o'clock even though it was a rebroadcast as well the six o'clock in the morning because maybe we missed something in the first broadcast. Maybe it was too noisy in the room or we didn't think we heard what we heard. So we'd always listen at eight o'clock as well. Whichever broadcasts they were; John McCain would always listen to them because he was a student of current events. A student of the war. A student of how the war was going from the propaganda viewpoint. When you listen to these broadcasts 8 out of 10 times so to speak you would pick up a tidbit that would give you an idea of what the truth really was.

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QT: 02;49;15;04

JOHN FER:

Now, as an example, not too long after Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, the Vietnamese made some, on *The Voice of Vietnam*, some backhanded comment about America may be able to land a man on the moon, but they'll never be able to defeat the Vietnamese people in this war. That sort of thing. So you picked up that if you were listening carefully you would pick that up. So because of these little tidbits that would often come up, John would listen to both broadcasts and when he went up in the neighborhood of the speaker, which was always way out of arm's length or arms reach. You couldn't touch it to tear it down out of anger you know, because it's propaganda.

QT: 02;50;10;04

JOHN FER:

It was always up out of arms reach near the ceiling. John would walk down in front of the speaker and he would cup his ears with his hands so that they acted like amplifiers so when the sound came in it would be dispersed by any peripheral noises or things like that. He would put his hands like this and he did that for every broadcast and he listened and he listened and he listened. He would always find something there that would help clarify a point or explain something or give him an idea so he could think about it and understand what was really taking place because if you did that you could figure it out.

QT: 02;50;55;21

JOHN FER:

Let me give you something. When I was living in the zoo. The Tet of the 31 of January, I think, of 1968. The Tet Offensive was launched by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. And right off the top they claimed these thousands and thousands and thousands of casualties that they caused for the South Vietnamese soldiers and the American soldiers and this and that. And they destroyed this many pieces of military equipment; they've devastated these strong points. Above all they caused all of these casualties.

QT: 02;51;39;16

JOHN FER:

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And I looked over at my cellmates in this room where in which we were living and I said "you know, that offensive is a failure. They have failed." The same thing, I'm a student of Chinese history, I find it fascinating. I said " The same claims were made by Chang Kai Sheck when he was getting the stuffing's kicked out of him by Mao Ze Dong and being driven to Taiwan." The same thing. So you're going to see as the days go on, you're going to see a revelation that the Tet Offensive was a failure and that they suffered; they suffered more than we did.

QT: 02;52;24;13

JOHN FER:

Well, we didn't learn the full extent of it until we came home, but that's exactly what happened. When I went through last year, 2016, in March of 2016, I went to the citadel part of my visit with the GIs from the down South war that came on the trip with us. Part of it was to visit the ancient city of What and one the marines that was in the battle of What took us to bridge and he showed us exactly what happened and how they repulsed the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong attacks.

QT: 02;53;01;23

JOHN FER:

Then we went into the citadel and I saw how difficult it was to get them out of the citadel, the communists out of the citadel. I asked the question, I said, "Why didn't you—why didn't you bring in air power? You could have selectively used air power." They said, "Oh no," the guide says, "it was too politically sensitive." because this was the ancient citadel, the ancient capital of Vietnam. I said well you underwent an awful lot of casualties because you didn't bring in, you know, air to ground cover and strafe and do that. Not bomb but you know, take out the targets.

QT: 02;53;39;16

JOHN FER:

But anyway, when that announcement was made about the Tet Offensive, I heard it on the radio and I told my cellmates, "Hey that thing was a failure. Read between the lines." If you look at Chinese history and I told them that the same thing was made by the Nationalists against Mao Ze Dong and they lost, they lost. The same—you're gonna find the same—and indeed, indeed,

the Tet Offensive was a failure. It was a failure and we survived the Khe Sanh too, which was about that same time.

QT: 02;54;09;21

TITLE

Meals

QT: 02;54;14;18

JOHN FER:

Average meal—average meal was—you mean the one with the rat in it or the one without the rat, the soup? Anyway, a little girl—little girl, who di—women did all the heavy lifting up there, the little girl came in and she would have two buckets—two buckets of soup. It could be potato soup, it could be—now this is seasonal, this is seasonal. So it could be potato soup, depending say in the winter time. It could be pumpkin soup. It could be what we call sewer greens, which is like going out here and mowing the grass and then you throw it in a big pot and you cook the daylight out of it and you serve it up. Throw a handful of salt in there and—and some guys called them bitter greens. I called them sewer greens.

QT: 02;55;04;01

JOHN FER:

I love potato soup because I would mash it all up and then I'd take my rice and throw my rice in there and or bread and throw it in there. I just loved to do that. I believe in the one plate meal. Anyway, my father used to tell us, it all goes to the same place anyway. But—or if you have pumpkin soup they'd take a machete and take their pumpkins and they just hack them into chunks, skins and all. They'd never put the stem in there but they would throw the rest of it in, put it in a big pot and boil the daylight out of it. And it always came out watery, but so what? Ya know, I was raised in a family—this—this is a key. I was raised in a family that had a mother and father who were raised or reared in the depression, the Great Depression.

QT: 02;55;51;11

JOHN FER:

And so when I sat down to eat a meal, which was always built from scratch. My mom—we never went out to eat dinner, ever. She would—she would cook from scratch; she would bake from scratch. If there was anything leftover she would put it in the refrigerator and we'd have it for the next few meals. But at that meal, I would finish every single morsel of food on my plate. We weren't—my dad would not let us get up from the table without—my brother hated peas, okay? He never left until that last pea was gone.

QT: 02;56;23;10

JOHN FER:

But I loved everything. I eat everything. When I got to Vietnam I loved everything. Nothing was abhorrent to me. Nothing. The dried sardine sized fish was very salty, not very tasty. I don't care its food, you know. You know, consume food for the health of your body and—and don't throw anything away. So, so that's the way I looked at it. So you had pumpkin soup, at the zoo. You had pumpkin soup, you had potato soup or you had sewer greens. And you could have bread sometimes. You could have bread sometimes. Most of the time it was rice, and then you'd have a side dish, a side dish maybe of fried bananas, little monkey bananas.

QT: 02;57;09;15

JOHN FER:

They're really delicious when they're fresh—sweet, very sweet. They're better than the ones we buy in our store here. But they're short and they're fat and they're very good. But they would take the bananas and they'd slice them, they'd cook them and fry them, put a little—maybe put curry powder on it. They would take canned meat sometimes, give you a dab of canned meat. It came from—I saw one can came from Bulgaria, so it's all imported. But they would scoop it out and drop it in there. And—and basically, that's—that's what they fed us. That's what they fed us. The—(Cross talk)

QT: 02;57;46;06

TITLE

Gastrointestinal issues and the waste bucket

QT: 02;57;50;19

JOHN FER:

Oh, the dysentery, I think—ya know, I had—the only time I had any effects with which even vaguely resembled dysentery, I never—I didn't have a fever; I didn't have—ya know, nothing that was collateral with that idea. But my bowels turned really watery during the first week I was there. Just, ya know, to give you an idea, when I sat down on that bucket, ya know, the rice went straight through me. The rice would come firing out of my rear end, and it sounded like buck shot hitting the side of that. There was so much gas and pressure built up internally, it would fire against that old metal bucket, which is sat on. You sat on the metal bucket.

QT: 02;58;39;01

JOHN FER:

You know, what your seat—later years somebody showed me how to improvise a seat. That was to take my rubber sandals off, which were nothing more than slices of the tread off of automobile or truck tires. They were cut in the shape of a foot, and then the straps to hold them on your feet were made out of inner tubes. So you take those off of your feet, and you'd carefully balance them on the lid, on the edge of the bucket, and then put yourself over it and sit down very carefully.

QT: 02;59;12;20

JOHN FER:

Never wanted to hit it wrong and knock it into the waste bucket. Because you know, for instance, you've got eight guys living there, and they're all contributing to the bucket's contents. But when I lived by myself, I hadn't discovered that great innovation yet. So I was just sitting there and I had the big red ring when I got up from the bucket. But the only thing I could say about the dysentery would be that was the closest. And I think that was the water, ya know, whatever.

QT: 02;59;42;21

TITLE

The smell of captivity

QT: 02;59;47;03

JOHN FER:

You know, there were no vehicles driving around, so I didn't get a sense of any exhaust smoke or—the smells. The smells, if I was to describe the smells, would be when the meals were being cooked and the smoke, the smell of the smoke. They used wood and charcoal balls, coal balls, to fuel their fires.

QT: 03;00;20;21

JOHN FER:

And you'd smell the smoke, but not—ya know, nothing that was really memorable in that sense. The food was rather a non-event in a sense that it was just to maintain survival. It seemed to me that there was always enough food for me. I was slight build. Now the bigger guys, they lost a lot of weight. Some of the heavier guys lost a lot of weight. And so they might have wanted more food.

QT: 03;01;05;11

TITLE

The waste bucket

QT: 03;01;09;17

JOHN FER:

Put the lid on it, and it sort of sealed it off. I don't have any memory of how bad that smelled.

QT: 03;01;19;10

JOHN FER:

Now, cleaning the bucket, you dumped it down the pipe. The only time I got into cleaning the bucket was when you'd haul it out in the morning. For instance, at the zoo with the annex. And in the zoo, we had one of these walk-up, squat-down toilets. I don't know if you've ever seen one with the

footprints that are made out of cement, and you sit there and squat, and you do your stuff through the hole. You just take the bucket out and dump it down the hole of that. When I lived at the old little Las Vegas, and the Hilton portion of the prison, the two of us would go out with the bucket and we'd dump it down a hole. And we'd put water in the spigot, swish it around and go like that.

QT: 03;02;17;23

JOHN FER:

And there'd be a bamboo broom there, but yeah, I don't know whether I— maybe I got desensitized to the smell or whatever it was, but as far as—now, at the zoo in 1968, I came down with a horrific case of—and you know, I don't know whether this would be dysentery or not, but I got up 30 times one night, when the lights were out too, because they had a power failure. Underneath my net, and I walked to the bucket, in the dark put my sandals on there and sat down and just squirted out nothing but water 30 times. But there was no smell, no odor, no—when I picked it up the next day to go dump it, I just dumped it down the hole. I—

QT: 03;03;18;09

TITLE

Sleep and exercise

QT: 03;03;22;10

JOHN FER:

I never had nightmares. Nothing disrupted my sleep. I exercised vigorously every single day except Sunday. And so when I finished up at the end of the day and it was time to go to bed, I slept soundly.

QT: 03;03;39;20

TITLE

McCain and exercise

QT: 03;03;43;14

JOHN FER:

He did, but he was very much limited because of his stiff leg. He'd try. He walked a lot. He always had that cigarette. He always had that cigarette in his fingers, too. But we'd walk a lot, back and forth, back and forth. I think he did mostly walking. Then he would do upper body exercises. His push-ups were really funny looking. I mean, he had that one stiff arm, you know. He was almost doing one-armed push-ups. But he worked on muscle tone. And I don't think I saw him run, per se. I saw him walk a lot though. Saw him walk a lot.

QT: 03;04;24;22

TITLE

McCain's treatment

QT: 03;04;28;21

JOHN FER:

Not when I lived—he was treated just like the rest of us did. Now, early on when he was first shot down, he got a lot of brutal treatment because they were trying to get him to cause embarrassment to not only the country, but to his family, his dad—being the CINCPAC, the commander-in-chief of Pacific.

QT: 03;04;51;02

JOHN FER:

See I didn't live with him then. He got shot down in October. So, I remember seeing the film. I think it was a French or a Japanese, I can't remember company, French did that interview with him. I remember it was just tragic, it'd bring tears to your eyes, "Tell my wife I love her." You know, that's all I remember. I think that's mainly what they played in the United States. Now they may have played something else that he said during the interview when he was shot down.

QT: 03;05;31;21

JOHN FER:

Yeah, I just saw it after I was released. I got shot down in February, he was in October. In fact, just this last Thursday was his 50th anniversary. What a great opportunity to celebrate, huh?

QT: 03;05;42;22

TITLE

Solitary confinement

QT: 03;05;47;06

JOHN FER:

Solitary—my solitary confinement was never in the dark. I was never locked up in pitch-blackness. It would get dark sometimes, when we had power failures in the camp, but it was not a darkness where my windows were blacked out, and there was no light whatsoever. Some guys did have that sort of an experience, but—talk about solitary confinement, maybe seven feet by four feet wide. Five paces back and forth between the bed board and the wall. I walked all the time, back and forth, back and forth. I'd review past experiences. Sometimes I'd dwell on the failures. I'd dwell on my failures, until I learned from other POW's that we all did it.

QT: 03;07;00;15

JOHN FER:

We all did it. We were caught in a situation where we looked at things through a dark lens. We were, first of all, disappointed in getting shot down. I mean, never gonna happen to me, but it did. Now you gotta cope with it, and your immediate thoughts are always changing. Mine were—mine were always tendered or colored by your failures in light, where you could have done better, where you could have measured up a lot better. And then, eventually I got over that, when I learned that other guys went through it.

QT: 03;07;32;08

JOHN FER:

Anyway, solitary, back and forth, pace about five paces back and forth. Turn around. Face the door and walk the other direction, back and forth, back and forth. I thought about plans for the future, what I was gonna do when I got out. I always kept—tried to keep an optimistic outlook. I thought about plans and building an A-frame house on a piece of property I had. I thought about my investments in the stock market. I had just started when I shot down. And

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I just reviewed those and talked about—thought about the dividends, how they'd accrue, things like that.

QT: 03;08;12;16

JOHN FER:

And when I got out, I never thought about how much money I was gonna have, because being a bachelor, all my money was being saved for me. My father saved all my money for me. But I didn't learn that until after I came home. But I knew it was going into the 10% savings plan. The government set up a 10% savings plan for us overseas, for your base pay. Your base pay would go into the bank and earn 10%. Okay? So I knew that was going on.

QT: 03;08;46;11

JOHN FER:

But as far as back and forth, I prayed a lot. I made myself a rosary out of a piece of rope. I use to count the mysteries on the knots, you know, back and forth. I had 10 knots on a piece of twine that I found in the courtyard, when I was out one day. I just occupied my day, just with those, and communicating, and communicating. Communicating was a big part of it. You could occupy—and then, for good information, was always a lift. That was always a lift. And then, you know, exercise took up part of the time. And then mealtime came, about 11 o'clock or so, 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock. And then you go take a nap, take your siesta. And from, I don't know, 11:30 to 2 o'clock was a siesta. It's a good way to pass your time in jail. You sleep it off, you know, it's gone.

QT: 03;09;49;21

TITLE

He always believed he'd be released

QT: 03;09;55;03

JOHN FER:

The night I got shot down, I was thinking that I'd be there no longer than the end of 1968, because as I was pacing back and forth between interrogations, I'd think, "You know, Lyndon Johnson's gonna do something to end this war,

before his re-election in 1968." The election of November of '68. "He is going to bring this war to a close, and I'll go home." I thought I would be there less than two years, or less, yeah, less than two years. Yeah.

QT: 03;10;34;11

TITLE

Mike Christian, the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance

QT: 03;10;39;00

JOHN FER:

I remember the story, because John—John wrote it, because John was living in the same room with Mike Christian. I lived with Mike Christian for a while, and was a very upbeat, happy guy, very, very hard-nosed resister. As far as the flag, I don't remember whether he had it with him when I lived in the same room or not, but John was—knew it first hand. He knew that firsthand, when he came back in the room after being beaten by that—you remember the picture of John Dramesi, who incidentally I understand, just passed away. John Dramesi was holding the American flag out the window of the bus?

QT: 03;11;48;02

JOHN FER:

I've got a picture of that in there too. John Dramesi made that flag and kept it hidden. He kept it hidden. And I don't know whether he displayed it, cause that's how Mike Christian got caught. They displayed it for the patriotic portion of their—I think of their Sunday worship service.

QT: 03;12;09;00

JOHN FER:

Yeah. We always started it, our church service with, briefly Pledge of a—if it was not an expanded service like John and I conducted, it would have been like it was in solitary confinement, when I first got there. Bump on the wall. Face to the east. Lords prayer. Maybe 23rd Psalm was a big favorite. Pledge of Allegiance, and then any other meditations or prayers that you wanted. Probably, he had the flag displayed, and they did the Pledge of Allegiance.

The guard saw it probably, and that's how it happened. But I don't—I wasn't in a room when that happened.

QT: 03;12;56;08

TITLE

The Christmas bombing of '72

QT: 03;13;01;10

JOHN FER:

Oh yeah. I was in the same room with McCain. We were living in the same room. What I remember leading up to it was—in May of 72, president Nixon resumed intensive bombing in the north. Okay? 'Cause I recall the North Vietnamese launched an offensive in the northern provinces. And President Nixon responded with heavy bombing. In May, when he started bombing—when he started bombing, the Vietnamese took the bulk of the prisoners that were living in unity, okay, Hua Lo, the other side of the actual Hilton in downtown Hanoi, took the bulk of those prisoners, and moved them up to the Chi—near the Chinese border. Virtually emptied the camp, and they left only a small number of us. I think about 13 of us, living in a room, along with the senior officers, who were scattered all over. And we lived in that small room.

QT: 03;14;39;09

JOHN FER:

All that time, after the group had left and gone up near the Chinese border, we started hearing on the radio, negotiations going on in Paris, and you know, the duplicitous leading American actions to prevent peace from coming and all that. As the year went on, and we approached September, we started hearing things on the Voice of Vietnam which led me to believe anyway that the war might end with a peace agreement because of what Kissinger was quoted as saying, okay, leading up to I think October when he said, "Peace is at hand."

QT: 03;15;36;07

JOHN FER:

Think it was October he said peace is at hand 'cause that was—and the North Vietnamese pooh-poohed that. They were very negative about it and indeed

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they turned their back and walked away. They pulled the rug out from underneath Henry Kissinger and he was very upset and so was the president because they thought they had an agreement to end the war.

QT: 03;15;57;18

JOHN FER:

And so time just sort of percolated along for a while. And then all of a sudden on the 18th of December, just the whole city of Hanoi and the whole sky just lit up with explosions and from then round-the-clock bombing and just triple-A and SAMs going off. Just guys were absolutely ecstatic and I thought the war's probably going to be over. This is it. This is the coup de grace. This is the big, the final blow. It's either do your stuff or get off the pot. And we saw the bombing all around the clock. The lights in the sky.

QT: 03;16;48;17

JOHN FER:

That saddest—the saddest night I ever saw in my entire life was when a B-52 was hit by a SAM and exploded and the remnants of it just came cascading down through the sky like a—I don't know if you've ever been to Yosemite National Park but they used to have a fire falls thing. They used to roll fire off the mountain and it used to be a fire fall they called it. But anyway that's what it reminded me of. It was just a tumbling mass of burning metal and you know, I thought about guys inside there dying. The next morning they let us out for exercise and strangely enough there wasn't any adverse action taken against the POWs.

QT: 03;17;44;04

JOHN FER:

Except for the fact that they did put guys with AK-47s standing in the windows, okay, just so in—I'm not sure all windows but certainly one window so they could keep an eye on the POWs in case this offense of air power was the start of a commando raid or a wholesale riot on our part or something like that. But they did put guards in the window. They were very agitated but they never took any—I never experienced seeing any action against us in retaliation.

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QT: 03;18;27;15

JOHN FER:

Oh, that—all the guys were excited. They said, “This is the end. It's going to end right now. The war is going to come to a close.” And then for Christmas they stopped the bombing in observance of the Christmas holidays and then boom resumed right after Christmas. They resumed it again, okay? By that time they had already blockaded the harbor.

QT: 03;18;51;05

JOHN FER:

Nixon had already not blockaded but mined the harbor and the waterways so they weren't getting the supplies they needed to replenish their SAMs and all the other ammunition and they couldn't get it over land because it'd have to come through China and they weren't exactly on great terms at that time, the Chinese and the Vietnamese. And so the bombing resumed then after Christmas and we were very upbeat.

QT: 03;19;21;14

JOHN FER:

We were very upbeat. Never—did not hear as many SAMs being fired as we had earlier. And then the announcement on the radio came that they were gonna sign, I think it was on the 24th of January, that they were going to sign the agreement to end the war. So this, the bombing went from the 11th to the 29th, 18 days. Wait a minute, that's not right. See 11 days with Christmas would have been—no, excuse me. The 18th to the 29th, that's what it was. The 18th to the 29th. And 11 days to Christmas, yeah. And so when that bombing was over, there was a real strange—a very strange silence and then the announcement on the radio that they were going to sign an agreement to end the war.

QT: 03;20;22;03

TITLE

The announcement that the war was ending

QT: 03;20;26;04

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JOHN FER:

Over the radio they said that we'll be—when they sign the agreement on the 27th of January of '73, that we have to be notified within five days. The agreement said we have to be—POWs have to be notified within five days that we're going to go home and then what process, okay? And we'll go home in the order of shoot down date. The earliest like Alvarez would go first and then the latter part the people who got shot down in '72, late '70 and maybe somebody in '73 if they got shot down then, they would go home. They would go home after that.

QT: 03;21;13;18

JOHN FER:

I was in the second, the second large group, the 4th of Mar—the 4th of March.

QT: 03;21;18;14

TITLE

Preparing for release

QT: 03;21;23;14

JOHN FER:

We had a kind of a think tank that the boss in the room wanted a few of us to join. So he appointed us to do some contingency planning. For instance, if a commando raid was staged, what were we going to do? If the Vietnamese came in here with their guns blazing, how were we going to survive some of that? And then in the process, my group started talking about release and I chimed in and I said to them, I said, you know if we're going to be released as military people, I want my flight suit back. I want to leave here as I came in dressed in my flight suit. Because years ago one of my cellmates told me that he had seen a storage room with all the flight suits hanging in them. An accumulation of flight suits taken from Americans.

QT: 03;22;30;11

JOHN FER:

And in fact there's one in the museum there in Hanoi I've got a picture of. But—so I told them, I said, I want to go home dressed in my flight suit, my military flight suit. And I said, if they will not give me my flight suit I think we

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should refuse. We will refuse to go home until they give us a uniform. Because my belief was that the military, the Department of Defense, could fly in the proper service uniforms for all the POWs. It wouldn't make any difference if it fit or did not fit.

QT: 03;23;11;03

JOHN FER:

Whether it was baggy or whatever. It was still a uniform because I don't want to leave here being accused of being a criminal or typed as a criminal. A war criminal. So, I didn't carry the day obviously because one of the guys, a senior guys in my little group said, "Listen, if we're going to go home, we're going to go home. We're not going to quibble over how we're dressed."

QT: 03;23;35;17

TITLE

Release of the POWs

QT: 03;23;40;18

JOHN FER:

So, within the five days of the signing on the 27th of January, we were formed up in the courtyard and the camp commander got up there. The Vietnamese camp commander said, okay, you're going to go home in three large groups in this sequence. The guys that were shot down like Alvarez, '64, and so forth will go home first. And then the next group will go home, the second group will go home on—it wasn't the 4th of March. They delayed me after the—the first group went home on the 12th of February. And then two weeks later I was supposed to be released in that large group. But it was held up because there were allegations by the North Vietnamese of treaty violations down south. And so they dilly-dallied around and finally got it settled, and released us on the 4th of March.

QT: 03;24;57;11

JOHN FER:

Now I was in my room in—John had moved out. John had moved out by that time because when they announced we were going to be released in three segments, then what the camp commander did was, he started parsing us out

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in different rooms according to our release dates. John was moved to a group that was going to be released after me. And so I was in my room that particular day that this rearrangement of POWs was going to take place. And a guard came in, an officer actually, came in and said, "We're going to have a release of a special group of people for Henry Kissinger. There are going to be 20 people." He started calling off the names of the people in my room that were going to be released. Boy man, these guys were up and off like a shot.

QT: 03;26;12;09

JOHN FER:

They were off like a shot. They left the 18th of February. The first group was released on the 12th. Then the 18th was the 20 that were released for Kissinger. I think I explained to you that they picked the 20, Kissinger refused to pick the 20. He said, "I want our POWs to go home in accordance with the day they were shot down". The longest held first, and then of course the most recent. What happened was, when he said that, they still went through with this announcement that they were going to release a special group on the occasion of Henry Kissinger's visit to Hanoi. They picked the 20 people. Then after they went on the 18th, then we went home on March the 4th. That was about 106 guys in my group.

QT: 03;27;18;07

TITLE

Order of release and the clothes they wore out

QT: 03;27;22;07

JOHN FER:

John was in another room by that time. He was going to be released after us. But what they gave to us when we moved to these specified rooms that were associated with a release date, they gave us the clothes. They gave us a duffel bag, which I said, "I don't want." I said, "I've been here. I know what goes on. I don't want to take any souvenirs home." So a lot of guys took their cup, they took their toothbrush, and they took things home with them. I said, "I don't need anything to remind me of this."

QT: 03;28;02;00

JOHN FER:

So I left the duffel bag and I got a pair of nondescript clothes, which I still have hanging in the closet here if later on you want to look at them. They were just foreign made or Vietnamese made clothing. Slacks, shirt, and a jacket, pointy toed shoes, that sort of thing. I wasn't happy with it, but that's what we got and that's what we were supposed to wear out. Interestingly enough, Jim Perry who was the naval officer in charge of that group of 20 people, when he saw the makeup of those POWs being released as not being consistent with when they were shot down, in other words some late shoot downs were going home before early shoot downs, he says, "I refused to take these guys out." Right down from the top the word came to him, "Shut your mouth. Take your other 19 guys and get on that airplane. You're not going to turn this apple cart upside down now. We worked to negotiate." and it's right. It's correct. It's what should have been done.

QT: 03;29;22;14

TITLE

Going home and the devastation from the Christmas bombing

QT: 03;29;17;11

JOHN FER:

Nobody cheered until the airplane actually lifted off the ground and the landing gear was retracted. Everybody else was just talking quietly. Just talking quietly. I knew we were going to go home. I didn't have any ominous feelings. But some guys said, "I'm not going to believe it until it actually happens." I mean—they'd been there for such a long time. They were skeptical about that. I didn't have any. After the bombing, we drove—when we drove to the airport on that beat up old bus, you can't believe the devastation that our B-52s and other airplanes reaped on those targets. It's—the bus—

QT: 03;30;17;15

JOHN FER:

The—the bridge we, the [Domber] bridge which was a target which we drove across was nothing but—really, nothing but wooden planks. We were riding

on wooden planks, it was so beat up. Alongside I noticed railroad cars, just burned out hulks. It really, it was obvious that Nixon and Kissinger were very serious about bringing that thing to an end right then, and they did. And they did bring an end. They opened up the gates of hell so to speak. In a sense they showed them what total war was like.

QT: 03;30;59;23

TITLE

Landing back in the States

QT: 03;31;04;20

JOHN FER:

Oh, it was a great feeling. Landed at Clark. I started crying. And you know why? It was because the whole route primarily was lined with children. Primarily with children. These kids had every conceivable type of sign, homemade, all of them homemade, "Welcome home", "We love you", all that sort. Some of them had favorite POWs that, they had been wearing the bracelets and all that sort of stuff. And I'll never forget, and this is when I really broke down. We were driving down the road and we were getting ready to turn. We slowed down getting ready in the big, we call them Blue Goose. The big blue buses. We turned around and started heading to the hospital. Some kid threw through the window a religious medallion on a chain, a Catholic medallion. That just did it. I just fell apart. I thought, "This is incredible." I get kind of emotional when I think of it right now.

QT: 03;32;15;22

JOHN FER:

But these kids, they didn't have an ax to grind. They weren't anti-this. They were only pro-POWs and all that stuff. They just let it all out. They let it all out. We got into the hospital and I was walking down the hall to go to my room. Coming down the other direction was the only female that I knew existed as a POW up north, and that was Monica Schwinn, the German nurse. I think she was a German nurse working on behalf of an agency to help the South Vietnamese people. She had big dark circles under her eyes. She wasn't very tall, she wasn't a very big woman. But she walked down the other way.

QT: 03;33;11;00

TITLE

POW health issues

QT: 03;33;15;10

JOHN FER:

And then I've got a little anecdote I'll tell you. I got into the—first thing I had to do is, one of my cell mates for years and years kept telling me, "We've all got worms." I said, "No. I don't have worms." "We've all got worms." I mean, my rear end didn't itch. I didn't have any signs of it when I went to the bathroom. One of my roommates passed two worms that big. That big. Big black things. They were about that big around, three-eighths of an inch in diameter. Yeah, it's just—I mean, I wondered why he was so skinny. It was because the worms were eating all his food. But I never had any problem.

QT: 03;33;52;18

JOHN FER:

My appetite was always good. Never had a scratchy rear end. When I went to the bathroom I never saw any pinworms. "Yeah, we've all got worms." I said, "Phil, no. We don't have worms. I don't have worms." So I go to the nurse and she said, "I want a stool sample." I said, "Okay, okay." So she hands me, are you familiar with Foster's Old Fashioned? You know what 31 Flavors Ice Cream does? They give you a cup and you can put ice cream in a paper cup. You familiar with that?

QT: 03;34;33;02

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Sort of.

QT: 03;34;33;15

JOHN FER:

Yeah, yeah you're too young. Anyway, Foster's Old Fashioned freeze was, it's very soft-serve thing. Anyway, that's what I grew up with anyway. But it's a cup about that big around. "I want a stool sample." I said, "Okay. All right." So

she gives me this cup and a lid to put on it. And She says, "Okay, I want you to bring it back to the nurses station." I said, "Okay." So, I go get a stool sample and put the lid on it and I gave it to the nurses station and went back to my room. I've been up for almost 36 hours now. I hadn't slept. And so I go back and sit in my room and pretty soon I heard this call over the PA system. "Captain Fer, report to the nurses station at X, Y or Z." I said, "I wonder what they want?" Anyway, I got up and I walked down, and I've got my robe on. The same clothes I had when I saw in that picture there. That nondescript prison stuff.

QT: 03;35;38;06

JOHN FER:

So I walked down there. And there's the old, grumpy major, female major nurse standing there. And she's looking at me; she's got this cup in her hand. She says, "Captain, what's the meaning of this?" And so far I don't know what's going on. And she reaches and she pulls the lid off. And one of my POW buddies had taken that brown lump of excrement and his shaving cream and made a swirl on the top of it like it was a chocolate sundae. I said, "I have no idea!" She said, "Don't kid me!" I said, "You asked me for a sample and I gave the nurse a sample. I have no idea." "Well go get another one!" So she took that thing and dumped it in the hazardous waste I guess and gave me another cup and I got through that one. Boy that was—I will never forget that. It was absolutely hilarious.

QT: 03;36;37;19

JOHN FER:

Nobody ever fessed up to it. And they did find pinworms. They did find pinworms, yeah, yeah.

QT: 03;36;44;04

TITLE

The American response to the return of the POWs

QT: 03;36;49;22

JOHN FER:

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I was overwhelmed by the attention. Overwhelmed by the attention. And I was invited by my old elementary schools, by junior high school to come back and talk with them. So many of them had written letters for me because I was-- you know I talked to you about my dad being well known in town. San Pedro, or "Pedro" as we call it, a port of Los Angeles, is only at that time was only about 40,000 people. It was small, knew everybody. Virtually only had one high-school besides the Catholic high school, they had one public high school, one middle school or junior high school but anyway—and I graduated from both of them. But anyway, so I was invited to the schools to come back and talk. And some of my friends were now school principals and so they had an inside track on how to get a hold of me.

QT: 03;37;56;23

JOHN FER:

And my brother had been holding the fort at home answering all the letter on my behalf while I was a POW and all that sort of thing. My folks had been going to these different briefings that were put on by the Air Force and so I was wired into this whole homecoming thing. And so, I was just blown away by the attention. Churches, I spoke at I don't know how many churches, and schools, and service clubs, Kiwanis, the Lions Club, all of these people that had supported us. And I felt obligated. I really felt obligated. I felt that I had to do it to say thanks.

QT: 03;38;41;16

JOHN FER:

And then on the seventh of April my hometown had a "Welcome Home John Fer" thing. I mean, this was big time stuff. My dad being on the fire department they sent a helicopter down and they picked me up down at the police station. I was in my uniform. They flew me to my hold football field at the high school. We landed there. The pom-pom girls are lining the way and they're waving their pom-poms and all that stuff. And the stands where I used to run track and play football were jammed. They were jammed. And I walked down there and the mayor of Los Angeles was there. The assembly men that represented us in legislature were there. The congressman wasn't there but he sent a representative. And all these high-rollers, all these high rollers were there on the stand, and my mom and dad and me. Okay?

QT: 03;39;36;18

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JOHN FER:

And so, we had this big, big welcome home. At the end, the Chamber of Commerce who put this thing on had printed up certificates, had certificates of thanks to these people for supporting me while I was a POW. So the idea was, and we did it, was for me to stand there after I made my thank you speech and all that, was the stand at the head of the reception line, and all the people who had my bracelet, who had worn my bracelet come down through the reception line. And as they either returned the bracelet or said, "Welcome home" and all that, I would give them a certificate that I had signed, "Thank you."

QT: 03;40;19;16

JOHN FER:

So we did that and, well I don't know, a couple of hours they all passed through the line. And then, that night they had a big dinner at the church auditorium that was jammed. And all my athletic coaches, track and football, and gymnastics and the rest of them, were the bartenders. They tended the bar. The local Croatian restaurant owner who made wonderful food, he catered this thing. And we sat up on the stage with my mom and dad and other representatives and that sort of stuff and that's where they gave me a television set and any other surplus funds that were left over from selling the tickets, the Chamber of Commerce gave to me. So that was the welcome home. And I kept talking, I kept talking until I went off command a staff college.

QT: 03;41;15;17

TITLE

The anti-war movement and the effect on returning servicemen

QT: 03;41;21;17

JOHN FER:

I knew before I got shot down that there was the anti-war feeling and all that sort of stuff. But I didn't know the extent of the abuse that was imposed on the GIs that came home from South Vietnam or Laos or those that fought in Cambodia as opposed to what I enjoyed. We had, because of all the attention

that had built up, built up, built up, built up through the media, through the politics, through the grassroots had grown up and then culminated with Operation Homecoming.

QT: 03;42;00;21

JOHN FER:

All of that was just absolutely mind-boggling but what I didn't know was the extent of abuse that the other soldiers down south, and sailors, Marines experienced when they came home. How they were ridiculed, and how they were called "baby-killers" and all that sort of stuff. And a lot of it was because of that Lieutenant Calley massacre thing. A lot of things that John Kerry said in his testimony about the Vietnam Veterans against the war. All of that built up such that we were—and this still bothers me and I've recently written about it, but we were put in a special category of adulation so to speak. And then the guys, some of the 500, what 545 thousand whatever fought down south got none of it. They got none of it. They got the short end of the stick on everything.

QT: 03;43;09;15

JOHN FER:

And eventually a lot of them suffered from the Agent Orange. A lot of them had mental problems, drug and alcohol abuse, substance abuse. Now we had some that had family problems as POWs that were divorced by their wives in absentia, but they had some of that down south. They had as I say, substance abuse. They had a spiritual disconnect, which I think is a real serious thing, in that they gave up on their faith in what's good, some of them did anyway, ya know, about the goodness of life. And they were told that the cause they fought for was ignoble rather than noble. It was a downbeat. They were looked at negatively. And here we were on this side looked at as some sort of heroes. And like Charlie Plum says in his book, "I'm no hero." I don't think any former POW will ever say he was a hero.

QT: 03;44;17;07

TITLE

Reuniting with McCain in the States

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QT: 03;44;23;13

JOHN FER:

I saw him in October, I think it was October of '73, when we were released. When I went to his house in, I don't know whether it was Arlington, or Alexandria, or whether it was in D.C.

QT: 03;44;48;08

TEDDY KUNHARDT:

Alexandria.

QT: 03;44;49;06

JOHN FER:

It's Alexandria? Okay. Nancy and I were in town for the Navy, Air Force, football game. And he said, If I remember right, he says, "It's probably sacrilegious," he said, "but, I'm gonna invite you Air Force guys to this barbecue and we're gonna burn some steaks together." So, Nancy and I went over, with some of the other guys, and we went to his apartment where he Carol played really gracious hosts. I don't think I saw the kids, little Sydney, I'd heard so much about little Sydney, and the boys, so much when talking with him, in Vietnam. I think they were with a babysitter, but I'm not sure. But, anyway, we went in there and I'm telling you the place was chaotic. There were former POWs. I'll bet ya Gamboa was—Frank Gamboa was there. This place was just covered with Navy, Air Force guys, and the Marine side, a couple of guys there, the whole thing.

QT: 03;46;00;10

JOHN FER:

And, I went out in the kitchen, I says, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm trying,"—What was he trying? "I'm trying to burn some steaks." Or "cook some steaks." I've forgotten what he said. He jabs one of them and he throws it on the grill, and cooked up the meat and we had side dishes and all that stuff. So, really a great opportunity. That was when I saw him, when I came home. The reason I didn't see him at a hospital, is because, being Navy, I think he went to Bethesda, but I'm not sure. I think he went to Bethesda, and I was out in the west coast at March Air Force Base hospital.

QT: 03;46;37;00

TITLE

Nixon's celebration dinner for the POWs and later POW reunions

QT: 03;46;41;12

JOHN FER:

In fact, I was in line—when we went through the reception, that day, we walked across the stage and I remember him coming across, he's on crutches. I remember him going across. I think he went across before me, and then, I had a card of thanks, I wanted to give the president. This is funny, I didn't realize all these things took place at that time. But, I got my card, I walked up and I'm about to shake hands with President Nixon and, I had my card. I said, "Mister President, I'd like to," and his aide, a Secret Service guy, reached over and grabbed the envelope out of my hand and he says, "I'll give that to the president. So, I shook hands with him, and all that stuff. It was really nice, it was very, very nice. I have an anecdote, and I have a picture in there, it shows me with President Nixon, with Nancy and I.

QT: 03;47;36;13

JOHN FER:

In 1978, John put together the 5th anniversary of our release, at the western white house. Out in San Clemente. Nancy and I flew from Colorado, cause I was at the academy at the time, as an air officer commander. Anyway, we flew in there, and we flew into Clemente. We took the bus ride down from the, I think it was, the Marriot out in L.A. all the way down to San Clemente. We was standing in line, one of the guys behind me—one of the guys behind me gave me a camera and said, "Will you take the picture of me and my wife when we come up to the president?" Okay. And, of course, I had my camera too, so, he comes up and, in the meantime I'm taking pictures of other people as well, as they come through.

QT: 03;48;37;08

JOHN FER:

Okay. And then this guy comes up and I take his picture and I give him the camera. And then, Nancy comes up, she's in line next, and I have my camera, and I said, "Mr. President. Can I get a picture of you and my wife Nancy?" I

click it off, he says, "Your wife?" He says, "Well who were all those other women you were taking a picture of?" I said, "Oh, they're just friends." "They're just friends." But I've got that picture there where he's asking me that question. It's really funny. But, anyway, yeah, I saw him in '78. And then, I saw him one time at a—we had a reunion in Washington, D.C. not to long after that. And then, I don't know whether I told you this story, but, I was at the Pentagon at the time. Probably about 1979 I think, or '80.

QT: 03;49;23;17

JOHN FER:

And I used to ride the shuttle back and forth from Pentagon to the house or the senate office building. This particular time, I was going to the senate office building, because I had to do some work for the Air Force academy. I was their guy in charge of the office, in the Pentagon for the academy out in Colorado. So, I always had to explain to the senator why their son was guilty of an honor violation—either, constituent was guilty of an honor violation, and was gonna resign. But, anyway, I was over there waiting for my shuttle bus and I see this guy, who looks familiar, coming out of one of the senate exits, to a little mini hatch back car parked there by the curb.

QT: 03;50;10;16

JOHN FER:

And he comes around and he starts loading groceries in the back of this hatch back. I said, "John, what are you doing?" He looks over, and he's still loading them in there, and he says, "Ah, senator Tower and I are going to China, and if you've ever eaten that Chinese food over there, it's terrible stuff. And he doesn't like it and he wants to bring our own food over there. So, we're bringing our food, so we're loading it up like that." And, he slammed it shut and he drove off wherever he was gonna go. But I—unfortunately haven't been able to see him as often as I want to see him. But, when I have, it's been interesting. Been very interesting.

QT: 03;50;47;19

TITLE

The normalization of relations with Vietnam and MIAs

QT: 03;50;53;11

JOHN FER:

You know what I wasn't happy about? About diplomatic relations, we establish them with people on a basis of diplomatic diplomacy and protocols and things like that. Sometimes it's advantageous to do it, because it's a first step to greater things. What I wasn't happy about, was that we didn't hold over the North Vietnamese heads, the fullest possible accounting of our P.O.W.s, that were missing. I mean our Airmen, and soldiers that were still missing in action, unaccounted for.

QT: 03;51;39;16

JOHN FER:

And I'll tell you why. When I worked in the pentagon, as the principle advisor for POW and MIA affairs, to Caspar Weinberger, for instance. Okay, I was in international security affairs. We made a special trip to Hanoi, we made a special trip, with a stack, as I recall about 26 dossiers of people, men who had yet to be accounted for, that we had heard on the ground talking on their radio, or known to have ejected from their airplane and got out successfully, okay, but, nothing more.

QT: 03;52;22;01

JOHN FER:

What happened to em? So, I went with Rich Armitage, who was the deputy assistant secretary of defense, at that time, my boss. We went, and we sat down across from the Vietnamese, I had the state department guy with me, Joint Chiefs of Staff guy, then there was the linguist, who translated. We handed them this stack of 26s, and Armitage communicated back and forth. First, very cleverly, after he let the translator do the interpreting, very cleverly put his hand over on the translator's wrist, as if to say, "I'll take it from here." And he spoke in fluent Vietnamese to the ranking guy on that group of men sitting across the table, he goes, "We want an accounting of these people here."

QT: 03;53;17;22

JOHN FER:

I wish we had—now this was in the 80s, I wish we had followed up on that with the normalization of relations between us and the Vietnamese. The

headline that I have downstairs, If I remember correctly, was 'Clinton Puts Trade First.' It didn't say anything about accounting for the missing in action, accounting for the guys that we knew were alive, but didn't come home. That sort of thing. That's what disappointed me about the normalization. I would like to have said, "Yeah, we'll normalize, but I want help in accounting for those guys." You know, my three-crew members, who finally came home, 1967, the first remains came home in '77. The next one, just three years ago. The last two guys, three years ago. Took that long? Ah, baloney, they weren't trying.

QT: 03;54;39;07

TITLE

Connecting Trump's comments on POWs with Bush supporter comments in 2000

QT: 03;54;46;05

JOHN FER:

I would like to think that the president's opposition research went back and they looked at all the comments that were made about John when he was running for the republican nomination against George Bush. I happened to be in South Carolina and stuffed campaign fliers for him, in the neighborhood. Okay. In the Sumter Daily Item, he was higher than a Master Sergeant, in the Army, who was a military advisor on Admiral Moore's committee, which was advising George Bush, George W., okay? For the campaign on military affairs, that guy made a public statement to a reporter, which was printed in the newspaper that John McCain's not qualified to be a president.

QT: 03;56;02;12

JOHN FER:

"After all," he said, "anybody can fly around up there and get shot down." Now, I'd like to think that what Trump did, was he told his ops research guys to go back and start looking at things like this, because that's almost exactly verbatim, what he said about John McCain getting shot down.

QT: 03;56;21;13

JOHN FER:

It's grossly unfair! It's grossly untrue. And I wrote a letter to the editor, which I still have, saying that, that Army guy did a gross disrespect toward every single former P.O.W. in any war whatsoever. I got good response from it, but I wrote in defense of him, because of that. But, that Army guy who should've known better, said anybody could fly around up there and get shot down. It's the same thing—when I saw what—Trump said that, I thought, "Hey, what's going on, what the hell is going on here? Are we just reading the old mail?" "That's all we got?" I'm going to give you another anecdote. 2003, I guess it was. Remember the book I showed you that John autographed for me?

QT: 03;57;13;23

JOHN FER:

Worth Fighting For, I brought my cousin, and my brother to Borders. We get in line. We're working our way up through the line and I'm getting close to the table where John's sitting. About 30 feet away a head pops up, behind the stack of books, the new books that Borders is got for sale there. This lady says, "Senator McCain, I understand you're the Manchurian candidate!" And John finishes a sentence that he's writing. He looks up, and he says, "That's right lady! I am!" She shriveled into nothing. Cause nobody argued, nobody did anything. So, I'm next up there.

QT: 03;58;01;03

JOHN FER:

I go up there, I'm the next one in line, I got my brother and my cousin, who's told only two books, he's got two armloads of John's books, and he's standing there like this, and he looks up and says, "John, my friend!" So, to Mark, he says, "Mark, take em in the back room, buy em a coke, do something. Take him in the back room." So, we went in the back room and sat there and chatted, chatted, chatted, then John showed up when he got done. I thought that was classic. I mean, just like water off his back. Okay, just like water of the duck's back. My mother always used to say, "Yes them to death, and they'll go away." That's what that lady did, nobody argued with her, just agree with her, then she goes.

END TC:

QT: 03;58;42;17