

## Former POW Says He's "One of the Luckiest of the Unlucky"

By Rudi Williams  
American Forces Press Service

FORT BELVOIR, Va. -- Norman A. McDaniel, 62, calls himself, "One of the luckiest of the unlucky."

His bad luck was being shot down over North Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war for nearly seven years. McDaniel was flying his 51st mission in an EB-66C electronic reconnaissance aircraft when he was shot down July 20, 1966, about 30,000 feet in the air some 30 miles northwest of Hanoi.

"If it had been a direct hit, I wouldn't be speaking with you now," McDaniel said in his office at the Defense Systems Management College at Fort Belvoir, Va., where he is a professor of systems acquisition management. "The missile detonated close to the airplane and some of the fragments punctured the fuel tanks."

As McDaniel's parachute glided to the ground, he saw flames and smoke gushing out of the aircraft as it zoomed toward the ground and crashed in a ball of flames.

"As I neared the ground, I heard something go, 'Zing! Zing! Zing!'" McDaniel said. "I looked up and saw rips being torn in the canopy of my chute by bullets being fired by Vietnamese from the ground. I landed on a grassy knoll with nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. They converged on me from all directions, so I was captured in less than a minute after hitting the ground. He suffered burns from head to toe on his left side, a flesh wound on the neck and a sprained left ankle.

His North Vietnamese captors used hard interrogation techniques. "They'd drag you out, beat you, slap you, kick you, then throw you back onto the concrete slab in the dark cell," he said. "You'd lie there, not knowing if it's day or night, and doze off. You might think you were sleeping for two or three hours when you only slept for 20 minutes. Then they'd drag you back for another round of torture and interrogation."

Sometimes the interrogators would tie his wrists and ankles tight enough to restrict blood flow and induce swelling and excruciating pain. Sometimes they'd tie his hands and feet together behind his back, then slip a meat hook into the knots and hang him in the air. Other times, he said, they'd beat him with rubber straps and punch and kick him mercilessly.

"It got to the point where you didn't know if you could make it through the next moment," McDaniel said. "There were times when the torture was so tough, so severe, that I felt like throwing up my hands and saying, 'It's just not worth it.' Sometimes I'd say, 'Men, women die every day, so let it go!'"

But then he would tell himself prisoners have been tortured in every war. "If some of them survived, I can, too," he said, and he would promise himself, "I've got to get back to my family."

The North Vietnamese tried to torture prisoners into revealing biographical, military and propaganda information. "They even tried to play the race card with me," McDaniel said. "They'd say, you're a black man, we're colored people and the United States is waging a war of genocide against colored people.

"They knew enough about the Black Panthers, officers being fragged by enlisted people in South Vietnam and the friction between black and white GIs in Europe to throw them in my face saying, 'You must agree with us, help us,' he said. "They wanted me to make propaganda appearances."

He would anger his captors by countering their remarks and arguing his point. "When I did that, I'd get slapped around, kicked around," McDaniel said. "They called me an Uncle Tom, lackey and all that, but I wasn't about to betray my oath or be disloyal to my country."

The torture was horrible, and so was the food, McDaniel noted. The prisoners thought the North Vietnamese went out of their way to find the worst garbage they could and feed it to them. Only after peace negotiations got under way in 1969 did the prisoners learn the North Vietnamese themselves were not faring much better.

"They fed us old cod-type fish with scales and heads and something we called swamp weeds because they grew them in the wet marsh area," McDaniel said. "We were given two meals a day. You'd get a small bowl with about an inch and a half of rice, a smaller bowl of watery swamp soup or some kind of greens or bamboo shoots. Sometimes you'd get what they called a side dish, a little bit of pork fat or a smattering of chopped up chicken with the bones. I never saw bread for the first 10 months I was there.

"Sometimes the food tasted terrible, almost made you puke to smell it and eat it. But my philosophy was, 'If it's going to help me stay alive, I'll eat it,'" McDaniel noted. Some prisoners died from dysentery and beri-beri because they couldn't stomach the foul food, he said.

"When I was shot down, I weighed about 155 pounds. I went down to about 115, which wasn't bad," he said. "Some of the guys dropped from 190, 200 pounds down to 110, 115 pounds. That's the way it was until Ho Chi Minh died in September 1969. After that, our treatment improved. By the time we were released in 1973, my weight was back up to normal.

McDaniel said there wasn't any yelling "hurray" or any other excitement when the prisoners were told they were to be released.

"Just a few grunts, a few coughs, because we didn't believe it," he said. "When it finally did happen on Feb. 12, 1973, we were bused out of the prison camp to the airport, and boarded a C-141 medical evacuation airplane to fly to the Philippines."

McDaniel said he felt no exhilaration about finally going home, just awareness. "We had to control ourselves in the prison camps to the point that I'd lost touch with my emotions," he said. "I knew things were happening, but I didn't feel them."

He said prisoners learned to conceal their emotions because showing anger, hostility, toughness or meanness was an invitation to torture by the North Vietnamese. "They'd beat you and just wear you down," he said. "When we got to the Philippines, I learned that my father and younger sister had died in 1968. I heard it, but didn't feel it.

"It was about three or four months later that those feelings began to come back and I cried over the loss of my father and sister," he noted.

Readjustment and trying to rekindle his life with his wife and then eight-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son was tougher than the incarceration itself, McDaniel said.

"For the incarceration, you're there, you're a warrior, a military man, you have an oath to keep, a job to do -- remain true and faithful to your country," the retired Air Force colonel said. "Do your job, hang in there, and stay true and loyal to your fellow prisoners. You live or die. You resist the enemy. You return with honor. That was it. Pretty simple."

There are myriad choices when a former POW returns home: Stay in the military or get out? Stay married? A lot of military men and women who have been separated from their families for seven months find it tough to get back together, McDaniel said. A forced seven-year separation presents many more challenges, he noted.

He calls his wife, Jean, 59, "a super troop" for keeping him alive in their children's minds during his captivity. But, he said, when he tried to correct his son and daughter, they didn't want to hear it. His son

adjusted in about five months, but his daughter rebelled for years.

For example, when his daughter was 14, she wanted to do something and he told her he had the right to say no because he's her father. "She just looked at me very defiantly and sincerely and said, 'I don't have a father!'" McDaniel said. "With other children having their fathers around, evidently she had gotten her mind fixed on, 'I don't have a father.'" It took another five years before he and his daughter, Crystal, now 34, began to share a father-daughter relationship.

"It has improved over the years and now we're the best of friends," he said. Crystal was married to Warren Clark in October 1997, and her wedding has been aired on the TV Learning Channel's "Wedding Story" since March 1998. His son, Christopher, 37, is an Air Force major stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, as a civil engineer.

McDaniel said a lot of people thought the former POWs were going to be vegetables and would become wards of the state. "A few of us had problems, physiological and otherwise, and a few still do, but the majority of us have done quite well," he noted. "Those who had close family ties adjusted better than those who didn't."

Growing up with eight siblings in a sharecropping family on the outskirts of Fayetteville, N.C., McDaniel knew his parents couldn't afford to send him and the others to college. He planned to join the military to earn GI Bill benefits, but a couple of his teachers encouraged him instead to go directly into college.

"They felt I should stay in school because if I got out, I might not go back in," McDaniel said. After graduating as valedictorian from Armstrong High School in Cumberland County, N.C., the teachers helped him get a job at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University to work his way through college. He graduated cum laude in 1959 and was a distinguished military graduate of the Air Force ROTC program.

Armed with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, McDaniel went on active duty as an Air Force second lieutenant in June 1955 and planned to get out after a three- or four-year hitch. He decided that if he stayed for 10 years, he'd stay for the other 10 years to retire.

"When I hit the halfway point, I was sitting in prison in North Vietnam, so I didn't have much choice," the former POW said.

After returning home from captivity, he went on to earn a master's degree in systems management at the Florida Institute of Technology in 1975 through the Air Force Institute of Technology program. He was a distinguished graduate.

McDaniel said he feels an obligation to share his experiences with others. He established a business in Fort Washington, Md., called Motivation Assistance Corp., which provides motivational speakers and workshops on motivation, self-esteem, goal setting and personal and organizational improvement.

McDaniel, "the luckiest of the unlucky," said he hopes no one will ever again be subjected to the kind of POW experiences he endured. But, he said, "if a person's values, priorities, commitment, and faith are right and strong, that person could endure as I did."



Norman A. McDaniel, a retired Air Force colonel, calls himself "one of the luckiest of the unlucky" because he survived a missile attack on his aircraft, a hail of enemy small- arms ground fire and nearly seven years of torment in the "Hanoi Hilton," a prisoner of war camp. Photo by Rudi Williams.