

Congressman Recalls Years as Prisoner in North Vietnam

By Rudi Williams
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20, 2002 -- About 10 days after being shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese in April 1966, Sam Johnson's captors blindfolded him, put him on trial, accused him of being a criminal and sentenced him to death.

They marched him out into the woods and put him in front of a five-man firing squad. As he prayed harder than he ever had before in his life, Johnson said, the North Vietnamese officer told the firing squad to shoot.

"They all went Click! Click! Chick! Click! Click!" said Johnson, now a congressman from Texas. He was the keynote speaker at the Pentagon's POW/MIA Recognition Day ceremony on Sept. 20. "I praised the Lord and laughed at them, and they kicked me into a slit trench and left me there for a while."

That was the beginning of nearly seven years of hell in a prisoner of war camp for the Dallas native. He was shot down over North Vietnam during his 25th combat mission on April 16, 1966, and not released until Feb. 12, 1973. Forty-two months of that time was spent in solitary confinement.

Johnson was shot down during his second tour of duty in the Vietnam War. His first tour was in 1965, when he worked at MACV headquarters in Saigon where he helped set up the first B-52 strikes. The former Thunderbirds flight demonstration team pilot and director of the Air Force Fighter Weapons School returned to Southeast Asia in 1966 and flew F-4 Phantom combat missions with the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing in Thailand.

Johnson had flown 62 combat missions in F-86s during the Korean War and recalled scoring one MiG fighter kill, one probable and one damaged. Though he took his share of enemy gunfire and flak, he emerged from the war unscathed. He wasn't so lucky over North Vietnam.

"When I was captured I had a broken right arm, dislocated left shoulder and a broken back," the 72-year-old congressman said. "They took me to a house, kicked the people out and put me in there with two guards. They took another house over for my back seater, Larry Chesley. He lives in Tucson, Ariz." Johnson used to be right-handed but is left-handed now, he said, because his right arm never totally healed -- his captors kept breaking it.

"Some of the guards made like they were doctors and put my arm in a cast," he said. A couple of days later, people beat them with sticks and stones as they walked through a town headed to trucks bound for Hanoi.

"One of the guards got mad at me and threw me up against the front of the truck and broke my arm again," he said. Once the prisoners were on the truck, two guards separated them so they couldn't talk to each other.

In Hanoi, he spent about a week in a room by himself with little food and water. "Every day, they came in with a table and tried to get military information out of you," Johnson said. "Fortunately, they never knew I was running the fighter weapons school and had flown all those planes and fired all those weapons. They never found out. Thank God.

"They broke my arm again," he said. "They just took it and twisted it all the way around to the

front. I guess that makes three times. It hurt so much that I really didn't care what I did. So I didn't say anything. They spent a week doing that without food or water. They did bring a glass of water when they came in to interrogate you.

"I didn't tell them much, and after about a week they gave up," Johnson noted. "A different group came in and said, 'We're going to let you go to your room,' which was a jail cell in the Hanoi 'New Guy Village,' we called it. There were two other guys there when I went in." Johnson said the prisoners were fed mostly pumpkin soup.

"They used to pull grass out of the river and boil it and feed it to us," he recalled. "Rice was a staple that they fed us on occasion. They didn't mess that up. Fortunately I never lost my appetite for rice, even back here."

The six-foot, two-inch former POW said he weighed about 195 pounds when he was captured and went down to about 120. "When I was released, I weighed about 150 because they fed us better and bumped our weight back up," he said.

Johnson said he coped with the ill treatment because the Air Force trained him well. "Of course, they can't prepare you for what you're actually going to encounter with an enemy like that," he noted. "I just praised the Lord that I was able to talk to him. I feel like without God on my side, I would have never made it."

The whole ordeal was bad, but some days were worse than others, the congressman said. "Eleven of us were moved to a place we called 'Alcatraz' and they put us in leg irons for two and a half years," he said. "We were all by ourselves in separate cells and getting out, at the most, five minutes a day just to get food and bring it back in -- if you want to call it food."

But those really weren't the worst times, Johnson said. He said they were in deep trouble one time when a prisoner hit a guard.

"They put me in leg stocks for 72 days," he said. "I was completely alone. There were no other Americans around I could even tap on the wall to. There were just bugs, spiders, flies, mosquitoes and me.

"Seventy-two days in leg stocks is no fun," he continued. "I knew the Lord was with me because on the 72nd day, a typhoon came through and blew the covers off the windows. That very day they came in and took me out of those stocks and said 'We're going to take you to interrogation.' I couldn't walk, so two guards carried me over and stuck me on a stool and this officer said, 'Now we're going to kill you!'

"I said, yeah, yeah, be my guest," he said. "After that, it kind of eased off a little bit. Ho Chi Minh's death caused a change in their policy. It changed from bad to not quite so bad for a while. Then, finally, ... we knew release was imminent. You could tell by the food they started feeding us -- sugar and stuff like that."

Asked if he ever suffered flashbacks, Johnson said, "People tell me that we were not normal when we got back. I accused them of being wrong for a long time. But looking back on it, I think it took about a year to assimilate back into society -- for some of the guys, more than that.

"You learn a lot about yourself and how to survive in a POW camp," the congressman said. "Fortunately, we were able to communicate a little bit by tapping on the wall using a special tap code. So you knew other Americans were around, even though you didn't see them.

"I committed, originally, about 374 names to memory just from tapping on the wall. We were all trying to memorize names in case anybody got out. So you knew the names, but you didn't

have any idea of what they looked like. Most of the time, you never saw another American, except occasionally through a crack in a door."

He said knowing other Americans were there "gave you a backbone, and you knew you weren't there by yourself, even though I was by myself."

He said he thought of his family all the time and hoped they were all right. "My wife didn't know for two and a half years that I was anything but MIA -- missing in action," said Johnson. "Finally they told her that I was a POW. Even then she didn't get any correspondence. Nor did they let me write to her for about four years."

Johnson said he always felt he'd see his wife, Shirley, and children again. The Johnsons today have three children, 10 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

But back then, he said, there were guys who'd given up hope. The other prisoners had a hard time keeping them pumped up.

"We said our government would never leave us there, although the Vietnamese tried to persuade us of that every day," Johnson said. "That's why I've been fighting ever since I've been in Congress as part of the POW/MIA commission to make sure we never leave anybody behind."