

Remarks of U.S. Congressman Sam Johnson
National POW/MIA Recognition Day
September 20, 2002

Introduction by the Honorable Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense.

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Thank you so much. It's always a pleasure to be here at the Pentagon with our armed services and such a great Secretary of Defense. Don't you all agree? Applause.

Tell you what - it's about time we had an Iraq attack, don't you think?

We fly this POW flag on more than one day. This is the day for the POW/MIA Memorial. But it's also flown by congressional mandate on Flag Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day and Veterans' Day. That means that we are thanking our armed services for the job they are and will be doing for this nation to keep it free. And I thank each of these service men. I'm just awed when I'm in front them. They need a hand, too, don't you think? Applause.

You know, I was a POW in Vietnam, but those guys in World War II had it hard too - especially those in the Pacific Theater with Japan.

The Korea POWs had a hard time. You know it was cold over there and they were mistreated and we didn't quite know how to handle them when they got back.

I remember when I got back - along with some of my comrades who are here today - we were well treated, taken care of, and it was a precise operation that made us feel proud when they put us back in society.

Some guys said "You know, something was wrong with you when you get back. Wasn't it?" I would tell them "No. I don't think so." Looking back on it, it took me about a year to assimilate - learn how to drive in the traffic in Washington and other places.

You know, now I'm on the U.S./Russia Joint Commission on POWs and MIAs. Since 1992, we've been trying to find out about our Missing In Action. World War II amazed me. I couldn't believe there were 78,000 MIAs from World War II and a large number from Korea and again from Vietnam. And we didn't get the cooperation from the other countries, which were presumably our allies at the time. Or even our enemies, which are now allies. So we need to make sure any future conflagration we have cooperation from our allies and from the other countries.

Right now, you have got a guy named Scott Speicher who we don't know about. He could be dead; he could be alive. But we're not getting confirmation or help from Iraq, are we? Again, you heard what I said earlier. I won't say that again. Mr. Secretary, my staff cringed when I said that.

But I'm here to tell you that the United States Congress is ready to pass a resolution for the President of the United States so he can do what's right and so that we can protect freedom, not just for this nation, but for the whole world. We're going to do that next week in the House of Representatives.

Let me just tell you a couple of stories that happened to me while I was a POW because I think they are insightful.

One, when I was first shot down, I landed right in the middle of a whole division of North Vietnamese troops. My back-seater and I both got out and we were captured immediately.

We were doing 650 knots, by the way, on the deck with napalm. And the parachute opening shock was so intense that it took my helmet and gloves right off.

After about five or six or seven days in captivity, they put a blindfold on me and took me to a room that looked like a trial, a jury trial here in town.

So help me, they tried me. I was tied to a chair and they tried me.

And when they were done, talking through an interpreter, they told me, "we're going to kill you."

So they blindfolded me and took me out the woods. When they took the blindfold off, I was standing in front of a slit trench and looking at five Vietnamese with AK-47 rifles.

They pulled the clips out of their belts, jammed them into the rifles, charged their guns and pointed them at me.

You know my mother made me go to church, but I had never been close to God. At that point, I was praying harder than I had ever prayed in my whole life. And I did talk to God.

And guess what? When he yelled fire, the guns went click, click, click, click, click.

And to the point that I was relieved and praised the Lord, I started laughing at them. Bad move. Laughter. They kicked me into the slit trench behind me and left me there for a while.

That was one incident.

Another one was later when I happened to be living with a guy named Jim Stockdale. You all may know him or know the name.

He couldn't walk because he had a busted leg. Of course my arm was busted in a couple of places. And new guys were getting shot down every day. He was the ranking guy and said let's talk to them. Those of you who are POWs know that the first few days are the worst because you never know what they're going to do to you; you're always wondering.

Well, Jim would clear under the door for guards - because if they caught you, they'd punish you - and I would climb on the bed and talk to these guys down the back. I'd tell them that there are other Americans here. Here's how to act. Here's what you can expect.

Well, the Vietnamese didn't like that at all. And if they caught you, then they would punish you. They couldn't catch us because everyone was helping us guard.

So one night, this guard and some officer came charging down the hall and popped the door open. I barely got off the bed and Stockdale barely got off the floor and this little guy walks in with second lieutenant rank on and Jim goes BANG - decked him.

Right then I thought, man we're in trouble now...and we were.

They took him to torture, serious torture, and they put me in a room by myself on the end in leg stocks. If you all know what the old pilgrims had, they put your legs in these cut outs, put the iron bar down. And they left me there for 72 days.

When I got back the docs said it's OK to eat bugs because they've got protein and that's what we did.

Nonetheless, after being in leg stocks for 72 days, a typhoon came through and blew the cover off the window.

You know, for the first time in 72 days, I saw the sunrise, the trees; it was God in all His glory.

I want to tell you -- until you've had your freedom denied, only then do you realize what we have in this great country of ours.

It is ours to protect.

It is ours to defend. Applause.

These guys back here are the people doing it for us - along with the Secretary of Defense and the Chief of Staff. Applause.

My wife went about 2 ½ years, like Secretary Rumsfeld said, without knowing [if I was dead or alive] and she didn't give up. Freedom is something we can't give up. Now I don't care who threatens it - here or anywhere in the world.

We need to be vigilant and stop it in its tracks. That's what President Bush is doing today. He put the United Nations on the spot and said "Get after it or get out of the way," and I love it! And we're going to help him.

You know there was an inscription on the wall when we left the prison camps. Some of you who are ex-POWs know it. I'd like to cite that and close.

Freedom has a taste to those who fight, and almost die, that the protected will never know.

God bless America and God bless you all. I salute you.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Congressman Sam Johnson
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