

POW recalls moments of torture and 'live and let live'

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When Al Brunstrom, a prisoner of war for about seven years during the Vietnam War, visited the "Return with Honor" POW display at the Ocala-Marion County Library, he pointed out a former roommate at POW camp "Little Vegas" and also a cruel guard known only as "Spot" because of a birth mark on his chin.



Alan Youngblood/Star-Banner
 Vietnam veteran Al Brunstrom visits the POW display at the Marion County Public Library in Ocala on Wednesday.

"There's a picture of Ed Davis. He was one of my roommates. And there's one of the (North Vietnamese) guard we called Spot," said Brunstrom, 84, of Ocklawaha.

Brunstrom, a native of Michigan, is a U.S. Air Force veteran who served from 1948 to 1978, including in the Berlin Airlift. He was 35-years-old when he was shot down April 22, 1966, while doing a reconnaissance mission in his RF-101 Voodoo aircraft near Langson, near the China border. He was set to go home in just a month.

"I landed in a rice paddy. I undid my (parachute) riser straps and was undoing the buckle at my chest and it was all over," he said about his capture.

Brunstrom was held captive until Feb. 12, 1973.

Brunstrom stopped Wednesday at the library with his wife, Helen, to look over display items in three large glass cases, which include pajamas issued to American POWs, cups that served for food and washing, and cigarette pack wrappers that served as notepads.

The display, which will be place all month, is on exhibit courtesy of Ron Montgomery, director of the POW section of the Navy Lakehurst Heritage Museum, a privately owned facility on the grounds of the U.S. Navy base at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Montgomery, 67, is a dual resident of the Lakehurst area and Oak Run in Ocala. He served in the Navy from 1969 to 1977. He said he took an in interest in saving the artifacts as a reminder and to raise awareness of the sacrifice of Vietnam War-era POWs.

"My dad brought back World War II souvenirs. I wanted to document my era and pass it on," said Montgomery, whose son, Sean, is serving the U.S. Marine Corps.

Montgomery said he obtained most of the artifacts from NAM-POWS National Archivist Lee Humiston, who operates a POW museum in South Portland, Maine, and continues to work closely with him.

The NAM-POWs Corporation is a nonprofit 501c (19) veterans organization chartered by the State of Arizona in 1973.

"I plan to take the display now at the library to areas like The Villages, Largo and Merritt Island. I'd like to find a permanent place to display these items and perhaps others from Lee in Florida," Montgomery said.

He said he has met about 50 former Vietnam War POWs, most pilots, most of whom are now in their 70s.

Montgomery pointed out three packs of "bad tasting" cigarettes supplied by the North Vietnamese to the POWs.

"The POWs would open up the wrappers and write on them. One POW wrote the rules of the New York Stock Exchange on one and other wrote sheet music on it. The POWs had a 'tap code' and a hand sign language," Montgomery said. "The POWs did things to keep their sanity."

The display includes many pictures, including one that depicts the entrance to the "Hanoi Hilton" POW prison, and a piece of tile from the building.

"I remember walking through that door," Brunstrom said.

Brunstrom described a typical day for a prisoner of war as getting up, having a meal of "boiled rice and French bread," and a bath. He said the experience was filled with hours of boredom punctuated by moments of terror.

"I was tortured about six or eight times," he said.

He said one method of torture was tying the arms of a POW and pinning them behind their back, possibly cracking bones in the chest.

One guard, called "The Rat" by POWs, told Brunstrom it was "his year, the Year of the Rat."

Brunstrom said if the enemy wanted information, torture would follow; otherwise it was "live and let live."

Brunstrom called POW Doug Hegdahl, whose picture is in the display, "a hero."

Montgomery said Hegdahl was a young Navy seaman who went overboard and was picked up by the North Vietnamese. He wore thick glasses and was evidently considered a low risk by the enemy, yet he "put sand in the gas tanks of (numerous) trucks at the camp" and memorized the names of 300 POWs, which became valuable information when he was debriefed.

Brunstrom recounted a failed POW rescue attempt in 1970 at Son Tay. He was airlifted home about three years later. He met Helen at Travis Air Force Base on Valentine's Day in 1973. In May of that year, a reception for the POWs was held at the White House by President Richard Nixon. The event was hosted by Bob Hope. On Jan. 21 the library will screen a free viewing of filmed event.

“There are no bad memories, just memories,” said Brunstrom, who returned to Vietnam in 2000 and said he found the people to be “friendly.”

Helen Brunstrom said her husband, whom she married in 1959, had a hard-working farm upbringing, which helped him through the POW ordeal. She waited more than four years for confirmation that he was in fact being held and only received 11 letters over the seven years.

The couple’s grandson, Lance Freeberg, their daughter Kathy Freeberg’s son, is an Army Med-Vac Blackhawk helicopter pilot. Al Brunstorm, twice a recipient of the Purple Heart Award, Silver Star, Bronze Star and multiple awards of the Distinguish Flying Cross, recently pinned on his grandson’s pilot’s wings.

Marion County Veteran’s Service Officer Jeffrey Askew said POWs are examples of “honor, courage and commitment to their country, who took it to the very end.”

Kevin and Elizabeth Healy of Ocala, who were viewing the display, called the service of the POWs depicted in the exhibit as “amazing.”

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