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Pure Torture

By Tom Moe

I was hiding under a log. Doing my best to masquerade as North Vietnam terrain, I'd pulled branches on top of me, smeared mud on my face, and arranged leaves and other foliage to stick out of my clothes. I was 20 miles behind enemy lines, having parachuted out of my F-4C fighter aircraft when a weapon malfunction blew it, along with my wingman, to bits. So far my terrain act was working; a group of North Vietnamese soldiers had passed, unaware of my presence, within six feet of me.

I'd heard on my survival radio that two other pilots had been rescued on the day of our mishap. Now, after three days in the cold and rainy jungle, I knew planes were on their way for me. It looked like a question of who would find me first.

I was eventually betrayed by a small hole in my camouflage through which I poked my radio antenna. Within seconds a zillion rifles were pointed straight at my head. Thus began a month-long, 100-mile journey to the "Hanoi Hilton" to begin my five years as a prisoner of war -- where I would get to know pain on a personal basis.

North Vietnamese policy was that POWs were war criminals, a policy that supposedly justified brutal treatment and total control. That control was reflected by a list of regulations posted in each cell. Rule number one was the catchall: "Criminals will strictly follow all regulations or be severely punished."

The scenario was quite simple. An interrogator would tell you to do something, like give out military information. When, predictably, you would refuse, you were told you had violated the regulations and had to be punished. The word "punish" still evokes in me a slight feeling of nausea since it meant, at the very least, beatings that would last several days and nights. Punishment ultimately meant torture, and to torture was to extract submissiveness. I found you could be tortured for accusing them of using torture.

Torture is methodically applied pain to produce a wearing effect -- to make you submit. Usually the pain would reach a level just short of stopping vital functions, although it could continue even after one lost consciousness.

Its preliminary stages could start with something as simple as being sat on a stool, dressed in long pajamas (in summer) or just shorts (in the winter). The summer jungle air was suffocating; the damp, cold winter air was penetrating. After a while, you became a lump of huddled misery, sitting in the heat or biting cold. During a single session I sat on a stool in the same position 24 hours a day for 10 straight days.

Sometimes the guards would tie you to the stool with your wrists strapped to your ankles, but usually you were left untied and told not to move, only being allowed to get up to visit the putrid waste bucket in the corner. And the guards were always nearby. If you moved a muscle, they'd pummel you with their fists and gun

butts until they tired. I don't remember sleeping during these periods -- just pain and the interminable passage of time.

After I spent days being worn down, interrogators would enter the scene, curiously almost a welcome break from "stool time." Tired and numb, many of us prisoners at first would give name, rank, and serial number -- like you see in the movies. But this is fool's play and contrary to our military training, because this open belligerency would earn some pretty tough knocks. To survive you had to get your mind going and overcome the tendency to react with your emotions. You had to fight through the haze of fatigue to recall the specialized training, and it worked. Although the interrogations and torture rarely lightened up, with the resistance techniques we were taught we were able to avoid giving any useful or classified information.

I was fortunate because, as a young lieutenant fresh out of pilot training on my first assignment, I didn't know anything of real worth. The senior officers were really under the gun. If the enemy wanted something and knew you knew it, they would stop at nothing to get it. Thus we were trained to be clever, an actor, under stress.

What I was not prepared for were the effects of solitary confinement. For the first nine months of my captivity, and sporadically later, I didn't see, hear or talk to another American. Although physical pain was inflicted on me deliberately and effectively, I would discover what an incredible burden mental pain would add to my suffering, how a dark fog slowly could creep over my consciousness, trying to rob me of my remaining power of reasoning. I saw that the mind could convince life itself to slip away through the beckoning black hole that pain created. I learned how vital it was to keep the mind as sharp as possible.

This was necessary to get through interrogations and also for survival. If you didn't keep your mind clear, the "V," as we called the North Vietnamese, would crush you through a steady dose of pain that eroded mind and body like a vicious chemical.

The body is first to give up. You cannot keep yourself from passing out, throwing up, screaming. I discovered that the more the body convulsed involuntarily, the more I could observe it as though it belonged to someone else. I found I could intellectualize pain, which allowed me to take a quantum leap in my tolerance of it. Sometimes, though, the problem was staying in touch with reality enough to keep alive. Detaching oneself too much has an insidious narcotic effect that invades one's reason and dulls normal danger signals. This is probably the way nature helps us die without being all tensed up.

I walked a psychic tightrope between too much pain and too much mental retreat from reality. That meant fighting back against the siren lure of pain-free death. Sometimes I knew I needed to feel pain. Pain could keep my senses sharp, my contact with reality stronger. I recalled the saying, "Pain purifies." This may not be entirely sensible, but it was curiously relevant then. Sometimes I would try to observe the pain process and translate the feeling into some sort of metaphysical experience -- something interesting to contemplate, something detached. Sometimes when the pain got to be too much for the physical side of me, nature would take over and I would simply pass out.

I based my mental retreats not on fantasy but on real things. I designed and built homes, about 10 of them -- some dream houses, others more practical. First I made a floor plan, then the exterior, and then I would build them in my mind nail by nail, down to the most minute detail. I'd design it, lay the cement, put up the two-by-fours, drive each nail, and even saw each board -- slowly. If it progressed

too fast, I would envision a bad cut on a board and resaw it.

I made lists. I made a list of every country I could think of, then every capital. I even made a list of all the candy bars I could think of. I tried to think of everything I had ever learned; once I reviewed everything I'd learned about trees. Sometimes I'd derive mathematical formulas, spending hours in the process. I could get completely wrapped up in this, completely escaping into my mind. With mental exercise came resolve -- if I could help it, this was not going to be the place where I cashed it in.

Isolation lasted about nine months, until I was moved to another prisoner of war camp in Hanoi. There I got a roommate, Myron Donald from Moravia, New York. For more than a year we lived together in a windowless concrete bunker we called the Gunshed. During that time Myron would save my life.

It was a hot box, the Gunshed, so hot we could hardly breathe. It was so stifling that just to breathe we often lay by a small slit under the door through which our jailers slid food.

The food itself was used against us like everything else. It usually consisted of watery green soup (we called it weeds) and a chunk of tasteless bread. The soup was delivered boiling hot in the summer and stone cold in the winter. When it was hot we couldn't take a mouthful, since eating raises the body metabolism and thus body heat. If the guards didn't return too quickly, we would let the food sit until dark and the room temperature had slacked off to, maybe, 110 degrees.

We perspired so much our skin became waterlogged, looking like pale cheese, a crumbling coat of slimy flesh often festering with rash and fungus. Horribly dehydrated, we got only two little teapots of putrid water a day, and we used some of it to dampen our faces and wash off the crumbling skin. On top of this, mosquitoes were thick, their wings creating a constant chorus, and the room stank of the waste bucket. Rat droppings seasoned the food along with razor blades, glass, stones and pieces of wire. Actually some of this unexpected booty came in handy.

After about a year of captivity when, oddly, I was getting accustomed to the harshness, my journey took me down an even darker path. The situation developed slowly. First I was told I might win an early release if I would cooperate and meet with some visiting delegations -- anti-war groups or radical Hollywood personalities -- and tell them I had been treated well. I refused these special favors and at any rate would not participate in their propaganda. When they kept pressuring me, I went on a hunger strike -- an emaciated prisoner would not make good propaganda I reasoned. This got me off the go-home-early list but angered my jailers if only because I was not submissive. Thus began the really hard stuff.

Things started with long sessions of standing immobile around the clock; next I was put on my knees for three, four, six hours at a time. This went on for days. It was the first phase, sort of a limbering-up session to wear me out and take the edge off my powers of reasoning. Then I was told to write a war-crimes confession, saying I was sorry I'd participated in the war. When I refused, I got to serve as a stress reliever for about 20 guards -- each took his turn beating me to a pulp. They pounded me for six or eight hours. By then I was getting pretty shaky. Then they got serious. I was introduced to a bowl of water, some filthy rags and a steel rod. The guards stuffed a rag in my mouth with the rod, then, after putting another rag over my face, they slowly poured the water on it until all I was breathing was water vapor. I could feel my lungs going tight with fluid and felt like I was drowning. I thrashed in panic as darkness took over. As I passed

out, thinking I was dying, I remember thanking God that we had made a stand against this kind of society.

When my senses returned I discovered I had been blindfolded and trussed into the "pretzel" position. Thick leg irons shackled my ankles, my wrists were tied behind me, and a rope bound my elbows just above the joints. The guards tightened the bindings by putting their feet against my arms and pulling the ropes until they couldn't pull any harder. Then they tied my wrists to my ankles and jammed a 10-foot pole between my back and elbows. After a few hours the leg irons began to press heavily on my shins and feet like a vise. The ropes strangled my flesh, causing searing pain and making my arms go numb and slowly turn black.

In the middle of the night, one of the less hostile guards, whom we called Mark, sneaked in and loosened the ropes a little. If he hadn't, I'm sure I would have lost both arms. In this case I would have vanished with the other badly injured POWs who never were repatriated.

After a few hours, the guards came back and jerked up on the pole, lifting me up and down by my elbows then slamming me to the floor on my face or backward on my head. This went on through the early morning hours.

At dawn two Vietnamese officers casually strolled in. I told them they might kill me, but I still wasn't interested in their propaganda. They laughed and calmly said, "It's easy to die but hard to live, and we'll show you just how hard it is to live."

Indeed the pain got to the point where I truly wanted to die. My mind games weren't sufficient to help me manage any more pain. I tried screaming to relieve the stress until the grimy rag was stuffed back into my mouth. I tried doing anything to take my mind away from what was happening, but I couldn't. My prayers became desperate gasps. The only solution was to stop living, but what can you do when you're tied up? You can't will your heart to stop beating.

After about a week I finally told the guards I'd write the confession. I had to get out of the ropes, collect my thoughts, and perhaps muster a bit more strength to still do nothing or at least moderate what would happen. My hosts knew exactly what I was thinking and simply said, "It's too late." They brought in a guard who sported the only leather boots I ever saw in North Vietnam. I don't know what they told him, but he looked like he wanted to kill me. He looked insane, his eyes wide open, and he practically jumped up and down when they turned him loose on me.

From my point of view, what went on next didn't last long. He began by kicking me in the back with all the strength he could exert. After this first savage kick, just one kick, I knew I'd been badly injured, maybe mortally. The pain was grave, more of a deep sickening feeling. My mind floated free of my body as if I were a spectator, not a participant. I was beyond pain.

Sometime the next day the guards untied me, and I sprawled on the bloody floor, red fluid oozed out of every opening in my body. I had no strength to sit or stand; I just sort of unrolled. In spite of my sorry state, I did not want to look undignified, so I tried to get up. I managed to crawl to a corner and sit leaning against the wall, trying desperately to gather my thoughts.

We spent the next three days working on the war-crimes confession, but the guards would wave whatever I wrote in my face and scream that it wasn't satisfactory. Were they seeing through my innuendos and double meanings? I could feel myself starting to panic as I could feel my last remaining defenses slipping.

The demands increased now to a taped confession. Somehow I still found the strength to refuse -- perhaps a little bit too resolutely, because they reverted to the hard stuff again. I was having trouble remembering those precious resistance techniques I had been taught so many light years ago. I started making a tape, pushing my sluggish brain to come up with ideas to show acceptable submissiveness to my wards yet useless for propaganda. My attempts were not convincing, so the torture continued. I told myself just to make it one more day, and then just one more. ... Anyone trained in such affairs knows that constant torture can make captives reach a point where they can't maintain mental equilibrium, and my captors knew it too. They could break me, and I was becoming frantic, fearing my strength would not last.

Then, they stopped -- just like that. Some weeks had gone by, and perhaps they had other business. Maybe they figured I might not make it. Although they had murdered prisoners, I believe most of my colleagues who died were accidentally tortured to death. The North Vietnamese knew they could not win the war militarily, but they might succeed if they garnered world sympathy. It would be difficult for them to look good if too many POWs "died in captivity." But I came pretty close, as did many of my mates.

My immediate challenge was to recover from the kidney and chest injuries from that wild night of "kick the Yankee." My entire body was bloated, my eye sockets two puffy slits. You could stick your finger into me up to your knuckle and pull it out leaving a hole that would slowly fill with fluid. Myron didn't recognize me at first when I was thrown back in our cell. He set my broken ribs with his fingertips and used our shirts to bind my chest. Occasionally the ribs would click out of place, and he would reset them. But it didn't take long after I was on the mend for the torture sessions to resume.

As I grew more and more weary, I had to cope with one of the most corrosive elements of the human spirit -- hate. Hate is a terrible distraction, a horribly destructive human enterprise. Hate invades the consciousness when the mind's reasoning power fades. Hate is a way we assign blame for our plight when our faith weakens and our resolve becomes clouded. Pain intensifies hate, making us want to strike out at something.

I stumbled into this blackness and, with vivid flashes of bitter invectives, cursed everything I had held sacred. I bathed in self-pity and resolved all my sufferings with the most wicked solutions. Although I drew some strength from hate, I finally realized I was drawing it from the devil. I journeyed into the lowest point in my life. And then I was truly exhausted.

I "came to" after a particularly horrific torture session, alone, lying on a stone floor, more naked than clothed, bruised, filthy, gaunt, and panting in little puppy breaths. I felt surprisingly free of pain and acutely aware of every inch of my surroundings. I knew I wasn't very healthy, and I was startled at how my body looked like a bag of leftover chicken bones.

My knees looked huge compared to the rest of my scrawny legs. Lying on my side, I could place a fist between my thighs and touch only air. But I didn't hurt anywhere. I thought maybe I was dead. I thought about many, many things as I lay there almost motionless for days. I prayed and prayed and prayed. ...

Finally the cell door peephole quietly opened and an eyeball squinted into the darkness. Then it was gone. A few minutes later the heavy wooden door opened with a clanging of keys and sliding bolts. An enamel plate skittered across the floor and halted just short of my slowly blinking eyes. On it was a mound of raw salt crystals piled on top of some rice. "The salt is for beriberi," the voice said, and

the door banged shut.

I thought for a moment: *Does he mean the salt will give me beriberi or prevent it?* I chuckled to myself. My feeble attempt at humor was an elixir. Even though I would spend several more years as a guest of Uncle Ho, I knew I was over the hump. Humor, faith and mental focus would allow me to endure. I felt human, mentally whole and refreshed.

Maybe there is something to that old saying about pain purifying, but I would not prescribe the treatment.

* * *

Captured in North Vietnam in January 1968, Thomas Moe was released in 1973. Two years later he earned a master's degree from Notre Dame, where he eventually served as professor of aerospace studies and commander of the Air Force ROTC program. He retired from the Air Force in fall 1995.

(Notre Dame Magazine; printed January 1996)

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Last Modified July 31, 2007

