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The crucible of character

Former POW, fighter pilot shares leadership wisdom

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — For several months, a dank 6.5-by-7-foot cell at the Hanoi Hilton served as a crucible that tested the limits of human endurance for retired Air Force Col. Leon Ellis and three of his fellow prisoners.

If it wasn't too cold at night to sleep, if he wasn't too hungry from slurping watery pumpkin soup, or wasn't worried about his parents who didn't know he was shot down over North Vietnam Nov. 7, 1967, Ellis was suffering torture at the hands of his captors.

The communists wanted compliance and useful information, but what they really wanted was written statements and filmed confessions denouncing the United States.

Ellis said it was during those months when he would confront in stark terms who he was. He thought he was tough coming from a background in football on both offensive and defensive lines, but he wasn't tough enough, he said, at least not alone.

Still, with the help of his leaders and comrades-in-arms, Ellis said he managed to pull through during his Aug. 19 speaking engagement with Air National Guardsmen of 176th Wing at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

Ellis reported to Da Nang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, in July 1967 with the 390th Tactical Fighter Squadron where he would fly mostly bombing sorties in the F-4 Phantom II fighter.

On Nov. 7, 1967, then-First Lieutenant Ellis was flying a mission with Capt. Ken Fisher when their F-4 took anti-aircraft artillery fire right after the fighter duo released their bomb load. As the crippled Phantom broke apart, both Airmen managed to safely eject from the stricken fighter.

Ellis said his pilot indoctrination served him well during the ordeal, but it would only go so far.

"I was totally calm during the ejection — coming down in the parachute — it was all training," Ellis recalled. "I had one thought: evade. But after they captured me, I was terrified."

During his multi-week journey cross-country to the Hỏa Lò Prison, a 19th Century French-built prison better known by its captors as the Hanoi Hilton, Ellis and his captors were strafed and bombed by American aircraft, pilots unaware of American presence, three times.

Before seeing the inside of the Hanoi Hilton, Ellis said he had already feared for his life when a mob led by a bullhorn-bearing communist cadre member tried to get their hands on him. He credits the militiaman charged with transporting him with saving his life.

When he arrived at the prison, Ellis was crammed into a tiny cell with Fisher and two other officers. All they had was a 3-gallon bucket for a bathroom and a loud speaker that plumed in communist propaganda three times a day.

“What they really wanted was for us to make antiwar propaganda,” the colonel said. “We were a tool in their hands, so that was going to be our battle.”

If they were going to win the battle, Ellis said they had to band together and keep their collective objectives in mind.

“Our goals were to live up to the Code of Conduct, to resist the enemy, and to keep faith with our fellow POWs and our country — to return with honor,” he said.

Reading the Code of Conduct was one thing, living it was quite another, Ellis said, when facing down a torture team.

“That’s when you find out who you really are,” he said. “I was tough, but one-on-one with a communist interrogator who has torture guys with him, that’s a scary place. I found out I wasn’t as tough as I thought I was. Nobody was.”

‘Tomorrow is another day’

Ellis admits he is not naturally a positive man, but credits the “Stockdale Paradox,” for keeping him in the battle. Named after fellow captive Navy Vice Adm. James Stockdale, the paradox is both positive and realistic.

“You must never give up hope of a good ending, but you have to brutally confront the realities of your current situation,” Ellis paraphrased. “It isn’t going away. You have to deal with it.”

Under the specter of constant privation and torture, Ellis said he struggled with his predicament.

“Staying positive in that little cell, especially that first year, was hard,” he said.

A saying he held onto came from the mouth of fellow captive, Marine 1st Lt. Jim Warner.

“Leon, tomorrow is another day,” Ellis quoted. “And it was.”

Keeping his small group together was Fisher. He encouraged the other officers and set the example for not giving in to torture. Ellis credits his crew mate with helping to keep him in the battle.

“You need to know your people are watching you, and they’re seeing how you handle the tough situations,” he said. “They’re seeing if you have the courage to stand up for what you believe in and to do the right thing.”

Beyond blazing a path for others to follow, Ellis also said leaders need to know themselves and to take the time to know their people.

“Leadership is always first of all about influence,” he said. “If you’re not connected to your people, you can’t influence them ... As a leader, you need to know where your people are, where their head is, and where their heart is.”

In the process of knowing members of the team, Ellis said leaders can move their people from a nagging sense of insecurity to a place of security.

“We’re humans, and one of the deepest needs humans have besides eating, shelter and being loved is to be valued and appreciated,” he said. “As a leader, that’s one of your biggest responsibilities.”

After several months, the torture stopped and conditions improved somewhat thanks to a change in communist policy. After 1,955 days of captivity, Ellis returned to U.S. custody. With the help fellow leaders, he managed to survive and return with honor.

“Your message was inspiring,” said Alaska Air National Guard Brig. Gen. Darrin Slaten, 176th Wing commander. “You came here with immense credibility, and our leadership here will be able to take your lessons learned back to their Airmen.”

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PHOTOS

1. Flickr link <https://www.flickr.com/photos/176wg/albums/72157710500650706>
2. DVIDS link <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/337012/crucible-character-former-pow-fighter-pilot-shares-leadership-wisdom>



Retired Air Force Col. Leon Ellis, a former F-4 Phantom II fighter pilot who endured 1,955 days of captivity in the Hanoi Hilton, shares a moment of levity with Alaska Air National Guardsmen of 176th Wing Aug. 19 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Ellis used his experiences to illustrate leadership principles. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)



Retired Air Force Col. Leon Ellis, a former F-4 Phantom II fighter pilot who endured 1,955 days of captivity in the Hanoi Hilton, speaks to Alaska Air National Guardsmen of 176th Wing Aug. 19 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Ellis used his experiences to illustrate leadership principles. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)