Jay Hess

Lieutenant Colonel

Air Force

Farmington, UT

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Jay Hess

I'm Jay Hess. Full name Jay Criddle Hess.

Interviewer

And you were born when?

Jay Hess

1930, May 9th.

Interviewer

Where were you raised?

Jay Hess

I grew up in Farmington. I went to junior high in Bountiful at Bountiful Junior High and graduated from Davis High School in Kaysville.

Interviewer

You went to the University of Utah?

Jay Hess

I roamed around. I went the first year to Weber College, the next year to BYU. After a mission, I came to the University of Utah.

Interviewer

By the way, where did you go on your mission?

Jay Hess

It was called Western States Headquarters. Went to Denver and I spent most of my time in Nebraska, Grand Island. I keep getting it mixed up because I spent a lot of time in Grand Junction, Colorado and Roswell, New Mexico.

Interviewer

So how did you get into the Air Force?

I always wanted to fly. Sometime in high school, one of these Korean Air Rep people came and said that you can get into the Aviation Cadet Program if you get two years of college. So that kind of made me think about getting two years of college so I did that and took the test, the physical, and flunked it. And I came back at the University of Utah after my mission and enrolled in the ROTC, the Air Force ROTC. I think they had the largest class they've ever had, and it was a big group. I don't wanna give a number, but it would be a thousand maybe, and they probably needed about 50. So I took another look at the Aviation Cadet Program, tried the physical, and passed it. And went in and told the professor of Air Science I'm quitting.

And he said, "Do you know what you're doin'?"
I was a smart kid; I said "Yep." So I did and graduated from the Aviation Cadet class in '55. That means I graduated in February of '55 from flight school without a college degree, which was always a handicap. So today, you get an education before you learn to fly in the Air Force. It may change, but that's the way it is.

Interviewer

So you began flying in the Air Force and where were you first assigned?

Jay Hess

I began as a--we call them a GCI controller, Ground Control Intercept Controller, and I went to Florida to Panama City, Tyndall Air Force Base, and learned how to direct one airplane to intercept another. And then I went down to Tampa, Florida to MacDill Air Force Base, and we just set up this new sign. Our call sign was Sheetman, and we never really got operational in the time period I was there. I had an opportunity to go back and train in combat aircraft. That took me to Georgia, where I learned to fly all-weather interceptors. And the first of those was the F-89, and then we upgraded to the F-102. And then the latter part of my career, we got into tactical aircraft, the F-105 and the F-4.

Interviewer

And so tell us about getting to Vietnam and how that all happened.

Jay Hess

Well, I went to Germany in 1964, and all my interest is in Germany, but that's really when things were getting happening in Vietnam. So the first attacks we made in North Vietnam were in August of 1964. I'm in Germany, and I knew the guys that were leaving were going to Vietnam, but I didn't even know where it was. So my three years in Germany ended in 1967, and I got orders assigning me to Cam Rahn Air Base in South Vietnam. And in Germany, we had flown the F-105 and I had the last year transitioned into the F-4, so I went to Vietnam flying the F-4, out of Cam Rahn Bay and I just flew there a few weeks, and then I received these orders. It was an emergency manning request, which is a little disturbing because it says "due to combat losses, the following individuals are diverted to Takhli Air Base in Thailand.

Takhli was one of the bases that was heavily engaged in flights over North Vietnam and at that time one of the most heavily defended air spaces in the world or in history. It's interesting because their thought, when I got there was, "Well, we're gonna put you on the staff as a briefing officer to brief the pilots before they fly their missions." And after a month, I said, you know, I ought to fly and they said, "Well, we'll put you up in the C-47 and you can fly it." So I did that once, and I came back, and said, "That's really dumb because I do know how to fly the 105." And they said, "Well, when we get one back that's working and it's not scheduled to fly right again, we'll let you fly it." And so I made a couple of flights around the traffic pattern and landed, and the next day I'm on the flight schedule to go

over to North Vietnam.

Interviewer

So your first mission flying over Vietnam, you were shot down in August of '60...?

Jay Hess

Yeah, so I went to Vietnam in May, so I just really flew during July and August, combat missions over and over.

Interviewer

Okay, how many missions had you flown before you were shot down?

Jay Hess

Well, I don't really remember, but I'm kind of sticking with the number 33 over North Vietnam. Those were different than others. We just counted them different, so I say I got 33-and-a-half missions. Unfortunately, I didn't keep the number of landings equal to the number of take-offs.

Interviewer

If you don't mind, let's talk about that August day when you were shot down.

Jay Hess

Well, our general mission was to degrade North Vietnam's ability to assist South Vietnam and mostly that was stop supplies that came from China or Russia or whatever down the railroads to Ha Noi and then south by truck or whatever, bicycles. So the 24th of August, our mission was northeast of Ha Noi, very close to the China border. We were assigned a railroad repair facility at Lang Son and we'd brief early in the morning, and the weather was bad so we kind of held 'till the weather cleared. And there were 24 F-105s and a supporting group of KC 135 tankers involved in this. We needed a tanker for every four airplanes because it was a long ways.

So we took off from Takhli, flew east across South Vietnam with our tankers, refueled and then went in the northerly direction at the Gulf of Tonkin, refueled again. The tankers turned around, and we continued in. up past Hai Phong, came into the coast and the weather began to break a little. We started to climb a little bit, pick up speed, and head into the target area on the railroad. I was in the lead flight, then Colonel Robert White was lead. He was an ex-astronaut X-15 -- did that in the X-15 above 50 miles.

So anyway, he was the flight leader and we were Shark flight and I was Shark 4, and we rolled into the target and a dive bomb pass, and I had six 750-pound bombs on. There were several different buildings. We were lined right up on the one that I was supposed to get, and I released my bombs and immediately was hit. It was kind of like going down the road in your car at 60 miles an hour and going through the guardrail. It was bang, and it slowed me down, and then the airplane tumbled and rolled. Then came out and I was pretty much still right in formation.

My reaction was, "Well, I've been hit, and I ought to get away from here as fast as I can." So I lit the afterburner, which you do by just taking the throttle and moving it out. And I shouldn't have done that because I should have treated that airplane really gentle. What that did was cause the whole thing to catch on fire. I didn't know that. All I knew was that all of a sudden, the cockpit is filled with fire. I can't see out and then the airplane, instead of being in this pull-out maneuver, is now suddenly like it's on the top of the rollercoaster and starting down and doing an outside loop. I do remember that I was able to look down and see if I really did have the stick back with it back 'cause I wasn't going that direction. I was going like I had it all the way forward.

So I'm thinking about telling the guys, "Well, I can't see, but tell me which way to go." I bet with this maneuver, I quickly realized that I either gotta get out of this, or I'll hit the ground pretty quick. So I pulled up the ejection handles, and about that time, I head on the radio, "Shark 4 is torching," and I never made a reply. My head's up against the canopy, and I'm off the seat because of the negative Gs, and I ejected. And that's not the right position, so it knocked me unconscious -- that, and the windblast.

I just woke up on the ground well, probably several hours after. And as I wake up, I reach for my radio to make a call on the radio, and all I can hear is the emergency locator beacon is in the parachute, so I think, "I've gotta shut that off."
And then I notice that I'm on a trail; I'm laying down on my face, and there's a young boy crawling down the trail towards me. So my reaction at that point is I take out my pistol and point it at him, and then I look. Man, he's just a kid. So I put that away and looking for my parachute for that beacon, and then I notice that there are a lot of people around me. And as soon as I pointed the gun at that boy, he was pretty smart. He started to yell real loud. I never got up, but everybody was on top of me, and I was captured.
It was an interesting experience because they hadn't practiced this, and neither had I. And they're pretty excited, and their approach of POW, a pilot shot down in Vietnam, was to capture them. And the best way to keep them under control was to take all their clothes off.
Anyway, in the process of getting off my G suit, I changed my position from hands up -- 'cause they were taking off my G suit with a machete, which meant they were chopping at my leg and not cutting the G suit off. So I reached down to unzip it myself, and they didn't know what I was doing, but they shot me. I think it was with my gun. But anyway, I was really lucky because I was bent over, and it just grazed my neck and head and knocked me out again and just made a lot of blood. So that was the capture.
After hiking over a couple of mountains, wading through a stream, and doing some interrogation with the Chinese and their pep rallies -- 'cause there were a lot of people all on that railroad and many more trucks moving supplies. They'd round up the crowd and have a pep rally since they had the enemy captured there. It was a very bad night. Next morning, a helicopter picked me up, and I didn't walk like most of the guys did. I flew by helicopter to Ha Noi and then driven by Jeep to the gates of the Ha Noi Hilton.

Interviewer

Tell us what you saw and experienced at Ha Noi Hilton.

Jay Hess

Well, we got blindfolded and tied up, and I didn't see much. I did see iron bars, and I did see a gate and a door.

But in my memory, it's nothing like I see pictures of it today; I don't really know what I saw. But I saw the inside.

When I was taken inside, I was put into a room and it was maybe 15, 20 feet by square. It had a table in one

corner, a blue tablecloth on it, and a little stool in front of it. On the table was a spotlight and a fan.

After a while, a gentleman came in and he read me the camp regulations. In the camp regulations, it said that "American criminals captured in the democratic Republic of Vietnam, all of the blackest criminals will be treated humanely, but they will answer all questions." And it went on: "You won't make any noise; you won't talk; you'll bow when you see one of the guards or any Vietnamese."
Then he started asking questions, like "What's your name, rank, serial number, date of birth, and where you were stationed," and I can't answer that question. "What kind of airplane were you flying?"
"I can't answer that question."
There was a lot of pressure to do that. And anyway, after a while, he leaves and we go to three more interrogators. I seemed to be able to just get by with: "I can't answer that question."
"Why can't you?"
"Well, would you answer it if you were me?"
"No."
Anyway, after most of the day has gone by, the interrogator comes in with a couple of assistants and it is explained to me--you're very foolish because everybody answers all the questions. And I know everybody doesn't answer all the questions. But after these guys knocked me to the floor, tied my arms behind my back and then rotate 'em up over my head and tied 'em to my feet in front.
say, "Okay, I can tell you what kind of airplane I was flying. But they didn't even stick around. They just all left and left me in that room. And I sweat this big pile of sweat. I mean it was like water came out of every place, and it's kinda like a circuit breaker popped on the pain 'cause it reached the point where it just didn't hurt anymore. I should say it wasn't worse. And I don't know how long that lasted, but it could have been 30 minutes, or it could have been three hours.
When they untied me and let me back up, my hands were paralyzed. And for months afterwards, the guys that would come out of this torture session, their arms were at a 90 degree angle like this, and their hands hung down like this, and they couldn't move their fingers and some nerve damage that that did.
So anyway, that's a torture I didn't wanna go through again, and so I started to answer some of their questions.
That torture lasted a couple of weeks, and then I was a couple of months in solitary confinement.
Then I got a roommate--another Air Force pilot -- and then a couple days later, two more roommates and so there

were four of us together. We left the Ha Noi Hilton and went to the annex on the outskirts of Ha Noi and spent the next two years in a room together and never contacted anybody else. So that was the start of five and a half years, and that's 2,029 days before release came. So the shoot down day was the 24th of March, 1967. The release date was the 24th of August. The release date was the 14th of March, 1973. So I missed six Christmases with my family.

Interviewer

You said you ran into some Chinese when you were shot down. Tell me about that. That's very unusual.

Jay Hess

So we were very close to the China border. There was a buffer zone and we were right up against it. I don't know if that was 20 miles or--yeah, I think it was 20 miles. I just think these people that captured me were Chinese because in the crowd, there were some people in uniform and so there were old people, young people, kids. Some people in uniform had a shirt on and normal pants. Some had military pants on and no shirt.

But when I was first taken into a cave-impressive cave, the floor was smooth and leveled out with sand and electric lines run back in it, and there were lighted rooms off to the side with folding chairs. And there was the crowd of people.

Finally, a surprisingly well looked--I'm gonna call him Chinese--came in. He was dressed like he worked for IBM. He was very, very neat, and he spoke English perfectly. And he translates. There was an old man that I would say might have been the village chief or a mayor. And they asked me the questions, but really no pressure.

Well, I'm taken out of the cave, and we walk a little ways, and there is a bamboo building, like two rooms, and to me it was like a storybook thing. You know, it's like you're walking through the woods, and here's this building that you don't expect just made out of bamboo. It was like rattan furniture. It was well-built and shined. So I walk in the front, and we go in the door, and there's kind of a wide room across that goes from one side to the other, and then there's two rooms.

They take me in the room on the right, and I walk in there, and it is full of cameras. There's a desk and the picture behind the desk is not Ho Chi Minh. It's Mao Tse-tung. So I'm thinking, "Oh, man, am I in China? 'Cause this is a little concerning." So that's my contact with the Chinese.

So the pep rallies and all that, that night were with the military. The next morning, we stopped by a building that's got a pole and a line that goes into the building. And there's a little wait and conversation, and when they come back, the whole situation changes. I am now tied up with wire, and they put me in the back of this pick-up truck, and the treatment is no fun from then on. I mean, we bounced down the road, and there's a couple of guards and other people in the truck, and they're stomping on me, stomping on my feet. And during the capture phase, going back, I just want to show the difference in the treatment.

There was a definite change like from Chinese control to Vietnamese control. So the policy was take all your clothes off. Well, they got down to my underwear and stopped and gave me my flight suit back. Then we walked a little while, and they gave me my boots back. When we go past where there's a hut anywhere along the trail, we stop, I take off my flight suit; one of the guys gives me a shirt; another guy gives me these pants, and we go past. Then I get my flight suit back. Well, when I get in that pick-up truck, the boots are gone. I kept the flight suit until I got to the Ha Noi Hilton. So there was just that change in treatment and the picture of Mao Tse-tung on the wall behind the desk of the people that are interrogating me.

Interviewer

Had you gone through any survival training or POW training before that?

Jay Hess

Yes. We had special training here in the States early on when you're in a combat aircraft, so I went to survival school in Nevada near Reno, Stead Air Force Base. So I would spend a weekend in the Sierra Mountains and go through the survival POW experience, which then, again, was like they like take away your clothes. I didn't like that. So we were exposed to a whole variety of treatments, but none like this tie your arms behind your back and rotate them up over your head thing. But other things were familiar: the table with a blue cloth on it, little stool you sit on, and a normal chair for the interrogator. That was familiar.

Interviewer

So after you were released from being bound up, tell us about your mental. What's going on? How are you trying to keep your mind? What are you doing at that point?

Jay Hess

I don't know. See, the first problem is I gotta get out of this place; somehow, I gotta escape. And then the next problem is how am I gonna handle the hunger right now? How am I gonna handle the next encounter with the interrogator? And then you hurt so bad, I mean, it's just pain. That's all there is, is pain. So your concept changes from how am I gonna make it through the day to how am I gonna make it through this next minute? It is minute by minute, yeah.

Finally, after the torture and all that, then you're in solitary. So the pain starts to ease and finally, one day, you can move one of those fingers a little bit. So then you're concentrating on getting those. You bend 'em out and you squeeze 'em close. You bend 'em out and pretty soon--I think it's a lot of a spiritual experience because you never felt so helpless and dependent. So there's a lot of praying, a lot of reflecting back and thinking about your life, and a lot of regrets, you know? Like how come I was such a crummy guy? Why would I ever treat anybody the way I treated them? So there's a lot of that.

And then the time goes on, and then it's like, "Okay, I'm gonna be here a long time, I better try to get some strength." So you just start doing whatever you could, isometric exercises, push-ups, sit-ups, whatever. So that became a good part of every day's routine. Then finally, when you get with somebody else, you can teach each other. One of my first roommates spoke German, so it was learn a German song, *(sings in German),* and learn some German words. So exercise, school, and then something fun. Well, we're gonna have movies in the evening, and storytelling, and we'll make a chess board, and we'll make a deck of cards.

Interviewer

So tell us about when you were first introduced to your company. What was his name? Tell us about them.

Jay Hess

I'm in this cell in one of the sections that we called Little Vegas, section of the Ha Noi Hilton, and at night, it was scary 'cause you'd heard guys screaming; you'd hear woman screaming; you'd hear crying; you'd hear babies crying. I didn't know where all this stuff was coming from. But you'd hear the guards coming; you'd hear the keys jingling; you'd hear a cell door open; and sometime later, you'd hear a stagger back in.

So anyway, I hear the keys; I hear the guard. They go in my door. It opens up, and I don't know what to expect. But I'm blindfolded, pushed through the halls, and put in a room. I'm blindfolded. Pretty soon, they bring this other guy in, and he really looks bad. I mean, he's got this beard and he's muddy and dirty. His feet were about three sizes bigger. They had just swollen up.

And the guard says, "You take care of him. Americans die very easily in Vietnam." So we go back to our room. This was Konrad Trautman, another F-105 pilot. He had been shot down. It's October. He'd been shot down about a week. And unfortunately, he had walked without his shoes on, and the skin was all gone from the bottom of his feet. POW camp is just nothing but infection.

So here we are in a room, and my thought is, "I have been planning this escape. I'll probably get killed, but I don't wanna involve anybody else. I don't want a roommate." And his thought is, "This guy is working. He's a traitor. You know, the guard told him to take care of me," like I'm working for them. So he's not too happy to have me. Well, that went on for a week before we got the other two.

And then, when we got two more roommates--and that was an interesting experience--but with Konnie and I, we were taken out of the room like I was, went to another room, lined up against the wall, took the blindfolds off.

And they say, "Okay, you can turn around." And we both turn around and look on the other wall. There's two other guys over there. And my first thought is, "Man, you guys look bad. I mean, you don't have a mirror, you don't know how crummy you look, but these guys really look bad.

One was a Navy pilot, Mike McGrath. His arm was broken; his leg was broken. The other one was Jerry Gerndt, another Air Force pilot, an F-4 guy. We all go back to my room, and that filled it up because there were four bunks in that cell. And then we get acquainted, and everything kinda comes into focus then, and we have a chance to

talk. So Konnie, my first roommate, becomes just a very special person in my life, and so are Mike and Jerry. Put it this way, they took a lot of the rough edges off. But it's an interesting experience being locked up in a room with three other people and no input or anything else for two years. It's like, what do you talk about next?

Interviewer

Tell us about the things you'd do in there with one another to bolster yourselves and keep yourselves going.

Jay Hess

Well, I think the main input that we got when the four of us were together was just Konnie's input on the German language. But you just delve into each one's life from birth up to that point and all the lessons they've learned, and that's a discussion. One of the things that the Vietnamese gave us--well, first off, in the torture session when they take away my flight suit, they gave me a pair of shorts. So that was my clothes for two months.

Before they moved the four of us out of the Hilton over to the annex, they gave us a straw mat, a blanket, a pair of pajamas, long-sleeved pajamas, shirt and shorts, pants and another pair of shorts, and a toothbrush. Now that was a big thing after months without brushing your teeth. It was remarkable what it felt like to get to brush your teeth. And a cup, so that was it. Oh, a mosquito net. That's kind of how I got into this.

I wanna talk about the mosquito net because the mosquito net had reinforcing threads through it, which made squares. And we finally figured out we could use those squares for a checker board or a chess board. My only problem was I couldn't remember how far across it was for a checker board. But once we put the chess pieces on it, then we got it right, and so that was kind of fun to play. It gets your mind off of everything and concentrate on protecting the queen. They're using the queen to protect the king. That's what it was all about.

Interviewer

What were they feeding you?

Jay Hess

Food, I told you about how I was in the cave right after capture. To my surprise, they brought this big bowl of fried chicken. Food was not on my mind. I didn't eat a bit of it. But I'm gonna dream about that chicken that I saw a lot 'cause I'm hungry. Sometime like in the third day of torture, they brought in a bowl of soup, and it was like water with a leaf in it. But I was grateful for the liquid 'cause I was so dehydrated, I was hallucinating.

But the normal food started coming after that, and it was twice a day, a bowl of rice. And I started out on that bowl of rice, and I couldn't eat it down so it was level with the top. Man, they'd take it away.

"Don't take it away. I'll eat it."

No, they take it away, and so I'd eat more the next time. My stomach would hurt, but before that two months was up and Konnie joined me, I'm eating the whole bowl of rice twice a day, two of them, one bowl each--one in the morning and one in the afternoon. And I'm losing weight. Then Konnie comes and he can't eat his rice, so I eat mine and his. Then I stop losing weight.

But then as time went on, besides a bowl of rice sometimes they give us a vegetable, like, was in the soup but they hadn't put it in the soup. So it took a bowl and a plate--rice and something else. We called it swamp green soup. Sometimes, we would get a little piece of bread; sometimes it wasn't grass soup. Sometimes it'd be a period of time where it'd be pumpkin. But on a survival basis, it was pretty luxurious. The guys that came up from the south that had been in a bamboo cages, they'd say, "We couldn't have survived another month in the jungle. I could live forever in the Ha Noi Hilton."

Interviewer

Did you start encountering other POWs besides the four in your cell? When did that start happening?

Jay Hess

After two years, I was moved from one building in the annex across the hall. There was a sidewalk that went down the row of buildings across to the other row into another room, and there was a couple of guys already in there.

And we wound up with eight, so the next year is eight. And then after Ho Chi Minh died--I wish I could remember

the date--they had built this new camp, and I'm always confused if it was Hope or Faith. It was one of those. It was Son Tay.

But anyway, it didn't have the windows shuttered. It was just bars, so you could see out. And instead of sleeping on the floor, they had boards up on a platform. And then there was like 16 in that room. Okay, then things really changed because they tried this rescue at Son Tay, which was close enough that when they pulled that off, we could see the rockets' red glare and feel the ground shake from the anti-aircraft fire from the bombs or whatever. And, as a result of that, they closed down all these camps out around the country and moved everybody back downtown Ha Noi into the Hilton.

And so they pulled the Vietnamese prisoners they had out and put 'em over in the side where we had been and gave us the big rooms, and there were 50 in a room then. So I think about that time there were 400 or so of us. We were all in this; we called it Camp Unity. There were like two rooms here and two rooms here, kind of around the square. There were smaller rooms around this way, where they isolated the senior officers.

So then there were 50 people, so that's a party. Then we had guys that were teaching Russian, and guys that were teaching Spanish, and guys that were teaching history, and guys that were teaching math. We had all these academy graduates that were well-educated people.

And then we had Gerry Venanzi, who was a remarkable guy. He was an usher in a theater all the way through school, and he remembered every movie. And we had a movie every night, Gerry telling the stories. If he didn't have a movie, he could make up one. And he was a great resource, you know? You could almost look forward to tonight; Gerry's gonna have a story for ya. It was remarkable. He could take a half hour getting through the credits, describing each person in it.

Interviewer

The war was changing?

Jay Hess

Yeah because, you know, I got shot down in '67. They stopped bombing North Vietnam in '68. So there was this whole period of time, and then Ho Chi Minh died, and then I got two blankets. Oh, you got this picture with decorative things around it. It was like they were trying to show you they were really good guys. But then we started to bomb North again.

Interviewer

Could you hear it from where you were? Could you tell there was a new bombing campaign where you were?

Jay Hess

Well, the guys that were there later certainly could. When they first started this, they were hitting targets farther away, and all I would hear was anti-aircraft fire, the airplanes going by, the SAMs, and all that stuff. They moved 100 of us then out of the Ha Noi Hilton and took us up to the China border to a camp we called Dogpatch. The thing that finally got us out of there was President Nixon said, "We want this thing to end, and we've been talkin', and nothing's happening." So they brought the B52s in. Wow. It wasn't me carrying six bombs. The B52 was loaded with--I don't know what the load is but it just goes on and on and on.

Those guys that were in the Ha Noi Hilton when that was going on, yeah, they heard 'em goin' off. Up in my camp at the Dogpatch, you could tell by the mood of the guards what's going on. They were very sober when that was happening. And then they reached an agreement that we're gonna pull our forces out; we're gonna exchange prisoners. Whereas when we went up to Dogpatch, it was two days in the truck blindfolded and bouncing along, no stops, guys sick, can't go to the bathroom, throwing up. It was a mess.

When we came back, they'd stop and say, "Anybody need to go to the restroom? Oh, here's a lunch. We got a lunch for you." We get back in Ha Noi, and they put us in this camp and say, "This is your room," but they don't lock the door. And you just walk outside and there's a basket of bread. You could play volleyball, and we changed from being zombies that had never been in the sun for five years to look like normal people.

Interviewer

Did they try to use you for propaganda? Did they try to use you in photos?

Jay Hess

Well, see the interrogation in the torture process is for you to just say, "The war is wrong." That you are against the war; that it's an unjust war. So that's the whole battle. It's propaganda. It's just all propaganda.

I can't speak about other people's experience 'cause it's much worse than mine, but here's the typical thing. Interrogator comes in one day and he says, "Read this letter."
It's a letter from a gal in Michigan to the mothers in Vietnam. She expresses her sorrow and sadness at the sacrifice of their young boys that are getting killed in this war. "Comment on that letter."
So he gives me a piece of paper and a pencil, and we sit down and say, "What are we gonna do?" Well, let's just say in America, you're free to say what you wanna say. Some people think one way; some think another. America, you're free.
So nobody wrote anything, but the next day, the interrogator comes in and looks at the paper, and he's all upset 'cause nobody's written in it right now. My roommate, Mike, the Navy pilot, writes, "I don't have any comments." And I'm thinking, "Mike, that's not what we were gonna do," but I wrote, "I don't have any comments." Everybody wrote.
This is a guard; he can't read English, so he doesn't know what it is, but he's got writing on the paper. He's happy. He goes out and gives it to the interrogator. And the interrogator looks at the paper and stops right there. And you can just see the red goin' up the back of his neck.
And he comes back around there and says, "You guys, you think you're smart, don't ya? Put your hands over your head. You're gonna live this way the rest of the time you're here."
So we put our hands over our head; the guard closed the door. We put our hands down, and thought, "Wow, we got outta that easy." About five minutes later, the guard comes back with a machine gun on a tripod and a stool. "Put your hands up."
He's got us lined up against the wall. After a couple of hours, our hands up over our head begins to not feel so fun. To my surprise, when night came, the guard packed up his gun and left, and we crashed on the floor. That was the routine for two weeks, all day, every day, except we did get fed, so there was a break for that and we slept at night. But that was just to get a statement unfavorable to the war. They were trying to get statements for the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm. And these guys were tortured, and tortured, and tortured.
Say like, "These pilots that we know are against the war." And they gave 'em the name of Ben Casey, who was on one of the hospital television shows at the time, and Clark Kent. And they were very happy to get the actual names of pilots that they could rush 'em and give to the people who were making their case in Stockholm.
Of course, when the reporters at this conference heard the names, they knew where they'd come from; a comic character and a TV character. That was what it was all about. I never faced any of that. I hid in the crowd, but those guys that had to meet peace delegates that were making trips to North Vietnam. Jane Fonda is kind of the one we remember but that's because she had a name before and still does. It was a continual stream of Americans that were anti-war, that were goin' over to Vietnam, and they made it rough on POWs.

Interviewer

Tell us about coming home and how that all began.

Jay Hess

Well, I've talked about the change of treatment. We come out of the hills at Dogpatch and back to the camp at Plantation, and they let us outside, and we'd tan up. They'd talk about goin' home and towards the end of January of '73 it starts to look that way, and sometime in February, we see a newspaper. It seems like I saw a newspaper somewhere about Vietnamese people that had a picture of a former POW that had been released. It's the 14th of March; I was released.

The night before, the camp commander gets everybody together, and he says, "You go home tomorrow." And somebody said, "Don't smile." You were skeptic, but the next day in the morning, the gates opened up and these buses come in. They gave us a shirt, a pair of pants, shoes, and a little bag. We changed clothes, and I put my old POW clothes in a bag. They let us get on the bus and they opened the gates. There was this crowd of kids outside the gates, school kids, and they wore uniforms. They looked neat with their bandanas and white shirts. They were

all eager-eyed to see these bad people leaving their country.
We rode the buses over to the airport. Then we had to go across the river. This was kind of like, maybe we're getting out of here. But one of the emotional things for me is as we approached the airport, there were trees all along the road, and kinda through and above the tops of the trees, we could see the tail of this airplane, a C-41, and it had an American flag painted on the tail.
And everybody's poking everybody else, "Hey, look at that flag!" Now the action is from two things. One, you've been in the dark, and everything has been dirty and brown, and you haven't seen color. And red, white, and blue, I mean, it is outstanding because of its color, but only because of what's changed in you, about your feelings about your country. So then we got out to the airport, got off the buses, and got in line. There was a table. They read your name, and you went off in the order you were shot down, and there was somebody there to take you by the arm. Some of them were nurses.

These guys got a lot of courage to fly into North Vietnam. Anyway, they escort you over there and put you on that airplane. From when you take off, it's kinda like victory day, you know? Everybody's cheering, and happy, and celebrating. It's a feeling that's overwhelming. I can't describe it. A couple of things, on that flight, we hadn't been on it very long. One of my roommates that had been with me when we were in that eight-man room handed me this letter.
He said, "Read this." I opened the letter up, and it had a bracelet in it, and it had Ken's name on it, and his shoot down date. And I read the letter, and it said, "Dear Ken, you don't know us, but you're part of our family. We've been praying for you, and we're so glad you're comin' home."
And I'm thinking, "Wow. People you don't even know care?" How in the heck did they get that letter on that airplane? That was pretty impressive.
So the airplane landed in the Philippines at Clark Air Base. It was a long wait. They lowered the tail down so you could see what was goin' on out there, and there was a big crowd. And I don't know how everybody else felt, but I have stage fright. It was like I've been in this solitary world, and now I'm gonna step out onto this stage?
So they introduced each of us as we got off the airplane, and my heart beating fast and they'd announce your name, and the crowd would roar, "Welcome home!" It was crazy.

Interviewer

There's a picture of you running to your daughter or she's running to you. Where did that happen?

Jay Hess

So we landed first at the Philippines, and then we got some medical treatment and a uniform. And then we flew to Hawaii to refuel and stopped a little while there. Then we each went to bases that were close to kinda where we lived, and I went to California to outside of San Bernardino, Hamilton, I think was the name of it. And that's where we met our families. That was in California.

Interviewer

You said your feelings about your country had evolved.

Jay Hess

I say it this way. I went to Vietnam a fighter pilot. That's what I thought. I came back a born-again American. I didn't really know whether the war was right or wrong. I just knew my job was I got the orders to go.

I didn't like the anti-war protestors. When I'd live with the Vietnamese interrogator and see their perspective and understand where they come from, they have never seen a picture of America that was anything but a slum, a dirty dock, a homeless person, a trash area, and things that are totally untypical in America. Their minds were warped like this. These guards study English, and then some of 'em get pretty good, and after they get that way, they start tryin' to convert you to communism. It's wonderful.
Here's a story. "In America, the enlisted people are exploited. They can't have bananas. In Vietnam, everybody can have bananas."
I mean, where did he get this line of story? Well, I think they kinda capitalize that. In the annex, they did have a banana tree growin' there. I think that's the whole thing that comes from being a POW is a sense of appreciation. You don't think about being appreciative of a soft bed, hot water, not being hungry, not being with your family or friends. But those things really become in focus in the loneliness and separation of the POW experience.
And then it goes all farther than this, and I don't know quite how to put it together, but history used to be the most boring thing. If there was a class I'd sleep through, or think about somethin', be lookin' out the window in school, it

was history. A sense of appreciation for the greatness of our leaders. I read George Washington's addresses, and wow. We were lucky to have guys like that. Even the Vietnamese liked George Washington because he was a revolutionary with the Revolutionary War. They kind of felt like that was their job.

Interviewer

Are there other LDS people being held captive? How did you cope spiritually?

Jay Hess

Well, there were two other LDS that I knew of and made contact with in the POW camp. When we were together in

Camp Unity after the raid in Son Tay, I was in room two, and around the corner in room three was Jay Jensen and

Larry Chesley. They knew I was LDS, and we communicated through the tap code and sometimes, it was flash.

The tap code was a very important part of the development in our POW situation, and that's simply to put the alphabet in a box, five by five. So we had to leave out a letter. That was K, so we put the alphabet in this order: A, B, C, D, E; F, G, H, I, J; K, L, M, N, O, P; Q, R, S, T, U; V, W, X, Y, Z. So the letter was identified by two taps. One said the row; one said the column. So A is in the first row, first column, so that's tap, tap. And Z is in the fifth row, fifth column, so that's two taps of five. So that could be flashed, or tapped with your foot, or any other way you can see it. So there was some time after official communication between room two and three that Larry sent me this message.
He said, "I got a letter from my mother, and she said it's conference time, and she's mentioned who was presiding."
And it was like, you're in another world. There is nothing common about you. It would be if you could see the moon or the stars, but you're locked up, you don't see the sky.
But yeah, this was probably the first touch that I'd had that was part of my world, and it was very touching. We were together at Dogpatch. This was a small camp, and they were showing us an anti-war demonstration movie. Those guys snuck out of their group they were supposed to be with, and I snuck out of mine, and we got together. That's the about the extent of the contact.
But I had one very moving experience. I'm lying in room two one day, and we had a big king-sized bed, 25 on one side; 25 on the other. It was cement. We're getting little brave about this time, the rules were you don't make any noise; you don't talk and all that.
But I hear these guys singing over in room three beyond room two, and I kinda recognize the music. It slowly comes back, but I can kind of say the words but it's years out of my experience. But anyway, this was a group of guys that were practicing for their choir for church, which I don't wanna give the impression it was like, something we did. I mean, this thing caused a riot, but they're practicing, and the words are from this LDS hymn, "Count Your Many Blessings."
And so you go through the words "when upon life's bellows you are tempest tossed, when you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, count your many blessings."
Yeah, we were alive while many of our friends weren't. We were more fortunate than many of the POWs that were in the South. I remember thinking, "Man, I've heard that song in church. There must another LDS guy somewhere."
Well, in reality, there was another Navy guy down in room four, Jack Rollins, was teaching these guys this song. So then I knew there were three other. When I got home, Jay Heslop and Dell Van Orden, who were editors for the*Deseret News*, interviewed the LDS POWs, each one of them. So I found out that there were others. I don't know what that whole number is. Maybe eight; a pretty small number.

Interviewer

Were you allowed letters from home?

Jay Hess

Yep. Well, the first time I got a letter from home was after we'd moved out of the annex to this new camp they'd

built. Whether it was Hope or Faith--I don't wanna mix it up.

The guard said, "Come on out."
And I went out in the other room, and there was an interrogator there, and I see he had a stack of letters.
He says, "Would you like a letter?" "Yep."
He shuffled through it, and I could see that he had one with my name on it, but I didn't recognize the handwriting.
Now some of the guys would get letters from anonymous people that just wanted to do something. They didn't

know 'em and they just felt sorry about POWs.
Well, I thought, "Oh, man. I'm getting one of those." But I opened it up, and it started out, "Dear Dad." So it was from my oldest son. It said, "We all miss you, and I got my Eagle last Sunday."
Wow. I started to smile. So we couldn't keep the letters; they just let you read 'em quickly, and then they took 'em back because they suspected code messages and other stuff in there. You knew you had to read it quickly, and that was it.
But I went back to the room. I said, "Hey, guys! I got this letter! My son got his Eagle!" Everybody's cheering, "Yeah! That's great!"
And I'm still smiling. And after a while, it hurts 'cause I haven't smiled. Those smile muscles were gone. I smiled all day, and my face hurt so bad. I think I smiled for two days before I went back to normal. I can't remember how many. Not many. I got two in one day. That one, and another time, so I think there was three times I got letters.

Interviewer

Some people were given a hard time, and others weren't.

Jay Hess

It was Thanksgiving time and somebody tapped through the walls and came up with this little thing, "As we pause to reflect on this Thanksgiving Day of the many blessings that have come our way. For having lived in a country so fine where justice prevails over evil and crime. For these things we are thankful." I don't remember it all. "But for being more fortunate than many a friend, for just being alive, while their lives end, for these things, we are thankful." I just always say thank God for the Marines. Being an Air Force pilot, when I came back to the base, I took a shower and crawled into an air conditioned trailer and went to the club to eat. The guys on the ground, they were in the mud.

Interviewer

As POWs, some men really got hit on hard by the interrogators and guards, and others, not so. Where did you fall into that and what made those other men that were such targets, targets?

Jay Hess

There is a common hardship. If you're the senior, you take command, and you feel a whole different sense of the burden. I mean, you face the enemy and the other guys are in back of you. Sometimes, to break down the recognition of the rank, the junior guy would also be the one to get hammered. So there was something in the individual makeup that puts you into conflict, too. If you spit in the face, it's gonna come back to you. If you were too soft, they're gonna take advantage of you; they're gonna think they got an easy sale here. Then there's just the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. So one of the really bad things is some guys came from Cuba and pulled out a group of these POWs, and they were merciless. Guys lost their life in the Cuban program.

Interviewer

These were Cuban interrogators?

Jay Hess

Yeah.

Interviewer

Why do you think they were they were?

Jay Hess

Well, because they're a partner in crime. They sent sugar to North Vietnam. As a matter of fact, there was a couple of days where all we got to eat was sugar. But yeah, they were part of the opposing force. That's the communist brotherhood.

Interviewer

So some men were just pulled out to satisfy --

Jay Hess

Yeah, and then those guys, while they were there, "We'll break you." Yeah, they're really bad. I wasn't part of the program, so I don't have any stories, but they drove guys crazy.

Interviewer

Have you experienced some PTSD from your experiences as a POW?

Jay Hess

Today, that five and a half years of my life is like, I read a book about it. But that wasn't typical for a couple of years. I mean, everything I did was a contrast.

If I took a shower, "Wow! The water's warm." If I ate a meal, it was like, "Wow! I'm eating food I like." I can open the door and go wherever I want. Everything was in contrast.
But at some point, it just all wears off, and you become completely normal. Well, maybe not completely, but yeah, I don't think about--maybe once in a while I have a POW dream. It's like I'm held down. I can't get up. It's been so long since I've had anything like that.

Interviewer

Did your LDS faith see you through? What did that do for you in that experience?

Jay Hess

Well, I gotta kinda look at it this way. Being shot down in North Vietnam is one bad thing to have happen to you. How are you ever gonna get out of there? I got shot down in '67. The war had been goin' on since '61. That's six years, and there is no end in sight. Well, a miracle. It's the only thing. You gotta believe in miracles, so I think that's kind of a religious thing. With LDS, God isn't too far away. You don't have to go back 2,000 years ago to know that Jesus was. You don't have to go back to Moses or Abraham. Joseph Smith had an experience that I think it affects members of the church. But it's now that God talks to people, and He's there. It doesn't mean that's isolated because one of the other guys that I knew before comes back, and he says, "God just really came booming through." That's kind of from another person's point-of-view, but that's a good way to say it.

Interviewer

How do you feel about the Vietnamese people, and what did you learn from them?

Jay Hess

I feel like this whole thing was a lot like a play. My part was to play POW; their part was to play guards. We all were on stage at the same time, and we never left.

The guards were there as long as I was. Of course, they were gone, and they had shifts, but they didn't go very far away. Another thing was that they had been in that war a lot longer than I had. The only animosity is a reaction to their animosity, and most of the time, they're not showing it. So sometimes, the guards were really upset, and

they'd take it out on ya.
But most of the time, they were just normal people doing a job. Sometimes, they even had a compassionate stretch.
We kept saying, "Give us something to do."
Well, once in a while, they'd give you a magazine or something they'd got from Russia or the "Vietnam Courier," which was their story of the war. But being that there was nothin' to do, we kept saying, "Give us something."
And then we kept saying, "Well, what do we want?" Well, the decision was, well, let's ask for two books: a dictionary and a Bible. It didn't come. Well, it did in a piece meal way. We got a Bible for 30 minutes and one person could copy out of it once a week. That went on for a couple of months.
But then, one night a guard just comes by and hands me a Bible and says, "You can have it overnight." He was kinda sticking his neck out doing that. So a group of POWs went back a couple of years ago. They wanted to go back and see where they'd been shot down.
The guard was a girl in her 20s. Her father had been wounded in the war. She took them on the trip up to Dogpatch; took 'em from Ha Noi up to there, and she was always asking questions. They didn't know if she was a suspicious person or not, but anyway, they developed quite an affection for her as time grew on.
And one of my friends invited her to come to the United States for we were gonna have a reunion. It was pretty tough for her to get all the paperwork, but John McCain worked on it.
And then the first ambassador we had to North Vietnam after was one of our guys who had been a POW with us. So the two of them worked together, got her paperwork, and she came to a reunion we had a few years ago in Dallas. Well, this is somebody you'd like to hug. It's just funny. You see that a little bit with the pilots from World War II, there's kind of a brotherhood in the flying game. You feel like you've been in the same war, even though you're on a different side.

Interviewer

Explain how you did the tap code through the walls.

Jay Hess

So you bang your elbow on the wall, or something, so that you could get your attention. So sometimes, you have to magnify that by putting a blanket around your head, or a cup up to your ear, or something. But you just tap on the wall*(taps).* That's G. This is B. *(taps)* U. *(taps)* God bless you. That's the way it ended.

Interviewer

How did your family, when you were held captive, find out where you were?

Jay Hess

I wrote a letter, and they got the letter, and my status was changed from missing in action to POW.

Interviewer

Anything we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

Jay Hess

Several years ago, Helene Maw, who at that time lived in Kamas, was interviewing people who had unusual war stories. And the reason she was doing this was because she just felt people didn't understand the price of freedom, and so that's kinda what she wanted to do. So she asked if she could hear my story, and so I told it to her.

And when she got around to titling the book, she had had a conversation with Chase Nielsen, who was a POW of World War II on Doolittle Raid in China. And she's asking Chase how he feels about all this. So Chase says, "Well, I love America, and I love freedom, and I don't think we did this in vain. And freedom is for those who defend it." And so that's what she put the title of her book. I think that's an important point. Freedom is for those willing to defend it."

Interviewer

Chase Nielsen was a big friend of ours. We all loved him.

Jay Hess

Oh, he was an interesting guy, wasn't he?

Interviewer

You mentioned that when you arrived here at the airport you saw your little girl. You mentioned she was three when you left. Even if you had mixed feelings about family or thoughts had changed, can you describe personal emotion there?

Jay Hess

Well, it's a big thing to think about your family, so from letters in Vietnam, you're thinking about what to say. There is a sense of affection that really deepens with that separation. So over at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, I had the first chance to talk on the telephone. Man, it just takes your breath way. It was overwhelming. So the excitement and anticipation of landing in California, you look the crowd over, and finally you see them. You just wanna explode and run, and grab, and hug. It's the warmest, overwhelming feeling to touch, to talk, just to be with them.

Interviewer

When you saw the affection the crowds had for you, what went through your head?

Jay Hess

It's like, "How can this be?"

It's amazing, I got a whole jar that big around, full of bracelets that people sent me. And I still get them. People say, "Man, I was going through my drawer, and I saw this, and I was gonna give it back to you when you got home, but I somehow didn't. I was in high school back then."
So anyway, there is a little bit of reservation about all this because there's something about home. I'm not home with my family. I wanna get there. So it was a couple of weeks later we fly into Salt Lake.
The kids had gone back 'cause they were in school, but my wife's with me, and so we fly into Salt Lake. Well, my wife belonged to the Tabernacle Choir at that time, and I think a large number of the choir was there to sing and welcome me home. The airport was jammed. That was overwhelming. It's embarrassing. It's like, I'm a hero.
So we make a drive through Bountiful and go up to Farmington where I grew up, and I'm still not home, but there's a big crowd. It's crazy to me because most people came home from Vietnam and were not treated well and I am treated like royalty. So the parade's over, the meeting at the courthouse, and we go back to Bountiful to the home. Yellow ribbons on the trees, and the door, and you finally put your foot in the door, and you're home with your family. It's like, "I made it."