



DON L. HEILIGER

VIETNAM VETERAN ENDURED MORE THAN 6 YEARS AS PRISONER OF WAR

September 21, 2018 | By Chris Bucher

In an instant, Don Heiliger's life changed forever. Heiliger, a Madison native, said he was just trying to stay out of the military when he joined the inactive standby reserve shortly after graduating college. Instead, he found himself enduring more than six years of torture and beatings as a Prisoner of War in one of Vietnam's most notorious prisons.

Heiliger was on a mission during the Vietnam War as an F-105 pilot in the 333rd Fighter Squadron when his plane went down. He landed in the jungle and was captured and held against his will by several Communist cadres. It was at that moment that he saw his life flash in front of his eyes.

"I was convinced that that was my time to go," Heiliger said during a 1999 interview for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum's Oral Histories Collection. "Once you're past that, actually, the fear goes, I think. I wasn't afraid anymore."

Heiliger spent much of his time in captivity at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, the same place hundreds of American POWs, including John McCain, were held. But by staying true to the "Honor Code," and with the help of other POWs, Heiliger persevered and made it home safely.

"I feel a deep devotion to this country," Heiliger said. "You can never truly feel how great this country is until you have missed it."

Following his retirement as a Colonel, Heiliger got his master's degree in international affairs from George Washington University before working for the government, serving as the vice president of a D.C.-based marketing firm, finding success as a real estate agent and then as a bus driver. He also represented the Stoughton area for six terms on the Dane County Board beginning in 1992.

Heiliger remained active with his church in Madison, serving as its choir director with his wife, Cheryl, as the organist. He died March 23, 2016 and was survived by his six children and six grandchildren. But his remarkable story of tenacity and determination continue to be told to this day.

"I feel a deep devotion to this country. You can never truly feel how great this country is until you have missed it."

A Life-Changing Mission

Heiliger graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1958 and entered the Air Force a few months later, having been an ROTC graduate at the school. After many years of serving, he attended pilot training in 1964, training to fly F-105s and then was stationed in southeast Asia during the war.

On his 11th mission as an Air Force pilot, Heiliger was alongside Col. Ben Pollard carrying six 750-pound bombs. It was a night mission, and their target was a railroad marshalling yard near the Town of Kep, Heiliger said.

As they approached their target, they noticed a strobe locked onto the plane with something hitting its backend. Pollard alerted Heiliger of a fire in the cockpit, and both men ejected. Heiliger estimated that it took him about 20 minutes to drift down toward the dark jungle below, ending with him getting stuck in a tree.

"They always told us, 'Don't fool around in the trees at night,'" he said, insisting his plan was to stay put until the sun came up.

Once daylight finally hit, Heiliger freed himself and climbed a hill to oversee a village in the distance. After a few hours, though, a large group of civilians from the town approached his location. He was spotted by the group, who took everything except his underwear and boots and escorted him to the village.

Heiliger described the civilians as "friendly" until two Communist cadres arrived and riled them up. He was moved to a hut, where he was threatened and held at gunpoint. Then, at about 2 a.m., Heiliger was awoken and rushed through the

jungle. They blindfolded him and loaded him into a Jeep on its way to Hoa Lo Prison, better known during the war as the “Hanoi Hilton.” It was there that he finally saw Pollard for the first time since their in-air emergency. However, it was also the last time the two would see each other for the next five years, he said.

Life in Captivity

Screw cuffs were attached to Heiliger’s wrists, and u-shaped irons were fastened to his ankles. He suffered frequent beatings at the hands of Vietnamese guards seeking pertinent information. Through all of that, though, he said that he stayed true to the Honor Code — revealing nothing more than name, rank and serial number.

Heiliger estimated that there were about 337

total prisoners at the “Hanoi Hilton,” with him being No. 150. He communicated with others through walls using matrix tap codes, sign language and writing with ashes on toilet paper.

All the while he was held prisoner, Heiliger’s family in Madison was led to believe that he was either killed or missing in action. During the six years in captivity, Heiliger’s wife divorced him and moved to Ohio. It wasn’t until 1969 that he was finally able to send brief letters notifying his loved ones that he was alive.

Going back home

On February 12, 1973, as a result of the Paris Peace Accords

signed weeks prior, Heiliger was informed that he and about 20 other prisoners were going to be set free. But staying true to the Honor Code, Heiliger said the group refused to leave because prior arrangements stated the order which prisoners were supposed to leave.

“We said, ‘We’re not going,’” Heiliger said. “One night they brought in heavies with automatic weapons and said, ‘If you’re not going we’re shooting you.’”

It finally took a senior official to “order” the group to go home, and they were transported by bus to the airport. They would soon be back on American soil and reunited with their families.

“I know some of you don’t want to go, I know some of you won’t go,” Heiliger said as to what the official told them. “He says, ‘So I am ordering you home.’ So I was ordered to come home. I always thought



Wisconsin Veterans Museum Collection

Don Heiliger gets pinned for his service time during a ceremony.

that was kind of special.”

Heiliger arrived back in America on March 9, 1973 at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, where his parents and children anxiously awaited his arrival. For his service, Heiliger was awarded two Purple Heart medals, a Vietnam Service Medal, a Distinguished Service Medal and a Meritorious Service Medal.

Heiliger’s incredible story of survival is one of more than 2,000 readily available online through the Wisconsin Veterans Museum’s Oral Histories Collection. Visit bit.ly/WVMOraHistory to access the database.