Jenny Board: Okay, this is Jenny Board at the Texas Tech Archive. It is about 8:40 in the morning at May the 23, 2002 and I’m interviewing with Mr. McDaniel in Alexandria, Virginia. Is that correct sir?

Eugene McDaniel: Yes, retired Navy Captain, Eugene Red McDaniel.

JB: And you’re in Alexandria, Virginia?

EM: Correct.

JB: Did I just say that?

EM: Sure.

JB: I’m reading off a list that I had not read before. Well, sir why don’t we get started with a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, your early years.

EM: I was born in a rural community in Craven County, North Carolina, Newburn, North Carolina. I was the oldest of eight children. I was the son of sharecroppers. My father was a sharecropper and I grew up on a farm.

JB: Your early experiences in your childhood, you talk a little bit about it in your book, but what do you remember in terms of, World War II, did your father, or did you have any other family members who served in World War II?

EM: I had a couple of uncles that were serving in the Army, and I remember vividly the start of World War II in 1941. I remember I was, we had radio at the time, listened to the radio and heard about that, and shortly after that we moved from one
location to another location where I grew up, in Kingston, North Carolina, from about the
fourth grade, in fact my family still lives there, even today, but I moved there in about the
fourth grade, a farm that kind of bordered the city, around 20,000. My father was very
fond of athletics and he gave me the option of plowing or playing, and I played, and was
able to get a scholarship to college and I was one of the first in my family to ever go to
college. I did that through athletics.

JB: You were a baseball player, is that correct? Baseball and basketball?
EM: Pardon?
JB: You were a baseball and a basketball player?
EM: Yes, in high school I played all three sports, basketball, baseball, football
and in college I played basketball, baseball.
JB: Okay, what do you remember sir, in your childhood, in your college years,
about the Cold War and worldwide events?
EM: The Cold War didn’t have any real strong feelings on it. I just accepted
what the government said, our position and I kind of supported our government’s
position, was interested in maintaining our freedom, but never had any real keen interest.
JB: Tell me about your decision to go into the military.
EM: Well, I graduated from college, Elan College in North Carolina, now Elan
University, and I had been able to stay in school through my grades because you have to
have certain grades to stay in, and I was able to get deferments but when I graduated I
was eligible for the draft, and when I graduated there was a coaching opportunity which
opened up and so I actually coached for one year before I came into the Navy, but I knew
I had to become a member of the Armed Forces, and it was either to be drafted or to join
the Navy, so I joined the Navy to become a naval aviator, because it would give me a
chance to finish the school year, finish my coaching year, and then I could go in and
become a naval aviator, even though I’d never flown an aircraft, I felt flying was an
extension of athletics and I could adapt to that. Fortunately, I did, and enjoyed becoming
a naval aviator.
JB: Tell me about your initial training in the military.
EM: Initial training was in Pensacola, went to Pensacola for about one year, for
pre-flight and then basic flight training and then I went form there to Corpus Christi,
Texas, and was married in between Pensacola and Corpus, married in 1956 and got my wings in October on 1956.

JB: That's interesting. This is coming just a few years after the Korean War experience and the code of conduct came into effect in ’55 or ’56?

EM: Pardon.

JB: The code of conduct, I believe it came into effect in ’55 or ’56.

EM: I think so, yes. I was familiar with the code of conduct, of course when I went in, and through the years, the code of conduct changed somewhat, but it wasn’t, of course when I came in, of course, I was very aware of the Korean War, because the Korean War was going on while I was in college, and I was able to get a deferment to finish college while the Korean War was still ongoing.

JB: Do you remember anything in your training, your instructors talking about the Korean War experience, telling you perhaps, lessons they had learned from the POW experience there?

EM: Not from the POW experience, because it never crossed my mind that I would become a POW, but, yes, we had some of our flight instructors were Korean veterans, and would relay some of their experiences on to us as students.

JB: Okay, well from Pensacola where did you go after that?

EM: From Pensacola, I went to Corpus Christi, Texas to Cavness Field, where I began training in the A-1 Skyraider and, of course in between Pensacola and Corpus I was married, had a new wife, who I’d known and dated for some six years, and we went to Corpus and I was there for about a period of four months, and then I got my wings and came to Virginia Beach, Virginia, Naval Air Station Oceania, where I stayed for some fourteen years as my squadron, became a flight instructor and went from there to a ship, and aircraft carrier out of Norfolk. So I spent a lot of years, in and around Virginia Beach, in fact I went there in 1956, and moved for the first time in 1975, when I went to San Francisco, Alameda to take command of a Navy ship, the U.S.S. Niagara Falls.

JB: And that was in what year, sir, sorry?

EM: 1975

JB: '75.

EM: After having been released from captivity in 1973.
JB: Okay, well let’s go to your deployment to Vietnam; tell us little bit about that and how that came about.

EM: Well, in 1966, in November of 1966, my squadron, the A-35, which was flying the A-6 intruder, went aboard a West Coast carrier, the U.S.S. Enterprise, and deployed for Southeast Asia, and deployed in October of 1966, of course was shot down in May of 1967, so I was shot down right at the end of my ship’s deployment.

JB: What do you remember about the atmosphere when you were leaving, the feeling of your fellow Navy pilots as you were being shipped off, the feelings leaving family members behind, what were the general feelings there?

EM: Well, it’s very sad. You’re going into combat for a period of six months, and of course, you’re going with a group of pilots who are highly trained and you have great respect for their ability and feel comfortable, but it’s also sad leaving your family behind because you’re gone for a long time, and you know, into a combat situation, but perhaps wondering whether you would get back or not. We left Oceania and our families came to see us off. We left and went to Southeast Asia, had a six month deployment before I was shot down and I had a dubious distinction of being my squadron’s only loss on that crew, so, along with my navigator, Lieutenant James Kenneth Patterson, who is still missing from that mission.

JB: Tell me about some of your experiences in the six months before you were captured.

EM: Well, I flew eighty-one missions, shot down on my eight-first, and I kept a daily log of all my flights. When I’d come back I’d jot down some highlights of that flight, and I’ve never gone back to look at that. I still have that. I’ve never gone back to look at it but I did keep a log and wrote little comments about each individual flight, and it was a very exhilarating experience as you know flying across a country that is considered and enemy and being fired at, and of course, the A-6 was an aircraft we used to go in, in all weather and at night. We had a very sophisticated system, and we’d go in as individual aircraft for most of our missions, but when I was shot down in May 1967 I was flying in a group of twenty-six aircraft, so we were flying, a visual flight with a large number of aircraft.

JB: What were the circumstances of your shoot down?
EM: We were twenty-six aircraft going downtown Hanoi for the first time in about six months, and while dodging the fourth missile fired at my aircraft, and the missile looks like a telephone pole coming up, about Mach 1.5, but if you can see the missile, it has a great plume of smoke, and you can see the missile coming up, but if you can see it, you can outmaneuver it and stall it in, but while I was dodging the fourth missile, I was hit by the fifth which I never saw. And on impact the aircraft began to burn, began to accelerate out of control, and we rode the aircraft for about 70 seconds to reach a mountain range, to give us a chance to escape and evade, and my navigator landed on the near side of the mountain, and I came down on the far side.

JB: Well, since we’ve gotten this far, let’s go ahead and talk about your escape tactics when you actually ejected from your plane, what happened after your ejection?

EM: I’m sorry; I didn’t hear the last part.

JB: I’m sorry, just what happened after you ejected?

EM: After I ejected, I fell from a tree, about forty feet from a tree and I unknowingly crushed two vertebrae in my back and could hardly move, had a hard time moving around, was partially paralyzed. I was on the ground for twenty-six hours before I was captured. And on the second day, May 20, the enemy came up and they found me and I was taken to Hanoi two days away where I began my six years.

JB: Well, let’s talk about your initial treatment, your initial interaction with the Vietnamese population, on a ship I imagine you had not seen maybe any, had you had any contact with the Vietnamese population?

EM: Well, after I was captured I was taken two days away to Hanoi by truck, and en route to Hanoi we were placed on exhibit at various military bases. To rally their people, they would take us out and show the Vietnamese people that here was an American pilot we’d captured and sometimes they would throw stones at us, or sticks or maybe take a whack at us but by the end of two days we ended in the Hanoi Hilton, where we began our initial interrogation and torture, for a couple weeks for military information. Torture was not a daily occurrence; I was tortured very severely three times in my six years of captivity. Initially, for about a two-week period, and then in 1969 after an escape attempt by fellow prisoners and then another attempt after we were caught communicating, I was tortured. So only three times severely over a period of six years, so
it was not a daily occurrence, but it was a very brutal, in fact most prisoners were tortured after 1966.

JB: You say after you were captured and on your way to Hanoi, were you with any other prisoners at that time.

EM: No, we were alone. They would always keep you isolated. They captured my navigator, I since learned that they put him in a parallel prison system, because he was very valuable because of his electronic training. But the enemy as a rule, would separate a crew, if you were a two-man crew, when it was shot down they would separate you, so you couldn’t get make up a story, have each individual one, and it would keep you isolated, even in Hanoi they would keep you isolated.

JB: Right, tell me about this parallel system. What do you know about that?

EM: Well, just what’s in public records, public records is that they weren’t in, they United States was tracking prisoners, in eleven different camps throughout the war, tracking Americans in eleven camps, but when the enemy released us in 1973, they released 571 of us, but we all lived in only six of the eleven camps, but the question begs is, where are the Americans that were in the other five camps, and that was a parallel system where they were shipping prisoners to other countries, in exchange for military equipment that was supporting the war effort, they would give the other countries technology in terms of American pilots.

JB: And you talk at one point in your book, I was curious about this, about some prisoners in the later years, being shipped to a camp close to the Chinese border.

EM: Yes, they were in 1972, I think, just prior to our release, they shipped about half of us to the Chinese borders, and it seemed to be the younger pilots were shipped up there, but also the sick and injured and it never made sense as to why they would send younger pilots because it was a tough trip, but why would they include some of the more seriously ill people, or injured people, but they did that, and they lived in a camp called the Dog Patch, up near the Chinese border. And I think they separated us, in case there had been another Son Tay raid, that they would at least would not get half of them. I think that was the purpose in that move.

JB: That seems to be their reasoning. Well, you’re initial experiences in the Hanoi Hilton, initially during interrogation, they were after military information, can you
tell me about that, some of the information they wanted and how they might go about trying to get it?

EM: Well, they would want to know initially, what targets are going to be bombed tomorrow -- and of course, we didn’t know that, they deliberately kept that from us, so we couldn’t give it in case we were shot down – what type weapons were you using, what are the plans next week, and of course we didn’t know that. It was almost, we were in a no win situation. They thought we had the intelligence but we did not, so it was torture primarily for military information, and occasionally they would try to get propaganda statements from various pilots.

JB: Okay, propaganda statements, was there every any, I’m curious about any concerted effort to try and win you over to Communism, they wanted you . . .

EM: Oh, yes there was a continual effort to do that by giving us propaganda to read, that we didn’t read, but you have to remember we were a very sophisticated group of prisoners. Most of us were aviators, college educated, so we were a more sophisticated group of prisoners than you had in the Korean War when it was young, seventeen, eighteen year old, right off the farm, and we were just, had enough education to know what they were trying to do, and they were not successful, they were successful in a couple of places, but for the most part it was just a futile effort.

JB: They gave you reading material, and I noticed at one point in your book you talked about them giving you a couple of books that you refused to read. Was there ever any effort for them to force you to maybe write about what you read, discuss what you read?

EM: Yes, there was. When I was tortured pretty severely in 1969 after an escape attempt, I was forced to make propaganda statements, and I was supposed to make a tape after days of torture, and I did, but I did it in a very stilted way. I said considering my present circumstances, I am making this statement under duress, but this is my statement because I can’t take any more, that type thing, so it was of very little value to the Vietnamese, but they had the ability to force anybody to do whatever they wanted. You know, it might take one day, a week, a month, or a year, or a decade, they had it and they would use it, so they were able to get whatever they wanted from any of us, it was just a matter of how long could you hold out in torture.
JB: Right, the interrogators, can you describe their behavior, how they might behave in an interview?

EM: Yes, well the interrogators would do exactly what the leadership told them to do, ask the questions they wanted them to ask, if they told them to smile, they smiled, if they told them to frown, they frowned, and the interrogators were doing just what the system required them to do. They were really, what you would call good soldiers, for the Communist system.

JB: And those who seemed, can you talk about, and I’m not sure if you’d want to talk about this, but about any differences that you saw in those who seemed more susceptible to, accepting the Communist party line, versus those who took a harder line against it?

EM: Well, the enemy had the uncanny ability to take a group of men and ferret out the weak ones and put them in leadership roles, and we had a cross-section of the American people, we had strong resisters, we had moderate resisters, we had weak resisters, we were just a large representation of the American people, and some people did better than others. They were able to get to handful of people who would do all the propaganda things they asked them for, would make tapes, anti-war statements, and give them the propaganda they were looking for, but those numbers were very few. For the most part, I would say, perhaps ninety-five percent of the people did what they were supposed to do to the best of their ability.

JB: Right. Well, let’s move on to talk about health care in the camp system. How would you evaluate the Vietnamese medical treatment of prisoners?

EM: Medical treatment was very poor; they didn’t have it for their own people, so we didn’t get it. A few high profile prisoners were taken to hospitals, but for the most part they’d have a camp doctor that might come around once every three weeks. And I moved in with a young man who was critically wounded, Bill Metzger, who had several large open wounds, and a broken right leg, and I moved in to take care of him, because his wounds were life threatening and mine were not. But about every three weeks the doctor would come around, perhaps to bandage his open wound, which would be maybe sixteen inches long, four inches deep, with the bone exposed, so the medicine was very primitive but they didn’t have it for their own people, so we didn’t get it. To illustrate
that, in 1971 I had a tooth pulled, I had a molar that had become abscessed and for
eighteen months it was very painful. We were getting three cigarettes a day, of course I
was a non-smoker, but I took the cigarettes and I smoked them because I thought the
height of optimism would be a prisoner expecting to have lung cancer. But we’d take
tobacco from the cigarette and put it down into the cavity, to deaden the nerve, but after
eighteen months I decided to have it pulled, and I went up to have it pulled, expecting to
have Novocain, but they didn’t have it and I didn’t get it and I had a tooth pulled without
any sedatives. So that was really a very painful experience, so that kind of illustrates, the
fact is they didn’t have it. Had they had it, we might have gotten it, because we were
very valuable to them, they had to keep us alive, because we were of more value alive
than we were dead, because they could use to negotiate at the end of the war, with us.

JB: Were you aware of any feelings by other prisoners perhaps, that maybe it
would be better to avoid seeing a Vietnamese doctor, or being taken to the hospital
because they were worried about what might happen at a hospital or with a doctor?

EM: No, I don’t know. I think we kind of went with the flow, if it was available
we went, if it was not available we didn’t have any choice and it was no big deal, if we
needed it and it was offered we accepted it.

JB: Okay, medical conditions, what were the primary, just your typical, some of
the typical medical conditions that men suffered?

EM: Well, we lived in the elements, if it were 40 degrees outside, our room
temperature was 40 degrees because it was ambient temperature, there were no windows
in the cells. I think our major enemy though was heat, because it got very hot, and
sometimes in the cell block, the temperature would get up to 125, 130 degrees in an
enclosed cell block and we would have heat rash over our entire body, even the Afro-
Americans that we had, would have heat rash. It was a major problem and sometimes we
would take, in the height of summer we would take water and put it on the concrete that
we slept on and sleep directly on the concrete in the nude, to get the coolness from the
concrete. So I think heat was probably our major enemy, but again time and boredom,
you know whiling away the minutes, the hours, the weeks, the months, the years, seeing
just what, in something that we could do within a two minute period, we’d stretch out
over an hour because we had nothing else to do except kind of while away the time. The
major medical problems would be, the food was adequate, never good, but it was
adequate, we described it as a vitamin free diet, but it was able to keep us alive. And I
think dysentery was a major factor. It was never was a big problem to me, but a lot of
people would have dysentery, days after days upon days, and would lose a lot of body
weight. Some people had malaria, there was some hepatitis, and occasionally we would
get pink eye infections and the Vietnamese would always blame the Chinese for that, for
some reason.

JB: Did you see, were the Vietnamese population, the way I understand it, most
of these medical conditions were normal to them and so their response was not too
forthcoming with any medical care because these were common, is that the fact?

EM: Because we were what?

JB: These were common kind of ailments for the Vietnamese.

EM: Yes, that’s true. Some of the things we had were things that they lived with
daily, but for the most part they just didn’t have it, and the medications that they had,
many of them would be outdated in the other country and they were given to the
Vietnamese and of course, they still used them, and they might be effective or they might
not be.

JB: Well, let’s talk about, if you don’t mind, we could talk about, maybe the code
of conduct and leadership within the camps.

EM: Yes, we had a very strong, we had very strong leadership. In fact, I think
that was the reason we were able to survive because we had a strong chain of command.

What we did was take the best of the Air Force and best of the Navy, because most of us
were Navy pilots or Air Force pilots, and we took best of the two services and combined
into a chain of command. We took the best of the Navy and the best of the Air Force. As
an example, the Air Force have, you know in the Navy, we have a CO and XO, the Air
Force has a flight commander and we took the Navy CO, XO, number one and number
two jobs, and we had flights which the Air Force has because they had flight
commanders. And we operated, if we had a cell of fifty people we would have maybe six
flights of people with leadership, and we had very strong leadership from both the Navy
and the Air Force. The key to our survival was loyalty. Loyalty works both ways. It
works up a chain of command and down the chain of command, but we had that, we had
good leadership, and we were very strongly behind the leadership and we were able to
have a good strong chain of command, which was necessary to survive.

JB: Were there every any instances of conflict among senior officers when it
came to interpreting?

EM: Yes, there would be, in fact we had, the enemy had the ability to ferret out
our weak senior officers, and put them in a room where there was senior to be leaders,
but when that happened we would just bypass that senior officer. We would respect him
if he were a Navy captain, or an Air Force colonel, he’d get the courtesies of being a
senior officer, but he had no say in running that chain of command, we just bypassed him
to the next man who was senior who was a good strong leader. We had a few cases of
that but for the most part, that was something the enemy would do, bring the weak ones
into the system and of course we would be aware of that and there were just a very
handful of, there were only a few people, just a handful that became a little small group,
very anti-American, very pro-Vietnamese, but it was not a large group, I would say five
to seven people, maximum, which is pretty good out of a system that has around six
hundred people in it.

JB: Very good, yes. What about junior officers not following, or not following
the command of senior officers, in a sense, maybe in some cases, that they wanted to take
a harder line, was that ever a problem and what were some instances?

EM: Well, it was. What we would do is just bypass those men, in the leadership
role, they had no leadership role, but they got the respect of their rank, and when we
came back charges would be filed against them, and of course nothing was ever done,
because when we were released in 1973, we had a man commit suicide and the feeling
was, why bring up the old ones, what do you with a man that has already been
imprisoned for six years because he did something bad there, so we’d kind of drop the
charges, and some of those men have kind of faded into the woodworks and others
became political leaders for the opposition cause.

JB: In the camp system, tell me about the way senior officers would be able to
get their message out, especially if they were in other camps and how you communicated.

EM: Well, we had a very sophisticated communication system. Any time we
could see or hear we could communicate and of course, the enemy tried to keep us form
doing that, tried to keep us isolated. We worked hard to keep from becoming isolated, so
we had a very strong communication system. The Vietnamese, for some reason, would
move us every five or six months, they’d move people from one camp to another camp,
and the people who came from that camp would tell us what went on in that camp, and of
course, we took knowledge of our camp to them, and we were able to just kind of get a
feel for what was going on in the system because of their policy of moving us from camp
to camp and periodically and we would have a few men who would sing in a Christmas
choir would go to the various camps to sing, while there they would communicate with
the prisoners who lived in that camp, would bring names back to us who was there, and it
was in those small ways that we were able to keep a pretty good handle on who was there
and what went on in other camps.

JB: Okay, what about prisoners who accepted early release, what effect did that
have on morale within the camp system?

EM: Well the men who accepted early release had great impact on us, because
we had a policy that we would come home in order of shoot down, enlisted, then officers
and then sick and wounded before those of us that were not sick, so we had that policy.
We would sign nothing to come home, we would not sign an amnesty statement or
request amnesty, we would just only be released on the negotiations between the two
countries. But when the men came home early, we were all very disappointed that they
had accepted early release, because they had to make some promises that most of us were
unwilling to make. One was that we would never return to Vietnam to bomb again, and
number two we would ask forgiveness of Ho Chi Minh, and I don’t remember what the
third one was, but we were unwilling to do that, and those handful of me who came
home, did do that and of course, that was in violation of camp policy.

JB: Within the camps, when you were asked to make statements or make radio
recordings and you heard some of the men play these, they were played over the radio,
what other kinds of things did you hear over the radio, what other information from the
States did you hear?

EM: Well, the Vietnamese had a daily thirty minute radio program that was
actually taped in the United States by anti-war people sent to Vietnam, they called it the
Voice of Vietnam. And within that tape, they sometimes would have American pilots
speaking out against the war, and of course that would have great impact on us but we
knew who they were, why they were making it, and we just accepted that and we were
certainly not pleased with them doing it, but we knew who they were and that they were
just trying to feather their own nest.

JB: These pilots, these were pilots who were prisoners?
EM: Yes

JB: Did they publicize a lot of the anti-war movement?
EM: All the time, yes. We would get about thirty minutes about 98% of that
would be anti-war garbage that we were able to see through, but we were able to get as
much by omission as we were by commission, we would read between the lines, and we
knew our country was greatly divided on the war. They exaggerated all the shoot downs
of aircraft, the number of people killed, you know etc., but we just accepted that because
we were just too well educated to do otherwise.

JB: I’m curious, if you would mind talking about the school system that you set
up. You talk about being very well educated and I was reading in your book about the
university system, the University Hanoi, and that’s just fascinating, something that I
don’t think you would find in a group of people who were not used to education.

EM: Well, we lived in a total vacuum; there was just a void there. The only input
that we had in that prison system was what we brought in in our hearts and minds, and we
turned off the enemy propaganda, which they gave us, so we only had each other and we
would, after the Son Tay raid in 1970, when they tried to rescue a camp that had been
vacated, they moved us back downtown Hanoi in November, I think November 24, 1970,
and we moved into a large cell block. One of the first things that we did was establish,
well the first thing we did ask for the right to have a worship service, and we requested
that for two weeks and it was never granted, the camp commander wouldn’t meet with
us, so we decided we had to get his attention. So we started singing songs, we’d started
singing songs like God Bless America, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, Onward,
Christian Soldiers, but it doesn’t take us very long to run out of those kind of songs, so
we started singing fraternity songs, school fight songs. And we did this underneath our
mosquito nets and at the end of two and a half days, the enemy came with a hundred
warlorn soldiers, and took a lot of our senior officers out of the cell blocks and placed
those men in legs irons in solitary confinement where they stayed until just prior to
release, but for that activity and that action, we did gain the right every Sunday to have a
fifteen minute worship service and a four man choir.

  JB: And tell me about these services, you speak a lot about your testimony in
your book, and I was truly inspired by that and I found that fascinating, tell me a little bit
about that.
  
  EM: Well, the common thread of my survival was faith, was faith in the great
God, and when you’re in a situation like that, Jenny, the enemy has absolute total control
of your life, and he can take everything you have except two things, one is the will to
believe he can’t destroy that, and the second thing that he can’t destroy is the will to live.
Those two things, they are the only things we have left. If somebody described it as
taking a rope and tying a knot, and that knot representing faith, and hanging on for six
years, and that’s a pretty good description of being in captivity.

  JB: What was the structure of these church services that you were able to hold?
  
  EM: Well, I was, since I survived some pretty brutal torture in 1969 I was asked
to serve as chaplain, not because I was the most devout, but because I had gone through
some very heavy stuff, and I would prepare a simple message. I’d go around the cell
during the week and talk to various people and come up with some scripture and come up
with a message, and I would deliver a message which would be maybe, eight minutes
duration, we’d have a four man choir, and we’d have somebody reading scripture,
somebody with an opening prayer, closing prayer, it always closed that service with a
pledge allegiance to our flag, facing the east where a Navy ship might be, but that was a
very big part of our survival and I think faith was a common thread of each of our
survivals there.

  JB: And these church services, these were after you were at Camp Faith, or when
you were all back in the Hanoi Hilton?

  EM: Well, in the Hanoi Hilton, there in the Wallow, the big prison, that’s where
it all started. But of course Camp Faith, we did it there also. Camp Faith was system they
built after Ho Chi Minh died, they did a search of the camp and they found a lot who
were missing, a lot of men who had been tortured to death, a lot of men had been scarred
through rope torture and the enemy was embarrassed by that because the story had now
leaked out, by the early releasees that we were tortured very severely. They were concerned about that, so they built a model POW system, completely different. They built new camps, and in September of 1970 moved us to the new camps, and then we stayed there until the Son Tay raid occurred November the 7th, and then they deserted that system and moved us back downtown into Hanoi Hilton. That’s why we used to say the only consistency the Vietnamese had in our captivity was their inconsistency.

JB: Well, that’s difficult with the unpredictability of how they might behave.

EM: Oh, that’s true, it really was. You know one of our biggest fears was in the evening, was the rattle of keys when somebody would come to your cell, and the keys would turn, it had to be for no good cause. You’re going back for interrogation or torture or propaganda or something, so that was one of our biggest, living in fear with hearing the rattling of keys that would open the cell block at odd hours.

JB: Well, back to the church services that were held, what was the, how did the prison population, the prisoners, respond to that? Was attendance very high, did attendance fluctuate?

EM: With the church service?

JB: Yes, sir.

EM: Well, no, everybody, I would say, 95% would participate because it was in their cell, it was where they lived, they had no choice. They had to be quiet while we conducted our worship service, and most people participated in that.

JB: And, you talk in your book at one point about praying with the men in your cell for the Vietnamese guards.

EM: Yes, I did often.

JB: What attitudes did you see in other prisoners? Was there a lot of anger; was it forgiveness, towards the prison guards?

EM: Well, some of both. Some men would be unable to forgive the enemy, there are others that would, but I saw the Vietnamese as being in a system that was a very brutal system, but realized that they could be just like we are, if they were in our system. The Vietnamese guards that tortured us was only doing what the enemy told them to do, so it was the system of Communism that I learned to dislike, but respect, as a very brutal system, and so therefore, you had to, when you were undergoing heavy torture you would
have to have hatred for the guards because that’s they way you survived. You’d have to
battle them on those terms, but for the most part once you get beyond that, you just kind
of feel sorry for them because they’re only doing what they’re told to do.

JB: Well, let’s talk about the difference when you were isolated and in small
groups, there was a strong sense of, the way I understand it, a very strong sense of unity
in the camp, would you say that would be a correct assumption?

EM: I’m sorry, I didn’t hear that.

JB: There was kind of a strong sense of unity in the camps?

EM: Yes, absolutely, again, the chain of command, the loyalty, up and down the
chain of command, respect for the leadership that we had, and their respect for us it was a
very strong chain of command and we had that tremendous unity, and I think that was
why we were able to survive and because without that, you’re splintered and now you
have, you just have nothing to look forward to and we use that to our advantage.

JB: How did this change, maybe, or was there any change after you were all in a
group living situation, where you were in larger groups of men?

EM: Well, when we were in larger groups, the torture had stopped for the most
part. The only time you were tortured after Ho Chi Minh’s death was when you defamed
Ho Chi Minh or something, or made some kind of a rash act, or an escape attempt, but
torture was not a daily occurrence after that, and when that happened and we had a lot
stronger resistance because they had no weapon to use against us, and we were able to
really shell into a strong military organization because we’d had no, they had no leverage
over us. The only thing they could control would be the food that we got and the
packages that we got, or whether we got letters or not.

JB: How often did you receive letters from your family?

EM: Well, I had no letters for three and a half years. I was missing for more than
three years. My wife only knew that I had ejected from the aircraft into the jungles and
nothing more and finally after more than three years my name came out, and I was able to
receive a letter from home, after about three and a half years, and my wife was able to
receive a letter from me, and throughout the course of captivity I think I got maybe six or
seven letters, and my wife probably got that many from me.
JB: You mention in your book, some packages that some men received, did you ever receive packages from home?

EM: Yes, we did. The wives were allowed to send, after Ross Perot had an effort in 1969 to get them to give us packages and we were able, the families were able to ship every three months, 3.2 kilos, which I believe is about six pounds, six ounces and of course, when it got to us, the six pounds, six ounces might have become one pound because a lot of stuff was pilfered out of the packages. Some men got large packages, some men did not, and that was a real point of contention among the prison systems, in fact we, when the torture stopped, we created an enemy within the system because to really survive and fight you have to have an enemy. When the torture was not the enemy, we created our own enemy by fighting over the packages, in effect, not physically fighting, but sharing with people who had large packages, whereas some people got no packages, and didn’t get anything. It created a real problem for the leadership.

JB: How were these problems dealt with?

EM: Pardon, how did we deal with it?

JB: Yes.

EM: The leadership would just have to kind of work through it and get people to do what is good and just, and for the people who shared, who had big packages, to share those packages with people who had none, and it was a leadership problem, which we were able to resolve, but it was a real problem area for a while, especially after the torture stopped. When the torture was heavy, that was our enemy. We had a united front against torture, but when the torture stopped, see we don’t have that enemy so to really fight, you’ve got to, do you understand what I’m trying to say? You have to have an enemy to really hang tough, and that enemy became the food. The Vietnamese sometimes would give men in the cell block special food because of what they perceived to be malnutrition or wounds. One man had an open wound for five years, but sometimes the enemy would get people in the group who we felt, the leadership felt, didn’t need the food, whereas there were other people that needed it more than that person did, and we would redistribute that within the camp, so that created a real problem for us. So, it’s dealing with human nature, which really manifests itself in a vacuum like that.

JB: Difficult situation.
EM: And you know you had men that were strong, able to cope with it, men who were not, and those in between. We were really truly representative of the American people, strong ones, moderate ones, weak ones.

JB: Well, is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your years of captivity?

EM: No, not really, except that I learned, I think, in my captivity, that courage is not the absence of fear, courage is simply the presence of faith. It’s believing in the great God, and I believe with faith, you can get through anything that comes along the pike, with faith, but without faith, the journey through that adversity might become impossible. So my strength came from faith, the thing that they can’t destroy, that lives on no matter what they do to you. So I think with me, it was my strong faith that enabled me to survive, and I shared that with a lot of people even today. I think it’s very effective, and as I look back over my captivity I think perhaps that was the divine plan for my having been captured, to become a very humble person, to be able to share that with other people. My family became very strong because of that. We had three children and nine grandchildren and all three of my children are very strong because of the hardship of having to grow up without me for seven years, and we have a very strong family. My wife gets tremendous credit because she was able to keep me in the forefront with my children, my three children, for those seven years, and three of those years she didn’t know whether I was dead or alive, but she hung in there. I was very fortunate in that respect and I had a lot to come home to, and even today we have a very strong family, and my children are all involved in Christian activities and they just have strong faith, good families, so I have been blessed in many ways.

JB: That’s wonderful. Let’s talk a little bit, just for a couple more minutes, if you don’t mind about your release, and the feelings when you found out you were going to be released.

EM: Well, the release was, in Paris, the Vietnamese and the U.S. discussed our release for five years, and three of those years they were trying to decide whether to sit around a round table or a square table, in other words, accomplished nothing, but in the last two years, they got down to business, and they negotiated the Paris Peace Accords, which were signed January 27, 1973 and by agreement we were to be told five days after
that we were to be released in five groups. And of course, we were very elated over that, then we had the December bombing when the bombers came for ten days during, over Christmas in 1972, and we knew when the bombing stopped the war would be over, because they were hitting the enemy pretty hard. By agreement we were told five days at the end of that, that we would be released in four groups, and my release was in the second group, because I was only there six years, some men were there nine years. But just prior to my release, which was to be February 28, 1973 just minutes before our release, we were told that there would be no release, there’d been a violation of the agreements in the south, and when you’d been there for six years already, and are now, your release is stopped, you have no idea when it’s going to be again, so that was one of the low points of captivity was that delay in our second release, which occurred March 4, 1973.

JB: What were your feelings as you walked out of the, as you walked out of the Hanoi Hilton, you got on the bus as you saw the plane?

EM: Well, the feeling was, that the enemy that had been so brutal to us, they would never know the freedoms that we were going home to, that they would still live in that kind of system long after we were gone, and I really felt sorry for them. Of course, for us it was just hours of exhilaration, because when you lived in a vacuum under the threat of torture for six years and all of a sudden you’re free, it’s just a great, great thrill, great happiness.

JB: And I’ve seen pictures, I think it was the first flight though, of the atmosphere on the plane as it began to take off, what was it like on your plane as you?

EM: Well, I’m sure as all planes, we really didn’t get too excited until we became airborne, when we came airborne, we all got very excited and then we went -- we have a term in the Navy, when you cross the beach you go feet-dry, meaning you’re over the enemy territory, and when you leave enemy territory, you’re over the water you sat feet-wet, that tells your ship in fact you at least got over the water-- well when we went feet-wet, leaving Vietnamese air space over the Pacific Ocean, that’s when the celebration really set in because we now were free.

JB: What was the response of people, you first went to Clark Air Force base in the Philippines?
EM: It’s indescribable; the American people turned out in large numbers and received bracelets from people, letters from people (recording ends abruptly).