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## MIKE CRONIN, NAVY PILOT: POW '67 –'73

Mike Cronin: It's Mike Cronin, C-R-O-N-I-N. I grew up in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. Then went, my first experience with the service after high school was at the Naval Academy. I graduated there in 1963, went directly to flight training for the navy. My first assignment after flight training was to VA 23, which is the navy lingo for attack squadron 23.

Immediately after completion of training I was ordered to the Midway which was already in Westpac. That was in May of 1965. I served in the squadron on the Midway and on the Coral Sea until January 13<sup>th</sup> 1967 when I was shot down and stayed as a prisoner of war until March 4<sup>th</sup> 1973.

I was born in Boston. My dad worked for a large insurance company. As his career progressed we moved around. Lived several places in New England and ultimately in Pittsburg where I went through high school. In the course of trying to figure out how I was going to get through college I applied for every scholarship that was available.

The one that I got, I was very pleased with was to the Naval Academy. I graduated from high school in 1959 and went directly to the Navy Academy about two weeks later. Graduated from there in 1963 and from there directly to navy flight training.

It was a unique situation. The war was just beginning. In fact the public, including myself, was not really aware that it was going on full swing. I'll never forget the circumstances on which I received my orders to VA 23. I went through with the last part of my flight training in Jacksonville Florida and had been ordered to go to a squadron that was in the Mediterranean.

Just about a week before the end of training the commanding officer of the training squadron called myself and four other fellows into the office and said "Your orders have been changed and you're going to Westpac."

We didn't think too much about it at the time, but later on we put two and two together and realized that all of us were single and the people who switched out

and got our orders were mostly married guys. There was a little fraternalship going on there.

At that point, and of course we had been aware of the Tonkin Gulf incident. We knew that there had been a handful of retaliatory raids against North Vietnam, but not anything on a daily basis.

About a week after we got our orders one of my friends got a letter from his commanding officer who was in the Pacific already on the Midway and said "We are flying combat missions every day." None of us knew that at the time because we got these orders in early May and operation Rolling Thunder had only begun quietly in the middle of April.

A few days later I arrived at Subic Bay in the Philippines by MAC transport to wait transport out to the Midway, which is done by a small airplane that's capable of landing on the ship. I landed on the ship on May 28<sup>th</sup> and four days later, on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, I flew my first combat mission.

That continued until November of 1965. I came back to the states with more than 100 combat missions. Figuring that that was the end of the war for me I got married. I had gotten engaged before I went to Vietnam with the thought that "Well okay, no use in getting married until this is over."

I got married in December of 1965 thinking that I probably would not be going back to Vietnam, but sure enough, just a few months later the squadron was ordered back on the Coral Sea and over to Vietnam.

The navy didn't count missions ... you got no credit for the number of missions you flew in that sense. The rule for navy pilots was you had to complete two full deployments. A typical navy deployment aboard an aircraft carrier is about seven months. That's what you are going to do unless something intervened. That could be 250 missions.

In fact in those days you got an air medal each time you completed ten combat missions over North Vietnam. The navy had a rather odd system of crediting you with more than one air medal. You got an air medal. Then you got a bronze star in lieu of a second air medal. When you had five bronze stars that was replaced with a silver star. Then you had an air medal with a silver star and a bronze star and so on and so forth.

Using that system the most air medals you could show and display was 21 air medals. As a joke I can remember in the fall of 1966 that some of the guys in my fellow squadrons had been in Vietnam since the very beginning on the Midway. They had already accumulated 21 air medals.

They said “Well we’re not flying any more missions. That’s it. We can’t get any more credit,” which was a joke, but the navy listened. They changed the system. Shortly after that instead of the silver and bronze stars on the air medal they changed it to numerals.

Producer: What kind of ordinance you were carrying?

Mike Cronin: I flew the A-4 Skyhawk, which for the first part of the war, 1965, 1966 and 1967, that was the pointed end of the navy. We did most of the bombing missions. The F-4 and the F-8s that we had on the ship, they were primarily fighters. They did some bombing, but their job was to protect us from the North Vietnamese fighters, which they did extremely well.

We did most of the bombing. The A-4 is a single seat attack airplane. The ones that I flew, the model had five stations that you could load things on. A typical load would be six 500 pound bombs. We also carried rockets of various dimensions and most importantly for my squadron, we carried the shrike missile.

A big part of the mission of my squadron was attacking SAM sites, which that was what the shrike missile was used for. It’s a homing missile which homes in on enemy radars.

No, it was just beginning. One of the great frustrations in that part of the war was that by aerial photography we knew that the North Vietnamese were installing SAM sites at various points in the country because you could see the pattern of how they dig in the sites and so forth.

We were not permitted to attack those sites. The fear from Washington being that if we attacked those sites we would probably kill Russians who were aiding the Vietnamese.

That went on until August of 1965 when the first navy airplane shot down by a SAM missile, in fact was in my squadron. Don Brown, a very ... a new ensign in the squadron flying as wingman to one of the more experienced pilots on a night mission over North Vietnam in early August, I can’t remember the exact date, was shot down by an SA-2 missile. After that it was gloves off and we began to attack the sites.

We were the first squadron in any service to operate the shrike missile because it was developed by the navy for the navy. Of course, eventually not long after that the air force started using them as well. We had the shrike missile already in the squadron, but it was a very experimental program at that time. Only a few missiles and not really ever fired, but used on the airplane in captive sense to see how they would work.

Once that happened, once the first airplane was shot down and there was an air force airplane shot down around the same time, then it was gloves off. There is a long story that goes on about the tactics involved on the North Vietnamese side and on our side how to deal with SAMs.

I could talk about that for several hours because as time went on that became the main thing I was doing. They will do that, but I can spend a long time talking too about the technology and its limitations and its developments.

For example the shrike missile is a 500 pound missile. Of that 500 pounds 400 and some pounds are the rocket motor and some technology. The warhead is only about 100 pounds. The idea is that the warhead would impact the radar antenna if it works properly.

That's going to knock out the radar, but it's not going to knock out the site. The ideal thing would be to track the missile into the site, see where it explodes, because the sites of course will be camouflaged. That would reveal the location of the site, which could then be attacked with conventional rockets and bombs. That was the idea.

The problem was, and in the desert where the missile was developed and tested, that worked very well, but in the humid climate of North Vietnam, when one of those missiles impacted in a camouflaged area and exploded there was almost no visual signal. That was a limitation on our ability to use them. We had to find better ways.

The missiles were a threat, but as we learned how to deal with the through use of various tactics and jamming devices and so forth they were really not the main threat. The main threat was conventional anti-aircraft fire. Most airplanes were shot down by that. The North Vietnamese MIGs were a minor threat. Above that would be the SA-2s, but the main thing really was the anti-aircraft fire.

In the earliest parts of the war, yes, that's true. We were restricted from going up into the Hanoi high falling area. Later in the war, 1966 and on there were many missions up into what we called the Red River Delta.

There's a lot of politics involved in that. What you can attack, what you can't attack. The whole thing was highly politicized. The home port of my squadron was Lemoore California. When ordered the squadron would go on various ships and deployed.

When the squadron returned from Vietnam we went to Lemoore California which was, that's where I was based. Then I got married. That's where I lived

with my new wife. The war kept going on, which none of us were ready to believe until later.

Producer: Should we get you a glass of water.

Mike Cronin: That would be nice. Thank you.

Producer: The losses were very extensive?

Mike Cronin: During that first cruise we had ... the first week, in fact, here's my introduction to the squadron. I'm brand new. I found a bunk to sleep on in the ship and I'm in the ready room being introduced to everybody. As I'm being introduced a bunch of guys had just come back from a mission. Quite a four and one of the guys had been shot down. They were pretty well convinced he would not live.

At the same time in the ready room there was another group getting ready to go on a mission. They went out and one of them didn't come back. JB McCamey who was one of the longest held prisoners of war was on that flight.

Then later in that summer, I told you, Don Brown was shot down and killed. Grant Housen, another one of our pilots was shot down and rescued. That was our experience during the first deployment.

A typical A-4 squadron has 14 airplanes and about 18 assigned pilots. During my time in the squadron we had five KIAs, two prisoners, one wounded and landed on the ship safely, another guy shot down and rescued. You add that up, it's about 50% casualties.

I'll give you another example of what it was like. On that first cruise no pilot made it through the cruise without having his airplane hit at least once by enemy fire. Actually it wasn't known at that time because if you remember, there was a big peace initiative that went on during the Christmas season of 1965.

Nobody knew that the war was going to continue for years although should have known, it should have been obvious. Only as the next couple of months went by did it become obvious that our next deployment, which we would have gone on anyway even if the war had not been going on, we would have been out to a ship and gone out to the western Pacific in a peacetime cruise. But it became obvious as the months went by that the war was not going to end and we would be going back over.

Producer: Same plane? Same ... everything or was some of it different?

Mike Cronin: We're flying the same airplanes, but the war has changed. More, the missions are farther north. A larger part of our effort was devoted to anti SA-2 tactics, which I did a lot of myself.

During the earlier part of the war we flew a substantial number of missions over south Vietnam in support of ground forces. Due to a dispute between general Westmoreland and the navy about who was going to have operational control over the aircraft carriers during the 1966 cruise all of our missions were over north Vietnam only. Basically more of the same, yes.

... went out to Vietnam in July of 1966. We were scheduled to return in the first week of February in 1967. For me the end was in sight. I had only a couple of weeks to go. Had I completed that cruise that would have been the end of the war for me.

In fact, my wife had flown out to the Philippines and to Hong Kong to meet me ... we had the good fortune of having the ship be in port for a few days around Christmas. We spent those few days together and back out into combat in early January.

On the second day that I was back in combat I got hit by an SA-2 missile. It was a near death situation. The airplane was badly damaged, but I managed to limp back to Da Nang ...

Producer: Okay, let's talk about that faithful day.

Mike Cronin: This was a mission ... myself and another fellow, Doug O'Connell, we were assigned to be the shrike missile cover for a flight that was going in to bomb some targets up in the Red River Delta. Our job was to be above them at an altitude where we could pick up the emanations from the SA-2 radar and pick them off with the shrike missiles.

The tactic they had developed was that they would not turn their radar on. What they would do is they would acquire aircraft visually. Then they would only turn on the radar as the missiles were launched. You wouldn't have the chance to get the shrikes homing in on them until after the missiles were already away. That was one of their tactics.

That's exactly what happened on this day. Compound that by the fact that there was a cloud layer below us by several thousand feet. We had ECM gear that was very sophisticated and it did two things in addition to picking up the radar emanations.

When the missile is about ready to be fired its initial instructions are fed into the missile on a cable, but there's some leakage from that cable. We had a device which could detect that leakage. It would give us an indication, missile's about to launch.

As soon as the missile launches then the commands from the ground to the missile are broadcast over the air at a much higher power setting and this device could detect. Right away you know missiles have been launched.

What they usually did was they launched in a cubby of three. Myself and my partner were in this position trying to protect the flight below us and we get this warning. A missile's about to launch, a few seconds later, missile's away. We're above a cloud layer, we can't see the missiles. Key thing in order to avoid a missile, you have to see it, but we do have protective ECM gear, which should defeat what the missile is doing.

All right. We start making a hard turn so that we will not be easy targets. There goes one missile. Pretty soon there goes another missile, both of them misses. Then it feels like there's a big light behind me. Then there's an explosion.

For a second or two I and my airplane are weightless and all around we is debris from the missile. Literally I saw the nose cone of the missile, I heard it bounce along the bottom of my airplane and I saw it for a second just out in front of the airplane floating as a piece of debris.

Off to the left I could see, in addition to thousands of little pieces of debris, the main rocket motor of the engine. It's like a telephone pole, white telephone pole. What's left of it is about 10 or 15 feet long and it's tumbling end over end and the rocket motor is still burning.

After a second of course all that stuff is gone, it drops away. I'm sitting in the airplane and all kinds of lights are on on the instrument panel that different stuff has failed, but I'm still flying. What was left is most of my flight controls were disabled.

The ailerons were down to the manual operation, which is only used in emergencies. The rudder was completely inoperative. The horizontal control had trim only, not the usual controls, but the airplane is still flying.

It was pretty obvious to me that there's no way I'm going to land this airplane on the ship. Myself and my partner Doug who was not hit, we headed down towards Da Nang. A long story short, after quite a struggle I was able to land safely at Da Nang and walk away from it.

I'll never forget, a few days later on the ship, standing around with a bunch of guys just shooting the ball and talking. One guy said "What's the definition of an optimist? It's an A-4 pilot that's worried about smoking." One of the guys says "Well except for you Cronin. They don't have anything that can get you."

Of course, it only took me a few days to prove that they were wrong. I was shot down on the 13<sup>th</sup> just a few days later. That, which was supposed to be just a very ordinary, milk run mission. Myself and another fellow were going in across the coast on what we call a road wrecky which ... a type of mission where you carry several bombs and you up and down the roads and look for truck traffic that you can attack.

There was a cloud layer over the coast and we had to go down to a fairly low altitude to get in over the land. Shortly after that I could see a gun down there blazing away and we're making turns and so forth to be hard to hit. I feel a big thump in the airplane.

Just from what happens in the cockpit I know that I've been hit in the fuselage right behind the wings because there's an instrument that fails and it's located right there and the oxygen quit working and it's located in the same area.

I knew I'd been hit. I turned towards the water, once again started climbing out. The airplane, the fellow I was flying with says "You're on fire." I keep going, trying to climb, get as high as I can and head towards the water. The airplane just doesn't feel right. When you move the stick it was squishy. The airplane just didn't respond normally.

I said to myself "Well maybe I should reduce power a little bit, ease the strain on the airplane." As soon as I reduced power the airplane flip inverted and I'm pinned to the cockpit. What actually happened is the airplane came apart. The way the A-4 is made, when you want to change the engine there are some big bolts right behind the wing and you undo those bolts and the entire tail section comes off and that's how you change the engine.

The airplane came apart right there. When that happens, of course I didn't know that at the time, but now I know what happened. When you do that of course the nose is going to go down hard because without the stabilizing effect of the tail section that's what's going to happen every time.

Now I'm in the cockpit and I've been thrown out of my seat, the problem being I didn't strap in tight, which many of us didn't because it's not a good idea, but you don't want to do that because if you want to be able to turn around in your seat and move around and see in every direction. If you strap in too tight you might not be able to do that as well as you should.



I wasn't strapped in too tightly. The result of that was now my helmet is jammed up against the canopy. I can reach down and move the controls around and see that they have no effect. Now the light comes on. It's time to get out of this airplane. There's no way it's going to fly.

I can't reach ... the way you get out of the airplane, there's a handle above your head that you reach up and you pull that down across your face. That initiates the ejection sequence. I couldn't reach that because my head is jammed against the canopy.

There's an alternate way. There's a handle in the seat between your legs. Now, since I wasn't strapped in tight enough, my arm's not long enough to reach that handle. For just a few seconds it looks like it's all over.

Then the airplane did a gyration, I'm back down in the seat and I immediately ejected. That all worked the way it should. The parachute opened and I'm in my parachute. I'm still above the clouds. There's a cloud layer below. I'm thinking, "Okay, I bet I've made it back out of the water. No way of knowing for sure, but I think I must have."

I make a mayday with my handheld radar, do all that stuff. Inflate my life vest because I'm going to be convinced, I'm going in the water. I come down out of the clouds, still at about 4,000 feet and I can look straight down, I'm facing north and the coastline of North Vietnam is running right between my legs.

This is January. In January in that part of the world they have a thing called the northeast monsoon. At flying altitude the wind is steady 20-30 knots out of the east-northeast. When I look down what I can see is I'm moving really fast and I'm going to landing way away from the beach, not near the water at all.

As I come down and try to maneuver the parachute by slipping, but against a 25 knot wind that's totally ineffective. By the time I land I'm in some hills back behind the beach, I don't know, maybe a mile, I'm not sure. At first from the air it looks like that won't be so bad. There is vegetation there which from the air it looks like it might be enough to conceal you. When I get down on the ground what I see is there's nothing more than knee high scrub brush. There's not going to be any real way to hide.

My flying partner, commander [Mackle 00:30:52], made a low pass right over me strafing down the hill to keep the enemy at bay, but he's gone. Then there's a rescue team that is orbiting over the ocean not so far away. There was a good chance that they will be able to get there.

Right away, and they have A-1 prop powered airplanes. What they will do is come in to the sight where the pilot is down and use their weapons to keep the soldiers away.

As soon as they crossed the beach they start getting shot at really bad. One of them gets shot up and the helo and their job is also to protect the helo which is coming. About this time I can see the militia coming across the area where I am, lying abreast, shooting in the air. It was just a few seconds till they saw me and it's all over before the helo could get there or anything else.

That's all she wrote. A few cuts and scrapes, nothing to worry about. They were basically teenage kids and they were probably ... I was probably in a state of shock or whatever, I don't know. This whole thing, it's just like they say. When things like this happen it's like watching a slow motion movie.

These guys, by the time they get to me they're shaking in their boots. They're extremely upset and nervous. One reason why is because the airplanes are still there and there's bombing going on and their anti-aircraft guns are shooting. There's action happening. They are extremely agitated you would have to say.

Then we start moving. After we've been moving wherever they want me to go back towards the village of something we encounter, they put a blindfold on me right away. They each had a little card which had in phonetics, based on Vietnamese, a few simple commands like stop, go, sit down, stand up. They had that.

They were, to that extent they were prepared. We start moving after I got a blindfold on and we can't go too fast because that's all I can do with a blindfold on. Then I start hearing a bunch of noise and a scuffle. What's happening I'm sure is a bunch of villagers are trying to attack me with machetes or whatever they have.

The first job of these guys is they have to fend these people off. Finally we get to a village and they strip me and search me and all that stuff. Actually I was offered something to eat which I turned down, the last meal I ever turned down in Vietnam.

At any rate, now back in the village where the more organized people are in charge, nothing really happened. Later that day we start moving towards Hanoi, which took 16 days. I was not far, I was just south of [Pan Humanitarian assistance 00:34:23] on this occasion. I know the coordinates where it was now and I knew then where we were more or less.

Because of the way things were in Vietnam at that time transport didn't move very well. In a period of 16 days staying in safe houses and whatever, and walking and in some cases riding at night in trucks we moved towards Hanoi. That took 16 days.

I arrived, that was ... this adventure started on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, arrived in Hanoi on Sunday, the 29<sup>th</sup>. All navy and air force pilots were required to attend a survival, escape and evasion school. I had had that training the previous ... In January of 1965 I went through a navy facility that's up in near Lake Rangeley, Maine, which is a POW camp and some outdoors training and all that stuff.

Of course the problem was that the training that was given at that time was entirely based on what they knew, which was the Korean war and this is a whole different structure.

In any case, this is a whole another subject which relate to our detainees that we keep in Guantanamo and all this other stuff that's gone on. None of us among the prisoners, who later on were in Hanoi and talked about it, thought that training was particularly useful.

The background of it is that the government was not satisfied with the results of the Korean war POW experience. Looking back on it that was probably not entirely correct because at that time I don't think the government and the services really appreciated what those guys in Korea went through.

Anyway, the end result of it was that president Eisenhower issued the code of conduct which was very detailed and which was a good code. There's no criticism of the code which emphasized what was required of a person who might be captured.

Everybody had to be trained on the code and also if you were part of forces that might be deployed and captured you had to go through this survival training that was run by both the navy and the air force and I'm sure the army has similar schools.

Producer: There you were in Hanoi ... the food and the treatment you received en route?

Mike Cronin: The treatment I received en route was not bad. The soldiers, I'll never forget the second day ... or actually late afternoon of the first day. We're walking north towards the main road and there were airplanes overhead. The guards made it very clear to me that if they were attacked their first thing that they would do would be to shoot me.

That didn't happen and other than that there was no rough stuff. They behaved very reasonably. That's the way it was all the way to Hanoi. What the routine was in our movements, we would avoid any main populated area. These guys apparently knew where certain safe houses would be where there were communist cadres or whatever where they could stay overnight.

During that process a typical meal would be, and this was ... what these soldiers, they carried their own food with them. They had a long cloth tubular sack which was filled with rice. A typical meal would be they'd prepare some rice and they would probably ... they had peanuts also. They would crush those peanuts into a fine dust and scatter that on top of the rice and that was their meal.

If we happened to be in a safe house the family that lived there might also provide a few vegetables or a piece of sugar cane. They grow sugar cane there and if you cut it while it's fresh in short lengths you can chew it. It's very fibrous. You can't eat it, but you can chew it and you can taste the sugar. That was what it was.

It was really strange the way it worked. At certain times they would be willing to put me on display and they would let villagers come and look. A lot of it was just curiosity, but the meanest and nastiest of those people were the women. They were more hostile or could be more hostile than the men.

Couple of occasions during this time at one of these stops an older guy ... older guys were more relaxed about it and they would be inclined to offer you a smoke or something. One occasion a guy snuck in and wanted to be friendly. He was very worried that he would be seen doing it, but he wanted to shake my hand and offer me a cigarette. Obviously he was not in line with the political policy that was then in effect.

Producer: Did anybody speak English?

Mike Cronin: No. No, there was no English.

Producer: Did you speak any Vietnamese?

Mike Cronin: No. I never did learn any. In fact, they did not want you to learn Vietnamese. They wanted you to just be ignorant of what they were saying so obviously they could talk and you wouldn't know what's going on. I arrived in a truck with the two guards that had been escorting me.

They arrived at the front door of the Hanoi Hilton. Of course I'm blindfolded, get out of the truck and the guards are immediately dismissed and a guy from the prison staff takes me in, puts me in the room. Go in the main door, turn left, go

through a narrow passage way, left into another door and you're in a room. Shuts the door and locks it.

Now I know what's coming next is going to be very bad. First thing I did was I took off the blindfold and threw it in the corner, hoping that whoever comes in next would not remember that I had been blindfolded before.

What do I see? I'm in this room which is about 10 by 15. At one end of the room is a wooden table about six or eight feet long with a chair behind it. There's a stool in front of the table. There's blood on the floor. Not blood, but in one corner where I threw the blindfold there were some rags which were bloodstained.

If you look up it's an old style building with steel girders visible as part of the roof. From that, one of those girders, was hanging a big hook. This table that's there had a blue cloth on it. It must have been half an hour, 45 minutes before somebody came. Of course who comes in an interrogator.

Interrogation started that day along with torture. That lasted for several weeks. I didn't encounter another American until almost a month later, but all that time was interrogation and torture. The surprising thing was that there was only one military interrogation. Of course, I stuck with name, rank and serial number and the torture began and it was brutal and extremely painful. I stuck with that as long as I could.

The way the interrogation starts is exactly what you'd expect. It starts out with easy questions. This is after you decide you're going to have to talk. It starts out with easy questions and you give false answers, but they know the answer to the easy questions. Then they progress to more difficult questions, which they might not know the answer to.

There were only a couple of things that I knew that would be of any real value to them. Number one was about the ECM. Number two was the tactics involved in shrike missiles and number three was what raids will be coming next.

I was able to lie my way through the ECM and the shrike tactics by claiming inexperience and lack of knowledge. I was able to get through the last part about what tactics are coming next because I simply didn't know.

Our ship was scheduled to go back to the states in a few days. In fact by the time I was in Hanoi the ship had probably already departed for the states. I had no current ... the interrogator was reluctant to accept that, but eventually he did. I said "If you want me to make something up I'll be happy to, but that's it. I don't know."

Finally he said "All right, if you were the commanding general what would you do?" I said "Well okay, I have a plan for that, but it's not going to happen, it's my plan." I said "I would do a land invasion near Vinh," which is ... if you know the geography of North Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh trail comes down route one to the vicinity of Vinh. Then it goes west into the mountains and goes south through the jungle.

What's the chokepoint? It's right that area, right around Vinh. If I were the commanding general I would invade right at Vinh and I would drive all the way across to the Laotian border, maybe to the Thai border. The terrain in that part of Vietnam just like I experienced is mostly scrub, not real forest.

With our firepower coming from the sea and that kind of terrain the Vietnamese wouldn't have a chance. We could cut the Ho Chi Minh trail right in two. In addition to that it would give us something to bargain with. If they want their country back they have to make a deal.

Number two, it had some other effects. The forces hiding out in South Vietnam and Cambodia are going to die on the vine without supplies. Number two, the forces that are in South Vietnam are going to be drawn back to North Vietnam to fight the United States. With our firepower and concentration of force we'll kill them, they don't have a chance. That's what I would do.

That got his attention. He says "Who told you about this plan?" His reaction made me believe that's what they had worried about all along. In fact when I was starting to walk north I could see along the beach in the area where I was captured that they had dug slip trenches all along the beach. They were worried about an invasion.

Whatever discussions went on at the Pentagon, but I don't think it ever got past secretary McNamara. I'm sure I can't possibly be the only who thought of it. After this first interrogation session with the military interrogation they start with political interrogation.

What they want in the political interrogation is what they call a confession which is basically a propaganda statement. It starts all over again. I would refuse to write it. There would be torture. Eventually I get to the point where I have to write something.

Of course at the bottom of every statement you have to write "I certify that all is true and given voluntary" all that baloney. I'd get to the bottom and I'd write something that would completely undo everything that was written before it. They'd take it out of course and of course come back in an hour and say "Well

that wasn't good enough" and the torture would start all over again. This went on for weeks and in various phases.

Finally they put me in a room where I was supposed to sit for five days or I was supposed to sit sleepless until I gave in. After three or four days, I can't remember the exact timeframe, I was released from that. When the guards were taking me out of that room where I'd been held sleepless for a number of days they were really angry, like this is not the way it's supposed to happen.

Years and years later I finally realized what had happened. I went back and looked at the calendar. The day that they took me out of the sleep isolation punishment was the first day of Tet, the lunar new year. The tradition in Vietnam, nobody is punished during the Tet festival.

What they did then is they put me in a place called Heartbreak Hotel in a solitary confinement. It was the middle of the winter. I had only pajama type clothes, no blanket. Hanoi does not get below freezing, but it's wet and often gets like 40 degrees.

Of course now I've been a prisoner for several weeks, not much to eat and it's cold. Of course, I'm suffering badly. The positive part of that was that while I was there it just so happened that my cell was next to a cell which was used as a washroom. I never got in there, but other people were allowed to go in there and wash up and throw out their garbage and whatever.

When I'd hear activity over there I bang on the wall which you had to be careful about because the guards were all over and the principal rule was no talking, no communication. The punishments for doing so were severe.

The cell on the other side of me, I had been tapping on the wall, but got no response. I found out later that the guy in there was a Vietnamese, South Vietnamese captive who could tell that I was new and didn't know what I was up to. He didn't want to take a chance.

Finally I got a guy in the washroom who responded. He was a guy who had been a prisoner for five or six months and knew the routine and knew some things that I needed to know and he had the courage to take charge of the situation and help me out.

What he said was "Be quiet." He went to his door and whispered, after they had looked, the guard was not in sight he says "Be quiet, just listen. Here's how we communicate. We tap on the walls. It's a five by five matrix. There's no K. A through Z is ... A is 11, Z is 55. Talk to you later."

That is the tap code. All of a sudden the light came on. During all these previous interrogation sections which were always conducted in a room just like the one I described with beat up old wooden tables and stuff in there, with all kinds of scratch marks and hand pricks in the wooden surface.

Several place I had seen this little box with letters in it, but the light didn't come on until he said that. When he said that I was able to connect what I had seen on the desk to what we were supposed to do. The next task was to practice on my own and learn the tap code so that I could communicate when I've got a chance to do it.

Several weeks later I was moved into another section of the camp we called Las Vegas. Still solitary, but I was able to tap with some of the guys who were ... The room next to me was an interrogation room. They would bring guys in there for interrogation and if they were left in there by themselves it would be a chance to tap and try to communicate. That and about a month after that I was put in a cell with a bunch of guys, four guys. At that time the largest cell was four guys.

Producer: These are all other Americans?

Mike Cronin: Yeah. One of the main things that communication was used for was to ... for everybody to accumulate a list of the names of everybody that they had contacted because we suspected, and I had known this even before I was captured, that the Vietnamese had likely had many more prisoners than they had admitted to.

General rule was if you were coerced, tortured, whatever, to make a public appearance, a press conference and some had had that misfortune. After extensive torture they said what they were told to say, but then once it was known that they existed their name was released obviously. Their family knew they were alive and they would be allowed to write a letter two or three times a year, a short letter, very short.

But the rest of us who by luck or whatever avoided that experience, our names were never released, never got any mail, never wrote any letters. That was my case for the next three and a half years. In fact the official status I was in was missing, presumed captured. There was no evidence of my existence for the next three and a half years.

There was some of that activity, but it didn't really develop until later in the war. The part of the time I'm talking about there was ... if you met with a delegation it was almost certainly going to be East German or Russian or something like that. American anti-war protestors didn't start showing up in Hanoi until much later, '68, '69, that timeframe.



Twice a day, meals were twice a day the whole time, never changed. It would be a bowl of rice and few vegetables in it and maybe some watery soup, also only vegetables. No meat or anything. There might be a cube of pork fat the size of a dice. One or two of those might be in the soup, that's it.

Producer: How old were you?

Mike Cronin: Just turned 25 when I was captured. I lost a lot of weight. I was not a big guy to start with. I probably weighed 160 pounds when I was captured. I lost a lot of weight. How much, I have no idea. How could you measure, but I got pretty skinny.

Dysentery was a way of life. We had a saying, less than ten times a day – normal, 10 to 20 – diarrhea, more than 20 – that's dysentery. I suffered with that the whole way through. There was a doctor who would occasionally come around. Keep in mind, I was lucky. I was in pretty good health and I was ... my injuries in being shot down were minor and didn't require any treatment.

As a result of torture I had many injuries. The torture was, it's hard to describe, but it was a process of putting you in contortions which tore your shoulders out of joint and damaged ... they were manacles ...

The routine was, don't think of handcuffs. Think of a rigid figure 8. Your wrists are put together like this behind your back and those rigid manacles, the figure 8 is clamped around your wrists. Then, of course, that's behind your back. Then ropes go around your elbows and pull your elbows together.

What that does is it pulls your shoulders out of joint, which happened to me and also all the nerves and blood vessels in your wrists are crushed, which is extremely painful for about 15 minutes. By then there's no circulation and everything has gone numb.

They know that, so what they do is after about 15 minutes they come in and loosen the ropes, circulation starts up along with the extreme pain and then they synch you up again. This can go on forever.

I went through that I don't know how many times. It must have been 20-30 times. On one of those occasions I just about died, not from the pain, but the guy who did, he did what I just described. Then as an afterthought, and this was a stocky guy who did most of the torture work, a Vietnamese guy.

He took another rope and he looped it around my ankles and around my neck so that while I was lying on the floor I would have to stay in a back arched position.

At some point I wasn't able to do that and basically I strangled. I'd lost consciousness.

On one of those visits where they come in to loosen the ropes and then synch them up again, it just so happens his timing was perfect. A few more seconds I would be dead. He came in and loosened the ropes. I woke up and we started over again. This time without the neck rope. That went on all that time.

Producer: Did you ever get to the point of-

Mike Cronin: Break under torture, that's a Hollywood term. It has no real meaning. As we've discovered again in our treatment of the Guantanamo detainees, torture is not an effective method of getting the truth. Torture is an effective method of getting compliance.

If you're tortured enough and the guy says, "Okay, tell me that you are a murderer" you'll tell him you're a murderer. Or if he asks an open ended question what you can do is make up something. That's what happens when people are tortured. That's what I did. I either told lies or I made stuff up.

Probably the main reason why I never had to go to a press conference and nothing that I wrote was ever used or released was because Mel Stanner, a guy who was captured about three months before we and on the same ship, were shot down and went through the same thing I went through.

When he got to the point of having to write his confession about all the stuff that he had done that was so bad he used the names of various politicians and movie stars and baseball players to put in his confession as other characters. It was published by Time magazine and it made North Vietnam the laughing stock.

The end result was they tortured him nearly to death, but the second result of that was that they were much more careful about what they released. I did my best to make what I wrote unbelievable to any person who was not in Hanoi system. I don't know if it would have succeeded or not, to put zingers in there and write things that are completely unrealistic. Yeah, I wrote all that stuff, but I tried to make it as unbelievable as I possibly could.

What the Vietnamese did is they started getting a lot of pressure about the fact that they were not releasing names and that they were not unresponsive to any idea of exchanging prisoners or anything of that sort. As the pressure mounted they tried various things to deal with it.

Step one, let's take some prisoners who have had no contact with the other prisoners and treat them well, not torture. Just set them aside and we'll pick out

some of those who are pliable, which they did. The ones who were released in fact had not been tortured with one exception.

Doug Hegdal, a navy sailor who was ... basically he fell overboard on the Tonkin Gulf, swam around on his own for about four or five hours, was picked up by fishermen and turned over as a POW. All of those who were released early with the exception of Doug Hegdal are considered by us to be way below standard. They didn't do anything for us. They might claim that they did or think that they did, but in our opinion, we don't talk to them.

Doug Hegdal is the exception. He was a great guy. He did everything he was supposed to do, but the senior people in the camp ordered him to accept release and behave well and go home. He's the one who took out the names and the information. The others, in our view, those are people who simply didn't measure up.

My time in solitary was about six months totally in various periods. The first time, about three months until I was put in a cell with other guys. After that at various times when I was being punished, total of about six months all together.

I did all those things. Mine the mind of your roommates to find out everything they know and you tell them everything you know. Do all those things. We also, chess was a big pastime. For a long time the Vietnamese would confiscate stuff we made. If you had a rag you could make a chessboard out of it.

Sometimes instead of a bowl of rice you might get a piece of bread. You could take little pieces of bread, wad them up, make them into pieces. A lot of us played chess. One of the things about that situation is with no distractions and nothing else to do ...

Literally there was nothing else to do. We were given nothing to read, there was no mail, nothing, it was total isolation. One of the features of that situation is you can concentrate like you've never concentrated before. One of my roommates and I, Ralf Gaither, we were in a cell together for a long time.

We had played chess together quite a bit and the Vietnamese had confiscated our little handmade set. For a while we played blindfold chess and you can actually do it because you can really concentrate. When I went through college time was precious, I had no time for anything. If your studying was not completely totally efficient you're going to miss a few things.

Looking back at some of the math problems in calculus and whatever the heck seemed so difficult, but with the power of concentration and no distractions turns out they're not so difficult. I'm the type of guy, I don't know what day it is

unless I look at my watch, but while I was a prisoner I knew what day it was every day. It's just one of those factors that's involved in the absence of other distractions.

Years went by and the treatment improved. There are various reasons why people say that it improved. Ho Chi Minh died in the fall of 1969. Right after that things started improving, but that also coincided with a major effort on the part of the families to make an international ruckus.

I think it was the families. I don't think it was Ho Chi Minh. In other words some guys believed that when Ho Chi Minh died policy changed. I think Ho Chi Minh had been out of policy making for years. by the time he died he was no longer ... he was a symbol, he was not really in power.

Anyway, at least that's my belief. The pressure that came on Vietnam as a result of the families' action is what changed the course and they realized that if they didn't take good care of enough of us so that we live they would have no bargaining chips. Because of the ruckus that was being raised at home by the families they realized they had a bargaining chip.

My knowledge of who was held prisoner in South Vietnam is limited, but I'm sure there were some people, but the North Vietnamese had no interest in them.

That's part of the communist philosophy. Remember back to world war two. What happened to the Russian prisoners of war at the end of world war two? They went to the gulag. They did not get released. The North Vietnamese were not that concerned about people who were captured and they refused every offer of exchange.

Producer: I understand there was, at any given time there was 300 or 400 and then of course when they were released it was about 600 ...

Mike Cronin: Yeah, 591 is the exact number. There's a website I can direct you to which shows the exact numbers if you want to have that. Anyway, as we just discussed, things changed over time. For years and years my face to face communication was probably a dozen or less people, probably a lot less than a dozen.

Then there was a big event that happened in the fall of 1970. I've got to give you a little more history. Starting in late 1969 treatment improved. Pretty much there was no torture going on. There was enough physical force used to maintain order, but no people singled out were tortured very much, at least as far as I know.

There had been some terrible events before that. In the summer of 1969 there was an escape attempt from one of the camps that the Vietnamese perceived had been organized. They went through the camp with horrific torture trying to find out how the prisoners were communicating with the United States. Of course they weren't and who was in charge and all of that.

Many people were tortured near to death for information that they simply didn't have. One guy was tortured to death. [Inaudible 01:10:22] is his name. I was not involved in that. Lucky for me I was in a different camp, but there's a lot of bitterness about everything that went on in that episode. Right after that is when things started to change, in the fall of 1969.

Move ahead about six months and some of us were moved to a new camp which was the first place we'd ever been that looks like the POW camp you'd see in the movies. It had a series of big compounds with high walls and barbed wire, but within the compound there was more or less freedom of movement.

Producer: Is this outside of Hanoi?

Mike Cronin: Yes, outside of Hanoi. In each of these compounds there would be a couple of small buildings. Each building would hold about ten guys. During the day the doors of those buildings were opened, so you could move around in the courtyard, exercise, whatever.

It was like you imagine a POW camp would be. We got there, me personally sometime in the summer of 1970. I can't remember. I have it written down, but I don't have it off the top of my head. Conditions were substantially better.

By this time you've got to remember another fact. There hasn't been any bombing of North Vietnam for two years because in the spring on 1968 when Johnson decided that he was not going to run for office he restricted the bombing to below the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel, then below the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Then on the eve of elections in 1968 all bombing of North Vietnam was stopped. Now we're in 1970. There haven't been any new prisoners and there hasn't been any bombing for almost two years.

We got to this camp, everything is much better. One night there was a lot of noise and shooting, missiles going up, the works. It's really intense. What's going on? Nobody says a word, but about two days later we hear a lot of trucks. Then we're starting to guess.

We guessed that there had been on another POW camp and now what's going to happen is the Hanoi Hilton, which was also a civil prison, was being emptied out.

They're going to get into the POW camp and we're going back to the Hilton which is exactly what happened.

That was ... the Son Tay camp was not that far from this camp we're talking about. Then we went back to Hanoi, but in the previous situation in the Hanoi Hilton we were in small cells. These were cells that were purpose built. They were built with no common walls in an effort made by the Vietnamese to prevent communication by tapping on the walls. Part of the complex was set up that way, mainly a place we called the Thunderbird.

At any rate, the rest of the cells for most of the Hanoi Hilton were big open bays. They were, I don't know, 50 or 60 feet long, 20 feet wide and they had a concrete sleeping platform and you put 50 guys in there. For the rest of the time in Hanoi that was the accommodation with one exception, which I'll talk about in a minute.

The Vietnamese simply didn't have the facilities to keep us away from the helicopters. They figured correctly that downtown Hanoi would be one of the most difficult places to conduct a raid because it's all built up, heavily defended, whatnot.

After we got ... it was pretty clear what had happened after we got into this new situation in the Hanoi Hilton with the big rooms, 50 men to a room more or less. You could see the guards running around on the parapets with model airplanes conducting drills like they're defending the camp. Some of the guards indicated that if the camp were raided their first job would be to shoot all of us.

That changed the situation dramatically. After that I had contact with lots of people which psychologically was a big improvement. You could associate with people that you wanted to talk to instead of being stuck with your roommate who's a great guy, but after a while you're pretty tired of him.

There was another face to that. Two other things I want to talk about in terms of physical locations. Go back to 1967 when the bombing was pretty intense. Probably 1967 was the peak year for bombing of North Vietnam. By the spring and summer of 1967 the Vietnamese were pretty much on the ropes as far as that goes.

What they did is they took about 20 of us and put us in a temporary camp near the Hanoi electrical power plant which was a target. I don't know what they were thinking, but I'm guessing that they either wanted the US to figure out that we were there and not bomb it or that it would be bombed and we would be killed and they would be able to use that for propaganda.

That was one of my most interesting periods while I was in Hanoi. What they had done is there were what you might call a bunch of ... it was like a row house except one floor, a bunch of buildings which had probably been shops at one time. They cleaned those out, boarded up the windows and made them into cells. That's where they put us.

One of the tasks that fell to that camp was where do you get drinking water. Where you get drinking water was by tapping the boilers at the power plant because that's distilled water. It's not going to be dangerous to drink.

Periodically two of us would take a big 20 gallon bucket on a pole between the two of us and go into the power plant and tap the boilers and bring water back to the camp. Once you saw what the power plant was like you knew that it was probably not ever going to be knocked out.

First of all they had built big, really big revetments all the way around it. Then it had a reinforced concrete roof which was very sturdy and thick looking which had only a few air holes in it for ventilation. They had built very carefully pathways for evacuation in the event of a raid.

As it happened I was in the power plant when a raid took place. Myself and Ralf Gaither, our job that day was to carry the water. We went into the power plant and the alarm went off. All the workers who were in the power plant, which was quite a few, they thought that was funny.

It wasn't like they were in fear. They thought it was funny that we would be in the power plant when the alarm went off. Within a few seconds they're gone because their evacuation routes and their shelters, wherever they had them, were very well set up and they were gone. It only took a few seconds.

Now Ralf and I are there with our guard and we've got the water and it's time to go. Ralf and I put the bucket on our shoulder, now we've got to walk. It might be, I don't know, 100 yards back to where we're staying. We're walking as slow as we can enjoying the fact that the guard is getting more and more agitated because he's worried about getting into his shelter. We don't have a shelter of course, they're just going to lock us in our cells.

They did that. The guards shelter was what they had all over the city. They had these drain pipes dug into the ground next to the street. These were all along the streets. Each one of those would lie, get down about four feet and hunker down and except for a direct hit you'd be safe.

As it turned out this raid was a big one and it came really close to the power plant. The ground shook, it was intense. Plaster's coming off the wall, you can

see the guard ... you can peek through the slats and see the guard cowering out in his hole.

It was pretty intense, but as it happened none of us were hit. There were several of those while I was there. I was there for about three or four months. Because you could peek and see what was going on on the street a little bit it was one of the more interesting times I had. I was more happy to see a little outside activity than I was worried about being bombed.

It also showed the weakness of our bombing campaign because raids happened like clockwork. Every day around the middle of the day the sirens would go off because the planes are out in the distance and the sirens get closer and closer. Then you hear the anti-aircraft going off. Then the planes come and the raid happens, but with a raid conducted by fighter bombers it only lasts about 30 seconds. The bombs fall, that's it. It's gone, that's it for the day.

It was just ... the Vietnamese had not ... The city had been largely evacuated. I learned later when I visited Hanoi that before the war the population of Hanoi had been about a million people. During the war after evacuation it was down to about 250,000. Most people had left. When I was visiting Hanoi 15 years ago the population was four million and there was construction going on everywhere.

Anyway, the Vietnamese who were in the city, they were not greatly intimidated by what was going on. There's a psychology there. You could divide the whole group into optimists and pessimists. The optimists would always be able to develop a logic which would bring the war to an end within a month or two. The pessimists would always be able to develop a logic in discussion that would see the war going on for at least several more years.

Of course the advantage fell to the pessimists because the optimists were wrong every time except once. The pessimists were right every time except once. As the war came to an end, starting in late '71 and accelerating in '72 the bombing resumed. The Vietnamese had a plan and by luck of the draw I was part of that plan.

About 200 of us were moved out of the Hanoi Hilton to an isolated camp up near the Chinese border. The trip up there was miserable because it was shrouded in secrecy, it was because it happened in May and the Vietnamese were obsessed with secrecy. We were crowded into the back of trucks, very little ventilation, nothing to eat, nothing to drink. It was a miserable trip.

Anyway, we got to this place which actually was a special built camp near the Chinese border. From May until January ... May of '72 till January of '73 we stayed there. Basically we were the ace in the whole because if you look at a



map and see where this camp is, of all the locations in North Vietnam that would be the one most difficult to reach with a helicopter without getting shot down.

And because of the long overland stretch that the helicopter would have to travel before reaching the camp the Vietnamese would have time to evacuate the camp and to move all the prisoners across the border into China, which is exactly what they planned to do because many nights you could hear them outside.

We were isolated in little buildings. Each building had about probably 10 or 12 guys and there were a bunch of buildings inside this compound. You could hear the drills going on, how they were planning to come and evacuate. That was the obvious plan.

In October of '72 we started getting serious rumors that the war might be coming to an end. When we loaded into the trucks to go back to Hanoi it was pretty clear that it was just about over because it was completely the opposite of the journey up there. The trucks were opened and we could see the scenery. It was no funny business. It was just normal.

Producer: You remember that day that-

Mike Cronin: Yes. Here's how it happened. In January, I can't remember the date, when we're back in these big cells in the major part of the ... the 50 men cells. A very senior North Vietnamese officer came around, insisted that we come out and line up in formations and he made a speech and said "The rumors are false. The war's not coming to an end. It's going to go on much longer and on and on and on."

Just a few days after that we were each given a copy of the agreement because one of the provisions in the agreement that was signed was that every prisoner on both sides would be given a copy of the agreement within 10 days. That's how we found out.

Of course, that night, after they distributed the leaflets, they had a huge fireworks show in Hanoi. The best I've ever seen because by this time you could look out the windows from the building which had previously been blocked up and you could see it going on. It was the most spectacular fireworks display I've ever seen, it went on for hours.

It was such a grand moment, but you couldn't tell it by what actually happened. First thing to happen was we had insisted that we be released in order of capture because everybody knew that the whole thing could fall apart at any time and that whoever's left there might be there for another year or whatever.

I'll never forget, my number was 153 which meant that the first release, which happened on February 12<sup>th</sup> was not going to include me. The second release was supposed to happen two weeks later. It was supposed to be a two week routine. The first bunch of guys left.

Then as we got up to the date when we were supposed to go, in fact there already had been trouble. Ceasefire violations and so on and so forth. The day before we were supposed to go to the airport the camp commander called in the senior guy and said "Sorry, you're not going. I'm not giving you any bullshit, here, I have the passes to go to the airport, but they're no good. You can't go." After another two weeks all that was straightened out and on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March it was our day to go.

Producer: How many in your group?

Mike Cronin: Let's see. I'm not sure I know exactly, but it had to be at least 70 or so.

Producer: A plane load?

Mike Cronin: Yes. We had lots of planes. That didn't matter, but the routine was they gave you a cheap set of civilian clothes to wear and you could take some of the stuff you'd had. Most people brought back ... we had a tin cup which you'd had for years and a few things like that that you could take home as souvenirs. I think I still have my mosquito net, which was by far the most valuable possession I had while I was a prisoner.

Anyway, then we get on a bus. I remember walking out of the door of the Hanoi Hilton. Outside, just watching, there was quite a crowd of people. You wonder, "How did they know to be there and watch?" but there was quite a crowd of people, Vietnamese, outside the main entrance of the prison watching us get on the bus.

Then the bus went through the city and out to the airport. It was the first time in years that we'd seen any sign of life. There are people walking up and down the streets, shops with a few ... It wasn't busy because the city was still halfway evacuated, but there was life going on.

We get to the airport and put us in a building where we really couldn't see much of anything. We were just sitting there waiting. You'd think the atmosphere would be jubilant, but it wasn't. It was very subdued because it's almost like nobody can believe it's actually happening and it hasn't happened yet. Something could go wrong at any minute.

Then finally they take us out, get back on the bus, take out to the tarmac. Get out of the bus and line up. There's a table with an American officer and a Vietnamese officer and they call out each name. There's an air force officer standing across the way, you walk over and shake his hand. Immediately some airmen guide you onto the ramp of the C-141, which is sitting not far away.

It was a cheap set of civilian clothes that they gave you. Just a cotton shirt, a pair of cotton slacks and a little windbreaker type thing.

Producer: I guess ... tell me when you saw your wife.

Mike Cronin: In San Diego. The routine was ... okay, get on the airplane. Fly to the Philippines at Clark air force base. There's a chance to make a phone call, call home. They do some physical, do some other administrative things. Fit you out with a uniform and after three days of that get on an airplane and basically the group was dispersed to the military hospital nearest your home.

My wife was living in San Diego. Flew to Hawaii, then to Travis, a smaller airplane down to Miramar San Diego. My wife and my sister and my brother and my other sister are all there waiting for me when I got off the airplane.

Producer: That was a very wonderful day of your life when you ran in her arms.

Mike Cronin: Absolutely, yes, no questions about it.

Producer: Mike, I'd like to thank you for what you ...