

McDaniel, Eugene US Navy

[00:00:14.52] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I was born in North Carolina, Craven County, near New Bern, North Carolina and grew up in Kinston, North Carolina, which is my home of record.

[00:00:25.91] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you enter the Navy?

[00:00:28.19] EUGENE MCDANIEL: March 1955. I had graduated in 1954 from Elon University, then Elon College. And I had to-- the draft was coming after me. Because at that time, you had to be in the upper half of your class to get deferred from year to year. And when you graduate, you're fair game.

[00:00:47.48] I had a teaching job and coaching. And to be able to finish the school year in 1955, I had to find a program that would defer me until the end of the school year. And I found a naval aviation program. And I'd never flown, but I thought it would be an extension of athletics and I joined the Navy and they deferred me until the end of the school year and I came in March of 1955.

[00:01:11.61] Vietnam came on the radar screen in the '60s. I had got my wings in 1956 out of Corpus Christi and came to Oceana and flew the A-6, which is a propeller driven plane for about seven years. I went aboard USS Independence as ship's company for a two year tour. And then, from that job, I transitioned into the A-6 program, which was a new jet aircraft. Came out in 1963 and I entered the program in 1965.

[00:01:41.43] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you get orders to Vietnam?

[00:01:44.99] EUGENE MCDANIEL: 1965. The A-6 was a new aircraft, state of the art. Had a system that we could drop a bomb within 15 feet of any given point. And I transitioned from a propeller aircraft into the A-6 in the third squadron that--

[00:02:03.18] JOE GALLOWAY: What propeller plane were you flying?

[00:02:05.52] EUGENE MCDANIEL: The A-1 Skyraider.

[00:02:06.51] JOE GALLOWAY: A-1E Skyraider.

[00:02:07.44] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes.

[00:02:07.97] JOE GALLOWAY: I love that plane.

[00:02:08.25] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I had that-- flew that for 2,500 hours.

[00:02:10.42] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a fine plane.

[00:02:11.76] EUGENE MCDANIEL: It really is. And I flew that for about 10 years and transitioned into the-- I was very fortunate to get into the A-6 community. And went to Southeast Asia in the third A-6 squadron to deploy.

[00:02:24.19] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were aboard the carrier when it was deployed to Yankee Station.

[00:02:31.22] EUGENE MCDANIEL: We flew out of Oceana to Alameda, California to load aboard Enterprise, which was based there. And we flew out in-- I think in October of 1966. Went aboard Enterprise and left for Southeast Asia from Alameda.

[00:02:51.82] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I was 35 years old when I went to Vietnam.

[00:02:54.25] JOE GALLOWAY: And your rank at that time?

[00:02:55.84] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Lieutenant commander.

[00:02:56.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Lieutenant commander. You were a very senior guy.

[00:03:00.91] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Kind of middle of the road.

[00:03:02.32] [LAUGHS]

[00:03:03.31] I was a department head-- maintenance officer.

[00:03:05.95] JOE GALLOWAY: You were a fighter pilot. So when you get off Yankee Station, do you start doing missions?

[00:03:12.33] EUGENE MCDANIEL: We started with soft targets early on. I arrived on Yankee Station probably at late October. And we would have a few soft targets. Getting the feel for combat. And then we--

[00:03:28.77] JOE GALLOWAY: When you say a soft target, you're talking what?

[00:03:32.15] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Maybe a suspected stream bed.

[00:03:34.68] [LAUGHS]

[00:03:35.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Something easy.

[00:03:37.74] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Something easy.

[00:03:38.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Not protected by SAMs.

[00:03:40.13] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. And we had two or three of those missions, then we moved into the heavy stuff. The A-6 was an all weather, at night-- we flew in all weather at night. And in the monsoon season, we were the only aircraft that could get in.

[00:03:53.60] JOE GALLOWAY: OK, if you're flying night and you're flying in the clouds-- but they got radar.

[00:04:00.52] EUGENE MCDANIEL: They do. But we have equipment on the aircraft. Countermeasures, yes, to help.

[00:04:14.45] EUGENE MCDANIEL: The hard missions were called alpha strikes. They're strikes controlled by the chairman of the joint chiefs, coming out of the White House. And of my 81 missions, probably 10 were alpha strikes. And we had certain targets that were tough, difficult targets, deep into Hanoi. And we would alternate those within the squadron so one guy wouldn't have to take the same target all the time.

[00:04:41.94] And I would say my first toughest target was probably my 15th mission. It was a steel power plant called Bac Giang We bombed that. We had to travel about 130 miles inland to hit the target. And we would go in about 300 feet above the terrain so we would be out of the missile envelope. And we would go in--

[00:05:05.19] JOE GALLOWAY: But you're in the anti-aircraft envelope

[00:05:07.53] EUGENE MCDANIEL: You are, yes. But you're in the clouds and in darkness. All lights are out.

[00:05:12.36] JOE GALLOWAY: And you are going as fast as you can.

[00:05:13.58] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And all you can see are the tracers coming up. And every fifth bullet fired is a tracer. And you only see every fifth one.

[00:05:21.57] JOE GALLOWAY: So there is a lot of lead between the tracers.

[00:05:23.10] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. And I think that was early on. And that kind of conditioned us. And we would rotate that squad-- that target through the squadron.

[00:05:31.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, were you losing people on these alpha strikes early on like that?

[00:05:38.25] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, I was my squadron's only loss. We had a very successful cruise. I was two weeks from coming home. And I was the only loss. And the day that I was shot down was a visual flight day, which means we were one of 24 aircraft in a group going in where you're exposed.

[00:05:55.32] At night, you're by yourself in the darkness, one aircraft. And now, we were 24 aircraft. Not our element. Our element is at night in all weather. And that's when I was shut down.

[00:06:06.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, your-- these alpha missions were directed by the White House?

[00:06:14.64] EUGENE MCDANIEL: By the White House, yes.

[00:06:16.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Did that strike you as a little odd?

[00:06:19.25] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well it did, but the war was a political war. When Johnson stopped the bombing in 1968, and the bombers didn't come for three years, a political decision to have impact on the election in this country between Richard Nixon the hawk, Hubert Humphrey the dove.

[00:06:36.74] And when you're inside a communist prison looking out and that happens, it gives you a lot of food for thought. And I think that decision is one of the reasons a lot of us came back and got involved politically because of those decisions.

[00:06:55.57] EUGENE MCDANIEL: We were catapulted off May 19, 1967. 35 years of age. Walked up to the flight deck, strapped into the A-6. I was on the number one catapult with my Navigator Lieutenant James Kelly Patterson, who's missing from that mission. And as I walked up the aircraft, the skipper of the ship came up and tapped me on the leg and he says, Red, no sweat. He had been the commanding officer of my squadron. And now, he was the commander of Enterprise.

[00:07:25.92] So he had a special affinity for our squadron. And he tapped me on the leg and he says, no sweat. When you get to Hanoi, there'll be no flak because the Air Force is going before you and they'll get all the flak.

[00:07:37.70] So I was strapped into the aircraft and catapulted off. Rendezvoused with 23 other aircraft and crossed a beach. We were about 10 miles off the beach.

[00:07:47.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you-- where were the Air Force planes coming from, Da Nang?

[00:07:51.86] EUGENE MCDANIEL: They were coming from Takhli, Thailand, Cambodia. I mean, not Cambodia, but Thailand and Takhli. There's several bases there.

[00:08:03.14] JOE GALLOWAY: You hooked up with them and headed for Hanoi.

[00:08:06.15] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And we crossed the beach, armed our weapons, and flying about 20,000 feet. And our target was 110 miles inland, downtown Hanoi, a place called Little Detroit. It was where they repaired the trucks.

[00:08:21.01] And about 30 miles prior to the target, while dodging the fourth missile fired at the flight-- the flight of 24-- while dodging number four fired to our aircraft, I was hit by number five, which I never saw. And our aircraft-- the aircraft pitched down, began to accelerate, and began to burn.

[00:08:43.15] My navigator, seated to my right, said, let's eject. But had we ejected at that moment, we would have been captured right away because it was a flat delta area. So we held a little conference-- very brief, I might add-- but rode the aircraft for about 70 seconds, reached the mountain range, he ejects.

[00:08:58.90] I must wait one second because if we go up together, our seats collide. And in that one second, I traveled about 1,000 yards beyond him. He came down the near side of the mountain and I came down the far side.

[00:09:11.16] As we came down, you're-- as we're descending in our parachutes, they're still shooting. But the thing that shocked me--

[00:09:19.19] JOE GALLOWAY: They were shooting at you in your parachute?

[00:09:20.63] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh yes, absolutely. You're fair game until you hit the ground. But the first sensation I had was total silence. Flying inside a very sophisticated aircraft with all the bells and whistles and the warbles and all of a sudden you eject, it's just total silence. It's really-- floating down.

[00:09:40.66] And as I came down on the far side of the mountain range, the parachute-- my parachute caught on a tree limb, a big banyan tree. And I was suspended, oscillating back and forth, not prepared to fall 40 feet.

[00:09:55.07] So the only option I had was to climb up the risers to reach the limb to go into the trunk to try to shimmy down. I climbed up, reached a limb, started in, the limb peeled away. And when it did, I fell about 30 or 40 feet to the ground and crushed two vertebrae in my back and was partially paralyzed. And that was my introduction--

[00:10:14.91] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were laying there in the jungle unable to move.

[00:10:18.34] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. Up until that time in my life, my life had run on a rather smooth course. I had been a star athlete in school, I was macho man, top gun pilot, a deacon in my church, father of three children. But all of a sudden, none of that matters. That's all gone.

[00:10:35.81] JOE GALLOWAY: It's gone.

[00:10:36.80] EUGENE MCDANIEL: So I begin to-- for the first time in my life, I had been challenged in a very real way. I was no longer self-sufficient. I was paralyzed in the jungles. And so that's when I prayed the most fervent prayer I've ever prayed. I prayed that God would bodily lift me out of that jungle, which didn't happen.

[00:10:56.31] But I was taken to Hanoi two days away.

[00:10:58.41] JOE GALLOWAY: They came and got you?

[00:11:00.36] EUGENE MCDANIEL: They came and got me and I was on the ground for 26 hours before capture.

[00:11:05.43] JOE GALLOWAY: You lay there for a day and night.

[00:11:07.59] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I crawled around and I was able to move around, but I just wasn't able to walk. That night, I was shut down about 11:00 in the morning. So I was able to avoid capture until the next morning about-- next day around 10:00 or maybe 11:00.

[00:11:25.83] And my downfall was that, the next morning, I had made contact with the aircraft overhead and they knew I was down. I was OK except for my back. But I was told the Jolly Green's would come the next morning.

[00:11:40.41] And they would come in from Thailand with helicopters to rescue us. And at 7:00 they were overhead. I made contact and I asked them where the Jolly Greens were and they said 45 minutes. Well, being an optimist, I got my parachute out that I'd hidden, spread it out so it could be seen from the air. 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 and I think it was around 2:00.

[00:12:04.57] JOE GALLOWAY: No Jollies.

[00:12:04.98] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No Jollies. And around 2:00-- and we were in-- we were so far inland it was almost impossible to have helicopters come to get us. We were deep into enemy territory. And we were in Air Force territory, which created another problem. We were Navy.

[00:12:24.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have contact with your backseat guy?

[00:12:27.75] EUGENE MCDANIEL: He was alive on the ground for four days. Disappeared. And I thought he just disappeared and I have reason to believe he was taken to the Soviet Union for--

[00:12:37.08] JOE GALLOWAY: One of those guys.

[00:12:38.61] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. Charm school environment to Americanize the KGB and knew the heart of the system. So I think he very well could have been. And I have strong reason to believe that.

[00:12:50.53] Well, I think there-- from what I've written-- reading, there's a book out now that says we brought some out in 1988, so-- written by a naval intelligence officer of 33 years. And I was working with Reagan and Ross Perot on this issue in 1987/88.

[00:13:09.18] And I do know that Ross Perot went to Hanoi. Found out he went there for Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Found out they were, in fact, there. For these conditions, we'll give them back to you. And it's about this time frame that General Lacey, Air Force, who is now deceased, went to Hanoi. And according to this book, American in the Basement, on page 272, it says he brought-- he secreted 62 men out in 1988.

[00:13:37.51] JOE GALLOWAY: From Hanoi? EUGENE MCDANIEL: Hanoi, North Vietnam. JOE GALLOWAY: Not from Moscow?

[00:13:40.57] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, North Vietnam.

[00:13:42.51] JOE GALLOWAY: But I mean, you would know them from flying off the Enterprise.

[00:13:45.79] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh, absolutely. They were friends of mine. Yeah, my navigator is one of them.

[00:13:50.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, where the hell are they?

[00:13:52.66] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, my navigator was 12 years my junior. We had flown together for 18 months. It was a great team. I knew his every move, he knew mine. And his brother--

[00:14:02.05] JOE GALLOWAY: You knew his family.

[00:14:03.37] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh, absolutely. His brother was a Marine lieutenant in Da Nang in the '60s. And Kelly Patterson, my navigator, would take leave from Enterprise to go to Da Nang to go on patrol with his brother. And that's the kind of love you don't find come down the street every day.

[00:14:23.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Are you in touch with his brother?

[00:14:25.82] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. He's coming to town next week.

[00:14:27.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ask him if he's out?

[00:14:28.79] EUGENE MCDANIEL: His brother has been looking 50 years for him and his brother went to Kazakhstan. And I have a FOIA request in, which is to be ruled on soon, which includes US senators and congressmen. And my FOIA request is based on an article out of Kommersant paper, November the 4th, 1991 that said, a Soviet journalist flew out of Vietnam in September of 1967 with a second pilot in an aircraft shot down May 19, 1967.

[00:15:00.89] JOE GALLOWAY: That's your mission.

[00:15:01.83] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. Flew through China, Russia, ended up in Sary Shagan, Kazakhstan. And that was a-- he said-- and I went back and researched that, and he's the

only second pilot that day missing. And they said his name was something like Peterson or Parkinson. Patterson.

[00:15:30.32] Because when I first came home, I thought he was dead. And I flew to California to tell his family that your son, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson, are dead. They wanted to start a national program with his picture and my picture. Pay no taxes until he comes home, like I did. And I wouldn't have any part of that because I had an absolute blind faith that my country would not forsake me. But that has all changed.

[00:15:56.58] JOE GALLOWAY: OK, you've been taken prisoner. Militia or regular army?

[00:16:03.90] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I would say maybe six militia and three or four civilians. Taken-- carried, because I couldn't walk-- taken to Hanoi. En route to Hanoi, they put me on display twice at military facilities where they would gather the crowds to rally the people.

[00:16:23.19] JOE GALLOWAY: And throw stuff at you?

[00:16:26.37] EUGENE MCDANIEL: They could throw stuff, spit on us.

[00:16:28.57] JOE GALLOWAY: They couldn't beat you, though.

[00:16:30.16] EUGENE MCDANIEL: They could slap us one time.

[00:16:31.96] JOE GALLOWAY: They would slap you.

[00:16:32.53] EUGENE MCDANIEL: One lick. And that happened twice. And then, on the second day, I ended up in Hanoi. And that was actually a relief because I was now-- JOE GALLOWAY: In the system. EUGENE MCDANIEL: --among friends. And I was about 200 prisoners shot down.

[00:16:45.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, did they give you medical care?

[00:16:49.54] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No. They never even looked at me.

[00:16:51.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Never even looked at you.

[00:16:52.63] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Even though I couldn't walk.

[00:16:53.44] JOE GALLOWAY: And you're still unable to walk. So you're now-- but you're now in the hands of friends.

[00:16:59.56] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, no, I'm in enemy hands-- I'm still in solitary confinement. But to me it's a relief because there will be friends that I will know there. But they kept us in isolation for most of the time. But I went through two weeks of very brutal torture, which bends the bodies in ways they are not intended to bend.

[00:17:20.47] But survived the torture. Tortured for military information. What targets are you going to hit the next day? We didn't know. So I went through two weeks of very brutal-- and ended up losing the use of your hands for about eight or nine months. Just dangling.

[00:17:34.11] JOE GALLOWAY: They were hanging you up?

[00:17:34.72] EUGENE MCDANIEL: What they do is they put your arms behind your back, bring you elbows together, put U-bolts on your ankles. They have a nine foot pole about that big that they run through the bolts with a rope tied to your arms up over a pulley through the bar and jerk you off the floor. And it was very brutal.

[00:17:53.98] JOE GALLOWAY: It takes your shoulders out of joint?

[00:17:54.70] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh, absolutely. All that. Oh, yes.

[00:17:57.79] JOE GALLOWAY: What was it doing to your back?

[00:17:59.94] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh it was just-- I found such great pain that I-- the only option I had was to bite myself to create-- to move the pain from one point to another.

[00:18:08.36] JOE GALLOWAY: To a different one. Yeah.

[00:18:09.43] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. And-- but God has a way. The body has a way of protecting itself by losing consciousness. So you eventually lose consciousness.

[00:18:19.86] JOE GALLOWAY: You just pass out.

[00:18:20.08] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes.

[00:18:22.28] JOE GALLOWAY: They got what they wanted after two weeks?

[00:18:24.61] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, well, we didn't have it.

[00:18:26.56] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't have what they wanted.

[00:18:27.43] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely not. We didn't have it. And we are purposely kept away from that kind of-- on the ship.

[00:18:39.55] EUGENE MCDANIEL: But then we start communicating. And that was our lifeline-- was communications. We took the tap code. And one prisoner, an Air Force-- Smitty Harris, had remembered reading a book about a prison communication system. And we needed a matrix to communicate with because all aviators are trained in dots and dashes. That's how we identify stations.

[00:19:04.83] But you can make a dot on the wall but you can't make a dash. So we had to have a matrix. And we took the alphabet and we dropped the letter K so we'd have 25 letters. And

there's-- five columns would create five lines. And we would tap in two groups. The first group of taps will be the column that we were in. If I tap two, second column, three, third line down, letter M. If I tap five, five, letter Z.

[00:19:37.01] And whenever we wanted to use K with suffix, C could be C or K. And we were texting and tweeting long before the kids today were.

[00:19:45.83] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHING]

[00:19:47.65] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And that was my--

[00:19:48.41] JOE GALLOWAY: And you got good at it.

[00:19:49.19] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And that was my downfall. In 1969, we had an escape attempt and it was communications. Because I had a window that connected around 220 prisoners in two different camps and I had lived in both camps. I had lived in the Zoo Annex, and they moved me to the Zoo. And I knew what you could see from the Zoo Annex.

[00:20:10.31] And from the Zoo, I could see my old cell in the Zoo Annex. And we had a little slit about ten feet up the wall, about five inches by 12 inches. And we made contact through that slit. And we communicated daily and were connecting some 69 walls with a question and answer through 69 walls and back within 24 hours. We were very sophisticated.

[00:20:34.53] Because anytime we could see or hear, we could talk. If you didn't tap, you could flash the code. Throw up a washcloth in two groups. Same principle.

[00:20:44.55] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you circulate your matrix?

[00:20:47.40] EUGENE MCDANIEL: We would tap on the wall to the guy next door and say, one for A, two for B, three for C, and if you're a slow learner, go all the way to Z. But getting to Z, though, he would realize what you were doing. And then, you tell him what the matrix was and you would start communicating.

[00:21:03.35] JOE GALLOWAY: And get it passed through. Incredible. What happened-- how did-- how was the escape planning?

[00:21:14.85] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, the Zoo Annex, which I had moved from, had a plan to escape. Looking for a rainy Saturday night-- a rainy Saturday night because of late bed check on Sunday about 7:00 rather than 5:30 in the morning. A Saturday night.

[00:21:34.14] A rainy Saturday night because when it rained, the lights would short out and the barbed wire would not be charged. And they had to go over a 22 foot wall with barbed wire. So we got the rainy Saturday night, May 10th, 1969. Two men went out.

[00:21:48.96] And the plan was to get into the Red River, float 110 miles to the coast where a Navy ship might or might not be there to rescue me. A desperate attempt, but we were desperate men.

[00:22:02.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you one of the two men?

[00:22:05.16] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, I was the communicator. I had connected 220 prisoners. JOE GALLOWAY: You put them all together, and-- EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. And all communications came through our window except they opted not to tell us about the escape attempt because they knew the senior officer in my camp would refuse the escape attempt. Turn it down. So they opted not to tell us.

[00:22:24.72] And then, the escape occurred. And after it occurred, they told us. And for the next 30 days, the torture was very brutal. They tortured some 20 men for the next six weeks. And on June 16th-- the escape occurred May 10th. On June 16th, they came to my cell.

[00:22:42.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they recapture these guys?

[00:22:44.93] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yeah, they did. Second day-- the first day, they got out the next morning. Came back and one of the two was tortured to death, a Major Ed Atterberry, Air Force. And then they tortured some 20 people very brutally over the next month, six weeks.

[00:23:01.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Came for you finally.

[00:23:02.51] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And then they came to me. I went up for two weeks of very brutal torture. Seven days, seven nights.

[00:23:09.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they already know your role in the thing?

[00:23:12.02] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh, absolutely. They knew everything because when you-- everybody has a breaking point. When you don't have the answers, you make up answers. And they would-- I was fingered. And went through seven days, seven nights without sleep, kneeling on pitted concrete. Beaten daily with a fan belt. On one occasion, more than 150 times with the fan belt, a relay team. Electric shock treatment, sustained a compound fractured arm, which I still can't straighten from the rope torture.

[00:23:44.51] And at one time I had 39 open wounds on my body. And the leg irons that I had on, I couldn't even-- my legs were just-- I could take my fist and embed it in the swelling. And I only weighed about maybe 115 pounds.

[00:24:00.43] But in that torture room, very near death, the only thing I had left was a will that says, hang on. And I made a total surrender. I told God, I said, God, it's all yours to do whatever you want with it.

[00:24:13.99] JOE GALLOWAY: If you want me, take me.

[00:24:15.40] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I had nothing else left to give. And so the leg irons did not come off. And in those seven days without sleep, you begin to hallucinate. In my mind, I could take those legs irons off. I could take my-- and I go through that process.

[00:24:32.22] JOE GALLOWAY: And walk out.

[00:24:33.00] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And walk out. And then, I would get them all off and try to get up and they were still on.

[00:24:40.19] JOE GALLOWAY: They were still there.

[00:24:40.97] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh yeah, it was-- it's really amazing. But the lesson I learned throughout all that was that courage is not the absence of fear, because I was very much afraid. Courage is simply the presence of faith. And it was my faith-- the one thing they couldn't take-- that kept me going all those years.

[00:24:59.24] And I find that the ropes didn't come off immediately. But after 14 days of torture, I came out and the thing that saved my life is this. They used my condition to throw me in with a senior officer of the camp to get him to lessen his resistance policy. Because they thought if he could see what I looked like-- and that saved my life. JOE GALLOWAY: And what they'd done to you. EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes. What they would have done normally is throw me in a cell to die. I'd have been MIA, like my navigator.

[00:25:30.27] But instead they threw me in around midnight into the-- Lieutenant Commander Wendell Rivers, threw me in with him. And it worked for about maybe a day. He resisted-- he lessened the resistance policy. But then, we-- right back into communications because communications was our lifeline. And that saved my life. That's why I was able to come home.

[00:25:58.09] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, the guards for the most part would do exactly what the leadership-- I have no hatred for the Vietnamese people. They're beautiful people. Smart. Intellectual. But it's the system of communism that I learned to dislike and respect.

[00:26:12.87] And the guards every night within the camp would have a political rally that would reflect what the leadership told them. If they told them to smile, they came the next morning when they let us out, they smiled. If they told them to frown, they frowned.

[00:26:27.75] And from that, we could read the guards and they would not allow us to learn Vietnamese. All the guards spoke English.

[00:26:36.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Really?

[00:26:36.96] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Broken English. And they would learn that from us.

[00:26:39.02] JOE GALLOWAY: And they would not let you speak Vietnamese?

[00:26:41.94] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, because they knew we were smarter-- we were college educated. Several astronauts. 15% of the men were college-- were master's degrees. In fact, they had some Vietnamese girls at one time that would bring-- deliver water. And we Americans were able to develop a relationship with them because the Vietnamese men could pay no attention to them.

[00:27:04.55] And of course the camp commander would see that, and finally moved all the girls out of camp. So we had just men for the last three or four years.

[00:27:14.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there one story, one moment out of those six years that you spent in that prison that stands out?

[00:27:25.30] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I think it was-- as I look back, when-- being macho man, on top of my game, world in my hands, but never had really been challenged. But having lost all of that and had to pick up the pieces and build a new life.

[00:27:47.20] And I think I brought that out with me. Because as I look back, I really believe that God had a plan. Because 50 years ago a few weeks ago it could gone either way. But for some reason I was able to survive-- survive brutal torture in captivity. And I came home with a strong belief in my country.

[00:28:15.22] As I said, there, the thing that kept me alive was absolute blind faith that someday my country is coming to get me to take me back. And I believed that. In fact, I was the camp optimist. When the men would get down in spirit they would tap on the walls and say, Red, when will we go home? And my goal was two months.

[00:28:31.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Two months.

[00:28:32.32] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Time and time again, two months. Well, in six years, I lost a lot of credibility. But they wanted to hear that.

[00:28:45.06] EUGENE MCDANIEL: After about 3 and 1/2 years, I was allowed to write a six line letter. And I got several letters from my family. In fact, one of the first letters I got was from my daughter who was four when I left. I had three children, nine, seven, and four.

[00:29:01.05] I think the second letter I got was from her and she said, Dear Dad, I hope you're having a nice time because we're having a very nice time. But we got a chuckle out of that.

[00:29:12.42] JOE GALLOWAY: And she was by then eight years old.

[00:29:13.09] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yeah, five or six, seven.

[00:29:16.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Once you had been acknowledged that you were a prisoner and you got a chance to send mail home and get some mail, were they strictly given rules as to what they could say in their letters?

[00:29:37.70] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, we were communicating with the US government in our letters. We have a system that 10% of aviators are trained in covert communications. And we took inventory in the prison system, and right across the board 10% had that ability. And they taught those of us who didn't have.

[00:29:58.46] So we communicated with the US government.

[00:30:01.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Gave names of prisoners.

[00:30:05.13] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes, and we actually had an escape attempt in 1972 that was--

[00:30:12.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Another one?

[00:30:13.81] EUGENE MCDANIEL: It was to be an escape attempt because the same escapee who escaped in 1969 wanted to go again. And the leadership decided it was not what you take out with you, it's what you leave behind. Those of us that are in the system.

[00:30:28.87] So they decided they would get a message to the White House. And Richard Nixon approved an escape attempt. And we would be notified by SR-71s at noon. An SR-71 would fly over Hanoi. And we knew it was noon because they had gongs. And the gongs would sound at noon.

[00:30:48.81] In May of 1972, we got the SR-71. And 15 minutes later, a second sonic boom. And still later, another 15 minutes, a third sonic boom. And they--

[00:31:00.43] JOE GALLOWAY: And that was the signal to go.

[00:31:03.18] EUGENE MCDANIEL: To go. But then, the leadership fought against that system and the Navy had dropped six Seals off Haiphong on an island. And one of the six was killed. And that's why this is public knowledge now because chairman Mike Mullens, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, it was his classmate Spence Dye who led the raid, was dropped to high from the helicopter, and was killed.

[00:31:31.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Shot from the ground or--

[00:31:33.70] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Dropped from a helicopter down to the island along with five others. The other five landed safely, he did not. He was dropped too high. The movie is called a Spy in the Hanoi Hilton. It's on Smithsonian. You can YouTube it. It's really a very-- and my story is very prominent because the leadership used my story as a reason not to do it. It's not what you take out, it's what you leave behind.

[00:32:01.39] So they decided against the escape attempt. And so we didn't-- it was not-- even though it was White House approved, they decided not to do it.

[00:32:10.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Did not proceed.

[00:32:11.17] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No. And just three years ago, the Smithsonian did a 51 minute video that premiered at the Naval Academy two years ago and I was part of that. But it's really built around Jim Stockdale, the Medal of Honor recipient. It's his story, how we communicated. JOE GALLOWAY: What a remarkable man Jim Stockdale was. EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh, absolutely. Great leader. Along with Jeremiah Denton.

[00:32:32.50] In my case, I had absolute faith that my country would come to get me. But now, knowing-- and our government has admitted that we left prisoners there. Because after all of our efforts-- in 1991, we had a Senate Select Committee, six Republicans and six Democrats.

[00:32:48.79] They concluded, at the end of that, we might have left a few, but only a handful.

[00:32:54.54] JOE GALLOWAY: I thought, they're covering it up.

[00:32:56.89] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely. And they were.

[00:32:58.48] JOE GALLOWAY: And they were.

[00:32:59.23] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely.

[00:32:59.58] JOE GALLOWAY: And it was John Kerry and John McCain.

[00:33:02.68] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And John McCain was the go-to guy because he was a POW. But the real guy was Bob Smith. Bob Smith was a great champion. And I have great respect-- I have more respect for Bob Smith than any man up there. But in the official record it said we might have left a few, but only a handful. But they didn't qualify.

[00:33:23.93] JOE GALLOWAY: How about 330 in Laos alone?

[00:33:27.65] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely.

[00:33:28.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Where are they?

[00:33:29.05] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely. EUGENE MCDANIEL: It's a very vivid memory when you find yourself floating down. Realize that-- I actually was kind of relieved in floating down. I said to myself after I got on the ground, partially paralyzed, I won't have to fly any more missions. And being an optimist, I'm going to be rescued. That moment stands out.

[00:33:59.98] But then I think the other moment is the time at the height of torture in 1969, which was kind of the beginning of the end of torture. That's because the wives in this country were becoming a very effective force, including my wife.

[00:34:17.53] And I was missing for seven-- missing for three years. Just disappeared. My name came out at the fourth year of captivity. But she hung in there. So I think that memory, the height of torture. That plus the initial shock of being shot down and floating down into total silence.

[00:34:46.49] EUGENE MCDANIEL: It was lift off in Hanoi.

[00:34:48.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Flying out.

[00:34:49.46] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Lifting off. May 4th, 1973. And I was to be released in the second group. The first group came out February 12th, 1973. And two weeks later, another 115 of us. I was one of the short-termers. I was there only six years. The first group was nine years down to six.

[00:35:13.88] And I was to be released on the 28th of February. And just about an hour prior to release-- we had clothes, they had given us clothes and-- jacket, shirt, trousers, belt. And about an hour prior to release, they said there'd be no release, there'd been a violation in the South.

[00:35:34.06] And when that happens and you've been there six years already, what does that mean? Well, prior to that, the senior officer had-- due to my treatment in 1969, I was not the most devout, but he asked me to serve as chaplain of my cell block, and I did. And he asked me to prepare a service of thanksgiving, thanking God for keeping us all alive. And the fact we'll be free next weekend.

[00:36:02.29] And we did that. A beautiful service. But then just prior to release, we were told we weren't going to be released. He came back to me and says, we need another service in the light of not going home. So we had to prepare that. And I did that.

[00:36:17.57] And then about 10 minutes prior to the service the next week, March 4th, we were told we would be going to the Philippines. So we were released. We got to the Philippines. There were 17 chaplains there to deliver the good news and the bad news to 115 men, some who had not heard from the families for seven years.

[00:36:39.87] And they started, but not one of the 17 was prepared to have a service. So the senior officer asked me if I would deliver my service that I had planned in Hanoi, which I did. And we had a choir. And he got a lot of publicity. My wife heard about that and she said, I can't believe my husband is a chaplain now.

[00:36:59.66] [LAUGHS]

[00:37:08.61] EUGENE MCDANIEL: The worst day would happen to be the height of torture using-- being near death. Having lost about 70 pounds in a couple week period. I think that-- as I think back, that is the worst day. We had a lot of good days. Torture was not our major enemy. Our major enemy was whiling away the minutes, the hours, the days, the weeks, the years because we lived in a total vacuum.

[00:37:40.00] Can you imagine living in a vacuum for six years? The only thing we had was what we brought in our hearts and our minds. And for the first time in my life, in captivity, I got serious about academics.

[00:37:52.27] I'd gone through college as an athlete. Three sports in high school, two in college. Almost untouched by education. But now, in captivity--

[00:38:00.85] JOE GALLOWAY: You've got time to get educated.

[00:38:03.04] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I learned some French, Spanish, German, some Russian. Committed to memory some 65 different poems. And we label everything we learned there as POW Fact. That is something that cannot be proven nor disproven. So you can make some very profound statements, and some men did.

[00:38:20.43] But we established what we called Hanoi University. Late in the war, we moved into a large cell block and everybody became an expert in something. And we would have a two hour session every evening with everybody participating that wanted to and those that didn't. We would have a toastmasters. So we worked very hard at staying active, trying to keep-- be ready for the day we would be released.

[00:38:51.22] Well, in the military we-- in the Navy, our fliers, we have a term. When we take off from the carrier, catapulted off, and fly over the beach, feet dry, meaning we're over land. When you come back out of the water, feet wet.

[00:39:06.37] And the g-jump came when we went feet wet.

[00:39:09.85] JOE GALLOWAY: You were out of Vietnam.

[00:39:11.50] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Out of Vietnam. And it was actually-- you could feel the g-jump of the aircraft. So it was a great thrill. And we came home to a large gathering in the Philippines. Spent three days there for emergency medical treatment.

[00:39:24.52] Then we were flown in to our home station. I flew into Oceana, where I saw my wife and three children for the first time in about seven years. So flew in. And they wouldn't let us go home for about a month or so because they felt coming from a drab prison into a home with color, furniture, family, it would be too much.

[00:39:52.53] So they gave us a suite at the hospital and my wife moved into the hospital with me. And in the Portsmouth Naval Hospital today, there's the McDaniel Suite from that time.

[00:40:03.39] And we were there. And then after two or three weeks they allowed us to go home for maybe an hour or a couple of hours. And we did. Having made no decisions for six years, it's-- my family had-- the children had become my wife's children because she had raised them. And when I would look at them with a critical eye, not liking something they did, it was a reflection on the way she raised them.

[00:40:28.14] But she was very gracious. She was able to move me back in. And my first decision was to allow my 11-year-old daughter to shave her legs.

[00:40:37.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh my.

[00:40:39.18] EUGENE MCDANIEL: For the first time.

[00:40:40.84] JOE GALLOWAY: That must have been tough.

[00:40:42.69] EUGENE MCDANIEL: So then I had the major role going again.

[00:40:48.22] JOE GALLOWAY: When you guys came home, I heard that the senior leaders in all the camps put together a list of men they thought had gone over to the enemy and wanted them court martialed. And that there was a decision taken, probably at the White House level, that there would be no court martial.

[00:41:13.33] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Correct.

[00:41:13.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Is this correct?

[00:41:15.70] EUGENE MCDANIEL: That's correct. There were 11 people. I think they were released in three or four groups. And of those, only one came home with permission, Doug Hegdahl, a young Sailor on a ship. Walked up one morning going to breakfast, went outside to get a little fresh air. A wave came over and washed him overboard.

[00:41:32.84] JOE GALLOWAY: And fell overboard.

[00:41:33.55] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And five hours later, he ends up ashore as captured. And they kept asking him, what kind of plane he was flying because everybody else had-- we were fliers. But he was not. He said, I fell off a ship. And they wouldn't believe that.

[00:41:47.22] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't believe him.

[00:41:48.04] EUGENE MCDANIEL: So they said, how large is your ship? He said, I don't know. He said, but if you will start walking, I'll tell you when-- about the size I think it is. So the officer would start walking and look back at Hegdahl. And he said, is this my ship? Hegdahl said, no, keep going.

[00:42:06.99] So he kept walking. And finally, he got to a point he thought that was a ship. He said, stop and they measured it. And Hegdahl asked the officer, how large is my ship? And the officer said, no need to know. Military secret.

[00:42:19.89] But he came home. And he came home with the blessings of the leadership because he had memorized all the names with a little metrical sound.

[00:42:30.95] JOE GALLOWAY: He wasn't on the list of 11 though.

[00:42:33.54] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, no. He was not. He was one of those released. But he was the only one that came home with the blessings of the leadership. The others were-- had to say they would never bomb Hanoi again. The war was bad. And most of us weren't willing to say that.

[00:42:46.44] JOE GALLOWAY: They made propaganda broadcasts.

[00:42:48.34] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes, absolutely.

[00:42:49.17] JOE GALLOWAY: And the majority of POWs did not?

[00:42:53.19] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I would say the majority did not. A lot did, but the majority did not. And what you try to do is make them get it from the other guy because they're going to get it. It might take one day, one week, one month, one year. They had nine years in two cases. They will get it, absolutely.

[00:43:13.71] In other words, my point is everybody has a breaking point.

[00:43:18.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you agree that the 11 should have been court martialed?

[00:43:23.07] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Probably should have because they betrayed the cause. But we had people-- other people who betrayed the cause who came back into the fold and served well the remainder of the war. So we had-- there was a group that we call the Magnificent Seven. And of the seven, five came back into the fold, two did not.

[00:43:48.41] And when they came back, they were used in antiwar-- Jerry Brown appointed one of them to the Orange County Board of Supervisors, a very conservative country-- county.

[00:43:58.65] JOE GALLOWAY: I remember that guy.

[00:43:59.83] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Edison Miller. He sued us for a million bucks. Because within 10 days, we were able to circulate a petition among the 500 prisoners basically, and we had 221 signatures within about 10 days. And we were all sued for one million dollars.

[00:44:20.82] And USAA, which most of us were insured with, paid off a small amount so they wouldn't have to deal with it. But Edison Miller was-- went on to-- appointed. And Jane Fonda was involved in that in some way.

[00:44:36.61] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow POWs over the years?

[00:44:42.80] EUGENE MCDANIEL: A lot. When I began to get involved in the missing men, a lot of them backed away because they didn't want to believe it.

[00:44:51.33] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't want to believe it.

[00:44:52.49] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I had to get involved because I had my navigator, the guy who I had flown with for 18 months, is one of those. And so I got involved. And then we got the Select Committee, which we talked about. But now the condition in this country is such that politicians know a lot more about that situation than before. Donald Trump, our president, knows about this issue and that excites me.

[00:45:23.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have difficulty readjusting to normal life after six years as a prisoner?

[00:45:30.88] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, I was very fortunate. I got back-- the Navy gave us every opportunity. We could retire and wallow in the trough. We could get back into the mainstream. Get back onto the fast track. We could do whatever we wanted. I opted to go back because I was on a fast track when I was shot down.

[00:45:51.07] And I was selected-- about a year and a half after I was released, I was selected to command a Navy ship. One of two people. And I never had the prerequisite because during the time I would have those jobs, I was in captivity.

[00:46:08.10] JOE GALLOWAY: What have they done for your back? You were still paralyzed?

[00:46:12.23] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, no. I regained that in captivity. I was able to exercise and--

[00:46:17.09] JOE GALLOWAY: And you walked out of that prison?

[00:46:18.90] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I did. I had no idea how serious it was until I came out and it was x-rayed. But I regained-- I was able to walk after a few months and came back. And then, I-- about 30 years ago, I had begun to have some back problems. And I went to a surgeon and asked him what the options were. He said, surgery is the best.

[00:46:39.15] Another option would be water aerobics. I got in the water with 32 women 37 years ago. I was the only man.

[00:46:47.58] JOE GALLOWAY: And they cured you.

[00:46:48.63] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And I haven't-- and I'm still in the water. We have a few men now, but I'm still in the water. But I reached age 80, though, five and a half years ago. I hit a stone wall. My legs went numb. I couldn't tell the accelerator from the brakes. So I had to have surgery.

[00:47:05.64] And I went to a Dr. James Ecklund, an Air Force-- Naval-- West Pointer in charge of Inova Hospital out at Fairfax. And went to him and he did a laminectomy on my back. Fours hours of surgery. I've been pain free ever since.

[00:47:29.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your service in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life?

[00:47:39.30] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, I do I think at Christmastime-- we had some of the most meaningful Christmases in captivity that I've ever experienced. Because we wouldn't take anything the enemy gave us that was beyond the ordinary. We would only use what they gave us.

[00:47:57.21] But we would have-- the week of Christmas, we would have-- during the week we'd have, at night, we would have a Charles Dickens' A Christmas Story. Miracle on 34th Street.

[00:48:08.43] JOE GALLOWAY: This is tapping?

[00:48:09.75] EUGENE MCDANIEL: No, no. We would be at-- this would be when we were moved together in larger cells. The treatment was basically two systems. Early on, the first three or four years was isolation, one or two men per cell. Then after the Son Tay Raid in 1970, they moved us into a large cell. I moved in with 57 men.

[00:48:32.34] And we had a cell-- it was very small, but maybe 42 by 30. We divide up 57 ways and we had 21 and 1/2 inches by six feet per man for the next three years. But we gained strength because we moved together with other people.

[00:48:51.29] And then, that's when we started the Hanoi Hilton. After we moved together like that. They were not torturing us because of the efforts in this country to get our name into the forefront. And we knew they couldn't torture us so we began to push them a little bit.

[00:49:08.09] And then in 1969, after the escape attempt, that was the last of the heavy torture. After that, Ho Chi Minh died. Ho Chi Minh was their god. He died and they backed off and we only were tortured after that if we defamed Ho Chi Minh or did something to the camp commanders. So after-- the last two years was live and let live.

[00:49:36.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from the Vietnam experience more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:49:45.03] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely. I have said it's probably the best thing that ever happened to me because I never would have reached the point I've reached now had I not experienced that. To appreciate the small things in life. Things we take for granted that can be taken away. All except one thing, the will to believe. They can't destroy that.

[00:50:08.11] But that's the only thing we had. And one person described it as taking a rope, tying a knot, and hanging on for six years to a rope-- a knot of faith. And that's pretty much like it was. But that meant a lot to me, that description.

[00:50:26.79] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did that war mean to you and your generation?

[00:50:31.71] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Well, it was a losing war. A war we committed the troops, but not the nation. We fought a no-win war-- protracted war-- as we did in Korea, as we're doing in Afghanistan, as we're doing in Iraq, as we've done since then. We've got to reach a point that we get in it to win it. And if we can't do that, stay out.

[00:50:56.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Stay out.

[00:50:56.74] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely.

[00:50:58.85] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from the Vietnam War that you would like to pass on to future generations?

[00:51:06.95] EUGENE MCDANIEL: To appreciate the country that-- what we have. The greatest country in the world. But it bothers me today how we are polarized. Split right down the middle. And I don't see any way to go except, in the last few days, due to the assassination attempt just a few days ago, I see a little effort to come together and drop the hostile language and try to unite.

[00:51:45.05] Because we are at a point now as-- at loggerheads. And I don't know how we ever get anything done. It's tragic, really. But I think we will-- I believe under the last administration, I felt that we'd reached a point where the leadership of this country was not worthy of the sacrifices that our sons and daughters were willing to make for this country. But I don't feel that way anymore. I think there's hope.

[00:52:14.87] I see more awareness of where we are, but we've got to get to the point that we aren't so polarized as we are.

[00:52:30.55] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I go up there and I go to 19 West and see James Kelly Patterson, my navigator up there.

[00:52:37.18] JOE GALLOWAY: It lists him still missing?

[00:52:38.58] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Absolutely. Well, yes, he's MIA still.

[00:52:48.86] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration.

[00:52:53.23] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Yes I have, and I really appreciate this opportunity to be able to talk about it. I think it's a great effort. Because it's something-- it seems to be coming to the forefront again, for whatever reason.

[00:53:05.53] Because my message-- and I speak to a lot of groups. It seems to be more-- they seem to be more receptive today than they were 30 years ago. I think it's almost as if they wonder why Vietnam happened. What can we do to keep it from happening again? And I think that's a good sign.

[00:53:24.14] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a good sign.

[00:53:25.10] EUGENE MCDANIEL: And I think even the Millennials today, even though they're going off on a tangent, I think that's a good sign. They're thinking for themselves and I think that's good.

[00:53:34.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you gotten your lapel pin-- your Vietnam Veteran lapel pin?

[00:53:38.22] EUGENE MCDANIEL: I don't--

[00:53:39.44] JOE GALLOWAY: We got to do that.

[00:53:40.79] EUGENE MCDANIEL: Oh, great. I'd love to have it. Thank you.

[00:53:42.23] JOE GALLOWAY: I'll pin it on myself.

[00:53:43.15] EUGENE MCDANIEL: All right, thank you.