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Kenneth Cordier, Oral History Moment Script

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Kenneth Cordier

Interviewee: Kenneth Cordier

Interviewer: Nick Sprenger (ETWMP)

Technical Support: Samantha Weeks (ETWMP)

Location: Kenneth Cordier's residence

Date Recorded: February 26, 2014

Duration: 1:16:28

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Script Author: Madelyn Cox (ETWMP)

Script Date: July 29, 2017

NARRATOR: On today's oral history moment, Kenneth Cordier recalls the six years he spent as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

NARRATOR: Kenneth Cordier dreamed of being a fighter pilot as he grew up in Ohio during the 1940s.

CORDIER: [3:05-3:07] All I could think about was airplanes. [3:48-4:10] I had this instrument panel and a little book that went with it, *How To Fly*, and it told you about air speeds, altitude, power and flap settings, and all that. And I used to play with that all the time to where I think I could've actually flown an airplane if I had the opportunity.

NARRATOR: Cordier received his commission in the Air Force in 1960 after completing the Reserve Officers' Training Corps program at the University of Akron. He trained to be a fighter pilot and was sent to Cam Ranh Air Base in South Vietnam where he flew missions over North Vietnam.

CORDIER: [7:29-7:41] I flew once or twice almost every day. And I loved it. I would have volunteered for another tour. But...[8:11-8:31] it was on one of those missions on the second of December, 1966, when I got shot down. Took a direct hit from surface to air missile, never saw it coming and no warning. And it was quite exciting. I felt a thump, and the airplane kind of lurched, and then went out of control. [25:44-26:20] Getting shot down is one of the most dramatic fundamental changes of state that you can imagine. Because one minute you are flying at Mach point eight, 24,000 feet, master of the universe, right, you're a hotshot twenty-nine year old fighter pilot, and then seconds later you are hanging helpless in a parachute no control and then you're captured and you're totally out of control, you don't have any control over your life.

NARRATOR: Now, Cordier's life was in the hands of his Vietnamese guards who subjected him to numerous interrogations.

CORDIER: [21:55-22:29] I said, "This is barbaric." I used that word. "You're torturing me and I need to see a doctor." He said, "What's wrong with you, you're not bleeding." I said, "I think my back is broken, I'm in a lot of pain." That was a big mistake. I found out later when I was in contact with other prisoners that everyone that had an injury they tortured the injury to make the guy break more quickly. [22:43-23:02] And because I said that, this time they put a rope around my neck and my ankles and arched me backwards as far as I could, tightened that up and tied it off, hogtied me. So that gave new meaning to the world pain. And I didn't last even an hour this time.

NARRATOR: After Cordier agreed to sign a war crimes confession, the hourly interrogations stopped. His guards moved him into a seven by nine cell in Hanoi, where he lived for years.

CORDIER: [31:23-31:53] Life was pretty boring. A typical day started at 5:00 a.m. They'd ring a gong and the gong was a 85 millimeter shell casing that they beat on with a wrench. It made a raucous noise and got you awake in a hurry. And then you were supposed to fold up your mosquito net and sit on your bed and think about your crimes, and what you could do to help end the war, meaning give them propaganda.

NARRATOR: For Cordier's captors, the Vietnam War was a war of propaganda. They attempted to capitalize on the prisoners' frustration over the war protests and draft dodgers in the United States in order to break the prisoners' spirits.

CORDIER: [69:03-69:23] We saw a lot of that in their propaganda. They'd show us pictures and everything. All I can say is I despised them then and I despise them now. That's not the country I fought for.

NARRATOR: The events Cordier learned about through propaganda enacted change in the U.S. American discontent with the Vietnam War had finally reached the nation's highest political offices during the late 1960s.

CORDIER: [43:15-43:32] November of 1968, and three days before the election, Johnson unconditionally stopped bombing North Vietnam. [44:22-44:41] As it turned out, we got our worst treatment after the bombing halt. The Vietnamese apparently figured that the U.S. government had written us off, and that they didn't have any obligation to treat us humanely. [47:38-48:08] We were getting really, I don't know what you call it, we were getting down at the mouth. Just we never smiled, we never laughed, there wasn't anything to be lighthearted about. And I noticed that we were really getting this down at the mouth look. So I initiated forced optimism. And I would do smile exercises every morning when I was doing my illegal exercises.

NARRATOR: Cordier was moved from camp to camp until he ended up at the Hanoi Hilton. Then, in April 1972, the United States government escalated the conflict.

CORDIER: [54:42-55:10] President Nixon had decided it was time to conclude the war and he sent the Air Force and Navy to bomb Hanoi. And bomb 'em they did, every day they came back. It was really exciting. Some of the bombs came close, the ground would shake, and you would get on the floor and see dust bounce... off the cement.

NARRATOR: In January 1973, the prisoners of war were released according to the conditions of the Paris Peace Accords.

CORDIER: [62:25-62:56] Throughout this whole release everybody was very sober, no smiling or laughing or anything. And we get on the airplane, raise the tailgate, taxi out, and we took off, and as soon as we heard the gear come up everyone just burst into a frenzy of emotion, cheering, clapping each other on the back. We knew for sure that we were on the way.

NARRATOR: Though Cordier experienced torture, injury, and imprisonment in North Vietnam, he did not give up hope.

CORDIER: [66:31-66:45] You know what I used to say, if you want to play in the big boys' game, you gotta realize that some people are gonna get hurt, and if it turns out to be you, that's just the luck of the draw.

NARRATOR: After returning home to the United States, Cordier requalified to fly jet planes. He spent three years in Germany, and then earned the rank of colonel and worked as the air attaché in London. He retired from the Air Force in 1985.

CORDIER: [65:34-65:43] I've had two capital city tours, Hanoi and London. I used to say London was my payback for Hanoi. [65:30-65:34] All I can say is, on balance, I've had a wonderful life.

NARRATOR: Members of the East Texas War and Memory Project at Texas A&M University-Commerce completed this interview. Today's interview was conducted by Nick Sprenger and Samantha Weeks, edited by Madelyn Cox, and produced by Margo McCutcheon. I'm Allan Folsom. Thank you for listening.