

THE UNCHAINED EAGLE

The Bob Certain Story

EDUCATION KIT

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What does it mean to be The Unchained Eagle?

Robert Certain was a typical "American kid" - smart, clever, hard-working and well-liked. And, since age 15, he also had a clear calling of what he wanted to do in life - serve others in as a minister in a church.

Leveraging the opportunities provided through military service, he became an expert at the (very) challenging role of Aircraft Navigator, directing the flight of one of the most powerful weapons on earth, the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress. Additionally, Robert met the love of his life, "Robbie" and was married during the summer of 1972.

Robert's future seemed "golden."

However, a streak of negative circumstances hit on December 1972 while participating in one of the Vietnam War's most pivotal Operations - Linebacker II. Though the operation was ultimately a powerful success, resulting in the ending of the Vietnam War for the United States (and release of hundreds of Prisoners of War), Robert's B-52G bomber was shot down on the operation's first night. Forced to eject over the heavily defended target, Robert was captured and sent to the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prison camp. There, he learned that half of his airplane's crew had been killed from a hit from North Vietnamese missiles and violent ejection. Of the surviving three, only he was without serious injury.

The pain of loss of friends and frustration at seeing dreams and goals derailed left a mark on Robert - one that would affect his ability to manage stress and reclaim his full potential. Robert felt like an eagle that had been chained to the ground.

Yet, through the love of those around him, a desire to make good choices and deep faith in his calling, Robert worked through the complicated process of learning positive ways to beat the negative forces affecting his life.

In 2003, Robert published the popular book, "Unchained Eagle" to help show others the path to success through troubling times.

Like everyone who's ever lived, Robert Certain had to learn how to overcome negative experiences and succeed at achieving personal goals.

Published by



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Photo courtesy : Robert Certain

Robert "Bob" Certain - Vietnam War BACKGROUND AND FACTS

Birthplace: Savannah, GA
Birth date: Dec 4, 1947
Occupation: Air Force Navigator

FACTS:

- One of five children
- Graduated from Emory University with a degree in History
- Married wife Robbie (Wade) just six weeks before returning for second combat tour
- Flew 100.5 combat missions
- 101 days as a prisoner in the "Hanoi Hilton"
- Ordained as an Episcopal Priest in 1976
- Air Force Academy Chaplain
- Leader of many veteran organizations and initiatives

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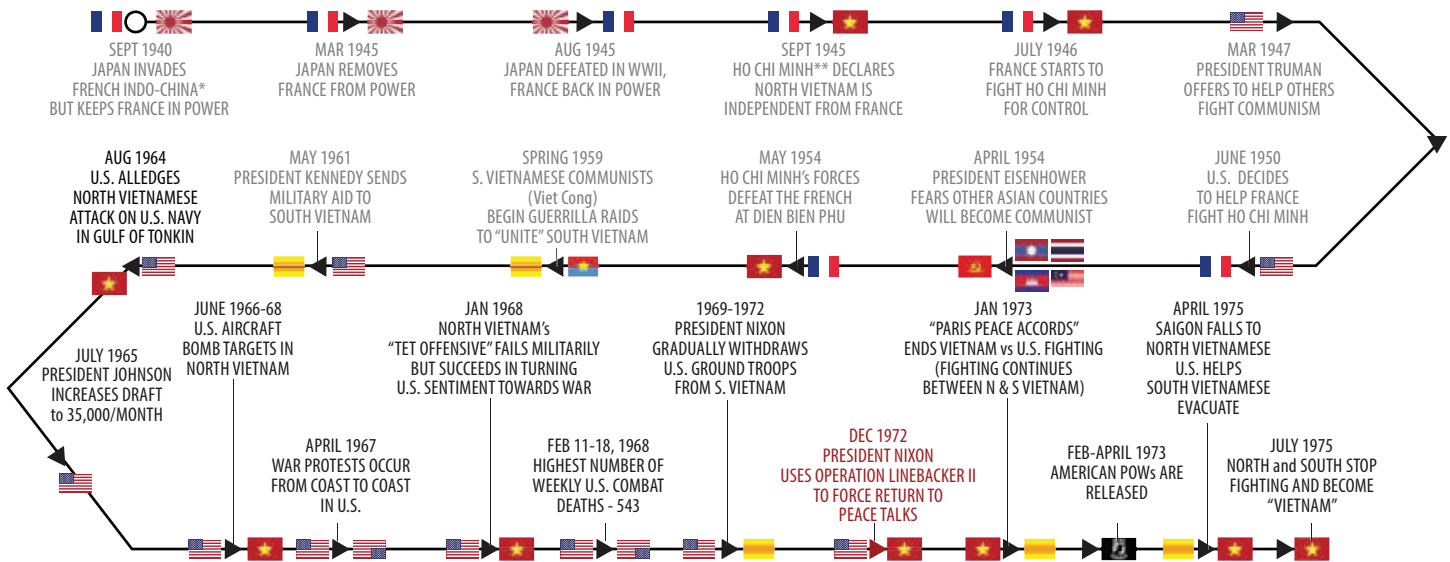
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LINEBACKER II was a big moment in a long war

(It had its beginnings in World War Two)



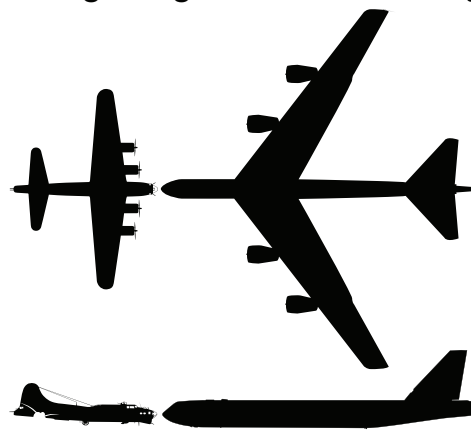
*The name for Vietnam before 1945

**Leader of the revolution for Vietnamese independence from French colonial rule; used U.S. Declaration of Independence as a model

LINEBACKER II's B-52 was a big weapon in a long war

(It also had its beginnings in World War Two)

B-17 Flying Fortress
 4 prop engines
 12,731 produced
 First flown: 1935
 Last military service: 1968 (Brazilian Air Force)
 Surviving today: 46, about 8 flying
 Cost (2021 dollars): \$3.6 million each



B-52 Stratofortress
 8 jet engines
 744 produced
 First flown: 1952
 Last military service: still flying
 Surviving: 76 in-service, 46 in museums/display
 Cost (2021 dollars): \$71.5 million each

Typical threat:
 German FW-190 fighter
 and "flak" anti-aircraft shells

Typical threat:
 Russian-built SA-2 "Divina"
 missile with explosive warhead

Crew: 10 (B-17) / 6 (until 1991, then 5) (B-52)
Defensive protection: ~13 .50cal guns (B-17) / electronic warfare; tail guns removed in 1991 (B-52)
Offensive bombload (typical): 2.5 tons (B-17) / 25 tons (B-52)
Range: (typical) 4,000 mile combat radius (B-17) / 4,000 mile combat radius (B-52)

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Col Certain's B-52G Stratofortress!

KNOW THE CREW: Pilot and Co-pilot

LtCOL Donald Rissi was the pilot,
Lt Robert Thomas was the co-pilot.
Their jobs were to fly the airplane.

Both were KIA on 18 Dec, 1972

KNOW THE CREW: Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO)

Capt. Richard Simpson was
responsible for detecting enemy
missiles and fighters; the B-52G
used on 18 December did not have
important anti-radar technology and
was unable to thwart the two SA-2
missiles that hit their airplane.

He survived ejection and became
a POW on 18 Dec. 1972

KNOW THE TAIL:

Most of the B-52 missions of the Vietnam War
were flown by "Tall Tail" B-52D and Fs. Only later
in the war were the "Short Tail" B-52Gs used.



KNOW THE CREW: Navigator and Radar Navigator

Capt Certain was the B-52s Navigator
and responsible for making sure the
airplane arrived over the target, on-time.

Maj Richard Johnson was the Radar
Navigator and managed the radar
systems and dropping of bombs

Both survived the ejection and
became POWs on 18 Dec. 1972

KNOW THE CREW: Gunner

MSgt Walter Ferguson was
the tail gunner on this B-52G
On D/F model B-52s, the tail
gunner sat at the very back of
the airplane. On the G model,
he sat in the front with the rest
of the crew, aiming the tail guns
via radar and a tv screen.

Ferguson was KIA on 18 Dec. 1972

KNOW THE CAMOFLAGE:

Col Certain's B-52G was not originally designed to
fight in conventional bombing missions. Instead, the
"G model" was intended on delivering nuclear weapons!
When the needs of the Vietnam War required more
B-52s, the G models were modified to carry conventional
bombs but retained the special camouflage that included a
white-ish belly designed to reflect the radiation of a
nuclear blast. Thankfully, B-52Gs never had to use
their nuclear weapon capability!



Col Certain was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC)

Physically, a medal, trophy or certificate is simply a thing of (often) little material value. However, what it represents may have far-reaching and powerful influence on the individual and others. Robert Certain was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions during the night of December 18, 1972 when he navigated his B-52G bomber crew over thousands of miles and many unique challenges to arrive, at night, over the military target. Later, after being shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese, Robert conducted himself with honor in the face of angry interrogation, physical pain and deprivation via a strong belief in duty, loyalty to his nation and above all, desire to represent his fellow warriors, honorably.

Today, the Distinguished Flying Cross Society (DFCS) works to make sure the inspiring stories of its members are available to encourage everyone to be their best self.

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B-52G “Nav’s” workspace: small, cramped, crucial

WHAT IS THIS?

This is the edge of the ejection seat of the Radar Navigator

WHAT IS THIS?

This was the bombing and mapping radar screen used by the Radar Navigator to identify targets

WHAT IS THIS?

This is called “The Green Apple” and pulled to activate emergency oxygen in the event a crewman had to eject.

WHAT’S THE STORY BEHIND THIS PHOTO?

This photo was taken behind (and to the left side) of the B-52G Navigator’s seat; Col Certain would be able to stand up to stretch his legs but as B-52 missions could take 12-16 hours, he needed to focus on the detailed job of ensuring his aircraft was on-course, all the time.

WHAT IS THIS?

This is the edge of the ejection seat of the Navigator - the place that Bob Certain occupied on his 100.5 missions

WHAT IS THIS?

This is the Altimeter that indicated the B-52’s flight altitude

WHAT IS THIS?

This is a “Remove Before Flight” streamer attached to safety pins in the ejection seat handles

WHAT ARE THESE?

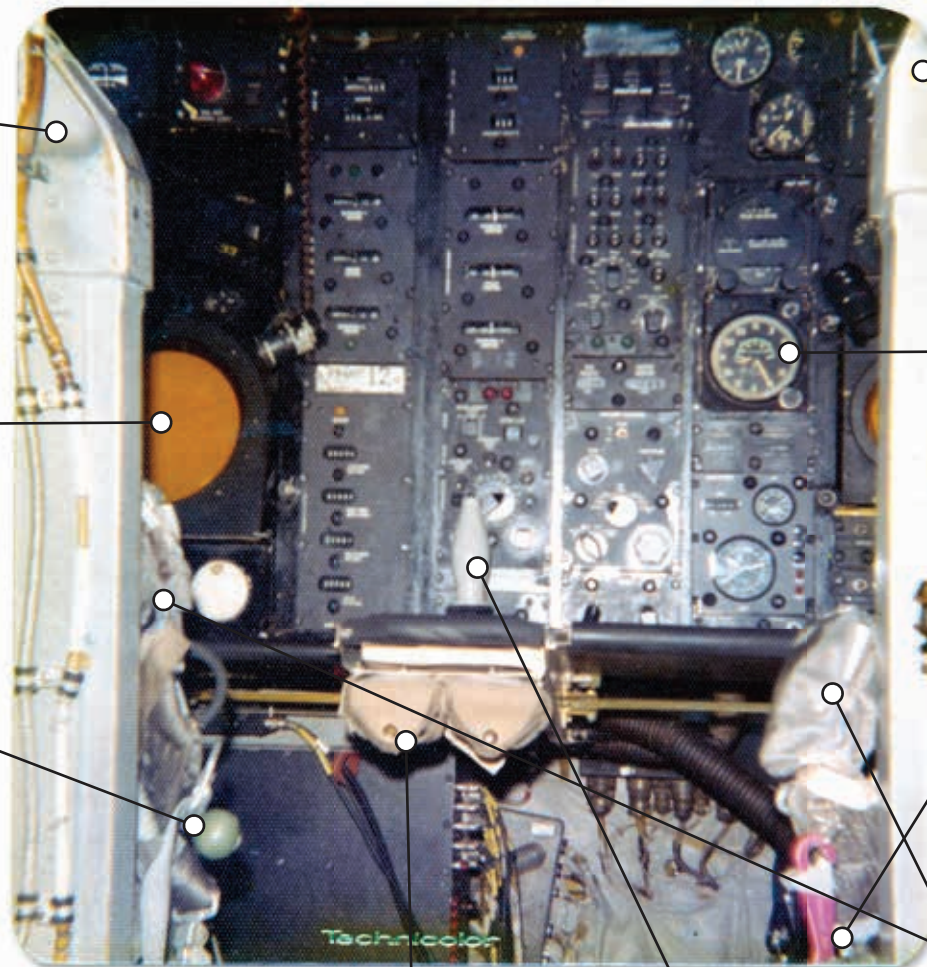
These are part of the parachute harnesses that were attached to each seat.

WHAT IS THIS?

This is a set of storage pouches that held special Bypass Keys for the aircraft tug tow-bars used to move the big airplane around on the ground

WHAT IS THIS?

This is a tracking handle used by the Radar Navigator to place crosshairs over the target’s radar ‘return’



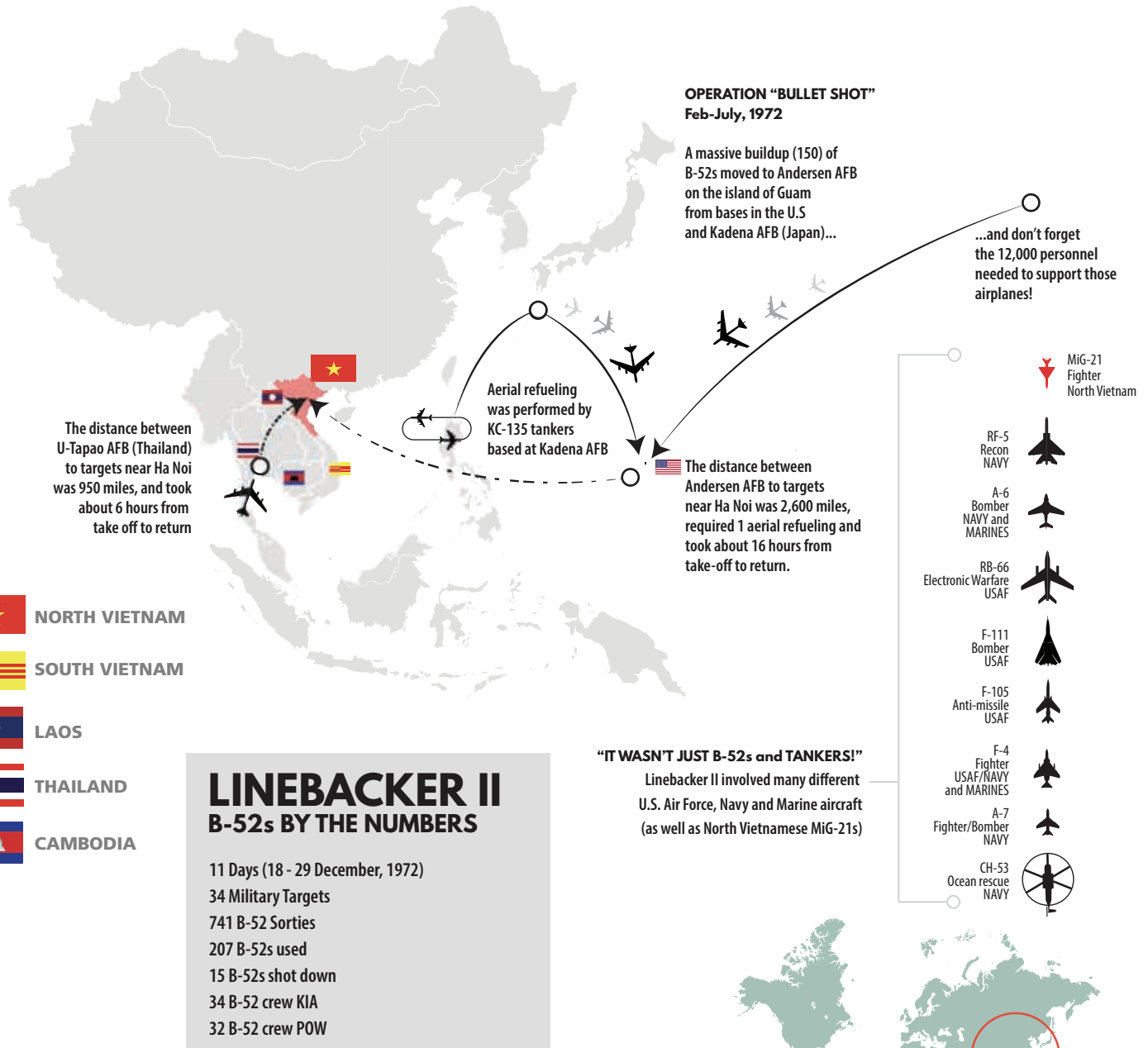
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LINEBACKER II: a massive effort over long distances



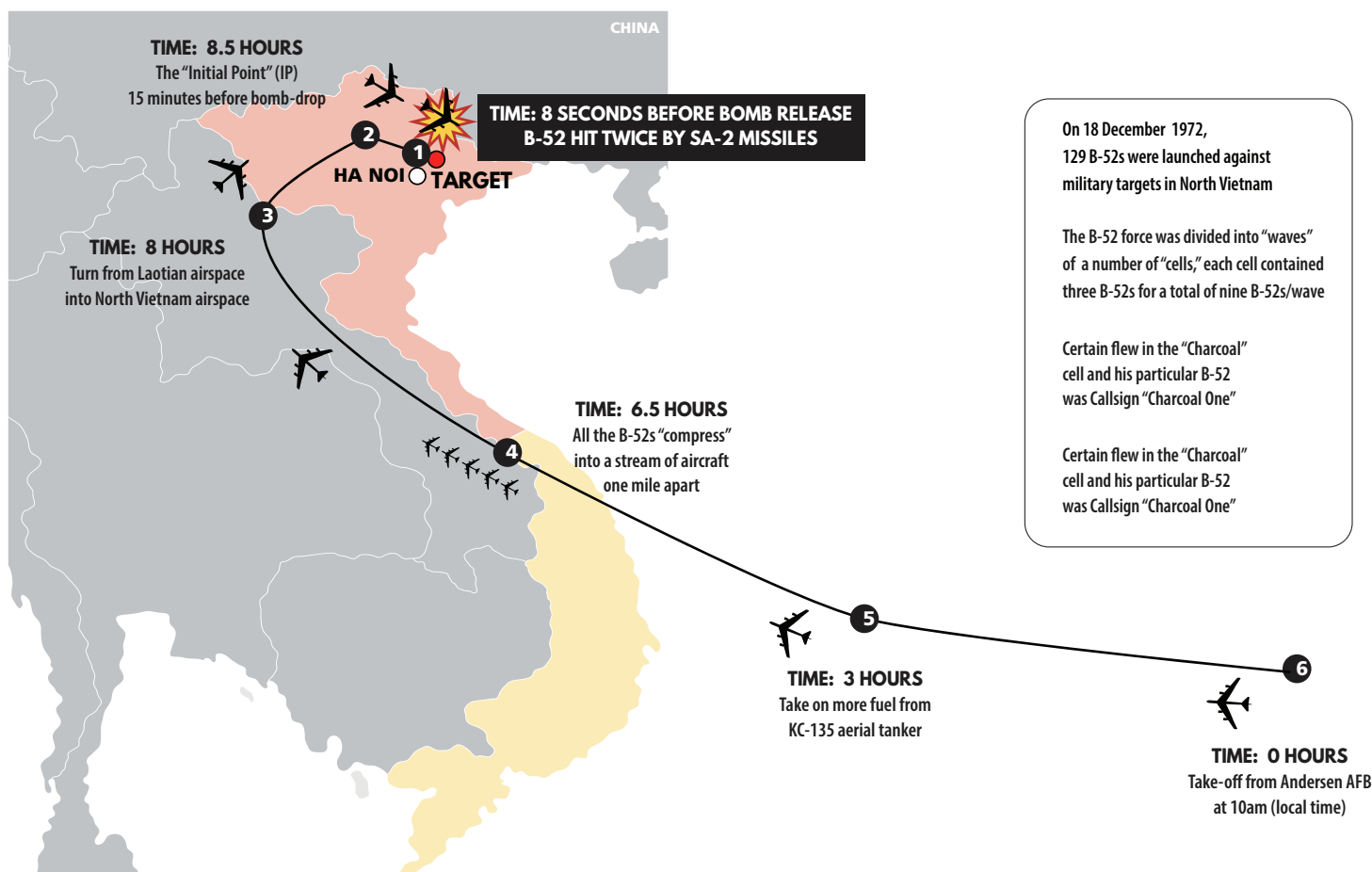
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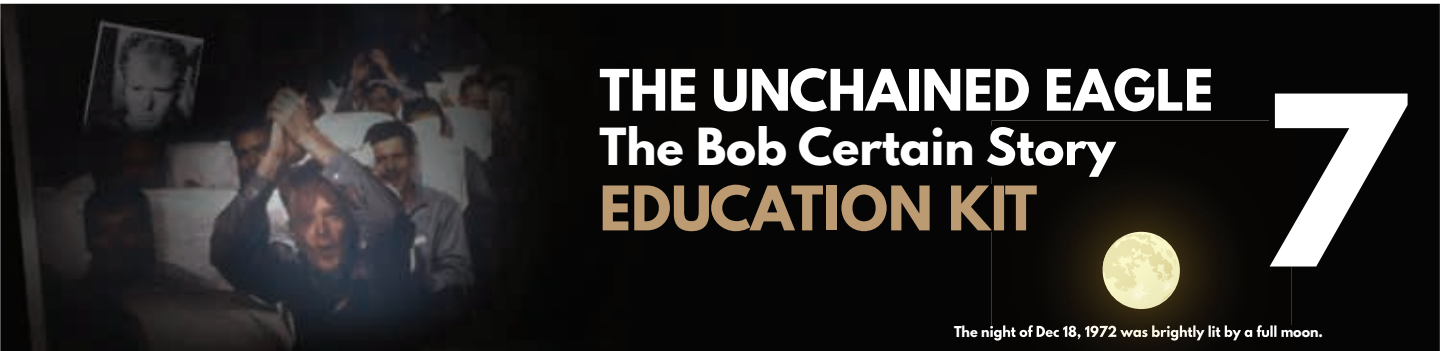
TARGET: Yên Viên Rail Yard, December 18, 1972



? WHAT WAS ROBERT THINKING?

- 6 "Our flight plan, two aborts that made us #1 in our flight, the earthquake that started shaking our runway..."
- 5 "Navigating to our tanker, frustrated that we lost valuable time when another tanker used our security code..."
- 4 "Compressing all the bombers into a straight line, one mile apart, without colliding..."
- 3 "We're over enemy territory! Checking/re-checking our position, safety harness, procedures..."
- 2 "Approaching the target - so many SAM calls over the radio, I had to turn it off! Keeping focus on the job..."
- 1 "We're hit! We have to safety the bombs before they're jettisoned (so they won't explode off-target)!..."





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The night of Dec 18, 1972 was brightly lit by a full moon.

COMBAT: B-52G vs SA-2 vs Yên Viên Rail Yard

Charcoal 01, 02 and 03 approach from the Northwest at 33,000ft, one mile apart and 'stacked' in 500ft elevation differences

SA-2 missiles had a range of about 20 miles, flew at about 2,500mph and could reach 80,000 ft in less than 30sec!

Anti-aircraft guns were effective from 1,500 ft to about 28,000 ft — B-52s didn't fly that low but F-111 "low level" bombers did

The North Vietnamese defended their targets vigorously, sending up many thousands of rounds in hopes of hitting a target and also to try to intimidate the American aircrew

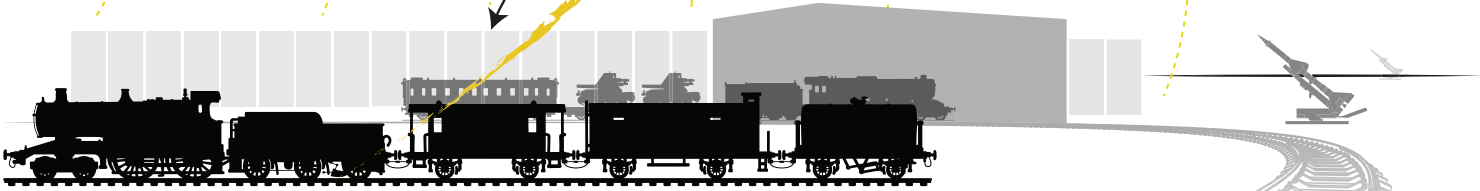
Charcoal One was hit just eight seconds before bomb-release by the shrapnel-blast from two SA-2 missiles

SA-2s didn't need to directly hit a B-52 as its blast radius was deadly at 200 feet

A number of B-52Gs were not equipped with up-to-date electronic warfare (EW) equipment including Certain's Charcoal One - the SA-2 missiles that hit were undetected

Meanwhile, the POWs in the various prison facilities around Ha Noi are having their cells shaken like an earthquake from the affects of B-52 bombs. Are they scared?

NO! They're confident the "bomber guys" won't miss their target and that the power of the attacks will lead to their release... ..WHICH IT DID.



Many dozens of SA-2 missiles are launched against the B-52s on 18 Dec

Over 1,000 SAM missiles were launched during the entire Linebacker II Operation shooting down 28 aircraft, including 15 B-52s

Why bomb the rail yard?

The North Vietnamese were experts at "logistics" - the collection and distribution of military weapons and nothing could move heavy weapons as fast or as far as a train!

At the end of Linebacker II, the North Vietnamese claim that they shot down 81 American airplanes while American records show a loss of 28 airplanes

Charcoal Two and Three were able to hit the rail yard and knock it out of action



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When you have seconds to live... (there's no time to lose your mind)

“The SAMs exploded, scattering hot shrapnel like a shotgun blast at a velocity of 8000 feet per second.”

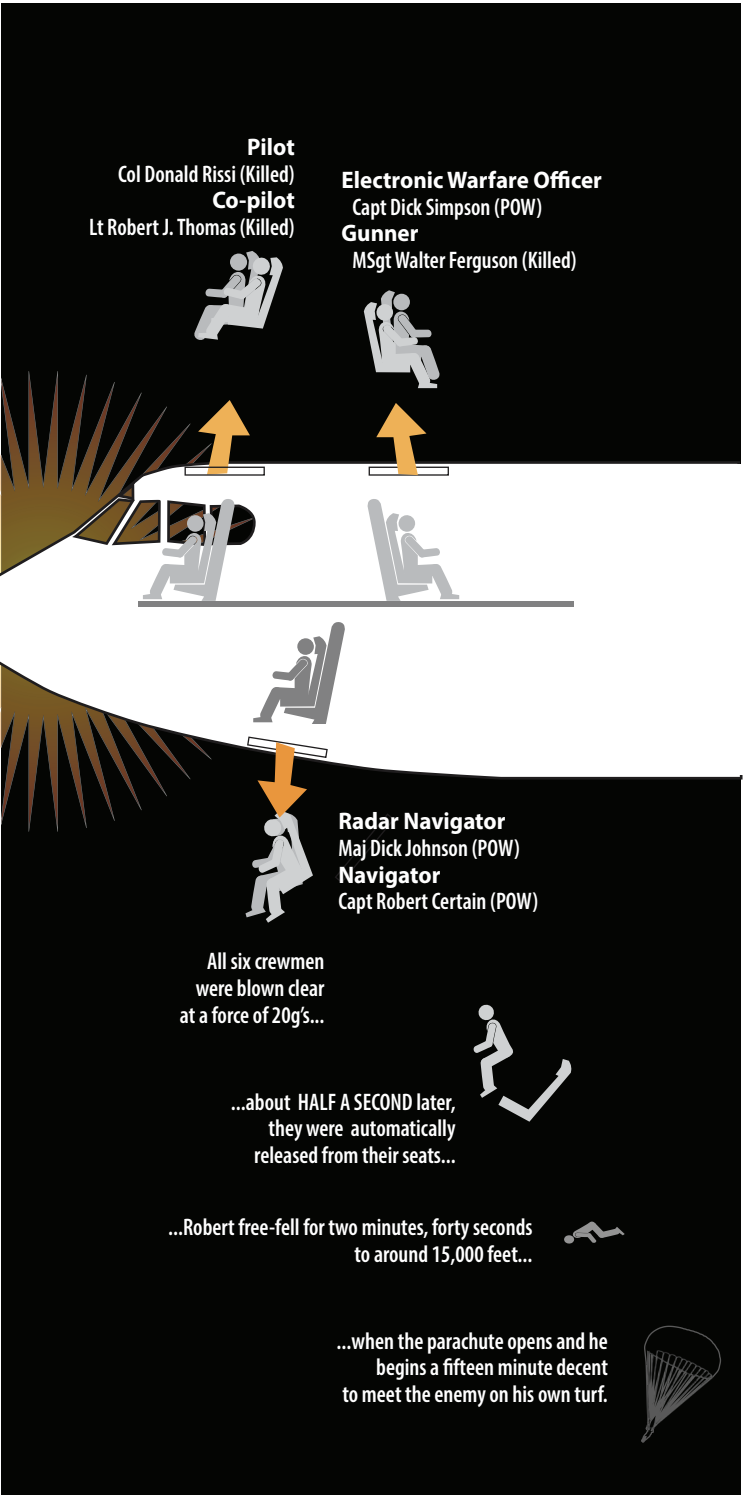
Loaded with bombs and fuel, a burning B-52 is a bad place to be!

Nevertheless, Robert had tasks to perform:

- A. “Safety” the bombs. Accidental damage due to bombs flying off target had to be avoided
- B. Clean up his Navigator station. The work table had to be folded back up, charts & equipment removed - anything that could impede with the violent ejection had to be cleared away
- C. Set leg restraints. If a leg caught on the edge of the ejection door, it could be sliced off
- D. Assume the correct position for ejection and pull the ejection handle correctly with palms facing up; this kept the elbows tight against the body instead of sticking out to the side

AND IN .01 seconds - ROBERT WAS BLOWN CLEAR OF HIS B-52!

“You don't have time to think. All you can do is react based on what you've learned.”

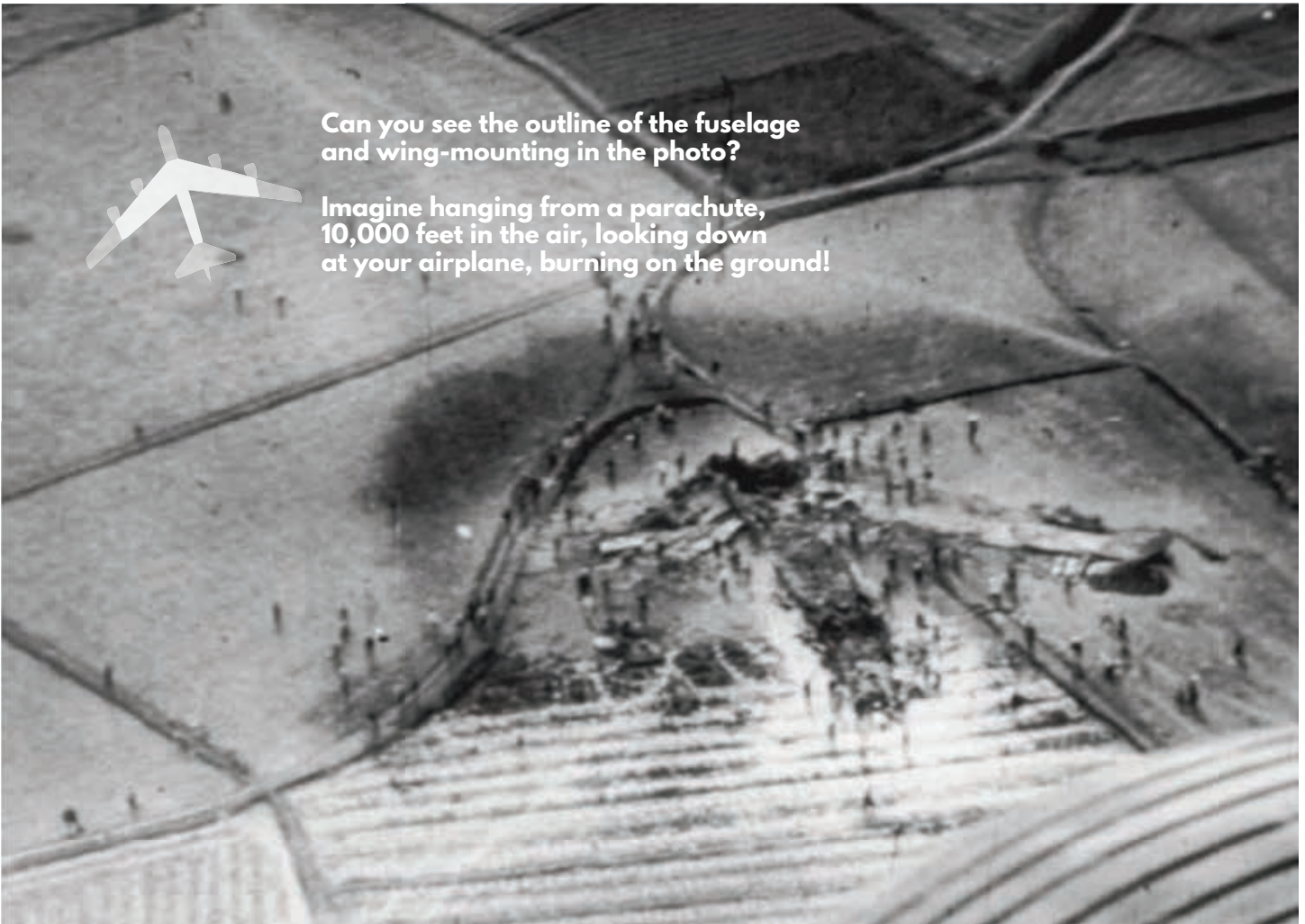


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“I looked down and saw an arrow shape burning on the ground...”

The picture above came from recently discovered footage taken by (possibly) North Korean journalists on the morning of 19 December, 1972. It shows the wreckage of a B-52 in exactly the same orientation as Robert Certain saw it while descending from his parachute onto North Vietnamese soil.

Certain was the first prisoner captured by the North Vietnamese during the Linebacker II campaign as well as being aboard the first B-52 lost to enemy fire. All told, five aircraft were shot down that first night - three B-52s, an F-111 fighter-bomber and a Navy A-7 fighter-bomber.

...I knew it was the wreckage of my B-52.”

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VIETNAM WAR POWs BY THE NUMBERS

Total POWs captured (1964-1973): 766+
Total POWs released (Feb-April 1973): 591
Total POWs died in captivity: 114

First POW: Capt. Floyd Thompson, Mar 26, 1964
First Aircrew POW: Lt. Everette Alvarez, Aug 5, 1964
Last POW: Name Name, Month X, 1973

Total POWs awarded the Medal of Honor: 5



KNOW THE MOMENT: President Nixon

President Richard Nixon was elected President bolstered by his promises to end American involvement in the Vietnam War. When the North Vietnamese pulled out of peace talks in October of 1972, Nixon ordered "Linebacker II" bombings to bring them back to negotiate. They did.

KNOW THE MOMENT: The POW/MIA flag

The POW/MIA flag was originally designed by the National League of POW/MIA Families. That it still flies today over public facilities is a credit to the dedication of the organization.



KNOW THE MOMENT: The wives who worked for freedom

POW wives such as Sybil Stockdale, Andrea Rander, Evelyn Grubb and Phylis Galanti were just four of many relentless advocates for information on the care, health and return of their husbands. They kept pressure on governmental and military authorities to make the POW issue a dominant one for media and military alike.

KNOW THE MOMENT: Bracelets, Buttons and Bumperstickers

"POW Bracelets" and other novelties were important statement-makers for Americans back home. When the POW returned, the bracelet was mailed to the POW as a statement of "Welcome Home!"



KNOW THE MOMENT: POW possessions

POWs were not allowed to have but the barest possessions — a uniform, sandals made from rubber & string, home made soap and a tin cup for drinking, bathing and brushing teeth. The prison uniforms were often dyed of garish colors to help discourage an attempt to escape.

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The POWs of the Vietnam War are crucial to understanding the times

That the 1960s were a difficult period in history cannot be denied. Political and cultural revolution was happening worldwide while in the United States, beloved leaders were assassinated (Martin Luther King, President Kennedy and his brother Robert), Civil Rights and Women's Rights were hotly contested...and even the rock-solid institution of American churches were being fractured with division and change. "The War in Southeast Asia" (as some called it) became the visible, tragic symbol for the problems of the world, the country and the home.

As the war casualties mounted, the economic costs escalated, the media seemed to take sides and more and more objectives missed, the Vietnam War was just a bitter taste for everyone. The POWs became the living, breathing symbols of an unfair time - tortured, politicized and unable to be freed.

Yet, in an ironic twist, the POWs have become a bright, strong moment for the United States. Robert Certain described it this way, "POWs were suddenly thrust into a horrible situation but through teamwork, love and support in-prison and abroad, we did our duty with honor and dignity. If that example is our legacy, then we're proud to offer it to the world."



Doug Hegdahl, USN - A POW to remember

Captured after accidentally falling overboard in the Tonkin Gulf, Hegdahl pretended to be insane and stupid to confound his North Vietnamese captors. However, he was actually memorizing the names of every POW in the system! The highest ranking officers in the POW prison camp worked to get Hegdahl released early so he could return to America with this vital, urgent information!

Another proud South Dakotan!

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**“I was a short-time POW.
A lot of the other guys had it
far, far, far worse than me!”**

Early in the Vietnam War, at least through 1969, treatment of American POWs was horrible. They were subject to methods of torture that included inflicting severe physical and psychological pain. Though the North Vietnamese were signors of the Geneva Convention on humane treatment of captives, they regarded the American POWs, not as soldiers, but as criminals and therefore subject to the worst punishments.

However, when stories of abuse reached the international community and the North Vietnamese realized how the POW community in the United States was becoming influential to the media and politicians, they began to treat the POWs better. By 1971, the worst of the treatment was over. By the time the Ceasefire of 1973 had been signed, POW life was normalized and priority given to provide the POWs proper medical care and food.

Robert Certain was a POW for “only” 101 days - a far shorter period than the four to nine years of others! However, he still experienced the physical trauma of being cruelly tied to the point where his elbows touched behind his back, hit with a rifle as well as forced to live in unsanitary conditions (human waste, vermin, lack of bathing). Yet, he found that the ‘old timer’ POWs were among those who were most encouraging and positive as they knew that, “...once you B-52 guys started showing up, we knew the we were getting serious about ending this war and bringing us home!”

Today, Col Certain holds the POW community as a brotherhood that is so strong, it is literally an extension of his family.

What does it take to survive as a POW?



**Gene Smith - Vietnam War
POW
1967-1973**

Three things got me through - faith in God, faith in my fellow POWs and faith in my country. I believed in them all!

**Bob Barnett - Vietnam War
POW
1967-1973**

“I believed the war would end, sooner or later. I also knew my family was waiting and praying! Plus, I had the support of outstanding cell mates.

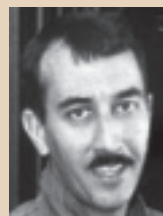


**Chris Morgan - WWII
POW
1943-1945**

“I was beaten, I was terribly sick, I had everything taken away from me. But I saw that the will to live was important - I had that, they couldn't take it away and I lived.”

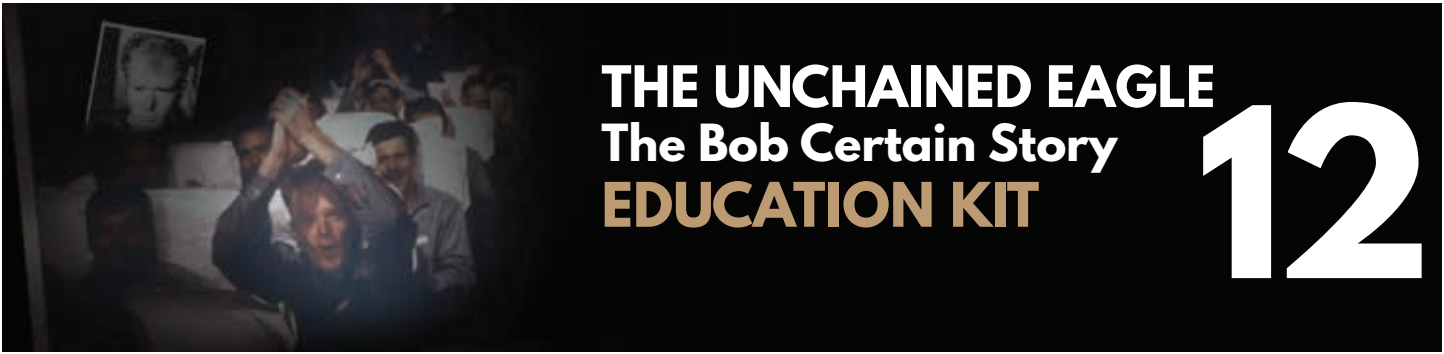
**Gerald Brown - Korean War
POW
1950-1953**

“How did I survive (torture and extreme confinement)? Things - wonderful things! I thought only about wonderful things.”



**Jeff Tice - Gulf War
POW
1991**

“The knowledge that my fellow warriors would not stop—regardless of my status—was the driving force behind my survival. Returning alive to my family, my comrades and my country so I could personally thank them (also) strengthened my will to live.”



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Everyone who experiences a trauma will experience PTS*

The stress and trauma of combat, being shot down, captured, abused by the enemy and then thrust home to start a new life with his wife and pastoral career were real. They added up to create a giant ball of negativity that Robert didn't know how to deal. So he didn't. He just buried it in his brain and denied that anything was 'wrong.'

However, he discovered that around specific times of the year or particular events would 'trigger' negative actions - quick temper, anger, being difficult to work with and alcohol abuse. It took a long time for Robert's friends and family to convince him that he wasn't handling things well and needed greater help.

But PTSD* happens when the PTS isn't dealt-with.

“To say that people who experience trauma are somehow damaged is like saying people can't heal from a bad cold or a broken arm.

But like a broken arm, you need to get it treated to have it healed right.”

Robert was able to correct “The D” in his PTS

As a highly trained and expert Navigator, Robert was used to the idea that progress required acquiring new knowledge and skills. He was introduced to a form of cognitive therapy called “EMDR” - a way to retrain how the brain processes information using eye movement.

Robert was able to see how negative past experiences were being re-awakened in the present. These negative past experiences put a 'block' on getting past them to more productive and positive experiences. Once addressed, Robert's brain was able “jump over” bad memories and heal from their impact.

“EMDR worked great for me. And, I was able to help so many other people in my life -friends, church members... I can't change the past but my present and future are strong the way they should be.”

*PTS = Post Traumatic Stress

PTSD = Post Traumatic Stress Dysfunction/Disorder

Dealing with the “D” in PTSD

SIGNS

SYMPTOMS

NEXT-STEPS

LONG-TERM

What is EMDR?

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LISTEN TO ROBERT CERTAIN IN HIS OWN WORDS

OPENER for the 28 Aug, 21 Old Guys and Their Airplanes + Distinguished Flying Cross Society Debrief

Copy link

THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS SOCIETY

OLD GUYS AND THEIR AIRPLANES

DEBRIEF

PRESENTS

THE UNCHAINED EAGLE

Live Q&A with Vietnam War ex-POW
Col Robert Certain, USAF (Ret.)

AUG 28, 2021

LIVE: 9AM PT, 10AM MT, 11AM CT, Noon ET

LIVESTREAM:

DFCSociety.org/pages/certain
www.SDPB.org (Facebook Live)
YouTube: Military Tales

Want to host a Watch Party? john@johnmollison.com

MILITARY TALES

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Watch on YouTube

STORIES ARE BEST TOLD BY THE PEOPLE WHO WERE THERE.

Taking advantage of the benefits provided through studying history is a fundamental aspect of personal success. Though there are excellent books, websites and even movies to help learn history, nothing beats interacting with someone who participated in the moment. Yet, it can be intimidating to talk with others about significant moments in their life, especially difficult moments that are related to war or conflict. To ease that challenge, consider these points:

1. Think about a period of history you're interested in learning about - then ask parents or teachers who they suggest you meet to learn more.
2. Ask questions that require a personal perspective such as, "What did you learn from your experience?" or "Describe your most vivid memory..."
3. If you want to record or photograph your meeting, ask for permission (and let the person know what you intend to do with their story).
4. One conversation may not be enough to understand the person or the moment; try to have at least three meaningful conversations.
5. Getting background information will help build credibility with who you're talking to but be careful to let the other person tell their story without being corrected or interrupted.
6. Be prepared for surprises! You may find that someone's personal story is different than what you've learned elsewhere.
7. You'll acquire humility, wisdom and character through learning about the lives of others so be prepared to share what you learn with others.

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LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE TIMES OF ROBERT CERTAIN



Col Robert Certain, USAF - U.S. Air Force Photo



Robert Certain retired from the U.S. Air Force as a Colonel, one step before General.



The Distinguished Flying Cross is the United States' 4th highest award for valor in flight

Robert was awarded his DFC on March 23, 1973 for his service during Linebacker II

Some of Robert Certain's other medals and honors



The Legion of Merit

Awarded for when an already exceptional military career is topped by even more exceptional work



The Purple Heart

Awarded for being wounded or killed due to enemy action - probably the one medal no one wants to receive!



Ordination as an Episcopal Priest

Awarded for years of study and service within the denomination and demonstrated commitment to the church

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:



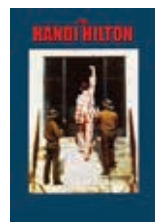
Unchained Eagle
History book
Robert Certain

Surviving Hell - a POWs Journey
History book
Leo Thorsness



The 11 Days of Christmas
History Book
Marshall Michell

The Hanoi Hilton
Movie



The Unchained Eagle

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The Distinguished Flying Cross is a military decoration awarded to individuals who demonstrate heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight.

One of the missions of the Distinguished Flying Cross Society is to share the heroic stories of its members with the world. Though especially remarkable, Robert Certain's story is just one of many. If you have any interest in learning more about how ordinary people can prevail under extraordinary challenges, the DFCSociety.org website is a great resource. Hundreds of DFC citations are available to read.

On behalf of the DFC Society, may Colonel Certain's story inspire you to appreciate what it takes to overcome your personal challenges.

Colonel Woody Gilliland, USMC (Ret.)
Chairman, Distinguished Flying Cross Society

www.DFCSociety.org