



Phyllis Hivner, right, places the original wedding band on retired Air Force Col. James Hivner's left ring finger Oct. 11 at the Cavanaugh Flight Museum in Addison, Texas. It was the first time the colonel has seen, or worn, the ring since Oct. 5, 1965, when he was shot down in North Vietnam. (U.S. Air Force photo/Lou Anne Sledge)



Retired Air Force Col. James Hivner addresses an audience of Airmen, family and friends Nov. 11 at the Cavanaugh Flight Museum in Addison, Texas, after receiving a ring that was confiscated by the North Vietnamese in 1965. Colonel Hivner was surprised by the turnout, but also gracious that so many people took interest. (U.S. Air Force photo/Lou Anne Sledge)

Vietnam POW receives ring 44 years after imprisonment

by John Ingle
82nd Training Wing Public Affairs

11/11/2009 - **SHEPPARD AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- With the traditional "I do's" and wedding bands some 54 years ago on Oct. 1, 1955, James and Phyllis Hivner began their life's journey together which, like many young couples, began with not knowing what the future held.

That journey was rocked 10 years later - almost to the day - when then-Capt. James Hivner and his co-pilot, 1st Lt. Thomas Barrett, were shot down Oct. 5, 1965, in their F-4C Phantom fighter-bomber over North Vietnam. About 10 minutes after ejecting from the wounded aircraft, the pair was captured by North Vietnamese militia and soon handed over to the country's regular army. By the end of the night, they were residents at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, a prisoner of war facility.

But another voyage began that fateful day; one that gives hope for this thing called the "circle of life." It was an expedition that now-retired Air Force Col. James Hivner never expected - his original wedding ring was coming home.

Just as the ring symbolizes the family the Hivners began in 1955, it also signifies the Air Force family the colonel joined in 1953. Personnel from Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, made the roughly two-hour trip to make this a complete family event.

"This is an incredible opportunity for our young Airmen in Training and our young student pilots to meet a fellow Airman warrior," said Brig. Gen. O.G. Mannon, 82nd Training Wing commander. "Colonel Hivner is a living example of executing the Code of Conduct, surviving a terrible situation and coming home. We are honored to be in his presence and be part of this very special ceremony."

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October 5, 1965

Colonel Hivner said he and Lieutenant Barrett occupied the third aircraft in a four-ship formation that was on a bombing run near the city of Kep in North Vietnam near Hanoi. The mission was going smoothly until the aircraft made its way through a valley, setting up to offload their munitions.

The first two aircraft in the formation seemed to fly through the area without resistance, the colonel said. But the lack of resistance didn't last long as flak started to appear around Colonel Hivner's aircraft.

"Wingman No. 4 called and said, 'Three, you're hit. You're on fire,'" the colonel recalled.

He said he began to gradually climb at a smaller angle than usual to keep fuel from getting to the flames. Peering ahead at the lead aircraft, Colonel Hivner said he realized that they had missed the target - an ammunition depot. He said he adjusted his F-4C to get a correct heading on the target, and then dropped his munitions.

"Right as I pulled off the target, I felt another thump," Colonel Hivner said. "Four told us we were burning again."

After the second hit, the colonel said warnings inside the aircraft started sounding and he was losing control of the Phantom. He instructed Lieutenant Barrett to get ready to eject. "By the time I said 'ready,' he was saying he was ready," he quipped.



Retired Air Force Col. James Hivner and retired Navy Cmdr. Rick Tolley embrace Oct. 11 at the Cavanaugh Flight Museum. Commander Tolley took on the task of returning a ring confiscated from a North Vietnamese prisoner of war in 1965. Colonel Hivner had not seen the ring in over 44 years. (U.S. Air Force photo/Lou Anne Sledge)

Ten minutes later, the two would be prisoners of the North Vietnamese.

"It turned out to be the first bad day of many bad days," Colonel Hivner said.

2,687 days of Hell

There was one lesson the colonel learned soon after punching out of the F-4C Phantom: never bail out of an airplane right after you drop bombs on a target.

Immediately after assessing their situation, Colonel Hivner said he and Lieutenant Barrett began doing what the Air Force had taught them - escape and evade. After hearing the enemy yelling, the downed pilots began moving in the opposite direction. The colonel said they came upon a hill and thought they would evade the enemy successfully. That was until they crested the hill and saw more enemy troops headed toward them.

Armed with only their wits and a .38-caliber revolver each, the colonel said they were hoping to escape, but now it turned into just staying alive.

"We were hoping we'd be captured, not killed," he said. "The gunfire stopped. There was a lot of yelling and screaming."

The Airmen were taken to a nearby village and stripped of everything: maps, boots, weapons and dog tags. The enemy even took the colonel's symbol of love for his wife - his wedding ring.

"I didn't think about my ring until much later," Colonel Hivner said, adding that POWs have plenty of time to think when locked up in solitary. "I was hoping, like many of us, that when we're released, they would give us some things."

The colonel admitted he wasn't then, and isn't now, a "jewelry guy." The ring was important to him because of what it symbolized, he said, but he didn't need it to feel or proclaim that he's married. In fact, he said, he didn't wear the ring for the most part because of the hazards of it getting caught on something while flying.

But, it was a little piece of home - a reminder of sorts - that was stripped of him.

"The ring is just another thing they take away from you," Colonel Hivner said. "It's part of your life they take away from you."

The colonel said he kept his ring and dog tag on a metal loop, tucked inside a pocket on his flight suit. Also on the loop was a "rat fink," a little rat-looking toy his daughter had gotten out of a gumball machine before he deployed to Southeast Asia. The colonel said his daughter, 6 years old at the time, gave it to him, he recalled. He said he had to break the news to her when he returned eight years later that he did not return with the gift she had given him.

End goal is to survive

Unless someone has lived in captivity, it's difficult to understand the emotions that go along with it. Still, today, Colonel Hivner dreams about his years as a POW - some good; some, obviously, bad.

"Yes I was tortured. Yes I was beaten. Yes it was Hell," the colonel said. "But, I like to focus on the brighter things."

The former POW said that that philosophy is one way he was able to survive his ordeal. He said he always had a penchant for looking at the brighter side, being a jokester and being able to laugh. He used that skill to combat falling into a mental world that was almost as dark and dank as the cells in which he stayed.

He shared one story about how the POWs communicated since they were usually in a small cell by themselves and very rarely, in the early going, allowed to knowingly communicate. The colonel said they communicated by tapping on the cell wall, similar to using Morse code or an old-style telegraph.

It occurred at Camp Skid Row, Colonel Hivner said. All camps had names. Some had multiple names. Skid Row was a long building with very small cells. There was a small hole in the door, large enough to see a 10-foot wall just outside. The colonel said the view tended to get to the POWs after a while.

One evening, he said he tapped out "G.N., G.B." - good night, God bless - to a fellow POW next to him.

Although there was no verbal communication, the colonel said he could tell something wasn't right.

"I got to the point to where I could sense how someone was feeling by how they tapped," Colonel Hivner said. "So I asked, 'are you OK?' He replied, 'I'm feeling mighty low,' or something to that effect."

The colonel said he tried to figure out a way to make a fellow servicemember feel better from his tiny cell, probably not measuring any bigger than 12-by-12 feet. After thinking about it for a while, the colonel tapped the first thing that came to mind: "Going out for a pizza. What do you want?"

"He replied, 'anything but anchovies,'" he recalled. "It was very special to me because I didn't know this guy."

Several years later, Colonel Hivner said he met the unknown POW. He said his last name was Waggoner and that his new friend told him how that simple gesture saved his life at that point.

"That was great," the colonel said. "That really helped."

Free at last

Seven-and-a-half years. 2,687 days. Eight Christmases. Eight Birthdays. Eight wedding anniversaries. These were all things stolen from Colonel Hivner while he lived as a prisoner of war, primarily at the Hanoi Hilton, but at other camps in North Vietnam, including Skid Row.

The Vietnam War did end for many American Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines. Many of them returned with their military units. Some returned on the infamous Freedom Bird, the aircraft that carried American POWs home. For years they thought of two things: survival and home.

Colonel Hivner said he knows a lot of former POWs who made the trip back to Vietnam to see where they spent days, months and years wondering when - or if - they would ever go home. The colonel said he has never had the desire to revisit the place that stripped away missed memories of seeing his 6- and 8- year-old daughters grow into 14- and 16-year-old young women.

"I didn't leave anything there that I needed to go back for," he said.

The colonel was glad to be home, glad to come back together as a family and glad to continue on the lifelong journey with his first love, Phyllis.

Although the colonel came home, his wedding ring, dog tag and the rat fink from his daughter didn't make it. But, the Hivners purchased another wedding ring to replace the one lost in Vietnam. It now sits in a jewelry box, the colonel said. After all, he's not a "jewelry man," remember?

Circle complete

It's rare that fate deals you a bad blow, but makes amends later in life. Colonel Hivner was shot down over a hostile area and was imprisoned for more than seven years. He lost just about everything that he had and knew, including his wedding ring.

The colonel had a new ring, though. He said it almost looks like his original one.

A stranger from South Texas, though, was about to do something that was never expected. It was almost too impossible to expect.

Rick Tolley, a retired U.S. Navy commander from San Antonio, came into possession of the colonel's original wedding ring and dog tag. The rat fink didn't make the voyage back. He started research on the whereabouts of Colonel Hivner and discovered he was still alive, living north of Dallas-Fort Worth.

Because it was so farfetched, Colonel Hivner said he wasn't sure if he should believe the story or not.

"I was skeptical at first," the colonel said once he was contacted by Rick Tolley.

Mr. Tolley provided some insight to the ring's mysterious journey from the Southeast Asia to North Texas. He said his former son-in-law was working in Vietnam when he was approached by a retired Vietnamese army soldier.

"He told John that he was cleaning out his desk and found these items," Mr. Tolley said of the ring and dog tag.

Also on the metal loop was a small cross. "(The soldier told him) if he would take on this mission of finding (the former POW) and return them in peace and respect, he would let him have them."

The former son-in-law agreed to return the items and contacted the former Navy commander Oct. 15 on Facebook, Mr. Tolley said. He said he took on the request to find Colonel Hivner, and, soon after, located him through the Internet.

Mr. Tolley agreed that he initially thought finding Colonel Hivner was going to be like finding the proverbial needle in the haystack ... if the needle even existed. But, that didn't stop him.

"There was that feeling," he said, "but because of what it was and because I know about the history of the war, I was bound and determined to find him or his family."

Colonel Hivner said he had no doubt who the ring's owner was after seeing a picture of the inside of the ring. Engraved inside his ring is his wife's initials and the date they were married.

The colonel said the missing ring didn't change their lives, and didn't expect its re-emergence to change it now. That, however, doesn't mean he isn't appreciative or surprised at the fact that his original wedding ring and dog tag would make their journey home, 44 years after the darkest chapter in his life began ... but just 26 years after his new life began.

"The never ending line is a circle," the colonel explained, adding that his wedding ring symbolizes his never ending love for his wife. "It's very special to me. I'm anxious to actually see the ring ... to look inside there with my tired old eyes and see the inscription."