

# Seymour Johnson Air Force Base

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## An unbreakable will

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9/22/2009 - SEYMOUR JOHNSON AIR FORCE BASE, N.C. -- How far would you go for your country?

Many give their life, some give their freedom and some gave their undying faith and devotion to their service.

Faced with potential death, brutal torture and malnourishment, retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Norman Gaddis never believed for a second he would not see his beloved wife and child again. As a prisoner of war for almost six years during the Vietnam War, he credits his ability to survive to training he received and the most important lesson he says he ever learned.

"As Americans, we behaved according to the Geneva Code and the Code of Conduct," he said. "Unfortunately, our captors didn't get a chance to read them."

When he entered the Army Air Corps in 1942 as a mechanic, he never imagined he would fly combat missions in some of the most sophisticated aircraft of the time. Coming from a humble background in Knoxville, Tenn., he decided to join the service because "it was the thing to do at the time."

One day, he was offered an opportunity to fly and jumped at the chance. After completing his psychological evaluations and formal training, he was prepared to fight in the war effort, but there was one problem. It was late 1945 and to his dismay, by the time he finished training, the war ended.

Given the option to separate from the military, he decided to spend more time with his growing family and pursue a degree in medicine. After a couple of years of study, he decided he was better suited for military service and applied for commissioning back into the Army Air Corps.

"At that time, the Air Force was becoming its own entity, and many of the pilots decided to go with the Army, so the Air Force was in desperate need of pilots," he said. "I was sort of drafted back into the military, but they didn't have to make me, I loved to fly."

The new second lieutenant and his family began their journey around the world from Germany to Georgia, where he completed Air Force fighter weapons school. One night, after buying a new car with his wife and children, he was told he would be going on a mission to move his squadron to the Pacific.

They left the same night, July 4, 1952, making the 31st Tactical Fighter Squadron the first to fly P-51's across the world from Texas to Tokyo. Upon their return, they were awarded the first Air Force Outstanding Unit Award.

A new conflict was stirring in Vietnam by 1967, and the older, more experienced Colonel Gaddis came into the fight. He received orders to Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, as the assistant deputy commander of operations.

During a massive firefight on a mission to Hanoi, Vietnam, May 12, 1967, the engine of his plane ingested part of a missile and it went down. Both pilots ejected, but the backseat pilot's parachute never deployed.

"I remember calling on my radio after I ejected saying 'Dager 4, I'm ok,' but I didn't say Dager 1, so they didn't know the fate of the other pilot," he said. "After calling on my radio, I looked around to see I was surrounded by the Vietnamese Army."

He was taken to a prison, better known as the Hanoi Hilton, where he only gave his name, rank and service number. The Vietnamese knew he was of a high rank so he was continually questioned about American operations. Because he refused to talk, he was beaten and tortured for 67 hours until they decided to put him into solitary confinement for 1,000 days.

"I went 1,000 days without seeing a soul and not being able to yell or scratch to contact anyone," he said. "Many thoughts run through your head in a situation like that. But I never doubted I'd make it home."

He still says he believes he is the luckiest man alive.

"When I was finally released from solitary confinement, I met another colonel who had been shot down after me," he said. "He was senior (in rank) to me. He had been badly wounded from a missile attack on his airplane and he was a little delusional, but he was the senior officer and as Dan Rather said, 'That's the way it is.'"

He began to room with the wounded colonel, both continually instructing those under them to continue to resist at any cost. He and four other senior officers faced continual questioning, beatings and severe malnourishment and treatment from the Vietnamese guards.

"They (guards) knew those were all the cards they had to play with," he said. "They didn't want to kill us, so they began to bring French doctors in to check us out. We knew we were beginning to get to them when we had all the people who had been captured stop writing letters gradually, and when they noticed, they locked the senior leaders in a room for 90 days. We knew we were making progress."

Small things passed the time for Colonel Gaddis. He dreamed about his children and his wife. Constantly being threatened with death by the guards, he kept his faith and bearing by being an example to younger servicemembers. The future began to look brighter in December 1972 when America began to bomb Hanoi.

Almost overnight, prisoner treatment began to improve at the prison.

The four senior leaders were brought into a questioning room where they were asked in broken English, "Why you bomb us?" They replied by saying "Because you sent troops into South Korea." Shocked by their knowledge of current events outside the prison, the guards began to treat the POWs better and in February 1973, they began releasing them.

"We formed an organization inside the prison with people who had been captured, and they would share information with us," he said. "We planned the way we would walk out of there. We were going to walk out like a military unit with our bags in our left hands, jackets zipped, in a formation and with dignity."

Colonel Gaddis was among the last to leave the camp and was shipped to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. There, the newly-released servicemembers received medical treatment and mental evaluations. He was then reunited with his wife and family, who never gave up hope that he would return home to her.

### Photos



SEYMOUR JOHNSON AIR FORCE BASE, N.C. -- Retired Brig. Gen. Norman Gaddis shares with the crowd his experiences as a prisoner of war during the Prisoners of War - Missing in Action remembrance ceremony at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C., Sept. 18. National POW/MIA recognition day is one of six days specified by federal law that the POW/MIA flag will be flown over federal facilities, cemeteries, post offices and military installations. The flag is also flown on Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Veterans Day and Flag Day. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Whitney Lambert)

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Not one to remain idle for long, he returned to work after three months of convalescent leave. He was given the choice to choose his next assignment, and chose to command Williams Air Force Base in Phoenix.

After being promoted to brigadier general and, working as a senior leader in the Pentagon, witnessing first-hand World War II, Vietnam, the Berlin Airlift, the Cold War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, General Gaddis decided that after 30 years, three months and seven days in the Air Force, he would retire to spend his days with his wife.

One thing that has remained consistent throughout General Gaddis' life is his unwavering devotion to service and family. The two were the driving force behind his entire career, he said. He said he never could have imagined what his life would end up like but, if given the chance, he'd do it all over again.

"When you think about all the blessings I received, it's just amazing," he said. "I've lived my life by the Code of Conduct, and it's gotten me this far. I'll say it works. I don't want to be remembered for anything else other than being an officer and a gentleman."

 Comments

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I have never heard such an extraordinary story or have seen such immense strength and faith. This man is not only an exemplary officer but he is also an exceptional human being. God Bless and I pray that he continues to live a long life so that he can tell his story to many Airmen to come

mary, Goldsboro NC

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