

Embracing the greater reality

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Everett Alvarez Jr. was the first American pilot shot down over North Vietnam on August 5, 1964. He spent eight years and seven months in brutal captivity in North Vietnam, making him the second longest held POW in American history. The first year and a half Alvarez spent in solitary confinement.

Alvarez was repeatedly beaten and tortured, but one of his darkest hours came after seven years in prison. On Christmas Day 1971, his captors let him read a letter from his mother that said his wife had left him.

In reflection, Alvarez said, "The hardest part was being alone. I used to do a lot of talking. I talked to God, and I realized I wasn't really alone." He scratched a cross outside his hut. Alvarez prayed often.

When Alvarez was finally released, he emerged from captivity with a new spirit. He remarried soon after his release in February 1973. He earned a law degree in night school. He held two senior political posts in the Reagan administration. In 1988, he started Conwal Inc., the executive management consulting firm that employs more than 200 people and pulls in more than \$15 million a year. There is a story about a White House reception he attended upon his release. John Wayne was introduced to him and broke down telling him "I only play a hero, you are a hero". Captain Floyd J. Thompson was in an observation plane that was downed by small arms fire on March 26, 1964. Thompson survived the crash, suffering burns, a bullet wound across the cheek and a broken back, and was quickly captured by the Viet Cong. Thompson spent the next nine years as a prisoner of war, becoming the longest held POW in American history. During his captivity, he was tortured and starved, and suffered the mental anguish of being isolated from other POWs for half his imprisonment.

The years following his homecoming in March 1973 were far from happy. Thompson's marriage had been troubled even before his captivity. He and his wife divorced in 1975. Thompson later remarried, but divorced soon afterwards. Thompson was never able to form any kind of a relationship with his four children. Ironically, Thompson said that one of the things that helped him cope with his brutal imprisonment was thinking of the fine family that awaited his return and the dreams of what his life would be like upon his return to America. Thompson developed a very serious drinking problem and was in several military hospitals for treatment. In 1981, while still on active duty, Thompson suffered a massive heart attack and a severe stroke that left him disabled for the rest of his life.

Thompson was found dead in his Key West By the Sea Condominium on July 16, 2002 at the age of 69. His body was cremated and his ashes scattered at sea off the coast of Florida.

Two men. Two similar circumstances. Two different outcomes, largely because of two different faiths.

Christian faith does not deny the problems and challenges of life. It does not turn away from reality, but it understands that beyond the realities of this world, a greater reality exists. And that gives us strength to persevere.

The Apostle Paul states it this way in Philippians 4:12-13: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."