

Nothing from this show or any others would be construed as legal advice. Please consult an attorney for any legal issue. Nothing from this show is endorsed by the Federal Government, Air Force, or any of its components. All content and opinions are those of our guests and host. Thank you. Views and hyperlinks expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of The Judge Advocate General, the Department of the Air Force, or any other department or agency of the United States Government. The inclusion of external links and references does not imply any endorsement by the guest(s), The Judge Advocate General, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense or any other department or agency of the U.S. Government. They are meant to provide an additional perspective or as a supplementary resource.



AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 15

Vietnam POW & Tap Code with (Ret.) Colonel Carlyle "Smitty" Harris – Part 1

HOST: MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN, USAF

GUEST: COLONEL CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS, USAF (RET.)

This episode is the first of a 2-part interview with Air Force retired Colonel Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, a Vietnam War Veteran fighter pilot who was shot down on combat mission in his F-105 over North Vietnam on April 4, 1965.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

Welcome to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. We have a remarkable interview in store for you today. This episode is the first of a two-part interview with Air Force retired Colonel Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, a Vietnam War Veteran fighter pilot who was shot down in combat mission in his F-105 over North Vietnam on April 4th, 1965. Colonel Harris was forced to bail out, captured by the North Vietnamese and became the sixth American POW, where he spent the next eight years in captivity with hundreds of other American POWs, including John McCain and George "Bud" Day. Colonel Harris suffered through torture, solitary confinement, and relentless abuse, but endured through it all with the reliance on the code of military conduct and a com-

munications system called the tap code, an old and unused World War II communication method that he covertly taught his fellow POWs, and they in turn taught others, which remained a vital link of communication through their captivity, without which they may have not prevailed. Here are a few clips from Part One.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

We knew how important communication was and went to every effort, wherever we were moved, to make sure that all POWs knew it, and took great risks sometimes to do that. Do not give them anything of value until they torture you so much that you can take no more and still retain your sanity and will.

ANNOUNCER:

Welcome to the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership, and best practices of the day. And now to your host from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Welcome to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School at Maxwell Air Force Base. I'm your host, Major Rick Hanrahan. Remember, if you like the show, please consider subscribing on Apple Podcast, [iTunes](#), and leaving a review. This helps us to grow in outreach to the JAG Corps and beyond.

Well, we have what I would say is a truly amazing guest instore today, and an amazing show for you today. I am personally humbled and honored to introduce our very special guest, retired Colonel Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, most well known as an eight year prisoner of war or POW in North Vietnam, creator of the tap code that allowed fellow POWs to communicate while in captivity, and frankly, just a story of remarkable courage, strength and inspiration. Sir, it is an honor to have you in today to talk to us.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, thank you very much. One slight correction. I really got the tap code, it had been used in World War II, between different parts of a prison. U.S. prisoners would tap on a common water pipe that could carry the sound. And that story was told to me out at Stead Air Force Base, the [SERE](#) (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) program out there. And as I was leaving class, it was just Providence. The instructor was walking beside me and I asked him, "How did they send the dashes?" And he explained, if I had a moment, and he went up on the chalkboard and showed me the tap code. So I really didn't invent it. I just was able to, happened to have it.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

But clearly something that was absolutely imperative for communication with your fellow POWs, is that correct, sir?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Yes. We were held in solitary confinement to begin with. And after about three months, for some reason, the North Vietnamese made decisions and then countered 'em. We never knew what they were gonna do. They put four of us into a cell together, and another joined us, so there were really five. And while we were together, that was wonderful, but I taught them the tap code. And when, a few days later, we were back in solitary confinement and we tried it out and it worked fine, everyone knew how important it was for us to communicate with each other. And so we went to great lengths to make sure that every POW learned the tap code and it really spread like a chain reaction, 'cause everyone knew how important it was.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Incredible, sir. I'd like to provide for our listeners just a little bit of background, and then we can kind of segue back into this incredible story.

So Colonel "Smitty" Harris entered the Air Force on January 2nd, 1951, and served through the rank of sergeant before earning his commission. He retired from the Air Force as a colonel in 1975. During his career, he flew fighter aircraft, was an instructor pilot, operations officer, and faculty member at the Air War College. On April 4th, 1965, while on a combat mission, his F-105 was hit, and Colonel Harris was forced to bail out over North Vietnam. He was captured immediately and was the sixth American POW, and spent the next eight years as a POW in various prisons where he was confined, mistreated and tortured.

As we've been discussing, he is credited with introducing the tap code to the POWs so that they could communicate surreptitiously between their cells.

During his career, Colonel Harris earned two Silver Star medals, three Legion of Merits, the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Bronze Stars for Valor, two Air Medals and two Purple Hearts. Colonel Harris retired from the Air Force in August of 1979 and entered directly into the University of Mississippi Law School, where he joined the Mississippi Bar in December of 1981. His post Air Force employment included banking, law and marketing. He otherwise keeps busy with volunteer work, flying, travel, golf, reading, and other pursuits, to include publishing this new book here at the end of 2019, with his coauthor, Sara Berry, entitled "**Tap Code: The Epic Survival Tale of a Vietnam POW and the Secret Code That Changed Everything**". He resides with his wife Louise in Tupelo, Mississippi, where his children and grandchildren also reside.

So sir, I know we were just talking about tap code, which is an amazing story, and I'm looking at the book here, which is also an amazing book. But maybe we could start a little bit more on your background. I know you enlisted in the Air Force, actually, in 1951. Could you talk a little bit about how that came to be?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, in 1951, the Korean War was going on and in order not to be drafted into the Army, I enlisted in the Air Force with a goal of sometime going through pilot training and getting my commission and wings. And that actually happened in September of 1953. So from then on, I wanted to be a fighter pilot and was able to go through, after pilot training to get that assignment. After gunnery school, I wanted to be in the F-86F program so I could go shoot down some MiGs. But, well, I got part of my wish because I was assigned to F-86Fs in a squadron that was located at Sidi Slimane, French Morocco. It turned out to be a very good assignment anyway. They didn't have any MiGs over there though.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

So maybe briefly, sir, could you describe where your assignments were and what were some of your trainings you had to do?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, I came back from French Morocco into the Air Training Command and was an instructor at Greenville Air Force Base, and then transferred to Bainbridge, Georgia, which was a civilian-run operated pilot training base. But there was a good outcome of that, because I met a young lady who is sitting beside me right now (laughing) and we've been married for over 60 years. So it turned out to be a great assignment. After that, they sent me to Air Training Command headquarters at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio. And we were there for a couple of years. Both of our daughters were born while we were on that tour in San Antonio. They're little Texicans now, I guess. It was a very good experience too. I was chief of the promotion and flying status branches for all of Air Training Command, and right down the hall from me were the officer assignment guys, and I made friends with them and was able to get another fighter assignment. I was assigned to McConnell Air Force Base. We flew F-100s before transitioning into the F-105.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Around what timeframe was that, sir?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

I went to McConnell Air Force Base in early 1964 and was then assigned from there, after going through F-105 training out at Nellis. And we were assigned to Okinawa, and oh, that was such a beautiful place. We loved it. It was a two-year tour, but we could have extended. My wife and my daughters loved it as well. To a great squadron and a great squadron commander, Robbie Risner. And we were just flying training missions, in the F-105, but then they started sending about two flights out of two or three different squadrons to Korat Air Base in Thailand. And from Korat, we were flying missions up

over Laos and into North Vietnam. And it was on one of these, it was on my second TDY to Korat, and the mission was to a large bridge that had vehicular and rail traffic. And it was the first important target we'd even been permitted to hit. And so I flew a mission against it on consecutive days, the 3rd and the 4th of April. The 4th of April, I was carrying eight 750-pound bombs and happened to be the first airplane down the chute in the 45-degree dive angle. And the rest of my squadron was staying at altitude because they wanted to see the impact of my bombs because the wind was unknown. Down where the bridge was, it was in kind of a valley and the winds were not very predictable. I made a perfect run, perfect sight picture. The bombs came off, and I pulled out, pulling a lot of Gs and hit my afterburner to get out of there in a hurry. And some lucky gunner shot a 37-millimeter exploding anti-aircraft round up in the air. And I took it out.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Could you walk us through that experience, sir, about what happened next?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

The exploding round hit in the engine area. The F-105 was a single pilot and single engine airplane. And immediately a deceleration because I was getting no engine power, also a bunch of fire lights on the warning panel were lit. And I tried to turn the aircraft towards the sea, because I knew there was a better chance of rescue there. But I didn't get very far. The plane was becoming uncontrollable. I think some of the hydraulic lines had been cut.

Anyway, I was forced to eject, and everything went perfectly in the ejection. The chute opened automatically and I was at fairly low altitude, 1,500 feet or so, I guess. And I looked down to see if there was any place I could guide the chute to seek cover of some kind, or a river or any hills. But to my dismay, I was directly over a large Vietnamese village with rice paddies in every direction. We were so close to the target, the bridge, that the villagers could hear their own anti-aircraft guns

going off and also the bombs from ensuing airplanes, hitting the target. So they, if they weren't hiding, they were looking up to the sky to see what was going on. And they immediately saw my chute and I was just overpowered immediately. They were waiting for me on the ground.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

If I can ask, what was going through your mind at this moment?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, I remember thinking, I'm going to be in North Vietnam for a long time. By a long time, I meant six months or more. It turned out to be almost eight years, but they were very angry when I landed. One of the young men was really emotional, and he was influencing some of the other villagers. Three of them had rifles. He pushed me up against a brick wall of a broken down building at the edge of the village and three of his cohorts were just 15 feet away or so with their rifles. And he walked over and put his finger on my forehead as an aim point. But there was a lot of talk and villagers, some older villagers milled in between us. And of course, my life was saved. But, I found out that generally, the North Vietnamese people were very well disciplined and they had been told to capture American pilots alive because we might be of some value as hostages or whatever.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

And then from that point, maybe you could walk us through, maybe your first 72 hours of that experience from what you recall, the conditions where they took you, kind of what you experienced.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

From the village, I had banged up my knee pretty badly on landing, also I had a broken shoulder, but they gave me back my boots. They had stripped me down in my shorts before, and they gave me back my boots and flying suit. And I zipped it halfway down as a sling for my arm. And we started walking and I guess we walked at least three hours. They had one stop for lunch, where

they had some lunch, and I had two guards watching me and they didn't, I indicated I was very, very thirsty, and they finally gave me a bowl of hot, watery soup that I could barely get down. But it was a little bit of liquid.

Finally got to a, I guess it was kind of a police station. Well, went through a couple other villages and was put in a, it was obviously a cell, heavy wooden door and one bed, which was nothing but heavy wooden planks. They pushed me in, and in a short time, a cadre of about three or four of them came back. And one of them was an English speaker, and he immediately asked me what ship I had flown from and what were my targets and capabilities of the airplane. And I refused to answer anything, except I did give him my name, rank, service number and date of birth.

They got pretty darn angry and knocked me around quite a bit. They saw that I had a wedding band on, so they threw me down and they, well, they asked me to give it to them and I wouldn't. So they threw me down and took it off me. It wasn't very difficult, 'cause that was my arm with a broken shoulder too. But anyway, later, maybe after they left, I heard a bunch of voices outside the cell. And they had encouraged villagers to come and see this criminal pirate that they had captured. So I felt more safe inside the cell than out. But the door opened and they had a roped off area to keep the villagers away from me because they had been brought with a loudspeaker to an emotional state that's unbelievable. And these are the same villagers, I had walked through their village earlier in the day and they just looked at me curiously. They showed me their hatred with their fists and so on, and I was finally thrown back in that cell, and I was glad to be there.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Can you describe the conditions within the cell?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, there was a bucket and nothing else, and the bed, and it was about seven by seven, maybe. And a big, a barred door with a about 10 by 10 hole in it that could

be opened from the outside that had bars in it so that they could look in. And there was one light that hung down that was on 24 hours a day, as that happened in all of the cells in which we were held. They could always look in on us and they always had the light on.

From there, I was put in a Jeep-like vehicle and taken to the city of Thanh Hoa, which was a pretty good sized North Vietnamese city, really, and not far from the bridge I had bombed. And the Jeep pulled up and I was pulled out and my blindfold taken off. Oh, my hands were tied in front of me with ropes. And there were several thousand North Vietnamese there to greet me. They were being kept away from me, but there were, they had big old lights illuminating a stage of some kind, outdoor stage, and these blaring microphones bringing the people to a state of hatred and emotion.

And from there, I was tied to a guy who was in a motorcycle sidecar and he gave me about three feet of rope. And we started through the crowd, with probably eight or 10 guards, four or five on each side, trying to keep the people away from me because they were ready to do me in. And they showed it by throwing things at me, shoes, anything they had. One young man was able to get through the guards and give me a kick to the kidney area that was almost incapacitating, but I stumbled on and that went on for probably a half an hour. And we came to another Jeep-like vehicle and I was put on it or in it, with two guards up front and one in back with me blindfolded. And we started the trek overnight, in the Jeep, and arrived in Hanoi, their capital, sometime mid-day the next day. And from there, I was thrown in another similar cell, except it was a large prison with many cells in it.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

At this new location, were you able to see other POWs at that time, or did you know whether you were alone or you were with others?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

No, I did not see other POWs at that time. They went to insane efforts to keep us from seeing or communicating with other POWs. And we were, the six of us when I got there, were all in solitary confinement. I was able to use voice and during their siesta time, call down to another American who was whistling a song that I recall. So I knew he was an American, and we just had a few words. His name was Hayden Lockhart. He had been shot down. He was the third person shot down over North Vietnam. I was the sixth. But just exchanging names were really all we could do because the guards came and banged on the door. And finally, a turnkey opened it. And an English speaker came in and told us what was gonna happen if we were caught communicating again. So we tried it a couple times more during siesta time, but it was very short, and we didn't have a lot of communication.

That's when we were moved back to another area of the Hoa Lo Prison, the "Hanoi Hilton", as we called it, into a little section that had four cells on each side of a little corridor and all of them were about the same, roughly seven by seven. And they had each had two bunks in 'em and leg restraints at the end of each that could be moved over on top of ankles and locked. It was pretty rough in there, because we couldn't talk to each other and get away with it. We did a little bit. But the guards were really adamant about any communication. But after about three months, four of us were taken out and put in a cell together, a larger cell. And then Hayden Lockhart, a day later, joined us. So there were five of us.

And at that time I was able to teach them the tap code. It had not been taught in any of our Services. So that's how it started. The North Vietnamese did irrational things all the time, maybe 10 days or so, we were back in solitary confinement in the same area. We called it Heartbreak Hotel, those eight cells. And there were some other, later shoot-downs that came in and as they did, well, we were able to get voice communication a little bit and teach them the tap code. And all of us used it on the walls. And that's how it really started. We knew how important communication was and went to every effort,

wherever we were moved, to make sure that all POWs knew it and took great risks sometimes, to do that. But we knew it was worth it.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Could you share with our listeners a little bit about how you came to learn about the tap code?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

When I went through training at Nellis Air Force, excuse me, Stead Air Force Base in Reno, Nevada, a sergeant was teaching a communications class, and his name was Claude Watkins. He mentioned that in World War II, American POWs held in German POW camp were able to tap on a common water pipe and communicate between different buildings. As it would happen, I asked him as we left class, how they sent the dashes, thinking it was Morse code. He said, "No, I probably should have explained that. It was not Morse code. It was tap code." And he pulled me up to the chalkboard and drew it out for me. And that's how I learned it, quite by chance.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

How vital or important was it to communicate while in captivity?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, that's kind of a long story because it was absolutely essential for us. The first thing we did was tap to each other, get names and any information that we could get from later shoot-downs. But quickly, we tried to find out who was the senior ranking of the group in our communication network, no matter how big it was or wherever we were, because that made us comfortable to have a senior ranking officer make decisions. For instance, we would discuss among ourselves in that Heartbreak Hotel, we called it, different responses we should try to make with the North Vietnamese during the interrogations. And the SRO would decide on one so we would be consistent. And also, our communication, they were trying to really create doubt about our relationship with other POWs. Our interrogators would

tell us that Lockhart or Shoemaker, or one of them, had told them all about their aircraft capabilities and targets, and well, you might as well too, and tried to use us against each other. But they were unable to, because we were communicating all the time about what we were being interrogated about, how we resisted and what we thought. And the SRO would get in on that too, of how we should resist. And it just boiled down, do not give them anything of value until they torture you so much that you can take no more and still retain your sanity and will.

And so that was our guidance. And so we did it time after time, and it created a peer pressure among all of us. When somebody came back and communicated what he had gone through, we made up our minds we were going to do just as much, if we could, or more, if we could. And it created a unity, an esprit, a pride in our, whatever group we were in, because we were actively opposing the enemy and doing our best to deny any opportunity of being exploited by making propaganda statements or giving them any kind of operational information of value.

And we were very successful. We told lies, (chuckling) we made up things. We talked among ourselves, what we were going to tell them and no more. And sometimes in an interrogation, they wanted to know something about maybe, our organization or how our airplanes were organized in a raid and so on. And we would sit there and listen and talk to 'em a little bit, giving no information, but we were at the same time trying to egg the interrogator to give his opinion of what the answer should be. And pretty soon he would give some answer that was way off base, but we would agree with him. And he really thought that was good information.

And we had all kinds of ways of just not cooperating with them in any way. And I think that is the one thing, that we followed the code of conduct to the best of our ability. Sometimes we were tortured to a point where we had to do something different, but when we did, we

usually went to a second level of resistance. And when they wanted us to write a propaganda statement that the North Vietnamese Communist government was so great, And we were, our government was so bad, and we were criminal air pirates. They wanted us to write that. Well, the English language is so rich, we could put in double meanings, all kinds of things that when, if those statements had ever been read to intelligent people, they would recognize immediately that they were forced statements. As a matter of fact, the North Vietnamese made almost no effort to use any of the propaganda statements they forced us to write because at the highest levels of intelligence in government, they recognized it would be counterproductive if those were released.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Thank you for listening to Part One. Please tune into Part Two, where we further explore Colonel Harris' POW experience, and eventual release after eight years of confinement, and his personal insights on resiliency and leadership. It's an episode you won't want to miss.

(uplifting music)

ANNOUNCER:

Thank you for listening to another episode of the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast. You can find this episode, transcription, and show notes along with others at reporter.dodlive.mil (now jagreporter.af.mil). We welcome your feedback. Please subscribe to our show on [iTunes](#) or [Stitcher](#) and leave a review. This helps us grow, innovate, and develop an even better JAG Corps. Until next time.

DISCLAIMER:

Nothing from this show or any others should be construed as legal advice. Please consult an attorney for any legal issue. Nothing from this show is endorsed by the federal government, Air Force, or any of its components. All content and opinions are those of our guest and host. Thank you.