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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 16

Vietnam POW & Tap Code with (Ret.) Colonel Carlyle "Smitty" Harris – Part 2

HOST: MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN, USAF

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

This is part two of our 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 part two of our interview with retired Colonel Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, a Vietnam war veteran fighter pilot, and POW who spent nearly eight years in captivity and is credited with teaching his fellow American POWs the tap code. A covert communication system from World War II that was essential to their survival and helped them prevail over the enemy. If you didn't hear part one, please consider listening to that episode before part two. In this part two, we further explore Colonel Harris's POW experience, eventual release from captivity, and his personal insights on resiliency and leadership. Here are a few clips from part two.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

I think they believe they could change my mind just as they change the minds of all the people that they controlled in North Vietnam. And so we were as stoic as you could possibly be. And we marched with our escort officer if we were able to up to the airplane and our goal was to come home with honor, per the code of conduct.

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.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

I have one story I'm gonna give in my talk, that one of the navy pilots, his name was Nels Tanner, had been tortured badly. And what they wanted was a statement from him, written statement, that two of his squadron mates were anti-war activists and they had encouraged and had gotten the entire squadron to refuse to fly combat. They liked that statement. They wanted to send it over to the war crimes tribunal in Stockholm that Bertrand Russell headed up, purely a communist front. But Nels Tanner, just in plain English, wrote out is the two squadron mates. There were a couple of things wrong with that because if his squadron refused to fly combat, how did Nels Tanner get shot down? The other thing was, he named those two squadron mates. It was never picked up until it was read to the convention in Stockholm. They were Dick Tracy and Clark Kent.

(Maj Hanrahan laughs in background)

Nels Tanner paid dearly for that for almost two years, but he was so proud of having made that deception and shown the North Vietnamese what they were doing with POWs.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

Wow, sir, if I could ask, just to give some context to our listeners, if you recall, approximately, just a general approximation of how many interrogations you went through, through your eight years in captivity and just the general techniques that the Vietnamese used in that.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, they used a lot of techniques. Early on I was interrogated almost every day for the first, nearly a month, and during the interrogations, it usually didn't last too long, as an interrogation of me, because pretty quickly when they weren't getting any information that they wanted, they either went to direct gross mistreatment of me or they practiced their English and actually, I think they believed they could change my mind just as they changed the minds of all the people that they controlled in North Vietnam. So they would teach me,

talk to me for hours about the history of Vietnam and the glories of communism and how the people were so happy, and it was so wonderful in their system. And all the bad things they could find about the United States and at that, particularly later on, there were quite a few anti-war activists, some of them Hollywood people that were well known and they played those things to us. Each cell had a little speaker in it and about once a day, they'd play an hour of just propaganda for us. And just so we knew what they wanted, but we didn't give it to them.

So those were the interrogations early on. They slowed down after that but they printed out, I think about 13 rules for us and in English and put them in each cell and all the things that we must do, the rules. There was no way we could not break them. They could find something we had done and would pull us out and punish us, meaning torture for breaking their rules, or they could resort to torture if we refuse to answer or refuse to write anything, but torture sessions slowed down considerably from every day to maybe once a month. In the last two or three years I was there maybe twice a year, really and they almost had given up on getting anything from us because we stuck together and everywhere we went, in every camp, we got communication inside the entire camp or not just the tap code, but other ways also. And, we had the SRO and he made decisions. We felt comfortable, we followed him, we had esprit and unity, and felt comfortable, and we had pride in all of us, and our goal was to come home with honor, per the code of conduct.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

When you were going through some of those most trying times especially in the beginning, how did you maintain your resolve? How did you deal with the fear and the uncertainty?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, we knew it was gonna happen so we were prepared to do what we thought we had to do. And we knew that our buddies had done the same thing and

we were going to do everything we could to maintain our own self regard as a United States or Navy officer and follow the code of conduct to the best of our ability. And so that was just a given, it was kind of like night and day. There was no other way. It was imbued in us and we were letting down our friends, our buddy, and our SRO if we did not do that, so we were always in that mode.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

So I know we could speak for, for days on this sir, but fast forwarding now to to the, the end of your captivity and moving into repatriate station. Could you speak a little bit about that process of finally being released and coming home.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Okay. My last camp in North Vietnam was, there were about 200 and a few of us, pretty good size camp, up near the Chinese border. So we did not hear the Christmas bombing of 1972 that convinced the North Vietnamese in Paris, that they ought to negotiate in serious. And in 12 days of bombing by B-52s and fighters, Navy Air Force, we hit targets we had never been allowed to get near. We closed the harbor of Haiphong and took out military installations and power plants and all kinds of strategic targets in and around Hanoi and in 12 days, the North Vietnamese negotiators in North Vietnam went from arguing about whether they should have a rectangle or a circular table to sit around, to actually negotiating with Henry Kissinger, who was our U.S. representative there.

And, we were, they quickly signed a release documents for us to be released and a cease fire, and really an end to the war, because in 12 days we convinced them that the use of Air Force air power, they couldn't withstand it. There was no way. They had to do something, just like we had to do something at some point when we were tortured, but the American people by that time, had been lied to so much and were so many anti-war activists that the political apparatus in D.C. would not permit us to follow up, because the North Vietnamese disregarded and sent troops and everything else down

South, as we pulled out and as was bound to happen, they took back all of Vietnam and we didn't help our forces at all.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

If you're willing, could you kinda walk us through, that, that timeframe when you finally came home and were able to finally see your, family now for the first time after eight years?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Well, let me add to my last statement that President Nixon is the one who authorized those targets that actually hurt the North Vietnamese. And as military people we should know that if there is a target that the military should use as an objective, that our political leadership should let their armed forces take care of that and as expeditiously as possible because there's gonna be less loss of life and quicker and favorable ending as a result. And our leaders at that time didn't. Our political leadership did not know that but President Nixon made a decision to heck with this. We're gonna hurt them enough that we'll end the war and did so. So we think a lot about him.

When we came home, I was on the first airplane, that was a benefit of being shot down early. You got to come home in the first airplane. We, it was a C-141. They bused us out to the airport in Hanoi, and we went in small buses that held about 35 or so guys. And, when we got off the bus, we didn't smile going out. We knew where we were going because we had heard the C-141s fly over and they had posted as they were required to by their peace agreements, at the end of the war, we were to be released. We knew what was happening. We got out of that bus and we lined up in two's, tallest to shortest, and the senior ranking person in that bus marched us out to the flight line. That really made the North Vietnamese so angry when we did that, whether in a camp or at this time. And when we walked out there, the senior person would give us at ease and then we would go be escorted up to a desk. There were a bunch of people there, where there was an American Colonel in full blue

uniform, a couple of our interrogators that we hated, but we went up and saluted and we never changed expression. We did not want any North Vietnamese to know that we were happy that they had done something for us, because it wouldn't make up for all the horror that they, we had been put through. And so we were as stoic as you could possibly be. And we marched with our escort officer if we were able to, out to the airplane and got on, and even on the airplane as it was taxing out, we were still in our stoic mood. It wasn't until we felt the wheels come up that we finally let out a yell and scream, got up, hugged the beautiful nurses they had put on board, went up and talked to the pilots and it was great.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

So it's kind of some summary questions. I think one of the things that we faced today in, in the Air Force and in society at large is resiliency. It's a very big topic. Sir, you have been through one of life's most challenging trials, that you could probably ever could face in one's life. Could you offer perhaps some words of wisdom to our listeners on what is resiliency to you? What does it mean to be resilient?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Resiliency goes back to having core values. Being a person that you like, that you know right from wrong, that you have a relationship with your God. You have patriotism running out the ears, you have pride in your unit and in your service. Those are the basics of having great values and following them and knowing what those values are. And then anything that comes up after that, you have something to rest on upon, some values that don't change. And no matter what situation you're put in, or how disagreeable it is, or uncomfortable, or an assignment you don't like, or anything else, just go back to those basic principles and know that you are an Air Force officer or enlisted person, or Navy or whatever, and you are supposed to do your job. And your job is to follow the code of conduct and the chain of command, and swallow political decisions that are made way above your pay grade or anything. Let them have those politi-

cal decisions but when it comes down to anything you have any control over, you take charge of yourself in any situation and know that you have basic values and beliefs that you can always go back to.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

One of the themes or tomes of this show is also talking about leadership and innovation and I'm looking at your book here, "Tap Code" and I would say that this was clearly an example of innovation, taking something from World War II and bringing this into the Vietnam era, which was absolutely instrumental in getting you and your comrades through such a terrible situation, and all the different leadership lessons that you, you're explaining here, just on our short talk today. What does leadership and, or innovation mean to you? Any words of wisdom on, on those topics.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

In the military services, leadership is expected. It's taught and when is exercised in the correct manner, that is in accordance with directors from above in the military chain of command, it gives one great, a sense of belonging, of being, that makes people comfortable and proud to be a part of whatever that unit is. Innovation, we innovate every day because I'm looking at a young major here who's, has all kinds of responsibilities that he has met, that he was not prepared for when he was commissioned, but whatever he was assigned to do, he did it to the best of his ability and invented ways to do the job even better if he possibly could, and each one of us in the military should always do that. Whatever your job is, change your thinking from what's good for you to what's good for the unit, and try to carry that out in the best of your ability. And you're gonna have to innovate to do that.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

And kind of coming full circle through our discussion today, we started off with tap code. It's been close to 50 years, right? Since you were released from captivity and just published this book here at the end of 2019,

an incredible story and book and already on making very good strides, as far as sales and publicity. Why "Tap Code" now?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Way back in the seventies, late seventies, I started a chronicle of my POW experience and I didn't intend for it to be ever a published document. I wanted copies for my kids, grandkids to know what happened but my kids and my wife had been after me for 50 years to put it in a publication, in a book form where others could, than just my family, could probably gain from whatever I had gone through. My daughter Robin had as her best, one of her best friends in Tupelo, was a very gifted writer. Her name is Sara Berry and my daughter, Robin asked Sara Berry, if she would help write the story for me and Sara and Robin prayed about it and finally decided to do so and it turns out she used my documents and others I found for her, some Air University documents that were prepared by returned POWs in the class of 1974. And she saw those and that was, of course, very current information. We were released in 1973. And she used a number of sources. And I had a number of books that she, written by other POW, she could look at and gain from, but she gained most of her really good stories and the stories that my wife Louise participated in, by coming over and visiting with us, sitting in our den and talking to us, and she was a wonderful typist on a computer. She could almost take down word for word, like a stenographer. And she put all that together and she did the work of putting this book, "Tap Code" together as a book, hardcover for publication. And, I'm very, very pleased with the outcome because Sara Berry did such a wonderful job, really of writing it, all the way through. And we had some people who endorse it that I was very proud of. And, just the forward is one of my best friends in the Air Force, ex-POW, did a wonderful job I think, cause (laughing) he likes us.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

Well, sir, it has been an honor and a privilege to have you in studio today. Unbelievable story. If there's any final

thoughts you'd like to leave for our listeners, just on how to be better leaders, better people? What can they take from your story to help them enhance their life and deal with adversity, get better with dealing with resiliency? Any final thoughts on what they should consider?

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

I'm gonna go back to resiliency just a little bit. The men who fought in the jungles of South Vietnam, came back to a society that questioned them, spit on them, did not welcome them home. They'd been out there putting their lives at risk to preserve our freedoms and get that kind of treatment. Most of them tried to forget all of that and go on with their lives, which was the thing they had to do. With the POWs, we were entirely different, because we had met the enemy and we had won. One's in South Vietnam didn't have that same feeling. We came home with pride and with honor and we were welcomed home. From the first minute we stepped out of the airplane at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, there were thousands of people out there, huge long banners, "welcome home" and "we love you". And from then on our whole nation was that way regarding return of ex-POWs. So we were lauded and it was no transitioner for us. We just went on with our lives as they had been. And, when I finally met this young woman again, after an eight year absence and met our eight year old son whom I had not seen, almost eight, it was as if I walked around the block. They were happy to see me and I was happy to see them and we went on with our lives, just as we had before.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

Well, again, thank you, sir. Thank you ma'am for coming in today. This has been such an amazing experience for us here and that'll be it for today's show. So thank you, sir.

CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS:

Thank you. It's really a pleasure to be here with the JAGs and to be able to talk to people who are in service, in uniform. I love it. They are some of the greatest people on earth. Thank you.

TAKEAWAYS

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Wow. What an amazing story and even a more remarkable individual. Before I get to my key takeaways, I would like to first publicly thank Colonel Paul Nelson, the surgeon general chair to Air University who graciously made this interview possible. Colonel Nelson also invited Colonel Cynthia Kearley and my wife and I to a dinner event, the evening before Colonel Harris's visit to the JAG school. It was a memorable evening where my wife and I had the opportunity to sit across the table from Colonel Harris and his lovely wife Mrs. Louise Harris, where they had recently celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. Congratulations to them on an incredible milestone. Also in attendance that evening, during the Harris's visit, were their close friends and chaperones, retired Lieutenant Colonel Richard "Sonic" Johnson and his wife, Ms. DeeDee Johnson. The Johnson's were a delight to meet and helped with logistics and numerous questions throughout the Harris' visit.

During the evening, while sitting across the table from the Harris', we talked about life, family, current events and other stories. It truly felt like being at home with my own grandparents, as part of the family. My wife and I were as equally impressed with Mrs. Harris as with Colonel Harris. She exemplifies grace and genuineness with a wit and a sense of humor that kept us laughing through the evening. We learned a bit about her story, in what she faced during her husband's captivity. Giving birth to a son, her husband wouldn't meet for eight years. Raising the children through all the uncertainty and standing up for her rights through numerous incidents. I personally recommend you consider getting Colonel Harris' new book "Tap Code" where Mrs. Harris' side of the story is told from her point of view through numerous chapters that alternate between Colonel Harris' story, and his point of view.

On the day of the interview at the JAG school, Ms. Harris, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson, and Ms. Johnson all sat in our studio room during Colonel Harris' interview. Mrs. Harris graciously deferred being interviewed, out of

an honor to her husband to grant him the spotlight to tell his story. With that, I often found Colonel Harris look to his wife when offering his replies and she at him with a clear and deep bond between them. Ms. Harris later said she wanted to make sure her husband didn't get quote "off-track." I had a laugh at that, and I'm sure many spouses can relate. Okay, here are my top three takeaways from the interview, reading "Tap Code" and overall experience with the Harris'.

Number one, the tap code equaled communication to the American POWs, or put alternatively, Colonel Harris's innovation to revitalize the forgotten World War II tap code allowed POWs to communicate. It's hard to emphasize in words how vital communication is, especially for those American POWs like Colonel Harris. Maybe we can all relate to it a little better now due to COVID-19 with social distancing, teleworking, and other measures to remain detached from society to reduce the spread of the disease.

With that, we generally take communication for granted in our daily lives. We communicate in so many ways today, including through texts, tweets, social media profiles, emails, videos, calls, to meeting people in person. Communication literally surrounds and bombards us from the moment we wake up until we hit the pillow at night. I think it's safe to say, we rarely think about communication itself.

For a moment, imagine you had no way to communicate with another human. Absolutely zero contact with the outside world, much like solitary confinement. Some may shrug their shoulders and offer a witty reply like now I can finally get some peace and quiet, but even for those folks, after a day, a week, a month, to even a year, one would surely realize that communication is as vital to the human experience as water, food, clothing, and shelter.

Communication is vital to our survival, growth and understanding, and basically required in every facet of our lives. Living in a world without the ability to

communicate would be like living in a black hole with no hope at all. I offer this insight as another way to consider Colonel Harris' achievement, to resurrect a forgotten World War II tap code, allowing his fellow POWs to communicate, to learn, adapt, instill order, rank and structure, offer that well-needed joke or a tap of consolation that they all came to know abbreviated as GBU or God bless you, after an interrogation or torture session. This tap code, this vital link to communication provided them the ability to survive, at times thrive and ultimately prevail over the enemy as they marched in fashion out of North Vietnam to their freedom. In a world with so much communication and so many distractions, consider taking a few minutes to reflect on your level of communication with others. Can you make it better, more genuine and less distracted?

Number two, Colonel Harris exemplifies the humility of a leader. Humility can be defined as a modest view of one's own importance. It's not usually the first characteristic that likely comes to mind in leadership, but humility is a virtue that leaders should strive to achieve.

For well over a thousand years, humility has been referred to as one of the seven great moral virtues along with temperance, charity, diligence, patience, chastity and kindness. These seven virtues have been defined by philosophers, theologians and others as a way to live one's life. Aristotle defined such virtues as a disposition to behave in the right manner and as a mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess. In other words, a virtue such as humility sits at the equilibrium point between two vices.

For example, humility is viewed as the equilibrium point between the excess of pride on one extreme and deficiency of self-deprecation on the other. Humility helps one to remain levelheaded in times of excess and times of scarcity. Humility helps the leader keep a reasonable perspective and healthy form of faith and belief in one's own abilities and strengths without an overbearing pride or hubris or a self-deprecating attitude.

Colonel Harris exemplified humility through his life, and it was also apparent in his trip to the JAG school. He continually recognized all those around him, seemed to downplay his importance in teaching others the tap code and didn't take himself too seriously. A few weeks after the interview, our commandant, deputy commandant and I received handwritten thank you letters from Colonel Harris and his wife offering their gratitude and thankfulness for the experience to visit the JAG school. Colonel Harris, a Vietnam POW hero, was thanking us for our service. If that doesn't instill a sense of humility in oneself, I'm not sure what will.

And number three, your most precious gift is time.

Colonel Harris spoke with an exuberance about his family and life when we broke bread and had dinner together. His eyes beam with joyful pride when we talked about his kids and grandkids much like my own grandfather, a former World War II POW. At the end of the dinner, I asked what Colonel Harris planned to do after his book tour. He looked at me, laughed and said, "Well, I'm sure not gonna waste any time." I think we can all learn from that.

One final anecdote. After a podcast interview with Colonel Harris, he gave a speech at the JAG school to a standing room only audience in our auditorium. He provided a riveting account of his experience, mindset and faith in his creed, fellow POWs and the code of military conduct. He also answered numerous questions after his prepared remarks. One question concerned resiliency, a hot topic in our current military. He emphasized a belief in oneself, one's own abilities and taking care of yourself and loved ones. Ultimately he said, "Believing and living by your core values are what define resiliency." He said his core values are what got him through eight years of captivity as a POW.

With that, consider reflecting on your own core values. What are the values that form your foundation? What are the values that make you, you? What are the values that you hope to instill in others? Last and in tribute to

all POW and MIAs, I'm going to air one minute of silence and tap out in tap code, the acronym of GBU or God bless you in the middle of the silence. This abbreviation of GBU was used thousands of times during the Vietnam war by the American POWs as a way to communicate their loyalty and faith in one another, the code of conduct and their American values. If interested, you can find the tap code matrix on page 75 of Colonel Harris's book "Tap Code" which uses two sets of taps per letter with the column first then the row. The one minute of silence starts now.

(silence then tapping)

That concludes this episode. Thank you for listening to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. If you liked this interview, please let us know by leaving a review on Apple podcasts, we appreciate the reviews. Last, if you have any topics that you think would be suitable for this podcast, please contact the Professional Outreach Division. As we try to bring you the best content on leadership and innovation. We'll see you on the next episode.

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