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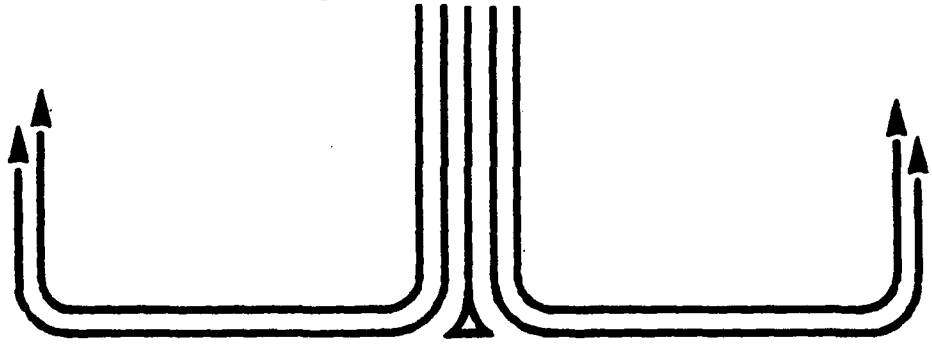
STUDENT REPORT

Captured: A Prisoner of War in Vietnam

Major Stanley A. Newell 88-1975

"insights into tomorrow"



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REPORT NUMBER 88-1975

TITLE Captured: A Prisoner of War in Vietnam

AUTHOR(S) Major Stanley A. Newell, USA

FACULTY ADVISOR Major Thomas O. Jahnke
ACSC/EDJ

SPONSOR Major Thomas O. Jahnke

Submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of
requirements for graduation.

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PREFACE

This monograph is a personal account of the author's experiences as a prisoner of war. Major Newell was a 19-year old Army Enlisted Infantry man when captured in South Vietnam in 1967. His purpose is to provide his first impressions upon capture, relate his experiences, and provide lessons learned. His conclusion: long-term captivity is survivable.

This monograph is based on personal experiences and memory of events.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Stanley A. Newell was born in [redacted] on [redacted]. He was drafted into the US Army in 1966 and was assigned to the 1st Battalion (Red Warriors), 12th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, Plieku, South Vietnam. He was captured by North Vietnamese Regulars (NVA) on 12 July 1967 and repatriated on 5 March 1973.

In January 1975 Major Newell graduated from Officer Candidate School (OCS), Fort Benning, Georgia, and commissioned a second lieutenant in the Military Police Corps.

Major Newell received his Bachelor of Science degree from Austin Peay State University, Tennessee, in 1980.

His military assignments include Platoon Leader and Batallion S-3 Officer, 101st Airborne Division (AASCT), Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Commander, Alpha Company, 10th Military Police Batallion; Course Manager, US Army Countering Terrorism Course, Fort McClellan, Alabama and Operations Officer, Office of the Provost Marshal, Fort Shaffer, Hawaii.

Major Newell's military education includes Advanced Infantry Training, Military Police Officer Basic and Advance Course, Air Assault School, Parachutists School, and Air Command and Staff College.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part of our College mission is distribution of the students' problem solving products to DoD sponsors and other interested agencies to enhance insight into contemporary, defense related issues. While the College has accepted this product as meeting academic requirements for graduation, the views and opinions expressed or implied are solely those of the author and should not be construed as carrying official sanction.

"insights into tomorrow"

REPORT NUMBER 88-1975

AUTHOR(S) Major Stanley A. Newell, USA

TITLE Captured: A Prisoner of War in Vietnam

This [illegible] is to

I PURPOSE: To provide information on what to expect and how to avoid unnecessary mistakes if a prisoner of war.

II PROBLEM: There is insufficient firsthand information dealing with captivity available to US service members.

III CONCLUSIONS: US military personnel should be thoroughly trained in all aspects of captivity. This will ensure their survival and compliance to the Code of Conduct.

INTRODUCTION

In the following pages my goal is to provide you some insight into what I experienced as a prisoner of war in South and North Vietnam during the period of 1967 through 1973. In my opinion it is some much needed information on what to expect if captured. It is also some personal tips on how to avoid the mistakes I made and to make your time in captivity easier. Your life as a prisoner of war will not be easy. It will test you physically and mentally everyday.

As you read, I ask you to remember two things. First, the guidance and recommendations put forth are based on my personal experiences and memory of events. These suggestions and recommendations worked for me, in my situation. They may not be suitable for your situation or work for you as an individual. However, I do believe they will, if nothing else, provide you with a reference, so if you are captured you will not be thrown into such a critical situation cold.

Secondly, remember that becoming a prisoner of war is not a no win situation. You can make it, but it is up to you. You will be confused and initially disbelieving that it is happening to you. Survival is your main goal. That is also my goal, your survival. If you remember what I'm going to pass on to you I believe it will be invaluable and assist you in guiding fellow prisoners of war with whom you come in contact.

BACKGROUND

I grew up in a small midwest town. The kind of town most people, once they leave, say it was a great place to grow up.

I had heard of Vietnam, but never thought I would one day fight a war there. Even after receiving my draft notice in 1966, Vietnam was still just an obscure country far away.

From the induction center it was an overnight train ride to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for basic training. I graduated from basic training an expert marksman. Ironically, at about this time General Westmoreland, who was the commander of ground forces in Vietnam, asked for men who could shoot.

There was no leave after basic training. About 30 of us marched off the graduation field onto a Greyhound bus going to Fort Polk, Louisianna. At Fort Polk I completed Advanced Infantry Training and the Republic of South Vietnam Training at Tiger Ridge.

I am now 19-years old with orders for Vietnam. After 11 days of leave I land at Bien Hoa Airfield, South Vietnam. I've been in the Army a little over four months.

Seven days after arriving in Vietnam I'm in my first fire fight. Several American soldiers are killed and wounded. I'm thinking how quickly things are happening and how little control I have.

The morning of 12 July 1967 (the day of my capture) was overcast. Not uncommon during the rainy season. My unit was conducting search and destroy operations in the Central Highlands northwest of Pleiku near the Cambodian border. We were in the Ia Drang Valley (nicknamed Valley of Blood by the French). It was called the "Ballpark" by Americans because it was so flat. My platoon was sent out to establish a blocking force in support of one of our sister companies whose perimeter had been probed by the enemy early that morning.

We had been in position only a short time when we were told to move. Reinforce Alpha Company ASAP. They were in heavy contact, pinned down and had suffered numerous casualties.

We never made it to Alpha Company. We came within sight of them but could never link up. Like them, we walked into an ambush that quickly pinned us down and inflicted several casualties. In fact, as I would find out several days later, several well executed ambushes had taken place. One such ambush wiped out the rest of my company who I thought was on the way to help us.

Help never reached us. Over the next three to four hours many thoughts went through my mind. One thought in particular I can remember was, if the next six months are going to be like this it's going to be a very long year.

That six months became the longest five years and eight months of my life. In fact, it became my life, one day at a time.

Chapter 1

First Impression

At the time of my capture I could not, would not believe it. I kept telling myself, over and over, this is not real. This is not happening to me. It will be over soon. I'm going to be rescued, help is on the way. It's just a matter of time. I know now or at least I believe I understand that this feeling was my way of reacting to a situation that was beyond my comprehension. A situation I was not prepared for or mentally capable of facing. Mentally denying the reality of my situation was my defensive mechanism. My way of allowing me time to adjust and make some sense out of my predicament.

Immediately following the battle I can remember lying on the ground, face down listening to the North Vietnamese talking and moving among the dead and wounded American soldiers. Several times I heard isolated shouts and single gun shots. They were shooting everyone and I'm next. Jesus don't let me cry. I don't want it to hurt. God I hope it's quick. Don't let me cry or beg --let me be brave.

Every story I could remember about the enemy reinforced my fear. The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese didn't take prisoners. They torture and kill Americans. It was just a matter of time before they found me. God, let me be brave. This isn't real. This is not happening.

They are standing right over me. It's my turn. I'm rolled over and stripped of my belt, boots, personal belongings and dog tags. I don't open my eyes. I guess I'm playing dead, trying to make them go away or just too afraid to look. Next they pull up my fatigue shirt, listen to my heart beat and check my wounds. As soon as they are finished I'm rolled over and with US Army commo wire my arms are tied, above the elbow, behind my back. I don't understand this. I thought I would be shot. If they are going to shoot me why tie me up? Why don't they just do it? Maybe they aren't going to. If they don't, what should I do? I know I'm supposed to escape but I don't think I can. What is going on?

They are pulling me to my feet and shouting at me. I don't understand a word. I know I've got to walk to stay alive. My arms feel strange. In fact I really can't feel them at all. I don't feel like walking. It's hard to move. If I don't try I'll die. I'm going to walk no matter what. I'm not going to do anything to cause them to shoot me. Maybe I'll be rescued. This isn't real anyway.

I don't know how long or how far we walked. Every time we came to a built-up area or a hole in the ground I knew this was where they were going to kill me. That did not make any sense though. If they were going to kill me they would have shot me a long time ago. They must want something, but what? What are they going to do? Where are we going? I wonder if I'm the only American captured? If there are more where are they?

We finally stop. We are on a hillside in a makeshift camp of some sort. I'll become very familiar with these camps soon. There are bunkers all around and hundreds of North Vietnamese Regulars moving through carrying weapons and gear. A stocky Vietnamese walks up to me, stares into my eyes, says something and pats his holstered pistol. One of my guards quickly moves to his side. I'm thinking this is it. They brought me here to kill me so everyone can see. He is still talking to me but I'm not going to say or do anything. I don't think I can say anything and I'm also afraid of what might come out if I did try and speak.

Two guards come over to me and tied my ankles together. I'm then put into a covered foxhole about one-third full of water. Both guards are talking to me but I don't know what the hell they want. One of them finally grabs my head, bends me forward and pushes me backwards through the opening into the hole.

It's dark now. Maybe I've been asleep. If so I'm wide awake now and thinking what is going to happen next. This will become a common thought. Wondering about tomorrow. Apprehension about the next hour, the next day never goes away.

I don't know how long I was in the foxhole. Every minute was filled with a different thought, what do they want, what should I do, what are they going to do to me, this isn't happening and how long before they let me go? This will become a question asked again and again. Not only by me but by everyone in the camps. No one ever imagined it would be almost six years before we would be released. Who even thought the war would last that long.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know they (the guards) have me by the arms and are dragging me out of the foxhole. It's still dark but I can make out several people around the foxhole and a couple of them are pointing their guns at me. They are shouting and pointing to bandages on their heads and legs.

This is it I know it. I've got to urinate but I'm afraid to move. I'm afraid I'll go on myself and be embarrassed. I'm scared, my stomach hurts so bad I feel sick. I just lower my head. The fear of several hours ago is back. I wish they would put me back in the foxhole and go away. What the hell is going on? What are they going to do to me?

Straight across from me, not more that ten feet away, is another American. God that's great! I know him but I can't remember his name. It will be several days before we can exchange names or talk. The first thing we ask each other is, you guessed it, what are they going to do with us and how long are they going to keep us. As I stare across at him I think he looks bad. I wonder if I look that bad. I feel better though knowing someone else, especially another American, is there with me.

We are both out of the foxholes, still tied, and barefoot. I can see blood on his face and his lip is swollen. They must have beaten him. I would later find out the blood and swollen lip was from a facial wound. I had not seen my wounds yet. My shoulder, head and buttocks ached but I did not associate this with a wound. Only later when I could see and touch my wounds would the pain become real. I guess the pain was blocked out because I was thinking about what was going to happen next.

This feeling of apprehension would be foremost in my mind for the next ten days until I reached a permanent camp in the jungles of Cambodia. Every time I would meet someone walking on the trail or each night when we stopped to rest I thought this was the time. They had finally reached, for them, a more secure area and this is where they get rid of us.

Over the next ten days five more Americans joined me on the trail. Two would die of their wounds before we reached the first permanent camp. I had, by this time, seen my wounds and was convinced that would be my fate. I was even more convinced I was going to die after the third or fourth day when I discovered maggots in my wounds. Jesus, I thought maggots ate dead things. Aren't these people going to take care of us. Do something besides walk us all over South Vietnam. I hated not having any answers. Always unsure of what was going on and why this was happening to me.

That old saying of first impressions are lasting impressions I think is true. I was never sure of my situation. Always confused about what was going to happen from the first day to the last day. As I look back I believe this confusion and insecurity was directly related to no longer being in control of my life. Someone else will make the decision if I live or die and you feel helpless to influence it.

Years later I became more comfortable with my situation but I never overcame my apprehension of wondering about tomorrow. Nor did I answer the question why me. Many nights I would wake up thinking I'm really not here or this isn't real. But it was and I had to continually fight a mental battle with a reality that I wanted to forget.

In addition to overcoming the reality of my situation mentally there were camp standards of behavior I had to learn. In some instances it took me a very long time to understand the importance of captivity do's and don'ts. In Chapter 2 I list and explain some of the more important do's and don'ts of camp life.

Chapter 2

DO's and DON'Ts

In this chapter I want to address two areas that I feel are vitally important to you physically and mentally. The Do's and Don'ts of captivity. Many may seem unimportant but believe me they all are key to your survival.

Do's

Exercise - Do what you can, when you can. It's important to your health and a good way to mentally escape for awhile.

Keep clean - It's important to your health.

Get involved with others - Play games, tell stories or anything that keeps your mind off your situation.

Eat - It's important to your health.

Keep your living area, clothes and eating utensils clean - It's important to your health. It may also cause your guards to view you in a more humane way.

Be polite - It may help you avoid injury. Also remember you are still an American soldier.

Speak slowly - This is to insure they understand you. If you speak quickly they may be embarrassed that they don't understand or misinterpret what you say.

Establish communications with other prisoners - This is a great morale factor for you and them.

Ask for anything - Conditions will be bad enough and anything extra that you get will be great.

Keep track of the days and time - Helps you feel in control and will also be important later during debriefing.

Maintain your dignity - May cause your guards to view you more humanely.

Use common sense - Will make your time there easier.

Be cautious - Especially around your guards. They are always listening and watching.

Supportive of fellow prisoners - An encouraging word means a lot.

Don'ts

Brag - May cause you unnecessary problems.

Use slang - Guards won't understand. American slang is hard to explain.

Swear - May offend your guards.

Be hostile - May cause you physical injury.

Argue - Arguing is a no win situation for you.

Give up - You can make it.

Lose your temper - It's a no win situation for you.

Feel sorry for yourself - You could be dead. Be glad you are alive.

Show interest in their cause - May cause longer interrogation sessions.

Lie - Unless you can remember it because they will.

Accept gifts or special favors - Something will always be wanted in return.

Worry about your family - It's your status that has changed not theirs. Concentrate on survival.

Lose faith in your country or fellow prisoners - You must help and support each other. Your country is behind you.

Learning and understanding the do's and don'ts are just one aspect of captivity. I believe they will always be applicable and worth remembering. Additionally, in Chapter 3 I will cover another aspect of daily life in captivity--what you can expect.

Chapter 3

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

You can expect anything. The only thing that will limit your treatment is the imagination of your captors. Remember they are in complete control of your life. You are totally dependent on them. Below is a list of things, physical and mental, that you may experience. Please remember, most if not all are temporary, they will pass. Also, if you do experience some emotional outbreaks, such as crying, don't worry. They are normal reactions to stress and frustration. They too are temporary. They will pass.

- Crying
- Depression
- Boredom
- Hearing voices
- Anger
- Frustration
- Helplessness
- Desire to give up
- No privacy
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Loss of appetite
- Illness
- Anxiety
- Worry
- Little or no medical care
- Fear
- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Beatings
- Interrogation
- Threats
- Accusations
- Demands
- Punishments
- Primitive living conditions
- Physical discomfort
- Broken promises
- Unanswered questions
- Lies
- Tricks
- Verbal abuse
- Strict rules
- Little or poorly prepared food

Many of the above will persist the entire time you are captured. Some will come and go. To overcome or at least reduce the effects of the mental and physical reactions, such as depression and illness, will require personal strength and effort. You may also have to help your fellow prisoner through times of doubt and sickness. No one is always strong. There will be many problems you will encounter.

In the following Chapter I will discuss several problems I experienced. I believe they are problems that can be eliminated early through knowledge and awareness.

Chapter 4

PROBLEMS

It is impossible to live under the conditions that we did for as long as we did without problems. Some of the problems recurred many times and were never solved. Other problems we simply learned to live with because there was no solution. Others were settled easily. I will attempt to relate some of these problems to you and the impact of them.

The biggest problem I believe we encountered was that answers to our questions were not known by the senior men of the camp. Compounding this problem was that some of the answers and/or advice we were given was made up. Why this happened I do not know. Maybe they felt they needed to give us an answer or they did not want to admit they did not know. The following are some of the questions we asked and the answers or advice received. As you will see, not all of the answers given are logical. Nor should we have asked the questions expecting a definite answer. I think it clearly proves how ill-prepared we all were for such a situation.

1. We asked, how long are they going to keep us? We should have known there was no answer to this. No one knew how long. However, we received answers that went something like this: When your tour (one year) in Vietnam is up you will be released. Dumb. We should have known better. I guess we wanted to believe it so badly we did.

2. We also asked about our pay. I was interested because by this time my separation date had come and gone. We were told that after our initial enlistment period was over we were not being paid. Again dumb. I can tell you this type of information is not a morale booster. A person captured, even if drafted, will continue to be paid as long as he or she is held.

3. Shortly after our failed escape attempt I was living with one of the NCOs. As we talked one day he told me if I wanted to get released I should stop eating, get real skinny and look like I was going to die. This he believed would cause the Vietnamese to release you. Even I didn't believe this. I was too hungry. The only thing advice like that would get any of us was a shallow grave.

4. Another question we asked, is the Army helping our families? This was very important to those who were married. No one knew anything about this. Speculation was that if we aren't being paid allotments have been stopped also. Wrong. Each prisoner of war's family or wife is assigned a Family Assistance Officer to keep them informed of any changes in our status and answer any questions. They do an outstanding job. Also, family members continue to receive authorized allotments as long as you are captured.

There is no end to the type of questions that will be asked. My advice to you is, if you don't know the answer say so. Don't make something up. Don't create false hope or unnecessary worry. Also you could easily lose your credibility. Always be honest with the men in your camp. Additionally, I encourage you to become knowledgeable about issues regarding prisoners of war. Read the accounts of returned prisoners of war, the code of conduct and related regulations. A good background will enable you to provide sound answers and advice.

The other problem area was our inability to handle our anger and frustrations. Maybe this was because of our age and lack of maturity. I believe this is true to some degree. However, contributing to this was our lack of preparation for such a situation. Our anger and frustration caused problems among ourselves as well as with our captors. We were helpless, sick, hungry, and confused. We were no longer in control of our lives. People who did not even have indoor plumbing were telling us what to do. All of this is hard for an American to accept. All of these things caused us to periodically take our frustrations out on each other. This reckless behavior carried over into our contact with our captors. None of us, I'm sure, realized how dangerous this was. Under the circumstances any injury could have resulted in death.

It took about two years and the death of several men before we realized that losing our tempers and allowing the anger at our situation to influence our actions was not smart. Finally, almost as a group, we stumbled onto the realization of our situation and accepted it. This I believe helped us to control our anger. We developed ways to release our anger and the pressure. There are many things you can do that will act as escape valves. We, for example, paced back and forth in our cells, told each other stories about ourselves, family and what we were going to do when released, related movies we had seen, played games, taught each other songs and of course talked a lot about girls. In so doing we directed our energies toward making the best of the situation, helping each other and surviving.

Problems are not always detrimental. Solving problems, individually or as a group, results in learning. Sometimes learning from mistakes, but it is still learning. The next chapter will describe lessons learned and their importance.

Chapter 5

Lessons Learned

It is impossible for me to relate everything that I learned over the years of my captivity. However, there are several things I do want to pass on because I believe they are critical to your survival. The topics I will discuss are not in order of importance. Each is equally important.

1. You must quickly overcome feeling sorry for yourself. It will do you more harm than good. Feeling sorry for yourself goes hand in hand with depression. Depression can be a killer. Additionally, feeling sorry for yourself will not cause the guards to pity you. To them you are the enemy. You have invaded their country. They have probably been told you committed crimes against innocent people. Seeking pity from your guards will not work. Also it is true you were unlucky to be captured. On the other hand you are lucky to be alive. You could have been killed. There is always a bright side to everything. One thing that always made me feel grateful and lucky, under the circumstances, was when I would look around the camp and see others who were paralyzed, disfigured or couldn't talk. This always made me think what could have happened to me. Remember when you start feeling sad about your situation just look around. You will see a lot to be grateful for. Things could always be worse.

2. Throughout my captivity I was not allowed to receive any mail or write any letters. This is your right according to the Geneva Agreements regarding treatment of prisoners of war. Not all nations honor these agreements. The communist government of Vietnam did not. After several years in the jungles of Cambodia I resigned myself to the fact I would not receive any mail. This I believe was to my benefit. It kept me from looking forward to the next letter that could have been months, even years apart. It also eliminated something my captors could have used against me. Additionally, if your family is like mine, Mothers always do the writing. If I had gotten a letter written by someone other than my Mother I would have known something had happened. This may sound selfish. Perhaps it was, but at that time I was most important. I did not want anything else to worry or wonder about.

3. Throughout your captivity you will frequently come in contact with certain guards or interrogators. I caution you: don't ever forget regardless of what they say, do or give you, that they are the enemy. They will do anything to get what they want or make you dependent on them. Like the Vietnamese, they may be underexposed to the world but they are not dumb. They know what they are doing and they are good at it. They are interrogators because of their abilities. Always be conscious of the fact that your captivity may cause you to occasionally drop your guard. Be suspicious of everything. Don't believe anything until you see it. This is especially true if they tell you other prisoners are doing something. I repeat, they are your enemy.

4. Every service member knows that it is his or her duty to escape or to assist those who are going to escape. I support this. However, let me give you some advice from experience. I, and several others, tried to escape just a little over three months after being captured. It is not easy. It, if successful, is one of the most difficult things you will ever do. You must plan it very carefully and take into account your attempt will fail and you will be recaptured. We did not. You must think about those you may have to leave behind. You should wait for your wounds to heal and plan for food, water, and shoes necessary for running through the jungle. We did not. Most importantly, think about how you will escape. I recommend, if possible, to sneak away at night. I strongly caution you to not attack your guards. We attacked and killed a guard. Also one of our fellow Americans was killed because we did not think about the seriousness of what we were doing. It also goes back to the possibility of recapture. I believe that because we attacked one of our guards, our treatment was much worse, our punishment was never over, and several were allowed to die. Think and plan before you act. Your life depends on it.

5. The situation and conditions are going to be the most demanding of your life. Hardship creates many close relationships. These relationships can easily be between junior and senior personnel. A first name relationship will exist. This coupled with the remoteness and length of captivity may seem that certain rules or regulations no longer exist. This could not be farther from the truth. All military rules, regulations and rank still exists. Never forget that. If you are senior you must enforce this. The harsh conditions of captivity makes it vital that military discipline be observed. Our camp was very informal.

However, it was understood who was in command. This was important to us. It gave us a sense of belonging and reality. To observe the military structure also made us feel good because we were practicing something the Vietnamese tried to destroy.

6. Lastly, don't believe the threats. Especially the most common of never being allowed to go home even when the war is over. This was constantly repeated to us along with the necessity for each of us to repent for our sins against the Vietnamese people. Individual repentance was a precondition for going home. With each passing year this threat became a little more real. It created doubt. It made us wonder; would they, could they keep us after the war was over. Additionally, we were never called prisoners of war. We were always referred to as criminals and given a criminal serial number. I can tell you without any hesitation these are just threats, nothing more. You will not be left behind when the war is over to stand trial or finish your punishment. When the war is over, everyone will be released. Everyone I had come in contact with, seen or heard of came home. They will tell you this to scare you. Some days they will achieve a degree of success. It will scare you and cause you to worry. Remember, it is just a threat. You will be released.

All of the things I learned in captivity are secondary to my belief in the human spirit. No one has more spirit or pride than an American. In chapter 6, my final chapter, I will discuss my belief in the American spirit to survive.

Chapter 6

Personal Feelings

The period between 12 July 1967 and my release from North Vietnam on 5 March 1973 was the toughest years of my life. Perversely, they were also some of the best. I learned more about myself, other people and what I appreciate about America during that time than I had in my previous 18 years.

I have many strong feelings today. I'm sure most were influenced by my time in captivity. They range from being stubborn to hating to see food thrown away. However, there is one feeling, one belief that stands out among them all. I believe with all my heart that you too can make it through such a situation

I consider myself an average person. I don't have any special talents or gifts. I made it, so can you. You must want to make it. You must set your mind on one goal, coming home. It's up to you. No one can do it for you. You are on your own.

There is no one more resourceful or resilient under hardship than an American. You must have confidence in your strengths and knowledge. You have more training and exposure to things than the majority of the people in the world. Rely on it, use it and never give up. Never lose faith in your country, your fellow American or yourself. From this and the knowledge that your family and loved ones are waiting for you to come home, you will get the strength to go on. Always remember you are going home. You can make it, I know you can. You are an American, proud and not forgotten.