

Former Vietnam POW 'Digger' Odell honored with street sign at Selfridge Air National Guard Base

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by Don Gardner

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Exactly 50 years ago Tuesday, Lt. Col Donald 'Digger' Odell was shot down 16 miles northeast of Hanoi in Vietnam.

Flying his 17th mission as part of the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron on Oct. 17, 1967, he would spend the next 5 1/2 years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, including some time in the notorious 'Hanoi Hilton.'

When he woke up Tuesday morning, the day he would be honored by Selfridge Air National Guard Base with a street on the base being renamed in his honor, he had to be reminded by his daughter, that this was the 50th anniversary of that day that would change his life.

Hours later he received multiple standing ovations at Zuccaro's Banquets & Catering as the SANG Community Council presented him with a copy of the Digger Odell Street sign that has been erected at the base.

While accepting the sign, Odell shared a story about when he first heard about the base making plans to honor him from former Base Community Council President Henry Sachs, who told Odell he had to apologize about one of the snags in the project, which had been in the works for about a year.

'Henry walked up to me and said, 'Digger, the sign has basically been approved, but you have to be deceased,' Odell said while the room filled with laughter. 'So I looked at him and said, 'Look Henry, you tell that sign painter don't get started on that sign, I'm in no hurry.'

After spending 5 1/2 years in captivity, Odell, now 83, has earned a shot of humor. And the painter went forward with painting the sign anyway.

'I'm deeply gratified. This all started 50 years ago today at 10:05 in the morning,' he said. 'I languished for 5 1/2 years in the Hanoi Hilton. All expenses paid, by the way. I've never gotten a bill, yet. I will cherish this moment for the rest of my life, and I hope it lasts a lot longer.'

Odell spent nearly 20 years of his career serving at Selfridge, first being assigned to the 94th Fighter Interceptor Squadron in June 1966 until February 1967. He was then assigned to the F-105 fighter-bomber crew training at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas and then the 34th at Korat Air Base in Thailand in August 1967. After being released from prisoner of war status in March 1973, he returned home in April 1973. After he retired from active duty in 1975, he was offered the job as director of public affairs at SANG and served in that capacity for 16 years, from March 1975, until his retirement in September 1990. He received multiple honors for his service, including the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal for Valor with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Air Force Commendation Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal with 11 Bronze Stars, and the Prisoner of War Medal.

Tuesday he was praised by his daughter, Barb Robertson, and Col. Shawn 'Lou' Holtz, the 127th Wing Operations Group Commander, for being a hero and for the sacrifices he made for his country. But, reflecting on his life and his career, Odell doesn't view himself in such a lofty manner.

'The heroes have their names etched in granite on the Vietnam Wall,' he said. 'For me, there is no such thing as a bad day. Some are better than others, but there no such thing as a bad day. One of the mottoes we had in the prison camp was 'one day at a time.' Don't

worry about tomorrow or next week or next month. Make sure about today then worry about tomorrow.'

Odell originally was housed with three other American POWs. He talked about how they helped each other survive with each other's support.

'You get to a point sometimes where you just want to quit. But you can't do that,' he said. 'There is camaraderie in that prison cell and you help each other because maybe next week you had to pull them up by the bootstraps when they get into the doldrums.'

'We as Americans are unique in that we have that extra sense, and that's a sense of humor. If you don't have that sense of humor, you weren't going to make it, period. You have to laugh about something. They had control of our physical being for sure, but they didn't have control of our minds.'

Odell also paid tribute to fellow POW Bob Barnett, who helped him through his time in the camp. During his first week as a prisoner, North Vietnamese prison guards used interrogation tactics and torture to get him to sign a document that would serve as his confession as a war criminal. When he refused to sign the piece of paper, he was struck in the back of the head with a rifle butt, which broke his neck and traumatized his spinal cord. He was then transferred to a separate camp on the outskirts of Hanoi when he was placed in a cell with Barnett. Unbeknownst to the Vietnamese, Barnett, a fighter pilot whom Odell had known for 10 years, was also a physical therapist.

'He worked on me for six months. I almost started hating him because he pushed me so hard,' Odell said. 'But after six months I started walking. I owe him a lot.'

The newly minted Digger Odell Street replaces the name Willow Street, a roadway that connects the commissary to the marina. He's humbled by the gesture, saying Selfridge 'is home to me.' He hopes others who see the sign and either recognize his name or ask who he is will be reminded of the sacrifices that all veterans make.