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Our Greatest Generation

## Donald E. 'Digger' O'Dell Lt. Col.

'A million to one shot...' That's how Donald 'Digger' O'Dell describes the SAM that got him.

Having arrived at Korat Air Base in Thailand in August, 1967, and joined the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron, he began a series of bombing runs aimed at the Communist infrastructure in North Vietnam

Piloting his F105 on his seventeenth mission, he had just crossed the border from Laos and begun to roll-in to dive bomb his target—a vital Communist rail point—when his aircraft took a direct hit from the first round fired by one of the anti-aircraft guns on the ground.

"It was a golden BB," says O'Dell; "Those guys on the ground rarely hit anybody ever, let alone on the first shot. We hadn't even identified their position yet. Within a few miles, my aircraft had split in two, and I had no choice but to bail out.

"I knew I had started a very bad day..."

That day went on for five years. Held for several days in the small hamlet near which O'Dell parachuted, he ultimately ended up in the infamous 'Hanoi Hilton', the central North Vietnamese prison for POWs. The prison, officially named Hoa Lo, received its facetious nickname from the Hilton hotel chain; in fact, what went on behind the stone façade was anything but a joke. At the time of O'Dell's incarceration, 1967, it was believed that the North Vietnamese would honor the tenets Third Geneva Convention of 1949 (which they had signed) demanding 'decent and humane treatment' of prisoners of war. As O'Dell recounts in ever-vivid detail, he was forced to



O'Dell recounts in excruciating detail, he was forced to undergo severe torture and prolonged solitary confinement in order to elicit a confession from him that he was, in fact, a war criminal.

“Everybody had their own personal breaking point,” he says. “For some it was days, for some it was weeks. Those who would not be ‘broken’ did not survive.”

Today, recounting his harrowing tale with all the dignity and emotion of a man who has truly seen the worst that any war had to offer, O'Dell hardly seems like a man who was ever ‘broken’. His survival was due to an inner strength that seems to characterize most veterans of Vietnam War. Released from POW status in April, 1973, Lt. Col. O'Dell was awarded a number of medals, including the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal for Valor with Oak Leaf Cluster.

