



Jack Van Loan Oral History Interview, November 7, 2014

Title

“A Prisoner of War for More than Two-Thousand Days”

Date

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Location

Memorial Union, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Van Loan discusses his upbringing in Oregon, including his parents' careers as educators and his own close friendship with Ralph Coleman, Jr. and the Coleman family. He describes his decision to attend Oregon State College before noting his advancement through Air Force ROTC, his involvement with Kappa Sigma fraternity, and various individuals at OSC that impacted him during his college years.

The remainder of the session is devoted to a detailed account of Van Loan's military career, with particular attention paid to his nearly six years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

In this, Van Loan describes his having manipulated an eye examination to qualify for pilot training; his experiences learning to fly the F-4 and the F-100 fighter jets; his early assignments in Misawa, Japan, Maxwell Air Force Base and elsewhere; and his memories of Colonel Robin Olds. From there, Van Loan shares his memories of being shot down over North Vietnam, ejecting from his aircraft and being captured by North Vietnamese soldiers. He then recounts his years as a prisoner of war, noting the beatings to which he and his fellow prisoners were regularly subjected and the particular valor that certain of them - especially Jim Stockdale - showed in the face of being tortured. Van Loan also speaks to daily life in the prison camp before relaying the story of a dog that became especially important to certain residents of the camp, and that played a role in the eventual release of several American POWs.

The interview concludes with Van Loan's description of the remainder of his military career, a discussion of family life in the wake of his experience, and his assessment of Vietnam War-era leaders and their varying applications of military force.

Interviewee

Jack Van Loan

Interviewer

Mike Dicianna

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/vanloan/>

Transcript

Mike Dicianna: Okay, today is Friday, November 7th, 2014 and the OH-150 project has the distinct honor of interviewing Colonel Jack V—Jack L. Van Loan, U.S. Air Force, Retired. We're at the OSU Memorial Union here on campus and also present today is Dr. Ralph Coleman, Captain Josh Burnett and Lieutenant-Colonel Robb Owens from the Air Force ROTC unit here at OSU. Colonel Van Loan, I'm beside myself, being able to interview you. We always like to start with just a little of a biographical sketch. I mean you know, where you were born, where you grew up and what it was like as a kid, that type of thing.

Jack Van Loan: Very undistinguished. I was born in Eugene, Oregon and grew up as a Duck, and the Second World War my father was the assistant superintendent of schools in Vanport where he housed Henry Kaiser Shipyard workers. And at the end of that stay he was offered a job as superintendent of schools here in Corvallis and he and my mother and my brother and myself, we all packed up and came to Corvallis and he was superintendent of schools here for about thirteen years. He built the Corvallis public school system as it presently stands. He modeled it after the St. Louis public schools, which was the best public school system in America, and my dad was a real stickler for making things the right way. My mother left, she had had a two year normal school education and she came down here and went right back to school and got her bachelor's degree and then she got her master's degree, then she got her PhD. She had to take one course from my dad, it was a 600 level course, and he was the only one in the state of Oregon that taught it and she had to take that from him and I came in the day that he was making the, filling out the paperwork and I said "how'd Mom do?" He said "she did very well, she's the best student in the class." I said "she's going to get an A then, right?" And "no, no she's not getting an A, she gets a B." I said "you just broke a perfect record. She's had a perfect record. She's absolutely Phi Beta Kappa and you're breaking her record and that really is unacceptable to me." And he said "well, I don't care, no wife of mine is going to get an A." End of story and she got a B and she came downstairs, I was so darn mad at him, and she came downstairs and said "don't worry about it, it doesn't mean a thing." That's exactly what she said. But I said "well Dad, you did it." But that's a little background.

MD: Well, growing up in Corvallis, how much was the college part of your community experience? I mean it was a big deal here in Corvallis, growing up.

JVL: Well to us, we were just, you know, kids. Ralph and I, we started playing high school baseball together when we were freshmen. That's when we first got to know each other. And his father, as you may or may not know, was the legendary Ralph Coleman that our baseball field is named after, was the head coach here at Oregon State for thirty-three years and very, very successful. He was also successful at raising kids. You know, he raised us, I mean we had, each one of us, there were four or five of us, and each one of us had four or five sets of parents and we couldn't get away with a darn thing because there was always a parent standing there looking at us. And Ralph Coleman was one of my parents and I'm terribly emotional at the fact that he was. You know, I'm damn lucky to have had him. I didn't have enough maturation to play baseball for him but I sure had a lot of respect for him.

MD: So, what actually influenced your decision to become a Beaver and go to Oregon State? Was it just a given?

JVL: Well, I had to go to school if I wanted to go in the Air Force and be a pilot. And my mother, during the Second World War, had been the director of the Eugene Vocational School in Eugene and one of the visitors that came to visit with her was Henry Arnold, General Henry Arnold, and had dinner at our home that night. We were—my brother and I were kept down in the kitchen and then we were allowed to come in and meet the General and they had candlelight and four stars. It was really very impressive, I've never forgotten it. He looked at me and he said "well Jackie, what do you want to do when you grow up?" Well, you don't tell the number one airman in the world you want to be a fireman, you know? I said "I want to be a pilot." He said "what kind of a pilot do you want to be?"

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Showing my mother's irascibility, I said "I want to be a fighter pilot," because I thought he was a bomber pilot. See, with all those guys, I showed how little I knew, all those guys were, they flew anything that had wings and a motor. It didn't make any difference what it was, and you know, Hank Arnold had all the experience you want to name flying fighters. And he just laughed; he said "that's great." So, I went to school so I could get a college degree because nobody was going

to let me in the Air Force to go to pilot training unless I could get a college degree. And that's why I got a college degree, just plain and simple so I could go fly fighters. And I thought about that more than once when I was in Hanoi.

MD: Well yeah, you entered Oregon State College in the 1949/1950 school year and your major was listed, that I find, as Business Administration in the School of Agriculture.

JVL: Yes.

MD: So that was what your goals were. I noticed that you were very honest and listed girls as one of your interests on your application form.

JVL: Yep.

MD: But, so that was what your, you know, you went in with the goal of going through ROTC.

JVL: That's right. I just, all I wanted to do was become an Air Force officer so I could go to pilot training.

MD: And so in your freshman year you were in Air Force ROTC.

JVL: Yes.

MD: Which was brand-new on campus, only a few years old.

JVL: Well, we started off right down there in the MacAlexander Fieldhouse, as old and decrepit as it is now, you can imagine what it was in '49 when Ralph and I first walked in.

MD: So, what were your living arrangements while you were in college and what fraternity did you pledge and why?

JVL: I went to Kappa Sigma and that's 'cause many men there were World War I vet—or World War II veterans. And they kind of took me to raise. I needed some raising and they took me to raise. And they took—you know, all of us, all of us are kids right out of high school, we didn't know anything from nothing, nothing. And they just took us to raise and helped us grow up. They gave them a paddle every now and then. So, it was pretty interesting

MD: Well, do you have any other campus life type stories? I mean, what activities were you involved with; going to dances, projects, that type of thing?

JVL: No, I was, I spent very little time doing what I should have been doing, which was really working hard, and it wasn't until I ran right into Earl Goddard - and Earl Goddard was the head of the School of Business and I was in Business at that time - and he pulled me aside one day and he looked at me and he said "you are a total embarrassment to this community, you're a total embarrassment to your family, you're an embarrassment to yourself and you're going to be in my class next fall and, you know, this next term, and if you don't behave I'm going to kick your ass and I want you to go to work." And I went to work and just about that fast got on the Dean's list and did—Earl Goddard was directly responsible for grabbing me and really slapping me around and slapping me into shape. And I had it coming.

MD: Well, the Kappa Sigma house is celebrating its centennial this year and so when you were there in 1953/54, what are your memories of fraternity life when you were in the house?

JVL: Well we, I don't think we were very distinguished. We had some, we had some good leadership. Jerry Long was one of my, he was my big brother, so to speak. He came back. Dean Doherty, there were a bunch of guys that came back from the Second World War and they were not interested in fooling around with kids. They wanted you to shape up or get out. And when I didn't do well in my studies, why I got on the business end of a paddle more than once. But they helped me grow up.

MD: Well that's, you know, 'cause you were at Oregon State College at quite an interesting time with all the returning vets, and so I mean it was kind of—the campus itself had kind of a different feel to it because of that.

JVL: Well, he and I were in the same—he was up the street at the DU house and I was in the Kappa Sig house and we were both getting our butts whacked every now and then just for not paying attention. Right? Yeah.

MD: So now, were you involved with sports while you were at OSC or intramurals at all?

JVL: No, no, I didn't have the maturity. His father was head baseball coach and I didn't have the maturity to play for him. Just that simple. He was far, expected too much maturation for me that I didn't have to offer. And his dad was a superb baseball coach and I finally got to play for him my fifth year in school.

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He was kind enough to let me come back out and try again but he told me I should have stayed with it from the very beginning and he was right. He just told me, you know, "you didn't grow up." At least not very fast. But his dad was a great friend of mine and we were a friend of Ralph's too, but he was very fair but he was also damned honest.

MD: Well, when you graduated with the Class of 1954, you graduated and were commissioned as an officer in the United States Air Force; reflections about reaching that goal?

JVL: You know, well I was certainly very pleased with that and I went off to the Air Force, down to Randolph, yeah, Randolph. And so it's which base in San Antonio? Randolph, is that what that is?

MD: Yeah, that's right there by Lackland.

JVL: Lackland, Lackland, that's what I was trying—I was down there at Lackland and the first thing that happened to me, I got kicked out of pilot training. And boy, that really hurt. And I got kicked out because I had what is called exophoria where your eye kind of drifts off to the right, and I had that and they discovered it and it was bad and they kicked me right out of the pilot training program and off I went to Francis E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming, to be a—learn to be a commissary officer and food service officer and so on. And I got sent to Scotland, got over there and I loved Scotland, I really did, and I met a girl and I married her, or we got scheduled to get married, which we did, and she's the mother of my three boys. But nonetheless, we got over there and I was asked by my commander, had called me in one day, it was Lieutenant-Colonel, was the squadron commander, air base squadron, which you had to go all over the world to find an air base squadron, but we had one there and he said "why in the world didn't you go through pilot training?" I said "I got kicked out." He said "kicked out? What do you mean you got kicked out?" And I said yeah, I told him about my eye and he said "well, we got a test now, we got a new test and I'll take you over to [unintelligible] with our guy here, our medical officer," or what passed for a medical officer, "and let's see how you do." Well, I could trick that test. They could say what number is the line running through and I knew what line it should be through and I could trick it. I didn't have to tell them the truth and it didn't make any difference, they couldn't tell, because I was the one looking through the scope.

So, I went over there and went through it and he said "good, you passed." He said "now I'll get you into pilot training," or back into pilot training. And so off I went to pilot training and I did reasonably well in pilot training. I had a lot of trouble with air sickness and it took me a while to get acclimated to that, but I finally did. And then I wanted to fly fighters and there were eight F-100 slots available to my class and I got the seventh one. And the one that got the eighth one, George Acher [?] is still alive to this day and still a great friend of mine. So, off we went to F-100s at Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix and from there up to Nellis for advanced fighter training and from there to Misawa, Japan. And I got to Misawa, Japan, I was there for three years and it was way worse than combat. We lost people left, right and center. We really had a terrible time because the F-100 is a very challenging airplane. It was just too much airplane for most young people. But for some reason or other I just got acclimated to it and I never tried to take advantage of the airplane and I never tried to make it do something it wasn't designed to do. And I had a pretty good idea what it was designed to do. And so I managed to stay alive through that period of time where we lost way more people. And in fact, our wing kind of got shot down. But I left there and then I got returned to Luke to be an instructor pilot at Luke, which is a terrific honor, and my group commander sent a message back to the guy that was running it and said "Make him an IP." And so they made me an instructor pilot in the gunnery program, which is at least one year ahead of where I should have been. And they honored me with that job I had done in Misawa, they said I did a good job, so "make him an IP in the gunnery program." And I

was an IP there for two and a half years and I ran up a lot of time being a gunnery instructor pilot and then I was picked to go to Maxwell Air Force Base, to go to Air Command and Staff College.

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I went down there and I really wanted to work hard, I was bound and determined that I was going to try to be a distinguished graduate and all that I got was a case of shingles. I had so much emotion there I just couldn't handle it. And I got kind of sick. But I did well in the program and then I got sent from there to Misawa, Japan and did well. Yeah, yeah, it was Misawa. Then I came back and went to Luke and then from Luke I went to Air Command and Staff College and from there I was sent to Davis–Monthan and transitioned to the F-4. And that was a real jump, too, because the F-4 was a hell of a lot more airplane than the F-100. It wasn't that it was that much more demanding; it just had two engines whereas the 100 had one. But that was, that F-4 was a real handful. It was a wonderful airplane. I got about seven hundred and fifty hours flying it; all models of it. And I did reasonably well with the F-100—or the F-4, and that's what I got shot down in, too.

MD: Oh, the F-4 Phantom is one of the iconic U.S. Air Force jets of the Vietnam War. And then when you were finally shipped over to the Southeast Asia theater, you were assigned to the 433rd Tactical Fighter Squadron, and that was at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base.

JVL: 433rd.

MD: Yeah, 433rd. And I see that you were there December of '66, until that fateful day. What about the life of the squadron, the life of the base, missions on base and greater bases?

JVL: The wing, the attack fighter wing was one of the legendary wings in the Air Force, and made so because of the commander, and that was Robin Olds. And Olds was, he was a case unto himself. He's passed now, and we lost a real combat warrior when we lost him, because all Robert Olds really wanted to do was kill people and kill MIGs. And at that he was damn good. There was no fooling around with him. He really meant business. And the communists knew where he was, too. They kept pretty close track of him. And when he got airborne, they knew he was airborne. And he was the one that organized that big mission around the, I can't remember what it was called now, but it was a big mission that happened around the first of the year. And we went up there and killed seven MIGs and Robin got one of them. But he was, all he wanted to do was kill MIGs. He was a real good fighter pilot and he didn't get out there and carouse around and mess around with other women and he didn't go out there and get drunk. He drank a little bit, but not much. And he was just—but staying with him, one of my good friends who got into the, came into the wing and he was scheduled to fly with Olds, he said "Geez, well what do I do?" And I said "well, you keep cutting him off. Keep cutting him off in the turns so you can stay with him. But keep on cutting him off and just work on keeping him in sight." And he came down and I said "how did it go?" And he said "geez, it went great. I kept him in sight the whole mission." But it was a complement that he could just keep him in his sight.

MD: Well, Colonel Olds is known for his famous mustache. Did you grow one to match or did all, did other pilots, or was he kind of the alone--?

JVL: No. Some of the other people thought it was kind of cute to have a mustache, and I didn't care for one. I wasn't trying to—I wasn't trying to mimic him in any way, shape or form. Now, if I could fly as well as he could, why that was great, but I wasn't trying to mimic him.

MD: Well you have one of the most epic stories of any Beaver alumni that I've had the opportunity to speak with. But your story changes so drastically on that fateful day of May 20th, 1967. Curious, could you fill us in on the actual mission itself?

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JVL: Yeah, the mission was to go North with the F-105s and to support them, provide MIG cap for them when they attacked the Northeast Railroad. And that was the mission. And it was plain and simple. And we met up with them out over the China Sea and went to the refueling anchors with them and left that and then turned and went in. The 105s were led by Major, at that time, Phil Gast, later Lieutenant General Phil Gast, a real good fighter pilot and a guy that knew

what he was doing, and he was leading and we were going in toward the North Vietnamese Coast and for some reason he said "watch it guys, it's real quiet." And I thought to myself what do you think I'm doing, taking a nap? You know, but anyhow, sure enough, very shortly thereafter we got jumped by about twenty-five MIGs. They later said it was twenty-four to twenty-eight MIGs. And they had laid in wait out there for us and we really got jumped hard, and they were everywhere. And I was trying like heck to stay on General Old's wing. I was his wingman and I was trying like hell to stay on his wing because one of my, my actual roommate had been his wingman and had left him in a combat situation. And I told him, I said "hell, you can't do that." He said "well, I'm not going to get shot down for him, I don't give a damn what he does." And I said "you just can't leave him. You cannot leave him. That's your job, is to stay right there." And there it was all turned around and now I was trying to stay with him and he was hard to stay with, but a couple MIGs came in real hard on Major Gast and I fired off a Sparrow, just an uncontrolled Sparrow, just got it airborne, and "bore-sighted" is what we called it, and the MIGs broke off and then about that time I got hit real hard, and I mean I really got hit hard. And the, all of the fire lights lit up and so on and so forth and I told my back-seater, I said "we're hit," and he said "how bad?" and I said "real bad." And he knew then to hang onto the handle.

And I had always said that if the—you have to have parameters; what is it going to take for you to eject? And if you have to think about it when it happens, you're going to die. You've got to be thinking about it before it ever happens so that when that happens, you instantly eject. And I'd always said if the airplane, if the stick freezes when I'm at or below ten thousand feet, if it freezes, I'm out of here. I mean it, just like that. Because I had friends of mine in the F-100 that the stick froze and they stayed with it and splattered right into the ground. Well, the stick froze and I said "get out." And I pulled the handle and we went up the rails and then I heard two explosions. The first explosion was the rocket on the seat and the second explosion was the airplane just vaporized. It just literally vaporized and I saved my life and my back-seater's life just like that, because he got a little burn on his face from the rocket engine, he was that close to it. But well, that airplane, there wasn't enough left of that to put in your hat. It just absolutely vaporized.

MD: Well that's the one thing, you know, ejecting out of a speeding jet is an experience that a very select few pilots experience.

JVL: Well, I'm convinced that you have to have—and I wanted to have that young kid in here, that girl that's going to pilot training, and I want her to understand you got to think about what it's going to take to get you to eject. You can't be thinking about it when it comes up. If you think about it, you're going to die. You got to say "if this happens, if that happens, I'm out of there."

MD: Yeah, 'cause you—

JVL: You can't sit there and say "okay, have we filled those squares?" You know? You don't have that kind of time.

MD: Because you're immediately into a several hundred mile wind smacking you.

JVL: That's right.

MD: And so, coming down in the parachute.

JVL: Yep.

MD: Over a residential area, or?

JVL: No, no, no, I went up, all up on the northeast. We were on the Northeast Railroad and up well into North Vietnam and we were coming down on what we call MIG Ridge and it was close to where the MIGs were a lot of the time, and coming down the chute, Joe and I could reach out and shake hands, and hit the ground and we got together and they had us triangulated. I wanted to, I told him, I said "we got to hide until it gets dark." I've always regretted that. That was what our—that's what our teaching was, you hid until it got dark and then you moved and I've always thought I should have moved right off. Well, I would have got caught anyhow, but I should have moved. But they had us triangulated and they knew right where we were and this kid showed up carrying a French musket and the damn barrel on that thing was that big around, it was unbelievable.

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And I told my back-seater, I said "keeps your hands up and don't make a false move, because if you do, three people are going to die. He's going to—that damn musket's going to evaporate and so are we." And so that's how we got captured and I said "well, this war's over for me." So we got down, got put on a truck and off we went to Hanoi and after about—we visited five different army camps, or three different army camps and five different flak sites and then were taken into the Hanoi Hilton, and I can give you a copy of my memoirs that I've worked up for being in jail for six years if you want one, but—

MD: I, oh very much so. I would love to have a signed copy actually. Well, you know, for this project and the Beavers and the future Beavers that are going to be viewing this oral history, as much as you feel comfortable, can you share a little bit about—I mean it's hard to condense six years into just a little bit, but what was it overall like at the Hanoi Hilton?

JVL: Oh, it was very difficult. It was very, very difficult. And the Vietnamese—you know we were the ones, the United States of America were the ones that came up with the things that we needed to be signed for the Geneva Convention. We came up with that. They did not. But they signed it and we did not because we had said "we have nothing to do with the Geneva Convention. We're not a part of it and we're not even a signatory to it. But the North Vietnamese were. But they did not sign it, they paid no attention to it and they said "you're criminals because you have, you have not declared war on us and this is an undeclared war and you're up here killing and savaging our country." And they really meant it. And I figured out real quick like, when I was being badly tortured, that I had to come up with some, to say something to them, even if it's only "goodbye," you know. And that was very difficult. And that went on for about eight days and nights, night and day, being tortured and you know, they had me totally beat. They had me totally beat and they were just trying to say "okay, you're going to do what we tell you to do and that's it." There was no Geneva Convention at all. That never even entered into it. They—I said something to them about that and they just brushed it off.

But the North Vietnamese were extremely well-led and a lot of people don't really understand this, but the North Vietnamese, when Ho Chi Minh was alive and Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong and soon you're talking about three or four of the most capable people in the face of the earth, and I mean they were good. Ho Chi Minh was no damn slouch. He was damn good and he had fought all his life, but for thirty-two he had been out of the country. He hadn't even been in the country and everybody, everybody in Vietnam thought he was there that whole time out, you know, plowing the fields and doing those kind of things, raising rice and making things better for the next generation. He wasn't even there. He was in France, he was in Moscow, he worked in Chicago as a cook.

MD: Really?

JVL: Yeah, he was very, he's a very remarkable guy and he tried like the dickens to get us, the United States, to treat him as we treated Tito in Yugoslavia, and we just ignored that and we wouldn't, we didn't do that. That was a tragic error. We had nothing to gain by not doing that, at all.

MD: Well, the Hanoi Hilton, as it was known was, ended up being basically your home for almost six years.

JVL: But remember, the Hanoi Hilton is not just the prison in downtown Hanoi. That includes all the camps. It's all-inclusive. There's the zoo, there's the plantation, the power plant, Cao Bang, all those things are all lumped into the Hanoi Hilton.

MD: Known as the Hanoi, yeah, and about how many people were at each one of these? Or did you know?

JVL: Well, we didn't know. But the zoo was the most infamous and that was where it was the harshest. The zoo was very harsh. But the thing that came out of the whole thing was that you really have to remember, we were extremely well-led. I don't mean just kind of semi well led, we were extremely well led. Jim Stockdale, Jeremiah Denton, Risner, Larry Guarino—that's all I can do, to keep from crying. Those men were really tough. I mean they were really tough.

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MD: And they kept you guys—

JVL: And they stood between us and the North Vietnamese for all those years. And boy, I'll tell you, that was a tough job, to stand there. And you know, Stockdale's a hero of mine. And all of them, all four of them, all five of them are. They're

incredible heroes, because they told the North Vietnamese "you can stick it where the sun don't shine and I don't care what you do to me." And they tried like hell to break Stockdale forever. And they came to Stockdale one time and they said, and this is the story that I told to the CNO at the Navy, when I told Zumwalt, I said "your man Stockdale richly deserves a medal of honor" and he said "why?" One word. And I told him about when, the day that the North Vietnamese came to Stockdale and they said "you're going to make a movie with us. You're going to make the movie, you're going to be the bad guy and we're going to be the good guys." He said "I'm not making any movie with you." "Then you'll be punished," which means you will be tortured. He said "have at it" and they put him on the ropes, tortured the hell out of him and he finally screamed "I surrender, I give up" and they put him out to shave, took the razor off and lacerated his face, cut his face all up. And the rabbit came back and looked at him, the guard was screaming and shouting, and the rabbit looked at him and said "you'll heal and I will be back." And sure enough he, six weeks later, he healed and there came the rabbit and he said "now we'll make the movie" and Jim said "I'm not making any movie with you" and he said "well you said you would." "Yeah, after you tortured me." "Well, we'll punish you again." "Have at it." And they put him back out to shave; this time he said "now watch him." The rabbit told the guard "now watch him." Well, he leaned over to wash his face off and gave himself a reverse Mohawk with a razor. And I mean and here he's got blood running down his face and the guard is screaming and shouting and here comes the rabbit and the rabbit says "you can wear a hat." He went off to get a hat and Jim picked up the stool he was sitting on and beat his eyes out. I mean this guy was in another league, in a whole different league. And you get led by that, and that's what I was led by. Why, it gets you to stand in there, that extra, that extra pace.

He got the Congressional Medal of Honor and he said to me "what did you tell them?" and I told him exactly what I told Zumwalt and they called—Zumwalt went back to his office and wrote a memo to the guy that was the view/purge [?] guy and he said get ahold of that Lieutenant Colonel Van Loan and get his story. And the guy forgot it. I don't know how you forget something like that when the Chief of the Naval Operations tells you what to do. But he just forgot it. And fifteen months later, why Zumwalt's going out of the Navy and he comes across this memo and he calls people in and he says "hey, what happened to this?" Fifteen months later and they said "well, he just forgot about it." And Charlie Southwick called me up—or Red McDaniel called me up, who's also another tough guy, and he said "Bunzie," my nickname, he said "Bunzie, there's blood everywhere in the E-Ring. Zumwalt just lost—remember when you told him about Stockdale?" I said "yeah." He said "well they found out the guy did nothing about it. He's a two-star now and he's going to get killed before night tonight, please take his phone call, he's going to call you." And I did and the guy said "I want to send a plane to get you and bring you back." I said "I'm coming back there for the National War College and I'll be leaving next Tuesday." When I get there, he said "where are you staying?" I said "the Holiday Inn in Arlington." There was a Navy staff car sitting there in the portico when I came in there and they hauled me right over to the Pentagon and I wrote a deal on Stockdale and on Risner, on both of them. The Air Force didn't want to fool with it but the Navy did and Stockdale got the Medal of Honor. And he richly deserved it, because he set examples that, Jesus Christ, they're just unbelievable, you know? Just unbelievable.

MD: Well you know, it's hard to think that living there for six years would kind of fall into kind of an ongoing routine, day to day.

JVL: It was hours and hours of boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror. I mean really, sheer terror. And we sought—Charlie and I, my cellmate and I, sat there and talked and we talked for hours amongst ourselves and the prison camp; how can we, how can we construct survival school to teach somebody how to handle this? And the answer was "we can't." And the answer was very—the reason we couldn't was because you can't substitute terror. You can't simulate terror like you can when it happens to you. Because boy, that terror was really something else. There's nothing like having that lock, key turn in the lock at three o'clock in the morning. There's just nothing like it. I mean it makes me start to break up all over.

[0:35:08]

MD: Did you spend time thinking about your college days at Oregon State?

JVL: Oh yeah, sure. I was blessed to come to Oregon State, I was blessed to have my parents put up with all my shenanigans and great friends that are lifelong friends to this day, like this guy sitting here. So, you know, I was very lucky and I knew it. And I was lucky to live through that thing in Hanoi, too. Make no mistake about it. And I know it better than anybody. What else?

MD: Well, one of the stories that I had got wind of that is just incredible that I wanted to ask you about was there's a story, a special story about a small dog that the fellow POWs had befriended and all the U.S. POWs refused to leave the camp and return to the U.S. unless the North Vietnamese, with approval of the camp commandant, would release this dog. I'd never heard this story about the end of the war. Can you share it with us? I just love it.

JVL: Sure. Ed Davis, Ed Davis was up in Cao Bang, which was up in the China border. Right on the China border. No electricity, no running water. I mean it was the end of the line, okay? And when we got up to that, that was really, that was a shock, shock, shock, to say "Jesus, well where are we?" And they had moved us out of Hanoi because they saw a bunch of big carriers coming up there carrying those great big helicopters, gunships, and they thought there was going to be a raid on Hanoi to get us out and so they said "well, we're going to divide them up in half. Half goes to Cao Bang and the other half goes to Lang Son. And we knew that because one of our members was a young Max Nguyen. That's actually, when you look at it you'd think it's "new-yen," but it's actually "win." But Max was Vietnamese and he had been flying an A-6 and got shot down. He was flying it with the Vietnamese Air Force. So, he was captured and he was actually from Hanoi. And he was a South Vietnamese pilot.

Well, he could of course speak Vietnamese and he spoke French fluently and he spoke damn good English, so he, he could hear what they were saying about what they were going to do with us and so he let us know that we were going to half go to Cao Bang and half go to Lang Son and this to get out of the way of those big helicopters. Well we got up there and they came out of the building that I was going to go into and they had this huge, eight, nine foot snake that was in there and they were in there getting all those creatures out of there. Scared me half to death. That was three in the morning and they slapped us in there and slammed the doors and I thought Jesus, we got the—we're at the end of the line here. Well the next two days later, we're out bathing and all the sudden there's a terrific sonic boom. And I said "I think they're looking for us. That's an SR-71 up there looking." And five days passed and all the sudden boom, boom. Two booms and I just started to cry. I said "they found us," and they had. And now they've signaled the double boom, two SR-71s we see and they're not here—you're not lost. Very, very emotional. Really, really hard to go through that.

MD: So, at the end of the—

JVL: Anyhow, anyhow here we are—

MD: Negotiations.

JVL: We're getting ready to leave Cao Bang, come back to Hanoi, and Davis, this guard went out and bought this dog and he bought it from the little village. The village is right there and it was just a little puppy. And he bought the dog and what they do is they fatten a dog up during the months leading up to Tet and then comes Tet it's time to celebrate and they barbeque—they cut the dog and kill him and barbeque him and that's considered a delicacy. That's their idea of a delicacy. It certainly is not mine, but nonetheless, that's what they were doing. So Davis, he gets this dog, or the guard has the dog, and the dog just can barely just waddle along in the courtyard in Davis's building. It comes time for the guard to go get the food for us and Davis says "hey guard, I'll watch the dog and you go get the food."

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And it's all in pigeon English and pigeon Vietnamese, and off goes the guard to get the food, he comes back and Davis says "I'll keep the dog in the building" and the guard says "fine." He knows the other guards won't steal the dog if he's with Davis, because Davis ain't going anywhere. And sure enough, the dog stayed right there and days passed, weeks passed and comes time to go down the mountain, the trucks came up to get us and Davis comes out carrying his dog and the guard says "give me that dog" and Davis says "that's my dog, I've been taking care of the dog, I've been looking after the dog, I've been bathing the dog, it's my dog and the dog stays with me." And the guy brings the gun down on him and chambers a round, says "give me that dog right now." And "no," and there's a hell of "hoorah" and here comes our SRO and—the North Vietnamese camp commander—you know, "what's going on here?" Well Davis says "it's my dog" and the guard says "no, it's my dog" and blah blah and the camp commander says "hey guard, you carry your gun and get in the truck and let him carry your damn dog. When he gets back to Hanoi, you get your dog back." And he's a simple kid so he says "okay." So, we go back down to Hanoi and the dog moves in with Davis in the big cellblock he's in and Davis starts to teach him to bark at the guards, which that, none of that would have happened if the thing hadn't been written out—peace thing hadn't been signed.

So, he signed that and now Davis has got this guard—barking at the North Vietnamese guards and comes the day of the release and Davis walks out carrying his dog and the guard says "give me that dog" and out comes the gun again and now he's not kidding, you know? He's got his money wrapped up in that dog and there's "bao cao," which means attention please and lots of yelling and shouting and all the POWs are out there yelling because Davis is about ready to get shot right in front of their face, and here comes the camp commander, the Vietnamese camp commander, he says "what the hell is going on here?" And he told him, you know, Davis says "that's my dog and I've been raising him, I looked after him, this damn guard hadn't done anything" and then Risner steps forward and says "none of us are going anywhere without that dog. This release is finished." Now the damn camp commander finds himself right between Pham Van Dong and Richard Nixon, which is not a very good place to be. Those are two pretty mean people. So he says "how much did you pay for the dog?" and the guard tells him and he fishes out his wallet and paid him off. And I sit there in a wonder watching. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but that's what happened. There was money changing hands out there.

Well, then we get released, Davis goes down the hill with the dog and we get down into the camp and he gets—we get released and off he goes to—off Davis and the dog go to Clark Air Force Base and get there and they, the, here come the immigration, nationalization people and they said "Davis, this is cute as hell you have this dog, but the dog stays here for six months for immigration. You know, quarantine." And Davis says "I'm leaving tomorrow and the dog's going with me" and Risner says "and if he doesn't go with him, the whole release is off." And so there was a little Brigadier General standing there that recognizes trouble when he sees it and he calls the White House and gets the Chief of Staff of the White House who goes in and tells Nixon, who is not the right guy to tell it to. Nixon says "you tell them to bring that fucking dog right now." End of conversation. So, out the door goes Davis carrying his dog and it's just cute as hell you know, and we're all, he blackmailed those, they'd blackmailed those Vietnamese and had taken the dog home, and I got a picture that's going to be in my little story of Davis holding his dog. It's cute as hell; it's just a little puppy, too.

MD: I mean, that's an incredible story of the end of the Vietnam conflict. In total you spent two thousand, one hundred and sixteen days in captivity before being released. Coming home with Operation Homecoming March 4th, 1973. I don't think there's probably any words that could express how you and your fellow POWs felt when that plane took off.

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JVL: Oh, we got some pictures of it and they're just, you know, we're just hollering and yelling and before the plane started to even taxi, one of the guys is running up and down the aisle and the loadmaster, who is the head boss—he's an enlisted guy but he's the head boss—and he says "okay, everybody sit down and strap in." Nothing. And he hollers again "okay, everybody sit down and strap in!" And about that time the engines are going off because they're working on block times. They only, the Vietnamese have agreed not to have their SAM sites working while these airplanes are taking off. Somebody had the foresight to get that done, too. And so they have to meet this flight time and the flight engineer, he knows that too, and he, finally he yells "okay, god dammit, hang on to something, we're going." Damn airplane took off, people still just hanging on. First time a mass airplane ever took off without everybody strapped in.

MD: Well—

JVL: And I got a picture hanging up in my wall in my office about that and it's really something.

MD: And you and your fellow POWs, when you returned, I guess you were all housed at March Air Force Base—

JVL: No, no, no. We were sent to six different locations. I was sent to March and that was just one. That was one of the return centers and we had the best doctors, dentists, you know, heart guys that the Air Force had and they were sent to those different locations and we were awfully well-treated.

MD: So, what were your consequences of, you know, health wise, as far as, I mean were you pretty messed up?

JVL: I'd lost a good bit of weight. I weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds, which is eighty, you know, almost sixty, seventy pounds less than what I had weighed, but I needed to lose the weight, so what the hell. But it, they really worked hard on taking care of us. I mean they really did. And a lot of my friends, a lot of my friends got to come and see me and, you know, mainly at Honolulu when we went through Honolulu and we were just awfully well-treated. We really were.

MD: Well, and you know, let's talk about returning to your family and life in the United States. I mean, is there any way to describe what it's like to finally see your family again?

JVL: No, we were in seclusion, you know, we didn't know anything about—what's the fabric; everyone was wearing, suits? I can't remember the name of it...polyester. You know, we didn't know polyester from a load of coal. Everything was new because we had been in a vacuum, an absolute vacuum for six years. And so it took some getting used to but, you know, and I could sense that my marriage wasn't going to last and it didn't, but that was her decision and not mine. So, that's over and said and done with and we're doing great now. I mean, my wife and I are just happy as two clams and I've got great friends like this guy right here that keep track of me.

MD: So, you continued your Air Force career with a number of duty stations after getting back on track and finally retired as a Colonel in 1984, can you fill us in a little bit about your final days as an Air Force officer after Vietnam?

JVL: Yeah, I got to be a Wing Commander, which very few people get to be, and I was very fortunate. I had a Tactical Air Commander that liked me a lot, respected me, and he took good care of me. But he told me, he said "you've used up most of your retainability. You used it up while you were in jail, so I'm not going to promote you to General," and that kind of hurt a little bit but I said you know, what the hell, I understand it too. He said "if you didn't spent so much time up there I would, but I can't do it now." You know, a lot of people got promoted that they were promoting them just to reward them but General Creech didn't believe in that. That was not his—the way he ran the ship. And I, to this day, he's one of—he was—one of my great friends. He, unfortunately he lost his life and I feel bad about that, but he was a terrific commander. Unbelievable commander. So, that's my story.

MD: So, that's your story. Well, I want to shift gears just a little bit, I'm curious about your children, your family life.

JVL: We got, my—I married Linda and Linda and I are—she's my best friend by far, and she's got three children of her own and I've got three and we take care of all six equally and we get along just great. And they know I'm here and she knows I'm here and she's probably sitting there wondering why isn't he calling me. But we're—we have nothing to complain about. Absolutely nothing.

[0:50:17]

MD: So, you retired in '84 and you live in South Carolina?

JVL: Columbia, South Carolina, which is the best kept secret in the world. The people in South Carolina really and truly appreciate and like the military. They really do. And they don't forget that you served. A lot of the—ceremony we had today was marvelous in that regard, but that's every day in South Carolina. I mean, they really and truly respect the military and I thank God for them. I just thank God for them.

MD: Well, I—are there any topics that you'd like to touch on that we've missed, first of all?

JVL: The only thing that I mentioned was, again, I've mentioned that I'll never forgive Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara for not using the military instrument. I mean, if you're going to use it, which—and it's a last resort, make no mistake; you do economics, you do all kinds of things first, but once you decide "we're going to use a military instrument," then you use it. You don't fart around about it, you use it. And they did not do that. And the truth of the matter is, President Nixon looked at me in the White House and he said "Jack, I made one mistake as president." And I said "yes sir, what was that?" and he said "I waited three years to really go after them." And I said "yes sir," and I agreed with him. You're damn right you wasted three years, had three years to figure out the number of kids that got killed at five hundred per week, it doesn't take a mental giant to figure out the magnitude of your mistake, okay? But we were, two or three of us standing there, we all said "yes sir." But he should have went after them sooner. But when he did, when he did, and you know, one of the young kids came to me after that initial bombing and he said "Van"—there was a delay in our release of three or four days and we're about ready to go, and I knew we were, but he came up there and he said "Van, you think B-52 come back soon, you not released?" I said "no, no, I do not think B-52 come back, I know B-52 come back." He looked at me and said "I think Nixon crazy." I said "no, no, no, President Nixon's not crazy, he's insane and he hates your guts." To that he ran off with his latest piece of intelligence from the Yankee air pilot. And I told that to President Nixon in the White House and he said "thank you very much, I wanted that spread around."

But he really, he really went after them and that's the lesson that—that's the lesson that I would want everybody that is in the military to understand, that if you're going to use a military instrument, you've got to use it. You can't mess around and not use it. I mean, if you're going to use it. If you don't want to use it, that's great, because it's a last resort, but they got to—you got to be credible. And I'll tell you, Richard Milhous Nixon was credible with the North Vietnamese. He, the foliage was gone off the trees in Hanoi when we came down. It was gone. Those blasts were so severe for those bombs, it was just unbelievable. And Richard Nixon turned to the Joint Chief, Chairman of the Joint Chief was standing right next to me, he said "and I told this son of a bitch," and he hit him in the stomach, "I told this son of a bitch if he didn't go up there and terrorize them, I was going to come over there and do it for him." Pretty blunt language, you know. I was shocked, talk to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs that way. And he—that Chairman just kind of stared at him, but he said "I want those people terrorized." So, they went up, they put three B-52s wingtip to wingtip and flew up Kibler Avenue and to Baden [?] square and dropped three hundred bombs, and it was like a nuke going off. The guys that were there in the Hanoi Hilton said "oh shit." I mean, the whole place just shook. And it knocked the trees and the foliage right off of all the—I mean, took all the foliage right off the trees. He was, he was genuinely, no matter what you may think about Richard Nixon, he was credible and he was also mean as hell. He was really mean. And I wish he'd been president the whole time.

MD: Well, you are a true, you're a true hero and to have you as an alumni, a true Beaver at the same time, are there any final thoughts that you'd like to impart to your fellow Beavers, and Beavers of tomorrow?

JVL: No, the best way is be yourself as best you can and defend your country but don't mess around about it. We just don't have, we don't have the luxury of being misunderstood. You can't be misunderstood, you got to be understood. And you got to be credible. Or you're going to be incredible. I want to be credible. It's terribly important to be credible. So, I work hard at that. And not be a son of a bitch in the process, but just be credible. Richard Nixon was a son of a bitch. And he was my personal son of a bitch, too. I loved him.

MD: Well, Colonel Van Loan, this has been a distinct honor to capture your story for the Sesquicentennial Oral History Project for Oregon State University and we thank you, I thank you with all my heart. And it's been—

JVL: You going to have the time to send me a copy of all this?

MD: I will take care of it. We thank you so much.

JVL: Okay, thank you.

[0:56:07]