

GUEST: JERRY COFFEE

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You've said that guys with whom you were imprisoned for a long time got to know each other better than they knew their wives.

Oh, right. [CHUCKLE] Some young pilots were there, and they'd been married for three years or three months, and they'd gotten shipped off to Vietnam, and you'd live in this tiny little cell where it was maybe six and a half feet long by four feet wide, there'd be a bunk with an upper and lower. And you'd be in that, and you get to know him, and you either love or hate the guy. [CHUCKLE] You know. And often, you were put in with somebody with whom you would have no inclination to be a friend with. I mean, he's not a bad guy, but you just had nothing in common.

And in such close quarters.

In close quarters, and you'd have to make it work. And you'd argue, and you'd make POW bets. Oh, listen, I'll bet you five thousand dollars that it was this date. He said, Okay, you're on, make it ten thousand. Okay, you're on. We all left the prisons owing thousands and thousands of dollars to other guys for making those POW bets, because you could win it or end an argument. [CHUCKLE]

Navy Captain Jerry Coffee spent seven years and nine days in captivity after his reconnaissance jet was shot down over North Vietnam in 1966. He got through it by taking it one day at a time, and never losing faith that he would be rescued. Jerry Coffee, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Gerald Coffee, better know as Jerry Coffee, is a highly decorated Navy captain who retired in 1985 after twenty-eight years of active military service. Since then, he has taken on many other callings. He's a sought-after motivational speaker in the country; he's a national commentator on political and military issues; and he's the author of a book, Beyond Survival, which draws from insights he gained as a prisoner of war. He also writes a

column, Coffee Break, in the local Midweek newspaper. Jerry Coffee had not originally planned on spending his career in the military. Instead, he was headed in a very different direction.

I was born and raised in Modesto, California. It's a relatively small farming rural area, and everybody knows everybody also. Although, it wasn't a hamlet, but it was a pretty substantial sized small town. It was really a good place to be raised and to call home, and I have great memories of my youth and growing up in Modesto, California.

All-American youth kind of experience?

All-American; exactly, yeah.

So, you went cruising at night on the main drag?

And went cruising on 10th Street, and one guy driving at one end, and the other driving at the other end.

Carhops?

Carhops; exactly. Cruising along there, stop; say, Hey there, how you doing girls? Where you all from? Turlock.

[CHUCKLE]

Turlock? Nobody's from Turlock. [CHUCKLE]

Was it always your plan to go into the Navy?

No; no. I went down to UCLA, and majored in art. And as it turned out, I got my draft notice at the same time I got my diploma from UCLA. And I got my physical, military physical in downtown LA at the city hall, and that experience caused me to realize I wanted to have a little more control over my life than just go in the Army. So, I looked at alternatives, and naval aviation looked exciting. I liked the looks of the beaches of Pensacola. I had spent a lot of time at the beaches in Santa Monica at UCLA.

But otherwise, you would have been an artist, you think?

Of some kind. Right. I'm not sure about, you know, with a palette and all that kinda thing, but probably an advertising artist, advertising art. Or something like that, or graphic design perhaps.

But here you are, headed to the Navy and the beaches of Pensacola.

Headed to the Navy; exactly, the beaches of Pensacola. And I just loved it. I loved the Navy from the very first week that I was there.

What did you love about it?

I guess I loved the structure and the discipline, and the athletics, and the challenge of the academics, and the prospect of flying Navy jets, and so on. And that's how I made my twenty-eight-year Navy career decision. Because I liked the looks of the beaches of Pensacola [CHUCKLE] where the training took place. I wasn't joining to fight, necessarily, but I liked the looks of flying jet airplanes on aircraft carriers, and I've never been disappointed. I've embraced the whole thing, and it's provided an exciting life, it's provided a good income, it provided security. It's provided experiences that I could never have had anywhere else.

You were involved in the Cuban missile crisis.

Right.

What was that—I mean, that's ...

I was stationed at Jacksonville, Florida, and I was in a squadron that flew tactical reconnaissance missions. When Castro and Khrushchev connived to put Russian medium-range missiles in Cuba, we got U2 pictures of it. But then, they shot down the U2s because they had SAM missiles, Russian SAM missiles in Cuba, so they couldn't get any more U2 pictures, so they decided to bring in the tactical recce squadron. And we flew our airplanes down to Key West and planned these missions out ahead of time, in meticulous detail. There were no navigation aids in Florida and in Cuba, so we had to do it all by dead reckoning. So many minutes on this heading, turn, so many minutes in that heading, and so on, and then pick up your cues from the topography, whether it be rivers and bridges, or Sugarloaf Mountains, and that kinda thing, in order to fly over these missile sites. And so, I ended up flying six of those missions. And we'd fly out of Key West, Florida, do the mission over Cuba, and then climb out and fly back to Jacksonville, unload the film, and then go back for another mission, ready for another mission. And we did that, and we took the pictures that Adlai Stevenson, as our ambassador to the United Nations was able to use to prove to the world that there were Soviet missiles, intermediate range ballistic missiles, in Cuba. And then it was a cat-and-mouse game between Kennedy and Khrushchev as to who would win out, and we finally won out by making some

concessions, and he removed all the missiles from Cuba. But flying those missions was really exciting. Because they were real world stuff, and the results were important.

And you knew exactly what you were doing, as you were doing it. It wasn't something you found out about later.

Yeah. No; we knew exactly the importance of it at the time. I flew across a target of opportunity. I was flying wingman on my leader up on there. And I glanced over to the left, and there was a motor pool over there. And so, I'm looking at him and he looks kind of important, so I pulled the airplane around and pulled real hard to make that sharp turn, and rolling slow and take pictures as I go across it, and catch up with my lead. And as it turned out, when they interpreted those photographs, they saw for the first time in Cuba a tracked vehicle that had a missile on it. And it was called The Frog Missile, and they were nuclear tipped. And until that moment, they didn't know that they were in Cuba. And so, our Marines had to change their entire concept of an amphibious invasion of Cuba, because if they hadn't known about those nuclear-tipped missiles, surface-to-surface missiles, they would have been decimated. And so, I got a nice letter of commendation from the commandant of the Marine Corps saying, Never in the history of the Navy-Marine partnership has intelligence of such importance gathered. Way to go, Coffee. That kinda thing.

Jerry Coffee, who was twenty-eight years old at that time, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his daring missions over Cuba. Four years later, in 1966, he was sent on another reconnaissance mission, this time over North Vietnam, where his plane was shot down, and he was captured.

You had to abort flight, you jumped out, you ejected. Broke your arm along the way, I believe.

I did; m-hm.

And you landed in water.

Yes.

And approaching gunships.

Yes. And so, I had to eject at a very, very high speed, and the airplane was totally out of control, rolling rapidly. I was knocked unconscious immediately, but regained consciousness floating in the water. And already, some small

Vietnamese boats and militia men, and army guys were there, and I was captured immediately. We got to the beach finally, and jumped out and ran across a wide sandy beach and dove behind a rice paddy dike to take cover just about the same time that an A-4 Skyhawk from the Kitty Hawk rolled in and fired a pack of rockets, which blew all those beach boats to splinters. That was my introduction to North Vietnam. So, I found myself a prisoner of war, a POW. And it takes a while to get to know the ropes, but the ropes were how they tortured us. [CHUCKLE]

Early on, there's this really vivid scene that you describe in your book, where you were with your broken arm and, I think, a shattered elbow, you were tied up with your arms in back.

That's right; to a tree. Yeah.

And to a tree, and essentially, you became a game of tetherball to some Vietnamese on the ground.

Yes; exactly. The tree was on a hill, and the guards kept pushing me downhill, and all the weight was on my arms. I was tied to an upper branch of the tree. And I was so naïve. I mean, I was a professional naval officer, military officer, and I didn't even realize, it didn't really register to me that I was being brutally tortured at the time. It wasn't until I had a chance to kinda catch my breath, and laying on a stack of hay in this stable, which was in this little village in central North Vietnam. And I just realized, Oh, god, I've just been tortured. You know? It's such a foreign, rare concept in our normal way of thinking.

Were you being for information, or just for sport?

For information. They wanted to know what carrier I had flown off of. And ironically, the name of the aircraft carrier was painted on the side of my airplane. And if they'd just get the wreckage, they'll know. But you know, I could only give my name, rank, serial number, and date of birth. Evade answering all other questions to the best of my ability. And so, I gave them my name and my rank, and I finally had to tell them, USS Kitty Hawk. That's all they wanted to know, what aircraft carrier was I flying from. And they already knew that. I was just a matter of breaking me down and to be, you know, a form of surrender to their power and their authority.

Well, you thought it was maybe twenty, thirty minutes that you were held in that horrible position with broken arm and bad elbow, and being batted.

It was. But even after you said, Okay, okay, okay, okay, I'll give up, I'll tell you, they would keep going. Just so you didn't forget the next time.

Did you have any faith that they weren't gonna kill you, they were just gonna make you suffer horrible pain?

Yes, I did. And one of the things that they told me in survival training school was, no matter how they threaten you, they probably won't kill you because you represent something of value to them. And that's exactly why they kept us alive; because we did, we were propaganda resources.

You had to be so strong, though. I mean, you were in this tiny little cell. It was just filthy, and unsanitary, and you never knew when you were gonna get called into the next session.

Exactly. And as you described that cell, everything that happened to you got infected because of the environment in which we were living.

An infection could have killed you.

Yeah; it could have, and did kill some men.

The toilet was a bucket without a cover.

A bucket right there; yeah.

In this very small space.

Right; right.

And you exercised in that tiny little space.

Right.

How many miles a day did you walk, at three steps at a time?

Three miles day, three steps at a time.

One of the first things you do when you're moved into a cell, and the cells did vary sometimes in size. But you'd walk it off and see how many laps it had to be for a mile. And you'd go get your exercise, and you'd do pushups on those concrete bunks, and stay in as good a shape as possible. 'Cause you never knew what the next day was gonna require.

You always looked at the brighter side. You thought, Isn't it amazing, you know, I can survive with this horribly mangled arm, and I'm doing pretty well here, I'm pretty resilient.

Yeah; I'm carrying this bucket of water back and forth in my cell. [CHUCKLE]

I may have a right-angle elbow for life, but I'm alive.

I'm alive. Exactly.

Besides surviving physically, Jerry Coffee had to deal with the psychological stress of being a prisoner of war.

Did you have a family?

Yeah; I married my high school sweetheart from Modesto, and when I was shot down, I had my daughter and two older sons. I didn't even know that I had a young son until about three years into the prison experience. They screwed up and gave me a letter from home one time, and my wife was telling me about the weather in Florida, and how Kim, our daughter, skis all around the lake, and the boys swim like fish, and Jerry jumps off the dock. Jerry? [CHUCKLE]

Your name.

My name.

Jerry, Jr.

Yeah; exactly. And we'd never planned that, either. So, that was how I found out I had a fourth child.

What are some of the other positive attributes that helped you mark that torturous, literally, time?

Well, you know, early on, Leslie, my prayers changed from, Why me, to Show me. I quit saying, Why me, God?, and I started saying, Show, me God. How can I use this positively? Help me to use it to go home as a better, stronger, smarter man in every possible way that I can. To go home as a better naval officer, to go home as a better American, a better citizen, a better ... Navy pilot, a better Christian. Every possible way, God, help me to use this time productively so that it won't be some kind of a void or a vacuum in my life. And after that change in my prayers, every single day took on a new meaning.

Because now, there was something to learn about myself, or about the men in the other cell around me, or about Communism, or about the little geckos that I was sharing my cell with, or about the moths that caught the gecko and shoved them into the hole in the corner of my wall, like that. There was always something new. Doing memory work, memorizing the books of the Bible in order, memorizing the names of over five hundred and sixty other American prisoners all alphabetically, going over them frequently. Remembering poetry, reciting poetry, composing poetry. Um ... planning an escape. Never had an opportunity to do it, but every man had his own escape plan, and every time you were moved to a different part of the prison or a different prison, you'd have to go back and re-plan another escape attempt.

How did your belief in God change as you were in prison?

It became very internalized. It didn't depend on going to church, it didn't depend on going to Mass, it didn't depend on having a rosary to say. It was very internalized. And early on, I saw scratched on the wall of a cell by another American that had been there in that little cell before me, two words with an equal sign. God equals strength. God equals strength. And for me, that really worked. I was never, ever totally alone. I could always find a little bit more strength when I needed it. To me, that was the key. Keeping faith in myself, faith in my fellow Americans, in my family, faith in America, and faith in God. Those are the four aspects of faith that guaranteed my survival.

And I know you tended to view time in small increments, because if you looked at it from the outset as seven years, it would have been harder to take.

If I had known somehow that I was gonna be there for seven years, Leslie, I don't know what I would have done. I don't really know how that would have affected many of us.

So, it was ... I'm only here for six months.

Yeah.

I can make it six months.

I'll be home next Christmas.

And then, another six months.

Next birthday, we'll be home. Next Halloween, I'll be home. You know, whatever it is. I'll be home, I'll be home. Never, ever lost hope that I'd come home.

It was just you in your cell.

We would do a lot of communicating on the wall for the guys on either side of your cell. You didn't often have a cellmate, but you could communicate.

You did mention the communication system, and that's so fascinating because it was such a bonding, and also a source of protection and vigilance for the prisoners of war. You used a sort of alphabet matrix of five columns of letters.

Yes. We based it on twenty-five letters of the alphabet. Throw away the letter K, because you could use a C interchangeably and it would make the same sound. And then, arrange those remaining twenty-five letters in five rows of five letters each.

You could spell out words that way.

We were actually texting. And our signoff at night was GB, which meant God bless you. And then GB, GBA; God bless America. [TAPS] G, B, A; God bless America. [TAPS] G, B, U, the letter U; God bless you.

And you didn't just use [TAPS] tapping. You used other ways to use the sounds.

Yeah; yeah.

Sneezing?

Sneezing; we had something called vocal tap. A cough was for one, and two sniffs was for two, a throat clear is three. I was in a courtyard waiting to be interrogated one time, and a guard was right there in front of me. He had the men under control, everything was fine. But through a high window in a cell next to this little courtyard, a guy was coughing and sneezing, and hacking, and spitting, and sputtering, and he's telling me that just before he'd been shot down, the Green Bay Packers had won the Super Bowl.

Oh ...

And this was the first Super Bowl. I didn't even know what the Super Bowl was. When we got word that we'd landed a man on the Moon ... that was exhilarating. You know, I was being interrogated, and the interrogator had left.

He had put me down on my knees to contemplate my crimes, but I was right next to the door that had louvers that looked through, and you could look down at the ground. And I saw the feet of a GI. And said, Psst, hey; who are you? What's your name? I got his name. I introduced myself. He said, Hey, did you hear we went to the Moon? No. Yeah; a guy named Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon. And then, he had to quit, because a guard came. And I was thinking, Oh, my god. So, could hardly wait to get back to the cell block and call up the guy next door [TAPS], you know, and say, Hey, we put a man on the Moon. And then, we started getting a little bit more information from the new guy shot down. But that was exhilarating. But on the other hand, you think, god, if we can put a man on the Moon, why can't we beat this guys in the war? How come the war is still going on?

What was the answer to that, to yourself?

It was a big question mark. [CHUCKLE] Don't know.

The Vietnam War finally did end, and Jerry Coffee was released and sent back home to America in 1973. He returned to his career as a naval officer, and was able to continue where he left off. But there were new personal challenges that would not be as easy to overcome.

Were you ready to resume life as you'd known it?

I think so. There were some things that took a little bit getting used to, some mundane things. Like everybody's toilet water was blue. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

Tidy Bowl water. And catching up on things that had happened in our families. You know, my grandfathers had all passed away, and other new babies born, and things like that, and reading the headlines from newspapers. Kinda catching up in general. And the Navy really bent over backwards to give us whatever we wanted to do, if it made any sense at all. And there was an ongoing masters program at some of the major universities in America that the Navy would send their officers to throughout as a routine course. And so, they sent me to Berkeley, UC Berkeley for two years. And I figured if I could handle seven years in a Communist prison, I could hack two years at Berkeley. So, yeah, bring it on; let's go. And so, those were two very pleasant years, low pressure years, and I studied political science. We lived in Walnut Creek in a beautiful little home there, and life was idyllic, frankly, and I couldn't have asked for two warmer, more embracing or better years for my family in those two years. Then my first orders after that were to command a squadron at Barbers

Point Hawaii. And so, we packed up and came out here. We lived at Barbers Point, and it was very insular, and spent two years out there. And after that, I went to the National War College at Washington, DC for a one-year course, studying all the kinds of political things and economics, and things that all combined to make our national defense, whether it be military or economic, industrial and so on. And then, after that, came back to Hawaii, and I've been here ever since.

What were some of the challenges? You mentioned some of the wonderful things. I mean, the Navy invested in you, and you had some great family times and education. What didn't go as well, as a result of what you'd endured?

Well, my marriage didn't go that well. We had about ten or twelve very, very happy years, but ... I think because my personal priorities were so touched by the sense of responsibility to make that experience count for something positive, and I'd begun to learn that through speaking, that I could share the message that would try to convince people that the things that I did, they could have done too, with the same training and orientation going in. And as one of my senior officers in prison said, Air Force Colonel Robbie Risner, he said, All the years I was gone, I was on idle, but my wife was an after burner, going [CLAPS] like that, being all things to everybody, and being the best mother and father she could be. And when I came home, she was ready for idle. Her tongue was hanging out, and I was ready for after burner. And for many of us, there was a disparity of pace and priorities in those early years that we just couldn't reconcile.

But that was generally the issue. It wasn't what you'd endured, it wasn't the absence that changed you?

Well, yes, it was the absence too, because, you know, during those seven years, we both were growing in different directions. And they didn't happen to coincide. So, it was a combination, Leslie, of the two things. The growing apart, of pace and priorities, and feeling that I had to do something to fulfill my sense of responsibility, to make that experience count for something, to share the lessons learned. And I was driven to do that. And I might have been able to save my marriage; I'm not sure.

So, it didn't happen right away, but your marriage did come to a stop.

Ultimately; right. Ultimately, it did. The marriage ended; it didn't fail. You can't have a failed marriage that produces great kids, I don't think. And I stayed in close touch with my kids, and with my ex-wife, and she's thrived, and I've thrived, certainly.

You still both live in Hawaii.

We do.

And you've remarried, since.

M-hm; I've remarried, and as I said earlier on, but you know, all those years in prison, I couldn't even fantasize about how good my life was going to be someday, how many blessings. I live a life of gratitude and grace for everything that goes on in my life. Dennis Berger says, Happiness is directly proportional to gratitude. Makes me the happiest guy I know. [CHUCKLE] You know, really, 'cause I'm so grateful for our blessings and to be able to survive the experience and have that experience, and to be able to capitalize on it, and make it count for something positive as well.

What are some of the attributes that you think made each of those who survived, and later did well in life; what were of the common attributes that you all shared?

I think optimism. And it costs more to be an optimist than it does a pessimist, and it's a lot happier way to live your life, I think. But those who were the most optimistic and could translate that optimism to faith, or through faith, I think that they were the ones that were able to make the most of the experience, and learn the most, and be able to make the biggest contribution because of the experience after we returned. I think that guys who were mechanically-minded also, that could be inventive, and guys can do some of the most remarkable things. Not the least of which was learning how to put our sandals, to balance them on the edge of the top of the bucket, to sit down on the sandals instead of the edge of the bucket. I mean, a toilet seat? How come I didn't figure this out earlier?

Any thoughts about man's inhumanity to man?

Oh, yeah. While I was in prison, I thought about that ... a lot. And you know, in the preface of my book, I'm talking about how we need to do better. War is not inevitable, I don't think, and we just need to keep evolving in positive increments, so that we can do better in the future.

I think you've said, Peace starts with you as an individual. You've got to have peace in yourself.

Yeah; exactly. Yeah; you do. And peace of mind, certainly. And I think that ... that experience was life-changing for me, obviously, as it was for every one of us. It's like any adversity; you decide what you want to do with it. Your attitude makes a difference. And I hate to sound like a motivational speaker. [CHUCKLE]

But you are. [CHUCKLE]

But I am. But it's really attitude. You know, actually, you have control, you're not victimized. And you can make anything you want out of something. Usually. And you know, and I've dodged a lot of bullets. I spoke down in Waikiki one day to about five hundred clerical workers with the State. Lot of little old ladies. And this little old Filipino lady came up afterwards she says, Captain, I need to tell you, I've been blessed with the opportunity to see angels, and you have leagues of angels, hoards of angels around you, protecting you. And I said, You know, boy, I sure believe you, because I've had a lot of protection.

Jerry Coffee was eighty years old at the time of this conversation in 2014. Despite health issues in recent years, he's still going strong, continuing to inspire others. Mahalo to Jerry Coffee of Aiea Heights for his sacrifices for our country, and for sharing his stories and insights with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii, and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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It occurs to me, Jerry, that you're a conservative in one of the most liberal states in the country, a state where Barack Obama, whom you do not support, was born. But you feel really comfortable here; you love it here.

I compartmentalize. [CHUCKLE] Guess where I learned how to do that? [CHUCKLE] Yeah. I mean, I love Hawaii, and I love the spirit of aloha. To me, the spirit of aloha is tangible. And my family loves it, we're all on the same frequency there. And yet, I know politically, Hawaii is very liberal. And that's why I get so much flack in the letters section of Midweek. [CHUCKLE]