

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



## TITLE: COURAGE IN CAPTIVITY: THREE POWS' STORIES

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I became a POW, and that was a very humbling, frustrating experience for me. One of the worst things that could have happened, that I was taken out of combat while the great men I'd been training with all this time, and they'd go on into combat without me. And I never got over that for many, many years.

You didn't want to be in a Japanese military prison. So, you know, you lose weight very quickly when you've got maybe dysentery, and malaria, and beriberi. Beriberi ... the water accumulates in your lower extremities; they swell up. You can take your thumb and put it in, and see a puka. You know. You can't walk very far. But then again, I wasn't doing any walking. I couldn't walk at all; I was in the damn cell.

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, 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 vacuum in my life. And after that change in my prayers, every single day took a new meaning.

**Former State Land Director William Paty, retired Hawaii Supreme Court Associate Justice Frank Padgett, and retired U.S. Navy Captain Jerry Coffee all survived ordeals as prisoners of war. On this compilation edition of Long Story Short, we look back at these previous Long Story Short guests and see how they never really stopped believing that they would come home alive. Courage in Captivity, 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. While prisoners of war may be valuable commodities to their captors, that does not mean they'll be well treated or survive. Sir Winston Churchill observed that courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because it is the quality which guarantees all others. This can mostly certainly be said about three Long Story Short guests. We begin with William Woods Paty, Jr., better known as Bill. In 1945, he left college to join the Army and become a paratrooper. He**

**soon found himself on the ground in Normandy, France on D-Day, fighting in one of the most famous battles of World War II.**

We dropped six miles further inland than we were supposed to. And then, on top of that, we dropped right on top of a German parachute regiment that had been training right in that area. Yeah; it wasn't a comfortable landing. Yeah.

**What happened when you landed?**

Well ... I ran into a French milkmaid early on. And some of you heard that story. D-Day morning, all this firing is going on, we've had skirmishes all night long from midnight. And you could hear the big shells from the Navy cruisers offshore coming in. The Spitfires and all were all over the place. She's milking a cow in the middle of the hedgerow. And I walk over. I told my sergeant. . . We didn't know exactly where they were, where the Germans were, and I go to give them my best Punahou French. Which is supposed to mean, Where are the Germans around here? She doesn't say anything; she milks the cow. But she moved her head like this, and I look, and there's a German patrol coming down the road just above us. So, I jump up, and jump back over the hedgerow. But I think I told my sergeant that I'm gonna get us a date tonight. I said, Captain, you didn't do too good, did you?

**Have a date with a German regiment.**

Yeah. And I became a POW, and that was a very humbling, frustrating experience for me. One of the worst things that could have happened, that I was taken out of combat while the great men I'd been training with all this time, and they'd go on into combat without me. I never got over that for many, many years.

**What were conditions like for you as a POW?**

Nothing's good about being a POW. The Germans, in terms of handling their officers, POWs, were more lenient than they were with the enlisted. By and large, if they went hungry, we went hungry. But it could have been worse. I think the worst part was being transported in forty box cars. Forty box cars, all jammed in together. And then, they shipped us up across France and into Germany. And every time we were at a marshland yard, they changed engines. And then the Spitfires or the B47s would come down, and the sirens would go off, and there you are locked in this boxcar. That got to be a little wearing.

**Did you worry that they'd kill you, as a POW? Or torture you?**

No, we didn't get any treatment like that. But if you tried to get away, they don't get very happy about that.

**You tried to get away.**

Yeah.

**What'd you try?**

Well, first of all, coming down, actually, I was wounded. They put me in an ambulance, and the Spitfires came down and shot up the buses we were in, the wounded. And so, the Germans would jump out and get in a ditch. If you tried to get out of the bus, you'd get shot. If you stayed there, you'd get strafed. So, in the process, the bus caught fire, and I scrambled out somehow. I was ambulatory, and got away, and got to a French farmer. And they took me up and they put me way up in their little attic they had up there. But they were gonna get the French Resistance guys to come in and help take me out. But as it turned out, the German artillery unit came in there and set it up as a command post, and they searched the place, and there I was. So that wasn't too bad; they put me back into the bus.

**They didn't discipline you?**

No. No, not then. They were too busy doing that. After that, the second time was kind of a bad one.

**What happened the second time you tried to get away?**

Well, the second time I got out was on a discharge from the German hospital. And they had a compound there, and they had the barbed wire around the walls.

**And what had you been treated for?**

I had a Smizer bullet in my groin. It's still there, by the way. And they never took it out. But be that as it may, we wanted to try to see if we could get out. And I guess there were several dozen, fifty or sixty were in the compound that had been pulled together. We had an idea that four of us would get out and make a break for it. And well, when the time came, there were only two of us, an Englishman and myself. So, we went out with blankets at night, and they had the watchtower, but the lights didn't go on all the time. We threw the blankets over, climbed over the barbed wire, got down the and over the next one. And it gets kinda touchy there, because you're not sure if the lights are gonna come on, they're gonna use the machine guns. So we got over, and it was getting close to dawn by then.

**Were you cut up by the barbed wire?**

We had gloves we had gotten, and we also had blankets, so they were not too bad. So we hightailed it off across the field. And I guess after we'd gone a few miles, we decided we'd better try to hole up. And so, we holed up in a cowshed, and again, a French lady came by, and we gave her our best, charming Punahou French again. She said, No, wait, wait, wait. She comes back with four Germans and two police dogs.

**So far, that Punahou French ...**

Didn't work out too well. But we got solitary time for that, you know.

**But solitary was the worst of it?**

Solitary—no, they didn't try. The Geneva Convention was observed quite well by them. But we got bread and water, and no lights. Gives you a lesson. Yeah.

**Bill Paty didn't give up trying to escape, and on his third try, he succeeded and made his way safely back home. On the other side of the world, Frank Padgett, a U.S. Air Force pilot, was captured and held prisoner for eight months by the Japanese military police. After losing an engine to enemy fire, he and his crew had to bail out. He was twenty-one years old.**

When we bailed out, we weren't sure where we were, because the navigator, when we were on the deck, he hadn't take times and stuff because the engine was wind-milling, that propeller, he couldn't use his instruments. So, we didn't know where we were. Turned out, we were northwest of Hanoi.

**So, did you fall into friendly hands at first, or not?**

No. Well, yes and no. I was trying to walk out to China. You know, I didn't know what the hell to do. We didn't know that the French were alerted. The French had a thing that when they found an American plane was down, they'd go and walk up and down the roads whistling Tipperary. Nobody ever told us that.

**That was a sign that there was a friendly person.**

Yeah, yeah.

**Come show yourself.**

Okay; okay.

**Did you hear Tipperary, and not respond?**

No. No; no, I didn't. About the second day, I was walking on a pathway between rice, and I looked, and there were all these Vietnamese following me. So, I stopped, and I spoke enough French, and they spoke enough, so that they asked me if I was hungry, and I went back to their village and they fed me. And the Japanese arrived, and I tried to run out of the village. I got outside, but it was surrounded. Fortunately, I'd laid down my pistol while I was resting, and I didn't have it, so I didn't try to shoot it. That's why I lived.

**You can laugh about it now. You not only got captured by the Japanese, but you were put in the control of the Nazi gestapo equivalent of the Japanese forces.**

Yeah. That's the Kempeitai. The Kempeitai was a combination of military police and gestapo, which is kind of a bad combination. Fortunately, the jail in Chalon was really military police, and the jail downtown was regular Kempeitai. That's where you'll see the name Nix and the other name in July of '45. And in the French prison camp, B-24s from the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force raided Saigon. A plane got hit; you could see it. You know, you're out in a trench watching your American plane go over, and listening to the bombs whistle. You know, they whistle when they come down. Anyway, these two guys bailed out, and the Kempeitai got them, and they cut their heads off.

And I'm being treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. They beat you, and you're back in the cell. And you know they're coming back, and they're gonna do it again. And it really bothers you, you know. And then, they take you out, and they take you back, and the first time they hit you ... that's it. They've done it, and you know they're gonna hit you some more. That's it; that's it. There's nothing you can do about it.

**I was really intrigued by this quote in your book, with your son. It's from an unknown person. But it says: To a prisoner of war, the enemy is everywhere; he controls your fate, your future, even your bodily functions. You're at war at every second. You're never given leave, and you can never leave the combat zone. Is that what it felt like?**

Well, in a Kempeitai jail, yes.

**You're always on alert.**

Well ... yeah. It was a little different. They were starving us to death; okay? We wore a breech cloth, we had a blanket. The tatami pillow on it, had a six-by-eight cell, the lights were always on. They came and stared through the thing. But, you know, human beings are human beings. One of the guards was from a dairy farm in Japan, and the only thing he was interested in was getting back to Japan. So, they would come and talk to you, and they weren't supposed to in that jail. They were not supposed to, but they did anyway.

**So, that was a nice bit of humanity you could share. I notice when you talk about being a prisoner of war, as awful as it was, you laugh. Did you have that sense of humor when you were there?**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Kind of a dark humor?**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**But I think that might be resilience, too.**

Well, probably. But, you know, what are you gonna do? You can't do anything about the circumstances, so you know, try to see if you can find anything good, okay; you know. There wasn't in that jail. The best thing that happened was, every two or three days, you got to carry the chamber pot out and dump it in the sewer.

**That was your excursion; right?**

Yeah.

**Now, you had become a Catholic when you were thirteen or fourteen. Did that faith kick in, or was that helpful to you at this time?**

I said the Hail Mary; I said the Rosary on my knuckles every day, and I prayed that I'd get released. God apparently moves at His own speed; it took a while.

**Frank Padgett was released from prison and sent back home when the war ended. He later served as a justice in Hawaii's highest court. Just over twenty years later, the United States was involved in another overseas war, this time in Vietnam. Navy Captain Gerald Coffee, better known as Jerry Coffee, also was a pilot. He spent seven years and nine days in a North Vietnamese prison after his plane was shot down.**

I had to eject at a very, very high speed, and the airplane was totally out of control, rolling rapidly. So, when I pulled the face curtain, it was about six hundred and eighty miles per hour. And you can kind of imagine the impact hitting the airstream at six-eighty. I say, you know, it was like going down H-1 in your convertible with the top down and standing up in the front seat. At six hundred miles an hour. And 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. Right after I was captured, some airplanes from the Kitty Hawk, the carrier that I was operating from, showed up and they see the boats

there, and they see my life preserver and the dye marker out here, and they think the boats are still on the way out to pick me up. And so, they figured, well, if they strafed the boats, they won't be able to get me. But they didn't know I was already in the boat. So, these two A-1 aircrafts strafed the boats that we were in, and I'm watching the bullets whack at the side of the boat. The Vietnamese stood up in the boats and returned their fire with their own weapons. And we got to the beach finally, and jumped out and ran across the 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. Sometime in that battle, my crewman was killed. He was my navigator, and I never saw him again, and kept asking all through the prison experience, you know, about him. Have you seen him? Have you seen my crewman? And nobody ever had. And his remains were returned here through Hickam in the late 80s, as a matter of fact. And I found myself a prisoner of war, a POW. And it takes a while to, we used to say, get to know the ropes. But the ropes were how they tortured us.

**Yeah. You know, I think people are very interested in the torture part, 'cause we all think, Could we have withstood that? What would that be like? I mean, just the mental agony of never knowing when it was gonna happen, or what it was gonna entail. And 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.

**Well, you mentioned that at one point, your broken arm was sort of encased in inflammation, swelling which acted like a sort of cast.**

It was.

**It was an untreated broken arm.**

It was an untreated broken arm. And my hand swelled up, and I couldn't get the red hot ring I was wearing on my finger off. So, they put me in interrogation one night, and sliced my finger open, and pulled the ring off, squeezed the blood in the lymph out. And then the next night, they took me to a military hospital and set my arm, and all the swelling went down. And they could have just taken the ring off. And they did a reasonably good job on my arm. That's about as good as they did for their own people. But they wanted to keep us in presentable shape, at least, to be propaganda vehicles.

**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 on those concrete bunks, and stay in as good a shape as possible. 'Cause you never knew what the next day was gonna require. In some cases, guys were forced to march northward towards the Chinese border to a new prison. They weren't hauled up there by trucks; they had to march. And images of the March of

Corregidor in World War II in the Philippines comes to mind, where if you fell behind, you got killed. And so, we'd try to stay in as good a physical shape as possible.

**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 no 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 and made a toilet seat. How come I didn't figure this out earlier? You know.

**Veritable luxury.**

Oh, what a breakthrough. You know. And also because most of us were aviators. I have to say this; there's something about military aviation that is kind of a winnowing process. And we were all college graduates, because you had to graduate from college to get your wings, whether it be Air Force or Navy. So, we were all better educated and had an appreciation for the things that you could learn by yourself, by just going inward and thinking about yourself, and thinking about the world, and thinking about what the future might hold.

**You couldn't be afraid to face yourself, and a lot of people have trouble with that.**

Exactly; exactly.

**Jerry Coffee wasn't released from prison until the end of the war in 1973. He stayed in the Navy until he retired a dozen years later. He became a national commentator on political and military issues, a motivational speaker, and a columnist. Despite lingering health problems from their captivity, Bill Paty, Frank Padgett, and Jerry Coffee went on to have full lives. Mahalo to these men for their heroic service to our country, and for the inspiration and life lessons we gain from your courage in captivity. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.**

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They call our name, you walk across in front of this guy, and he said, You know, you do not need to accept repatriation, you may stay in our country if you like. What? Get out of here, you know. Walk away and salute Colonel Abel, and shake his hand, and then this big Air Force major put his arm around my shoulder and said, Come on, Commander, I'll take you out to the airplane. And we walk up. And we're going up the ramp of the C-141, and at the top of the ramp there's four, I'm sure, hand-selected gorgeous Air Force nurses. Go up there and hug them, and you know, they smelled so good. Got magazines and newspapers, and hot coffee, and donuts, and so on. And we're all chattering away there, and finally we get the last guys aboard. And the pilot comes up on the intercom and he says, Come on, guys, let's strap in; we're ready to go. And it got quiet. And we're all thinking, Wow, is this gonna be it? So, we strap in, and he cranks up those engines on the airplane. Cr-r-r. We're taxiing out toward the runway. He gets on the and revs up the engines to full throttle, and pulling the brakes back, and he finally releases the brakes, and we're rolling down this kind of rough runway. And we're all straining against our straps saying, Come on, you beast, get airborne. Get airborne; come on, let's go. And then they pick up speed and the nose comes up, and then we hear that hydraulic whine of the wheels going up into the wheel wells and clunk up in there. And we're climbing on out, and the pilot comes up and says, Congratulations, gentlemen, we're just leaving North Vietnam. And then, we believed it. And then, we cheered.

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