

Hanoi Hilton POW Hero

The Incredibly Stupid POW Douglas Hegdah



It was a warmer than usual summer day in Clark, South Dakota when a rather large and ungainly young man, a recent high school graduate, set about finding his way in the world. The salivating Navy recruiter asked the youngster what it would take to have him sign up: “why, I’d like to go to Australia.” It was as good as done. After all, in 1966, if you were lucky enough to ship out on the USS Canberra, more likely than not, during the course of your hitch, there will be a port call to the ship’s namesake— Canberra, Australia.

This young man came from a solid, patriotic Norwegian Lutheran stock that believed when your country called, you answered. You did not go to the bus station but to the recruiting station. You did not go to Oxford, you went to Vietnam. So Douglas Brent Hegdahl III shipped out to boot camp at San Diego, where he slept through the Code of Conduct lectures since he would not be fighting in the trenches. Lo and behold, he did get orders to the USS Canberra. At that time Canberra with 8-inch guns mounted on the pointy end and missiles on the round end was assigned to steam with the Gulf of Tonkin Yacht Club in the South China Sea off the coast of Vietnam. (And, yes, She did have Canberra, Australia on her Port of Call list.)

Doug’s battle station was the aft ammunition handling room for the 5-inch guns, located aft in the bowels of the ship. One morning he had the 0100 watch while the Canberra was steaming down the coast of North Vietnam firing its 8-inch guns against targets of opportunity (bicycles, water buffalo and occasional trucks) on Highway 1. At about 0330 he rolled out of the rack. Being a prudent farm boy, he locked all his valuables in his locker and then proceeded to go out on deck for a breath of fresh air before manning his battle station. Now there is a non-repetitive exercise in the surface Navy called “going out on deck when big guns are firing.” If the concussion does not blow you over the side, it will at least blow out your eardrums.



But Doug must have slept through that safety lecture. He doesn't know what happened. Either not being night-adapted, or being without his glasses, or concussion did it, he ended up going arse over teakettle into the South China Sea about three miles offshore with no life preserver, no identification, no nothing.

Meanwhile he watched the Love Boat merrily steaming over the horizon, firing at the coastline and never missing him for two days. There is not much to do in the South China Sea at 0345. He took off his boondockers and hung them around his neck in case he needed them when he reached shore. He stripped off his dungarees, zipped up the fly, tie off the cuffs and popped them over his head, as he was taught, to make a life preserver. He reports back to you that it doesn't work. (He missed the part about old dungarees, with holes, out of the Lucky Bag would have to be kept wet if they were to hold any air at all.) So he put on his trousers, socks and shoes. (Sharks? Sea snakes?)

Somewhere along the line he had heard that drowning was a "nice way to die;" so he thought he would try it out. He put his hands over his head and down he went—bloop, bloop, bloop. Now both he and I had heard the myth that when drowning you would get cuddly, warm, all the nice things in your life would flash by in your mind and you would go to your eternal reward to the sound of music (harp?). Doug resurfaced and reports back to us that it is all malarkey: there are no movies, there is no music and it's colder than Hell! As dawn came he started swimming away from the sun, hopefully towards shore. He could see the haze of land, but the harder he tried, the further back it receded. So he just rolled on his back, playing like a whale, humming a few tunes and saying a few prayers.

Notice he never gave up. How many people have we been exposed to in the course of our lives, in a situation like that would have just plain given up? About 1800 that same day, a Vietnamese fishing boat came by and hauled him out of the water—some twelve hours later. Even those peasant fishermen could figure out that this moose would never fit in the cockpit of an A4 Skylark. They turned him upside down and inside out which garnered them absolutely nothing. Remember, he had prudently left everything back on the ship in his locker. Picture yourself being tortured to admit you were a CIA agent who entered the water in Coronado, California to swim ten thousand miles across the Pacific to infiltrate their shores!

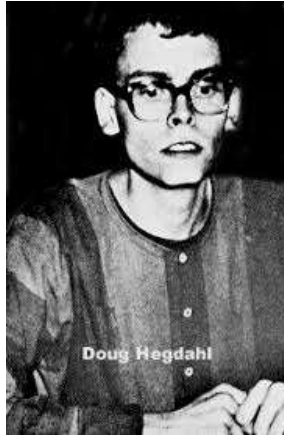


When the authorities got him ashore, they showed Doug piles of materials allegedly written by Yankee Air Pirates who had been captured before him. (95% of those captured in North Vietnam had been tortured, were not offered the option of death, and were made to give more than Name, Rank, Serial Number and Date of Birth sequence permitted by the Military Code of Conduct and required by International Law.)



Doug recognized that something was amiss, but, as he said later, “Geeze, they’re officers, they must know what they are doing.” So he decided his best ploy was to pretend to be stupid. He got them off target by comparing farms in North Vietnam and South Dakota. He didn’t realize that even then the Communists were categorizing him to gauge his usefulness to their cause. His dad had about ten motel units, numberless vehicles and all kinds of land—but no water buffalo. No water buffalo meant in Vietnamese parlance that he was a “poor peasant.” This is just as well, as Communists had murdered over 20 million “rich peasants” in their various revolutions, because those folks are unreconstructed capitalists. A little miffed at first, Doug caught on right away—he is a quick study—it was to his advantage to play out the poor peasant act to the bitter end.

Tired of the verbal jousting the Communist cadres told him that he would have to write and anti-war statement for them. He joyously agreed. The interrogators were dumbfounded. This was the first Yankee to agree to do anything without being tortured first. They brought out the paper, ink and pens. He admired them all and then stated: “But one small thing. I can’t read or write. I’m a poor peasant.” This was quite credible to the Vietnamese since their poor peasants could neither read nor write. So they assigned a Vietnamese to teach him penmanship, spelling, grammar and sentence structure. Immediately his learning curve went flat.



Eventually, the interrogators gave up in disgust; writing a confession for him and having him sign it in an illegible scrawl. He admitted to the war crime of shelling the presidential birthplace of Ho Chi Minh and signed it as Seaman Apprentice Douglas Brent Hegdahl III, United States Navy Reserve, Commanding Officer, USS Canberra. No one has ever seen this piece of paper. Doug was shuffled around from pillar to post, since his captors didn't know where he would fit into their propaganda plans. One mistake they made was to put him in for a while with Joe Crecca, an Air Force officer who had developed a method of creating the most organized memory bank we possessed to record the names of pilots shot down and imprisoned in Vietnam.

Joe took this young Seaman and, recognizing the potential, painstakingly taught Doug not only 256 names, but also, the method of memorizing, cross-referencing and retrieving those names. It was no easy task that Joe set for himself for it was not intuitively obvious to Doug the value of such mental gymnastics. It was a hot summer day when I first met Doug. I was in solitary confinement again. The Communists did not care for me, which was OK because I didn't like them either. My cell door opened and here was this big moose standing in his skivvy shorts (prison uniform of the day).



Dick Stratton

“My name is Seaman Douglas Brent Hegdahl, Sir. What's yours?” It is awful hard to look dignified when you are standing in your underwear, knock-kneed, ding-toed, pot-bellied,

unwashed and unshaven for 100 days. I automatically recited, “Dick Stratton, Lieutenant Commander, USS Ticonderoga.” Immediately I saw that I probably made a mistake as his eyes rolled back in his head and you could see what he was thinking: “Cripes, another officer!” But notice that instinctively he asked the critical and most important question for survival: “Who is your senior?” The rule we lived by was: “If I am senior, I will take charge; if junior, I will obey.”

The Communists took a siesta for two hours every afternoon which was a good deal for us as we were free from torture and harassment. I was laying on the floor on my bed board and Doug was skipping, yes, skipping around the room. I asked: “Doug, what are you doing?” He paused for a moment, looked me in the eye and cryptically said: “Skipping, Sir” and continued to skip. A stupid question, a stupid answer. After a moment, I again queried: “What ya doin’ that for?” This stopped him for a moment. He paused and cocked his head thoughtfully, smiled and replied: “You got anything better to do, Sir?”

I didn’t. He continued skipping. I guess he did learn one thing from boot camp. You can say anything you want to an officer as long as you smile and say “sir.” One siesta period he said: Hey, Beak, you went to college and studied government; do you know the Gettysburg Address?” We got a brick (no paper or pencils for the criminals) and started to write it out on the tile floor until we got it correct. Then he stopped me with the question: “Can you say it backwards?” Well, who would want to say the Gettysburg Address backwards? Certainly not the Jesuits at Georgetown and especially not me. Doug could say it backwards, verbatim, rapidly. I know because I could track him from the written version we had on the floor.



“So what?” you might say. The so what is that when they threw him out of Vietnam, and throw him out they did, he came out with 256 names that Joe Crecca had taught him memorized by service, by rank and alphabetically; next to each name he had a dog’s name, kid’s name or social security number to verify the quality of the name which we had picked up by tap code, deaf spelling code or secret notes. He still has those names memorized today and sings them to the tune of “Old MacDonald Has a Farm.” One of our intelligence officers asked him if he could slow

the recitation down to make for easier copying. Doug replied “No” that it was like riding a bike, you had to keep moving or you would fall off.

If it weren't for Joe Crecca, Doug and our government would not have had those names until the end of war five years later. In trying to get people to accept early propaganda releases, the Communists would have some “good cop” interrogator like the ones we called the “Soft Soap Fairy” talk to the prospect and sound him out for pliability. They got Doug one day and asked what we eventually learned to be the lead question: “What do you want more than anything else in the world?” The answer of the weak and willing was: “To go home to my family.” Doug thought for a long time, then cocked his head with a smile and said: “Why, I'd like a pillow, Sir.”

This was not an unreasonable response since we had no pillows on our cement pads or bed boards. However, the response sure confounded the enemy. They eventually came up with a name for Doug amongst the guards and interrogators: “The Incredibly Stupid One.” His original resistance ploy had paid off. Because they thought him stupid, they would let him go out in the cell block courtyard during the siesta to sweep up the grounds period monitored by only one sleepy, peasant guard. I thought that was great since it kept him from skipping and I could get some rest.



However, curiosity got the better of me and I started to watch him through a peephole we had bored in the cell door. He'd go sweeping and humming until the guard was lulled to sleep. Then Doug would back up to a truck, spin the gas cap off the standpipe, stoop down and put a small amount (“Small, because it's going to be a long war, Sir.”) of dirt in the gas tank and replace the cap. I watched him over a period of time do this to five trucks. Now, I'm a liberal arts major who shot himself down, so all I can do is report what I saw. There were five trucks working in the prison; I saw Doug work on five trucks; I saw five trucks towed disabled out of the prison camp.

Doug Hegdahl, a high school graduate from the mess decks fell off a ship and has five enemy trucks to his credit. I am a World Famous Golden Dragon (VA 192) with two college degrees, 2000 jet hours, 300 carrier landings and 22 combat missions. How many enemy trucks do I have to my credit? Zero. Zip. Nada. De Rien. 0. Who's the better man? Douglas Brent Hegdahl, one of two men I know of who destroyed enemy military equipment while a prisoner of war.

Later on, Doug, having left his eyeglasses on board Canberra, discovered that he had difficulty linking up isolated cell blocks throughout the prison compound with his defective distance vision. So he went to the authorities and asked if he could read some of their propaganda. They were delighted. Here was a prisoner, without being tortured, volunteering to read their swill. But then Doug cautioned them with his: "Small thing [They never learn]; I cannot read without glasses." So they trolled out a dime store clerk who fitted him with glasses by trying one on after the other until Doug said he could see. His near vision was OK. Unbeknownst to the clerk, he was fitting Doug for distance vision. Now, in between sweeps and gas tanks he was able to link up cell blocks not only by sweeping in code but now also using the deaf spelling code.



The Vietnamese were big on token propaganda releases of prisoners to make various peace groups look good and our government look impotent. They would try to pick people who had not been tortured or in jail long enough to look emaciated. Usually they were volunteers, violators of direct orders from their Seniors and traitors to our cause of resistance. These releases always were of three at a time. The magic of the number three was always a mystery to us. As our leaders exercised greater internal communications and controls, it became harder for the Communists to make up a propaganda release party.

Seeking to round out the number they finally turned to "The Incredibly Stupid One" who, although not volunteering, was certainly too dumb to do them any harm. As part of this conditioning they had both Doug and I examined by "the Doctor." This was a female soldier we saw through a peephole we had in the door get briefed up and then dolled up like a physician. The physician made a grand entrance worthy of a world-famous brain surgeon. The effect was somewhat spoiled by the face mask protecting her chin rather than covering her mouth; she really had no ideas what the face mask was for.

The exam, after looking in all the holes in your head and listening your heart, consisted of "feeling you up" under the guise of palpating your internal organs while the translator asked, "The Doctor wants to know if you miss your wife (girlfriend)? Wouldn't you like to be with her now?" Then they would pull Doug out for interrogations sounding him out for an early release. They told him not to tell me as I was an officer who did not care about his welfare like they did. They informed him: "Stratton would never even speak to you if you were in America." Doug

would come back from each go around and immediately tell me everything that was said. One time he plaintively asked: “Beak, you’d speak to me if we’re home now, wouldn’t you?”

They started to try to fatten us up with large bowls of potatoes laced with canned meat. No one else in the prison was getting it. As a result I told Doug we couldn’t take it. We could either not touch it and turn it back in; in which case the guards would eat it. Or we could dump it in the slop bucket so that no one could eat it without getting sick. Doug thought this was a bit on the scrupulous side, but went along with it. I told the Camp Commander that under no condition would I accept an early release even if offered and if they threw me out I’d have to be dragged feet first all the way from Hanoi to Hawaii screaming bloody murder all the way. It was time to cut to the chase. Doug would have to go.



Doug did not want to go. We finally told Doug that as long as he did not have to commit treason, he was to permit himself to be thrown out of the country. He was the most junior. He had the names. He knew firsthand the torture stories behind many of the propaganda pictures and news releases. He knew the locations of many of the prisons. It was a direct order; he had no choice. I know, because I personally relayed that order to him as his immediate senior in the chain of command.



Well throw him out they did. The 256 names he had memorized contained many names that our government did not have. He ended up being sent to Paris by Ross Perot to confront the North Vietnamese Peace Talk Delegation about the fate of the Missing in Action. He entered the Civil Service and is today a Survival School instructor for the U.S. Navy and the James B. Stockdale Survival, Evasion, Resistance, And Escape Center (SERE), naval Air Station, North Island, Coronado, California. And yes, he can still recite those names! You can watch him do it on the Discovery Channel special on Vietnam POWs—Stories of Survival.



A while after Doug had been released, I was called over to an interrogation. It was to be a Soft Soap Fairy kind of gig since there were quality cigarettes, sugared tea in china cups, cookies and candy laid out on the interrogation table. A dapper, handsome Vietnamese, dressed in an expensive, tailored suit and wearing real, spit-shined wingtip shoes, came into the room with a serious look on his face—all business.

“Do you know Douglas Hegdahl?”

“You know I do.”

“Hegdahl says that you were tortured.”

“This is true.”

“You lie.”

Rolling up the sleeves to my striped pajamas (prison mess dress uniform), I pointed to the scars on my wrists and elbows and challenged: “Ask your people how these marks got on my body; they certainly are neither birth defects nor the result of an aircraft accident.” He examined the scars closely, sat back, stared and stated: “You are indeed the most unfortunate of the unfortunate.” With that he left the interrogation leaving me with all the goodies.

Upon release I compared notes with Doug and we determined that time frame was the same time he accused the Vietnamese in Paris of murdering me [I had not written home once writing became voluntary] for embarrassing them in a Life magazine bowling picture. Thanks to Doug, despite the scars on my body, the Communists had to produce me alive at the end of the war. “The Incredibly Stupid One,” my personal hero, is the archetype of the innovative, resourceful and courageous American Sailor.



These sailors are the products of the neighborhoods, churches, schools and families working together to produce individuals blessed with a sense of humor and the gift of freedom who can overcome any kind of odds. These sailors are tremendously loyal and devoted to their units and their leaders in their own private and personal ways. As long as we have the Dougs of this world, our country will retain its freedoms. For a 2 hr 20 min video of Capt Rick Stratton's account of this go to <https://youtu.be/OB3BOCUzFF0>.



Dick & Doug USA July 2008

[Source: <https://cherrieswriter.com/2014/03/17/the-incredibly-stupid-one-at-the-hanoi-hilton> | Rick Stratton | May 2022 ++]