Interview with a Veteran

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Peter A. Callaghan was born in 1946 in Long Island, New York. He worked for NBC Television when he was drafted into the United States Army. However, he had a United States Air Force (USAF) recruiter connection who was able to get him signed up for navigation school in the USAF instead. In September 1969, he went to Officer Training School (OTS) at Lackland Air Force Base (AFB), Texas. After OTS, Mr. Callaghan spent nine months in Sacramento, California, completing navigator training.

Following navigation school, Mr. Callaghan was assigned to Seymore Johnson AFB in North Carolina, where he would begin his career as a navigator on the F4 Phantom jet. In 1969, there was no Global Positioning System (GPS), so his job as a navigator required him to understand long-range and celestial navigation, and he was responsible for keeping the plane on course while in flight. Perhaps it was a bad omen that on his first day in the squadron, he saw an F4 plane laid out in pieces that had been collected following a recent accident that killed a pilot on the same type of plane he would soon be navigating. The following year was spent training in air-to-air combat, air-to-ground bomb runs, and training on different types of bomb delivery methods.

Unfortunately, in April of 1972, the training was over, and it was time for a real-world deployment. Many stateside F4 planes were sent to Ubon Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand, where they would soon be responsible for many USAF air strikes over North Vietnam. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022b), veterans in Thailand from January 9. 1962, through June 30, 1976, have presumed exposure to Agent Orange. Mr. Callaghan does not explicitly state he has any service-connected disabilities related to Agent Orange; however, during the interview, he had several coughing spells, which prompted consideration of possible service-connected conditions. According to the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (2022d),

veterans who develop certain respiratory cancers such as lung, bronchus, larynx, or tracheal cancers who had Agent Orange exposure during their service do not have to prove the connection between their disease and service to be eligible to receive VA health care and disability compensation. Mr. Callaghan did not endorse any of those conditions. However, he did endorse smoking during his time in Vietnam, which according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022e), is pervasive among veterans during deployment.

Mr. Callaghan described flying combat missions up to six days per week and stated it was "thrilling" to be in combat and the adrenaline rush was "gratifying." He described the seating arrangement on the F4 for two people, including the pilot in the front and the weapon systems officer directly behind the pilot, where he sat. Between April and June of 1972, Mr. Callaghan flew 55 combat missions, stating they were dropping bombs multiple times per day on targets selected by the military. According to Mr. Callaghan, it was a common joke amongst pilots and flight crew that it would take a "golden BB" to shoot an F4 out of the sky. Meaning it would take a "lucky shot" to take them down.

Unfortunately, on June 21, 1972, on the first day of summer, Mr. Callaghan set out on a mission with several other aircraft to North Vietnam to bomb some oil storage facilities. The mission included several F4s flying in a specific formation to release material to block enemy radar detection. Although 16 aircraft were watching over the F4s, and 32 more were set to drop bombs, Mr. Callaghan's plane was hit by the "golden BB" and shot down while they were approximately 40 miles outside Vietnam. A low-flying enemy aircraft fired off an air-air missile that struck the plane that Mr. Callaghan was on, causing him and the pilot to eject from the aircraft at 500 miles per hour. Mr. Callaghan has no memories after the initial reach of the ejection handle. He woke up in a parachute, unable to open his eyes, and was still about 5,000

feet in the air. He used his survival radio to make a call to let others know he was alive and gave his call sign to anyone that could hear over the radio. Just after that, he hit the ground and found himself surrounded by approximately 40 people carrying machetes and rifles. He said his helmet was gone, his watch was missing, his knee board was gone, and he describes feeling "dazed." Surrounded by this group of people and unable to communicate due to the language barrier, Mr. Callaghan states that this group stripped him of his weapons and flight suit and kept him for approximately one hour and a half. When the militia came to pick him up, he stated he was "beat up" a little bit, blindfolded, and his hands were tied behind his back. He was put in the back of a vehicle and taken to where he would be a prisoner of war (POW) for the next 281 days in Hanoi, Vietnam.

During the first week in captivity, Mr. Callaghan was in solitary confinement at the Hanoi Hilton. He stated he was interrogated three to four times per day. He utilized training received to protect classified information from the enemy. Once the captors realized they could not get much information from Mr. Callaghan, they began more intense techniques, including brainwashing. They provided negative news about the war and told him he was not a POW but a criminal that could be tried in a court of law. While describing his experience, his demeanor changed slightly, and he laughed during some questions. Although he said he did not fear for his survival, he was worried about physical harm. He did state that he worried about his family quite a bit and felt that this war could go on for quite a while due to not having an end in sight for the war.

Ultimately, Mr. Callaghan was a POW for 281 days and experienced prolonged periods of isolation, skin infections, dysentery from contaminated water, and boils. He had an open wound on his elbow that developed gangrene after not being treated for over a week, which has

left a lasting scar limiting movement of that extremity. He also endorses a new heart murmur that he did not previously have. He stated that during his time as POW, they received minimal medical care from someone they referred to as “almost a doc.” During his time as a POW, he did not know of anyone who was severely beaten or tortured but had heard stories of people in the past that died as a result of injuries sustained as POWs.

While listening to Mr. Callaghan describe his experience as a POW, thoughts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the possibility of ongoing effects from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) from the ejection from the aircraft came to mind. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022a), TBI can affect physical functioning, and thinking abilities, behaviors. Although Mr. Callaghan does not endorse ongoing effects from TBI or any associated service-connected disability related to head injury, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022a), any veteran who served in combat should be screened. Furthermore, Mr. Callaghan’s involvement in combat missions, traumatic ejection from aircraft shot down, and experience as a POW put him at a higher risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Veterans experiencing PTSD may experience nightmares, anxiety, numbness, or hyper-awareness of their surroundings (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022c). Although Mr. Callaghan does not endorse having PTSD, some of the ways he answers questions while laughing and fidgeting indicate discomfort surrounding specific topics discussed in the interview.

On March 28, 1973, Mr. Callaghan was released from being a POW. They were taken to the Clark Air Base in the Philippines, where they received a warm greeting from crowds of people cheering for them and medical care. Following stabilization in the Philippines, they were taken to Westover AFB in Massachusetts, where groups of cheering people greeted them again. Mr. Callaghan described the emotional experience of reuniting with his family and meeting his

daughter, who was conceived just before he left for his deployment for the first time. Unlike many Vietnam veterans who had negative experiences upon their return home, Mr. Callaghan's homecoming was an exciting time. He stated that crowds did not "rally to support the troops" returning from Vietnam because war divided the country.

In the 60 days of rest provided following his release as a POW, Mr. Callaghan decided to remain in the military with his choice of assignment. He elected to go to Mather Air Field in California, where he was a navigator instructor for five years. Afterward, he was assigned to Travis AFB in Fairfield, CA, where he was a C-5 navigator for seven years. He later went to Michigan as a recruiting squadron commander and finally retired in San Antonio, TX.

Learning more about Mr. Callaghan's experience was important as he was stationed at the same base where we have been since 2016, flying on the same planes my husband flies today. Our hospital on Travis AFB works closely with VA Mather, located on what used to be Mather Air Field. When asked what being in the service taught him, after everything he had been through, Mr. Callaghan stated that his time in service is what led him to the importance of appreciating the people of our country who keep us free. Learning more about the experiences of Mr. Callaghan provides a greater appreciation for some of the most underappreciated veterans of the Vietnam war.

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