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# Hurts So Good

At POW school the Navy locked me in a box. Here's why I'm grateful.

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by Scott Shuger

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This box I was locked in made me more uncomfortable than I'd ever been. Its dimensions had been calculated to prevent the average-sized man from lying down or sitting up. Instead of either of those luxurious postures, the box forced you into a miserable muscle-straining compromise that made sleep impossible. Even when I was lucky enough to daydream—about my family or food or some other good thing—I was cut short by the periodic pounding of a rifle butt on my door.

In mid-afternoon, when I was stripped down to my underwear and put in the box, it had been in the mid-eighties and the cool darkness was welcome. But it had been forever since the slit in front of me had gone black—near midnight I bet—and I had been shivering for hours. The shakes started soon after a guard yanked open my door and then slammed it just as suddenly, spilling my piss-pot all over me.

This was one of those situations where what you *knew* didn't matter much in light of what you *felt*. I knew I was in a school, on an American military base, that my snarling captors were fellow members of the U.S. Navy, and that this whole thing would be over a day from now. But none of that was worth a thing to me shaking in the dark.

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*Scott Shuger is writing a book on the Navy.*

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As a navy aviation officer, the last special training I attended before I got ready to deploy overseas with my squadron in 1980 was Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape—SERE—school. That's where the boxes were. The acronym is pronounced "sear," and for me it always conjures up an image of being shoved on a spit and slowly turned over an open flame.

The existence of such a school probably strikes life-long civilians as intolerably barbaric—yet another proof that the U.S. military has gone stone haywire. But my reaction is more typical of SERE graduates: it was the best war training I got. If more of our military preparation were this focused and effective, our readiness would be improved exponentially.

The at-sea scenario exercises that the Navy depends on to ready its forces tend to lack realism. For one thing, they don't involve much live weapons firing (too expensive—the F-14's chief weapon, the Phoenix missile, goes for \$1 million a copy). For another, aboard a ship underway, there is no safe way to set off explosives, fill compartments with smoke and sparks, or set up catastrophic power failures. As a result, what is supposed to simulate an all-out war at sea with the Red Navy all too often ends up as just more routine. But SERE school was an example of how the mayhem of combat can be re-created on land.

SERE stands out from the great gray routine of the hundreds of hours of canned drills, exercises, lectures, and briefs now bemiring U.S. forces. It has no use for message traffic, or viewgraphs, or computers. Instead, its pivotal learning tools are nature's greatest teachers and combat's only constants—pain and fear.

## The Manchurian Candidate

For all that, SERE started off mundanely enough. About 40 officers and men trudged into the classroom at the North Island base in San Diego, most of us in a trance befitting the ungodly hour. We were given the usual “Welcome Aboard” by various instructors—including the always-popular Coffee Mess rules and base traffic regulations. (If the Joint Chiefs ever have to brief the president about an incoming wave of Soviet ICBMs, they’ll still have Petty Officer Flaherty come up first and explain the JCS Coffee Mess.)

Next we were told a little bit about the school. For most of its history, the U.S. military didn’t have any explicit doctrine about how its members should behave once they were taken prisoner. Everybody knew that the Geneva Convention required POWs to give captors only their name, rank, and serial number. What else was there to learn? After all, we were in the business of *taking* prisoners, not *making* them. Why dwell on getting captured? This view was shaken when the Chinese “brainwashed” some captured soldiers during the Korean War. It wasn’t quite like *The Manchurian Candidate*, but American officers, psychologists, and political scientists were startled to learn that “normal” troops could be trained, often in a relatively brief period of confinement, to identify and collaborate with the enemy—even to the point of refusing peacetime repatriation. This background led to the establishment in the mid-fifties of the American Fighting Man’s Code of Conduct—the first explicit statement of requirements for captured American servicemen. The poster on the wall by my seat quoted the key words—“If I am captured, I will continue to resist by all means available. If senior, I will take command. I will make every effort to escape and to aid others to escape.” In the prison camps of Vietnam the Code went to war for the first time. At SERE school, the Navy teaches it to aviation personnel, SEAL commandos, and others whose jobs make them most liable to be captured.

The first week of SERE was all classroom. There were lectures about the Code of Conduct

and about covert communications. There were films. One of them, “Here There Are Tigers,” portrayed the capture of a downed American pilot by the North Vietnamese. Some of the details were reasonably authentic, but it was eerie to see the film’s naive depiction of the relationship between the POW and the interrogator—strained at times but always absurdly “professional.” Strictly Richard Loo and Stalag 17 stuff.

After this week of lectures, we would spend a week in the field, living off the land as if we’d been shot down. But the kicker, the part that we just couldn’t stop worrying and wondering about, went well beyond that. At the end of that week, we’d be captured, imprisoned, and interrogated. By whom? Whenever we asked the instructors to fill us in on our future tormentors, they’d just smile and say, “Don’t worry, you won’t have to guess about who the bad guys are. When you see them, there won’t be a doubt in your mind.” Like everyone, I didn’t relish the prospect. If anything I was even more worried than my classmates, for I was the class’s sole intelligence officer, which in the exercise—and in time of war—could make me an especially juicy target. In light of that, I kept my true job to myself.

As we checked back into our classroom early on a bright Sunday morning we were advised that we’d eaten our last meal until the field phase was over. Soon enough we were marching in formation away from the populated parts of the base. It was hot in the sun and unbelievably, my traitorous stomach was already growling. “We’ll just be leading you through the land survival phase of the exercise,” our instructors smiled. Friendly stuff like helping us make tents out of our chutes and teaching us about edible vegetation. “We’re not going to have anything to do with the compound phase,” they reassured us. But just the initial mention of that phrase kept my imagination going all afternoon.

We spent the next three days in mountainous terrain unable to find food. It was amazing to rediscover how difficult everything becomes when you have absolutely no energy. By day, it was boiling. At night we tried to find the driest ground we could, but after a few hours the earth would suck away all our heat and our shivering would keep us awake.

As the third evening fell, the instructors took account of the complete lack of food. No, they didn’t take us into town for Big Macs. But they brought us a big rabbit. An enlisted guy came forward and quickly throttled the animal. All he wanted for his troubles were the eyeballs. He

probably knew what he was doing. The next day I noticed that he had a lot more energy than I did.

The next morning, after changing into school-issued green fatigues, the class worked its way to an X on the map, which was the drop-off point. Our instructors turned to leave, telling us that the next people we'd see wouldn't be so nice. This was the beginning of the evasion course. We were looking down a long, barren valley framed on three sides by rolling hills. If we could elude our pursuers and make it to "Freedom Village"—the objective point at the other end of the valley—before the hour allotted for evasion was up, we'd be rewarded with some food and a little rest.

When the go siren sounded, I crawled a few feet into the center of the thickest bushes I could find. After several minutes, I repeated the maneuver. Before I could advance a third time, the silence of the valley was shattered by automatic weapons fire.

### "These American slob"

"Oh, here is another of the pigs!" a voice on top of me grunted. I kept still. We'd been told not to be tricked into surrendering. I was making them earn me. I was hoping they were blind.

They weren't. "On your feetings, pig!" someone shouted at me. Before I was completely upright I was helped along by a rifle butt between the shoulder blades. Two guys held rifles on me while a third, who seemed to be in charge, pointed at the path in front of me. "Be walking!" he ordered. We were joined by other captives as we went along. Soon we came to a roadside and our adversaries told us to lie face down. They were a little disorganized, spending as much time shouting at each other as they did shouting at us. Eventually a truck showed up, and as we rumbled down a dirt road aboard it we used its movements to steal glances at each other. Everybody was okay.

Within five minutes we stopped at a clearing that served as a collection point. Some of my classmates were already laying face down on the ground. Others were being led out of my sight. But the main features of this new location were sounds. There was yelling and loud metallic banging. Before I could wonder too much about it all, I was pulled off the truck. I was taken across the field to a huge, swarthy, Hispanic-looking bruiser dressed all in black—a Che Guevara type. He dismissed my escorts with a nod and turned to me with a look of infinite annoyance.

"What's your name?" I told him. "Why were



Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape* United Artists

you flying a warplane against my country?"

"I wasn't flying a warplane."

"Don't waste my time. We know what you're doing. We have the wreckage. Now why are you committing acts of air piracy against my peace-loving country?"

In the back of my head, I knew this was make-believe. But in the front—which was much closer to this guy—I felt the pressure. I was floundering.

I had just arrived at the point that every person contemplating capture wonders about. We had been taught in class that no one is required to John Wayne it—to hold out even trivial military information in the face of abuse. But it had also been made clear to us that we were expected to resist as much as we thought we could. I ignored the question and repeated my name.

"And your rank?" I started taking long pauses after every question. "Ensign," I said finally. "So you are in the U.S. Navy?" This went beyond the Big Three Freebies—name, rank, serial number—but it was obvious and harmless. "Yes." "Now, what was your mission today?" I kept silent until Che put a big paw on my shoulder. "I don't know." "You don't KNOW?" Che exploded right in my ear. For the first time he sounded angry. He forced me down to the ground. "You know what is the push-push?" For a second I honestly didn't know what he was talking about. Being shouted at in pidgin English was apparently designed to be disorienting. It was.

I saw one of my classmates about 20 feet away doing push-ups. "Yes." "Then do. Until you no longer wish to insult my intelligence and that of my country." Now, I didn't mind this. A little exercise might relieve the tension. Momentarily, I thought I would simply bore him with a prodigious amount of push-ups. But Che was ready for that one. He walked away and with his back to me, started interrogating someone else. I kept doing push-ups until my arms were completely numb, like they used to get at Officer Candidate's School. After that, I just stiff-armed the ground trying to rest while I took in the scene.

There were a number of questioning sessions going on. Lots of enforced calisthenics. That wasn't so bad, but then I saw Lt. Commander Smythe, who had the unfortunate distinction of being the senior ranking prisoner. Two guys were repeatedly throwing him against a sheet metal wall. So that was the strange racket I'd heard since I got here! I wondered if they'd been bouncing him around all this time. He looked it. I was still frozen in the up position when Che's big black boots reappeared right under my chin. "Why you stop the push-push?" Turning to some of his comrades, he bellowed, "These American slob, they are so weak!" Suddenly he dropped down to me and whispered in my ear in an unnervingly gentle voice, "Mister, if you do not answer my questions I will be forced to hurt you badly." I admit it—against all reason, that scared the shit out of me.

Next a boot between the shoulder blades forced me down for "more of the push-push." When I couldn't even hold myself off the ground any longer, I was ordered to my feet. "Now Ensign, will you answer me truthfully?" I nodded. "So why were you flying a warplane against my country?" I kept quiet until I was positive things were going to get ugly again. Then I said, "I don't know. We got lost." "Your equipment is so

wonderful—how did this happen?" "I don't know. I'm still in flight school. The last thing I remember was being 50 miles off San Clemente—a small island just off the San Diego coast—"it was my first flight." Pleading incompetence and giving the story a benign local setting was a good stroke. Che turned his back to let loose some genuine laughter. He waved to a soldier to take me away. "Ensign," he said, forcing his smile off, "you need to do better when we speak again."

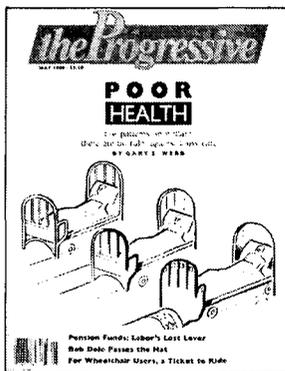
An hour later, when everybody had been rounded up and questioned, we were marched away from the field. I had the feeling we were taking a circular route, but I couldn't be sure because we were ordered to keep our heads down. After a bit, we trudged through some sort of gate and were halted. When I first lifted my head I scanned the area, spotting a few familiar weary faces in the process. It was like a movie set. There were several low-lying buildings surrounding a sandy open area. Off to one side, the ground swelled, indicating a bunker. The perimeter was ringed with barbed wire and there were even guard towers overlooking it all. Among the soldiers confronting us were several wearing officers' uniforms complete with hammer and sickle insignia. The most lavishly dressed, a lean small man, took charge. "This is your new home, war criminals. And I run it. I am your commandant." I'm sure this seemed pretty funny to most of us, especially since the guy's uniform was so overdone—his hat seemed enormous. Getting assigned individual "war criminal numbers" was laughable too. I was less amused when we were each locked into one of the squat boxes that sat kennel-like at the far end of the compound.

## It's academic

As we'd been taught in class, my box-neighbors and I tried communicating by tapping signals and whispering, but we were quickly discovered. The guards were constantly banging on boxes with rifle butts and dragging people out. I could hear forced exercise and some slapping and shoving. I distracted myself with the notion that all this apparent abuse was simulated. I pictured some of the staff sitting on the other side of my door, clapping their hands together or grunting and looking through a hole in the wall to check our reactions. Then I heard the groans. Long, wailing, gasping groans that trailed off into crying. I tried to imagine that they were fake too—on tape maybe. But it was obvious those sounds

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could only have come from real pain. Then I recognized Lt. Commander Smythe's voice. And then the second-ranking prisoner's (the XO). The heavies were getting some extra attention. "What's going on?" I whispered to my right. "Waterboard," came the hoarse reply. We'd all heard about it—torture by controlled drowning. Rumor was that a doctor monitored the victim's vital signs all the way. It sure didn't sound that way.

After about two hours of boxdom, I was grabbed out along with about half my classmates. We were marched into a bench-filled meeting room. Up front were two smiling guys in their mid-twenties. With their longish hair and their jeans, they looked like young pros. The one with the moustache started the talking. Seeing that we were rigid on our benches and instinctively keeping our heads down, he was quick to reassure us. "Please. Please. This is not a military area. Relax. We just want to explain to you the feelings of our country." On the wall behind him there was a strange flag. "We feel sure that once you understand the P.D.R.—oh, excuse please, the People's Democratic Republic" (he said it loud and slow, the way you always talk to foreigners)—"you will see that there is no grievance between us." This was the start of an hour-long bull session—an historical overview of the P.D.R., including comparisons with the American Revolution. At first the tone was amicable enough. But, when prisoners disputed P.D.R. dogma—and several did, especially a couple of junior enlisted guys who seemed to be discovering the pleasures of debate for the first time—our discussion leaders would reel off statistics about the number of black people in jail or on welfare in the U.S. Before I knew

it though, tempers were flaring on both sides and we were hotly dismissed. "You will have to learn," concluded the once-genial Professor Moustache, "that we don't need words to correct your thinking."

Back outside, the guards—who hadn't been allowed in—got wind of this sour turn of events and ordered us to strip down to our underwear. Then they shoved us back in our boxes. That's how I ended up practically bare-assed, shivering, and worrying about the "hard-sell" interrogation to come. The only conceivable chance for sleep was silence, but there was too much going on. When the guards weren't having fun with us, there was always some drivel coming out of the P.A. system. Like the hideous manic voice singing over and over again, "Boots! Boots! Marching into Asia, Marching into Africa. Boots! Boots!"

Suddenly there's a bashing sound and my right-side neighbor was pulled out and up. On command, he gave his war criminal number. "So pig, what is your name?" "Ensign Mike Stuart, sir." "So, this one tells us his rank even before we ask! And with the respect too. I like that!" There's a round of barroom laughs after this and then a menacing silence. "So Mr. Ensign Stuart, sir, what squadron are you with?" "I'm with HS-6." "And what is that?" "It's a helicopter squadron at North Is. . ." Suddenly there was a sharp noise—SMACK. "Why do you tell me this, pig?" "Because it doesn't seem very important." Another SMACK. "Let's start again—what squadron are you with?" "I'm with HS"—SMACK. This time the blow was followed by a crashing sound—this one had knocked Stuart off his feet. "Up pig." "What sort of helicopter do you fly?" asked a second voice. "An SH-3. We do Search and"—SMACK/PLOP again. This time Stuart hit the deck so hard he bounced up against my box, blowing a big puff of dust under my door. "Search and what?" "Search and Rescue," Stuart wheezed. "I don't think you understand the point of our questions, pig! Let's try it again!"

Back in the classroom they had explained to us that if at any time during the field portion a point of training was being missed, the staff would call "an academic"—sort of a time out—and clear things up. Every ear in the compound was sure they were about to call an academic right here on Stuart. Sure this stuff is scary, but how could he be so dense about the basics? Especially after we had repeatedly reviewed the Code of Conduct? "Now, what is your aircraft, Stuart?"

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Fortunately, Stuart’s bulb finally switched on. There was a long silence followed by, “My country does not permit me to give you that information.” Cringes all around, but no slap. “What is your squadron, then?” “My country does not permit me to give you that information.” Again no bad noises. “I think pig, that you finally understand. Now go back to your box and think about what was happening here tonight.” Now I knew why they needed SERE school.

## Below my groin

My neighbor’s worst times were probably over, but as for me—it was probably near midnight and nobody had laid a hand on me since my chat with Che. Uppermost in my mind was sticking to my cover story that I was just a regular air crewman, not an intelligence officer. As chaotic as this place was, I figured I had a shot to drop through the cracks.

“On your feet pig! Put on!” We were going to the office now, and I was given back a shirt and pants. We were headed to the barracks building near the gate we had first come through. Despite my destination, the minute-and-a-half walk felt incredibly good. I was led to a small office overcrowded with guards. For some reason I noticed right away that there was a protruding panel ringing the walls of the room at head level.

The only man in the group wearing a dress uniform came around from behind his desk and started right in on me. “You will be the one to decide if this meeting gets unpleasant. Now then. . . .” We danced through the Big Three Freebies. Then we got to the pressure point. I

tried to remind myself how I handled Che. But it wouldn’t work here. Prisoners had been pouring in by the truckload then, and the militia was very disorganized. But there were no distractions now. These dudes acted like they had all the time in the world. I was in this phone booth with four guys—I could see only two of them, but I felt the other two behind me, as the first hard question came: “Your squadron?”

I shut up, much more from fright than cool. The question came again, but before I could say anything, I was grabbed around my neck from behind. The guard on my left pulled my hands down and made them grab my fatigues, at the same time spreading my legs somewhat. Immediately, the neck grip tightened while the fourth guy who was standing behind the interrogating officer exploded past him and kicked toward my midsection. The toe of his boot hit the wall just below my groin. Quite unnecessarily, Mr. Officer remarked, “I can have him kick higher.”

When he repeated the question, I gave the reply that had worked so well for Stuart—“My country does not allow me to answer that question. . . .” “Your country?” Mr. Officer interrupted, screaming in my ear. “You are not in *your* country!” With that, the field-goal kicker came forward, grabbed me by the lapels, and shoved me into the wall several times. Each time, the flat of my back hit the wall hard, winding me, but my head was going into that panel I’d noticed, which turned out to be much softer. “Now Ensign, what is your squadron?” Intimidated, I tried to convince myself that I had already made this crew waste time on trivia. I needed a breather.

I gave him the name of the West Coast E-2 training squadron rather than my own. He then asked me, "What kind of training squadron is it?" Silence. Wall bounce. "They train student pilots for E-2s." "And what kind of aircraft is that?" Silence. Some threatening stares. I was pretty bounced out. "It's a carrier-based propeller plane." "And what is its mission?" Pause. But a shorter pause than I should have taken. "To deliver supplies and mail." Upon hearing this, the interrogator went back around to his desk. While he made some notes, he looked up at me. "Ensign, you are stubborn, you will have to be more cooperative if you expect your lot to improve." With that, I was taken away. Outside in the darkness, I felt bad about not having made a better stand towards the end of the interview but good about lying about the mission of my squadron's radar planes.

Back in my box my concentration was slipping badly. I hadn't had a lot of experience in cold weather in my underwear with my knees in my face. But after about an hour I was hauled to a different office and left alone with the man behind the desk. Dressed in casual, civilian clothes, he flashed me a sincere-looking smile as he waved me to a chair right in front of a glowing space heater. It was oddly reassuring to hear his regular American accent and grammar as he began asking me questions. My strategy would stay the same. Long pauses and incomplete answers. At first I was very defensive. I was asked to read over some materials to check the grammar and spelling. Since they were all politically loaded and there had been some whispered box scuttlebutt about hidden tape recorders, I passed on that. But compared to the low teens outside, that space heater felt fantastic! I decided that unless there was more rough stuff, I was going to do what I could to prolong my stay right in this spot.

I think I lost vigilance. We had a leisurely discussion about my hometown, my parents, and my education. All through this, my host was working on a steaming hero sandwich. The smells were another good reason to stay put. After about 20 minutes, the phone rang. "No sir, I am interviewing now. Could it possibly wait? Yes sir. I understand. Yes sir, I'll come over immediately." When he hung up the phone, Joe College apologized for the interruption. He left the room through a back door. Thankful for this surprising gift of peace, quiet, and comfort, I leaned back toward the heat and closed my eyes. I don't know how long it was before I heard J.C. say with

a slight edge to his voice, "I'm sorry but I must cut this short. We'll talk again, I'm sure. You need to change some of your ideas, but in time I think we will work well together."

I wasn't back in the box too long this time. When I stood up again, I saw about 15 of my classmates. We were taken over to the center of the compound and told to sit down. Incredibly, one guard handed out mess kit pans and spoons while another glopped out hot oatmeal. We ate greedily while the head guard explained what was coming next. "We know that besides the hunger of you, you also have want for the exercise. And we know Americans love the team sports. So let's be picking the teams and play."

Sitting there in the floodlights at two in the morning, it somehow made sense. "Now what sports should we play? Who likes the football?" A half dozen hands went up. "Oh, not enough to play football. Who likes the volleyball?" Only a few hands. "How about the baseball?" Most of the hands went up. "Okay, it be baseball. Now close your eyes so we can pick fairly the teams." Once our eyes were closed, the guard told us, "Raise your hand if you from East Coast America." Apparently this didn't give us a very even split. So he tried something else. "Raise your hand if you have the sportscar." At this point my eyelids were getting restless and I was getting a little suspicious. So I started peeking. I thought I saw about half the hands up. But the guard said, "Oh, too many rich guys with the sportscars." Hmm... this is leading somewhere and it ain't baseball. "Well, raise your hand if you are the pilot." I saw a few pilots unwittingly identify themselves. "No that won't work either." If I'd had some nerve I would have said something. I felt even worse on the next round. "Raise your hand if you have the Secret clearance." A lot of hands shot up. The damage was done.

## The wet bandanna

Fed and duped, we were boxed again until first light. Then the whole class was dragged out and over to the main compound area. There we were confronted by the commandant, standing on some high ground looking down at us. As the rising sun warmed our backs, he started a speech. "Well criminals, I trust you all had a restful night. I believe the People's Democratic Republic even graciously shared its precious harvest with you blackhearts." Looking at a guard who responded with a nod, the commandant then revved up for a tongue-lashing. "Well good, now you are ready

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Our class was typical in containing many people who refused to give out significant information when pushed physically but who gave it up quickly when they felt the pressure was off. The central lesson of all this was that as a POW the pressure would never be off.

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to do a good day's work! You must remember you are not prisoners of war. Your Congress has not declared war on our peace-loving country. So you are war criminals, not protected by the Geneva Convention."

We spent the next hour or so on our hands and knees pushing piles of gravel first to one side of the compound and then the other. Predictably, the guards found our work rather unsatisfactory. They "had no choice" but to summon the commandant to speak to us again. Once more, we were gathered at his feet. "My staff reports that you war criminals are malingering. We will not tolerate this! I will show you that this is not a game. Bring me the SRO!" With this command, two guards appeared from some sort of bunker dragging Lt. Commander Smythe between them. I hadn't realized that Smythe hadn't been out with us before. His face was puffy and dirty. We were about to see why.

"Put him on the de-vice!" shrieked the commandant. Guards swarmed over Smythe and pushed him down on a board, cuffing his arms and legs to it. "Let's see if he is getting better at breathing the water!" As Smythe struggled, one of the guards by his head pulled out a bandanna and covered his face with it. Then another guard started pouring water over the cloth. Smythe's limbs strained at the cuffs as if he was being shocked. The groaning, gurgling sounds were like the awful noises I'd heard yesterday afternoon. Maybe the worst, most affecting part of the spectacle was all the laughter. "Oh, this one flops like a fish, haw, haw," chuckled a bearded guard at the foot of the waterboard. Now, I knew they weren't going to *kill* Smythe. But they were surely hurting him. And where did they find guys who

could act like that? This was the one part that was worse than the real thing. You had to wonder how a guy could torture *his own side* for a living.

It seemed to last forever. Every 20 seconds or so, the torturers would remove the cloth so the commandant could ask a question. I felt like a spotlight had been turned on me when he asked Smythe who his political and intelligence officers were. Between deep sobs, the SRO said he didn't know. Thanks to me, he didn't. The near-drowning/questioning continued. And the rest of us were just sitting there watching. I wanted to protest, but not as much as I didn't want the waterboard. So I shut up, averting my eyes—as if that helped. A much braver guy in the front row—he was so close that the spewing water was darkening his fatigues—finally stood up and shouted, "Hey that's enough! Let him go!" It was the XO. "Oh, we have a hero in our midst!" cackled the commandant. He had his men release the heaving, plum-faced Smythe and put him over on the side. With hearty laughter the guards then grabbed the XO and strapped him in. They were working him over when the sirens went off.

"Air Raid! Air Raid! Into the shelter!" There was great confusion in the compound as the guards led us into a hollowed-out hill on one side. We huddled down while they promised new acts of terror against us in retribution for this latest American outrage. They were gleefully describing their plans for the new shoot-downs when the all-clear sounded. As we came out into the sunlight, the commandant motioned for us to sit. With more calm than usual, he began another diatribe. "Look"—he pointed at the top of the flagpole behind him, a camp feature that I hadn't noticed until now—"at our flag. Your airplanes

fill the skies with bombs and yet it continues to fly! You need to show respect for it! On your feet!" As a jangly martial tune blared from the P.A., we all stood stupidly looking at the P.D.R. flag fluttering in a light breeze. But after a few bars, the flag suddenly shot down the pole, and the American flag was run up in its place. Simultaneously, the P.A. system switched to "The Star Spangled Banner." Every man there, guards as well as prisoners, snapped to attention and saluted. It was a gimmick, but effective. The compound phase was over.

After that there was an awkward period when everyone just milled around. Here and there guards and prisoners were shaking hands and even smiling. But I just couldn't get into the cast party atmosphere. In the past 24 hours, I had experienced new dimensions of excitement, tension, concentration, anxiety, fear, cowardice, and regret. I didn't know how to rearrange all those emotions on cue. I wanted to be alone.

## Better combatants, better people

Like everyone else, I slept through the bus ride back to San Diego. After gorging myself on a fast food dinner, I crashed again at the North Island bachelor officers' quarters. Even though I had forgotten to set my alarm, the next morning I woke up in plenty of time. We were due back that morning for the SERE debriefing, considered so important that absentees were required to repeat the entire school. The rapidly filling base amphitheater showed no one was eager for that.

The debriefing wasn't a what-I-did-on-my-vacation session. It was immensely worthwhile. The instructor reported that we had been somewhat disorganized, but we had pulled together nicely at the end. We would have been kept there longer if we hadn't. This group assessment was undoubtedly the most important, because it had become obvious that for POWs, only coordinated action is effective—the bad guys were only too glad to have us off concentrating on our individual predicaments. But naturally, we were more intensely interested in our personal evaluations. The method for this was quite ingenious. After each contact with the authorities, we had been sent off with some sort of summary statement. And, as the instructor now explained, these were encoded evaluations. For example, if the questioners said you were stubborn and would only find grief until you changed your ways, that was good. If a guard said that eventually you would come around to the right way of think-

ing, that wasn't as good, and so on.

Most of us had come out as reasonably active resisters during the "hard-sell" sessions. But—and this was certainly one of the most important lessons—like most SERE students, we had found the "soft-sell" approach harder to beat. My own case bore that out. I had done okay when they were threatening me, but although I avoided some tricks, when they put me in front of a space heater I gave them a pretty good picture of myself. That was the point of the political discussion section too. Such sessions would be used to identify the talkers and the well-read. And as I already knew, the business of choosing teams was a similar gambit. We were told that our class was typical in containing many people who refused to give out significant information when pushed physically, but who gave it up quickly when they felt the pressure was off. The central lesson of all this was that as a POW the pressure would never be off.

It was interesting to hear the different reactions of various class members. The interrupted interview was an opportunity I missed. Some of my fellow prisoners were much more aggressive. When the interviewer left after that "unexpected" phone call, several POWs read the material on his desk. A few stole pencils and paper. A couple took bites from the sandwich. One guy escaped.

Later, in thinking about the debriefing, I realized why SERE school was so good. Although defense boosters and critics alike tend to focus on *hardware*, even the briefest review of military history reveals that for every battle decided by superiority of weapons, there are ten in which the outcome depended on differences in intelligence, planning, tactics, communications, logistics, or resolve. And this ratio has become still more imbalanced in modern warfare because the growth of technology shrinks the time one can maintain any given technical advantage. No, it's the *software* questions—questions about service members' thinking, judgment, and attitudes—which should be getting more attention. SERE school is one of the very few places where the Defense Department faces that fact. In just two weeks and for very little money, the Navy taught us things that would make us better combatants, better people even—more capable of operating with the men and material entrusted to us. It's been clear to me ever since that we'd get a lot more for our tax dollars if the Pentagon cut elsewhere and spent more money like this in all its tactical training—not on a fighter or a bomber, but on a personal plane. □

*The jokes that impeached a governor.*

# What Did Evan Mecham Ask The Pope?

by Alleen Pace Nilsen

What was it that finally drove Evan Mecham from the Arizona governor's office? His bigoted comments? His hand-in-the-till approach to campaign finances? In the end, his most enduring enemy may have been the countless Mecham jokes that swept the state, fueled the recall drive, and helped bring down the governor. Mecham's gone, but the jokes remain. A sampling:

Why did Evan Mecham cancel Easter?

Because he heard some of the eggs were going to be colored.

What do Evan Mecham's political appointees have in common?

Parole officers.

Why does Evan Mecham have to open his mouth?

So he can change feet.

What do Mecham and an untrained puppy have in common?

They both cringe at the sight of a newspaper.

How do you spell relief?

R-E-C-A-L-L.

What would be the difference if Mecham and a skunk were run over on the highway?

There would be skid marks in front of the skunk.

Did you hear what Mecham asked the Pope?  
"How's the little woman?"

Arizona bumper stickers:

I'll take a urine test if Mecham will take an IQ test.

God—Leave Oral and take Evan.

Don't get mad! Get Evan.

After Mecham began defending his use of the word *pickaninny* to describe black children, Arizonans turned it back on him: Pickaninny: What we did for Governor.

Mecham's education adviser, supporting a bill that would have required the teaching of creationism, told the legislature that if a student "wants to say the world is flat, the teacher doesn't have the right to try to prove otherwise." Shortly afterwards, a caller to a radio station suggested a state tax to fund the purchase of flat globes for schools.

At times, it seemed that Mecham and the jokes had merged. He was saying things so outrageous that the only logical explanation could be that he was mocking himself. As when he told a Jewish audience that America was a great Christian nation. Or when he denied being a bigot by arguing that he hires blacks "because they are the best people who applied for the cotton-picking job." Or when he scolded a reporter by telling him never to ask "for a true statement again!"

Speaking last summer, Morris Udall borrowed a line from Will Rogers and said he couldn't tell any jokes because Mecham had appointed them all. Udall, of course was wrong: Mecham left a few behind. Thanks for the laughs. □

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