

POW's memory of Vietnam War hasn't mellowed

By Louise Okrusky and Sylvia O'Neill staff writer

In 1973, a helicopter landed on a Ypsilanti high school football field. Its passenger, Marine Capt. James Warner, alerted to find the stands filled and the bands playing.

It was Warner's homecoming after 5 1/2 years as a North Vietnamese prisoner. "I didn't know what to make of it," said Warner, now a Plymouth resident, in recalling all the homecoming hoopla.

But he remembers he returned home convinced of the fairness and the justice of the United States political system.

Repelled by what he saw as the North Vietnamese' total disregard for the law, he had developed a passion for upholding the legal system and a determination to become a lawyer.

As preparations were made for last Friday's National POW-MIA Day, Warner credited his ability to hold on to a dream of going to law school as part of the reason he was able to return in triumph his hometown.

IN RECALLING the events that lead up to his decision, he remembers he still had questions about what to do with his life when he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in March 1964.

"If wanted to get the best deal I could, I wanted to get a cushy billet somewhere," he remembers with a trace of irony in his voice.

It somehow seemed the best thing to do after spending a few semesters at Eastern Michigan University taking out books from the college library on any subject that took his fancy.

At 23, certain of being drafted, he realized that he was making "little progress toward a life career."

When he joined the Marines, his assignment was Vietnam — which had yet to begin as a serious effort for the United States.

"We won soccer games because we had them on the team," said Warner, a former West Bloomfield resident. After talking to them about their country and reading about the area, he wanted to go to Vietnam in June 1965 when the fighting began in earnest.

He doesn't regret American involvement in that country.

"I was 100 percent convinced and remain so today that our assistance was wise," he said, sitting back in an easy chair with a fan softly whirring in the background.

Across the paneled family room, his wife Sharon and daughter Allison peruse a coloring book.

"It was a very righteous campaign conducted by people of dubious standard."

"They were afraid of actually admitting to themselves that communism is a threat to humanity," he said.

DISMISSING ARGUMENTS that full-fledged American involvement would have led to war with China he says that the distance between the Chinese and Vietnamese would have prevented their participation.

He believes the U.S. failed to use its troops effectively.

His own actual participation in combat ended Oct. 13, 1967 as he flew a Phantom F-4 jet north into the demilitarized zone "as far from Hanoi as you can be."

Within first half hour after he was shot down, he was captured and a machine gun was pointed at his head. The trigger was pulled and the gun clicked — indicating an empty chamber.

Tied up almost into a ball, he and his squad commander spent 10 days in an underground bunker before embarking on a 300-mile, 40-day march to Hanoi.

Warner carried the squad commander the entire journey because the man had broken his ankle when their plane had crashed.

With one-third of the journey left to complete, the group met two other pilots who were also taken prisoner. The

prisoners were tied and taken by truck to the prison camp known as the Hanoi Hilton.

"It was like playing ping-pong with yourself," Warner said.

Because it had taken the group well over a month to arrive in Hanoi, Warner wasn't interrogated. Any information he had already was dated. It was a lucky break since 50 percent of the prisoners interrogated didn't survive, he said.

THROUGH 5 1/2 YEARS and transfers to several other camps, Warner developed a philosophy of survival.

"Number one: keep breathing and ignore the rest of it. If you're breathing, you're still alive. They made it easier by being so utterly obnoxious."

Although he was told he could be released if he wrote a letter of regret for participation in the conflict, he refused.

"I was never tempted to write for amnesty. You're not supposed to. And I would never tell a tyrant he's right."

Instead, he endured beatings in September 1969 until North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh died.

He contracted dysentery after being locked in an airless box.

He saw other prisoners randomly released. He was moved from one camp before U.S. troops tried to rescue its prisoners. And he was told that some of the prisoners would never be released.

HE REMAINS convinced that the Vietnamese government still has American captives.

"The more people that are aware of it, the more public pressure will be put on those still holding prisoners to release them or release the names of the dead," he said.

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