

Ex POW says talking helps

By MARY CONNELLY

Five and one-half years in North Vietnam... in a POW camp in North Vietnam... with a medically untended broken neck... with arms and hands paralyzed for five months...

Slightly more than a year after returning to the United States, ex-POW Donald O'Dell of Pontiac says "talking about it helps the transition."

At a recent meeting of parents and teachers at Scotch Elementary School, Orchard Lake, L. Col. "Digger" O'Dell of the U.S. Air Force told the group not to be afraid to ask him questions.

O'DELL RECOUNTS in detail the events that led to his October 17, 1967, capture by the North Vietnamese.

His 17th mission out of Thailand, an air strike of a railroad artery from North Vietnam into China, fell under routine procedure from the start.

Take-off time was delayed from 4:15 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. to permit targeted materials to accumulate. O'Dell's own plane developed a hydraulic leak and a substitute pilot was sent on the mission.

But O'Dell followed the original force 15 minutes after its take-off with a repaired plane and sent the substitute back to the base.

WHY, PEOPLE ask him wherever he goes. Why?

"The truth is," he answers, "that as soon as you flew 100 missions you could go home. There was incentive there."

So O'Dell flew and at 10:52 a.m., two minutes after reaching the target, he was shot down.

Recollections turn to smoke in the cockpit, lights blinking on the plane's "idiot panel" indicating generator failure, loss of control and plummeting toward the ground.

"MY REFLECTION is a huge ball of fire that completely engulfs the

nose of the airplane and the side of the airplane," O'Dell recalled. "My airplane went into a crazy, tumbling gyration."

Thrown from the ejection seat of a plane which had cracked into two pieces, O'Dell parachuted to the ground.

"I felt lucky because I had no broken bones until I realized where I was," he recounted.

"I was immediately grabbed by the Vietnamese."

"They immediately grabbed me and stripped me down to my shorts."

"THERE WAS a moment of comedy there. They had never seen a zipper and didn't know how to work it."

Twice O'Dell tried to help loosen the zipper. Twice he was knocked to the ground.

Guarded in a thatch hut by four teenage girls, O'Dell was periodically led to the front of the hut and displayed to the villagers.

"During the day I was praying to see Hanoi. I felt I would be safer in the hands of the military than civilians."

WHEN THE TIME of transfer arrived, O'Dell was led to a grainery from which he was loaded onto a truck.

In Hanoi, interrogators sought three types of information.

Questions focused on military data and personal details about O'Dell, his wife, children, family, life insurance, savings, political affiliation and other organizational memberships, written confession and tape recording in which the prisoner termed himself a criminal, not a prisoner of war, were asked.

"WE NEVER criticized one another... about how long we held out," O'Dell said. "Pain levels vary."

"I was told at the outset, 'I'm gonna break your arms one at a time. I'm gonna break your legs one at a time. I might kill you.' After a day

and a half, they convinced me."

"You approach a state of mind where you're worried about cracking mentally. That's the worst hazard."

TODAY, TALKING in a brown business suit, O'Dell recalls being hung upside down and having his head bounced against concrete. He remembers the "pretzel act" with his hands tied behind his back and his body lain on its side while being jumped on.

"After a while you prayed for the moment you'd go unconscious."

"I'm not trying to impress on anybody that I'm a hero. I'm not. I was scared as anybody else."

HIS MILITARY interrogator had limited knowledge of English, O'Dell said, coupled with restricted technical comprehension.

"Anytime you deviated from his train of thought he was lost. You learned you could lie, cheat and be vague."

He doesn't think those five and one-half years in North Vietnam are lost years from his life.

"I learned insights into others," he said.

Another hold-out period preceded

the political interrogation but attempts to obtain a confession were eventually abandoned.

One and one-half years of O'Dell's stay at the POW camp were shared with another prisoner in a room without windows or ventilation, measuring 10 feet by 10 feet.

"WE WOULD just lay on the concrete floor and try to absorb coldness from it. We peaked out of cracks. It reminded me very much of pictures of Dachau."

Since his release March 14, 1973, O'Dell has begun working at Pontiac Motors through an Air Force program.

"It was like being gone a week when I moved back last April," O'Dell said of coming back to his family.

He doesn't think those five and one-half years in North Vietnam are lost years from his life.

"I learned insights into others," he said.

Insurance FACTS

by Robert H. Bergstrom, CPCU.

Here are some types of insurance that are not commonly known about: crop insurance, rain insurance, bad debt insurance, crop insurance is for farmers. The Federal Crop Insurance Corporation has a wide variety of crop protection against drought, flood, hail, frost, insects, and diseases. Rain insurance protects, for farmers, races, and open air conventions. It provides coverage against rain which could undermine the show. The insurance is for loss of profits only. Bad debt insurance protects businessmen when customers fail to pay on their agreed plans.

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WSHJ—88.3

Monday

12:25 p.m.—Periscope: Osborn Elliot talks about the Vanishing Concorde.

6:30 p.m.—Hear Tonight: Larry Rich will be your host this week.

Tuesday

12:25 p.m.—Periscope: Osborn Elliot talks about Video Cassettes.

Wednesday

12:25 p.m.—Periscope: The Buster Keaton Revival will be discussed by Osborn Elliot.

6:30 p.m.—City Council Highlights: Jeff Maxwell reports on this week's city council meeting.

Thursday

12:25 p.m.—Police Chaplains will be the topic of discussion with Newsweek editor Osborn Elliot.

6:30 p.m.—School Board: Mark Kovac brings you this week's board of education meeting.

Friday

12:27 p.m.—The Space Story: Dr. Werner Von Braun presents "ATS-F Mission!"

6:30 p.m.—Wolfman Jack: Nationally known disc jockey Wolfman Jack plays music and talks about groups.

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The mini-courses run four weeks. The four new ones (there are lots of others) are Commodity Futures, which is free, and Wine Making, Batik Making, and Model Railroad Repair, all of which are not free. They begin the week of May 6.

The office of the Community Schools is at Southfield-Lathrup High School. For information call 354-7456.

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