

CAPTURED

AN AMERICAN PRISONER OF WAR
IN NORTH VIETNAM

BY ALVIN TOWNLEY



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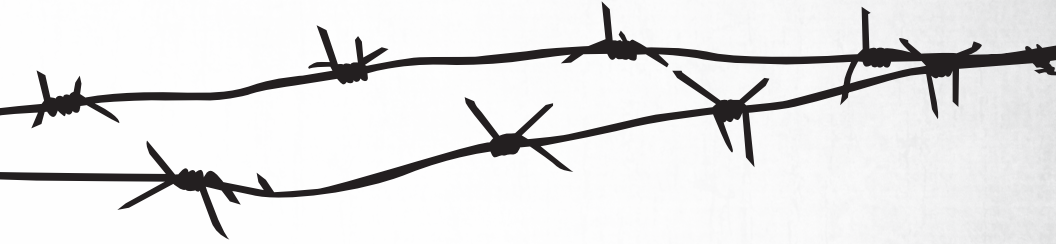
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Chapter 1

CAPTURE



JERRY STOOD AT HIS SHIPBOARD desk and slipped off his US Naval Academy ring. “Class of 1947,” it read. Nineteen years and two months had passed since the ceremony where he jubilantly tossed his hat into the air with his classmates and became a naval officer. Between his graduation and this day, Sunday, July 18, 1965, he had married his high school sweetheart and fathered seven children. In just two days, he would realize his dream of commanding an aircraft squadron at war.

He placed his ring in a drawer. Next to the ring, he placed his wedding band and a patch from his uniform. The patch read “CDR Jeremiah Denton” and bore the anchor and wings that marked him as a naval aviator. Commander Denton always removed these personal items before a mission. Doing so served as humble acknowledgment that a remote possibility of being shot down did, in fact, exist. No naval aviator, especially a veteran commander like Jerry, ever truly thought an enemy missile could catch him. On a ship, Jerry Denton was a good officer.

In the air, he was exceptional. Like most military aviators, he felt best in a cockpit. A thrill ran through him as he closed his cabin door and set out on the day's mission. He had no doubt that he would put his rings back on when he returned that afternoon.

Jerry's brown boots paced down narrow passageways of the aircraft carrier USS *Independence*. In the navy, only aviators wore brown boots; everyone else's were black. Jerry's distinctive boots were part of the trappings that built the spirit and ego of a naval aviator. These men were special.

The soft hum of machinery and hiss of ventilation helped him relax and focus on the mission ahead: another bombing run over North Vietnam. He walked the familiar route to the flight deck, climbed the usual ladders, and reached the last bulkhead. He opened the hatch.

Noise, fumes, sunshine, and heat immediately assailed him. Jerry shoved on his helmet and pulled down its dark visor. He still squinted against the brightness of midday in the South China Sea. The summer sun roasted steel, concrete, rubber, and men on the expansive four-acre flight deck, which felt conspicuously like a frying pan. Sunlight gleamed off the blue water, white aircraft, and glass canopies. His helmet provided little defense against the cacophony of jet noise. The moment a steam-driven catapult sent an aircraft howling off the bow, another aircraft would land near the ship's stern. It would ram its engines to full power in case its tailhook failed to snag one of

four arresting cables strung across the deck. The air trembled with deafening noise.

Heavy exhaust made the humid air thicker still; air crew wore wet bandanas to help them breathe. Jerry felt sweat break out instantly; he noticed heat seeping through his boots. He hastened to his A-6 Intruder, nimbly weaving between taxiing aircraft, jet blasts, and whirling propellers; surviving on a flight deck was a vital art he'd had to master. Jerry knew one could be killed more easily on the deck than in the air.

Jerry arrived safely at his assigned aircraft from Attack Squadron 75, nicknamed the Sunday Punchers. He saw crewmen securing fourteen Mark 82 500-pound bombs to the Intruder's wings. To bear such a load, engineers had made the all-weather attack aircraft a big one. It weighed more than 60,000 pounds—30 tons. It stood sixteen feet tall. At six feet, Jerry's head barely reached the middle of the big plane's two distinctive gaping air intakes, which made the jet look like an oversized walrus missing its tusks.

Next to the plane, Jerry felt small. In the cockpit, he felt powerful. No average pilot could handle a beast as large and fast as an Intruder, fly it off a moving ship, then land it back on a ship in any weather, day or night. In fact, Jerry and his fellow navy fliers didn't even call themselves pilots. They were better. They were *naval aviators*—air warriors—and they were invincible.

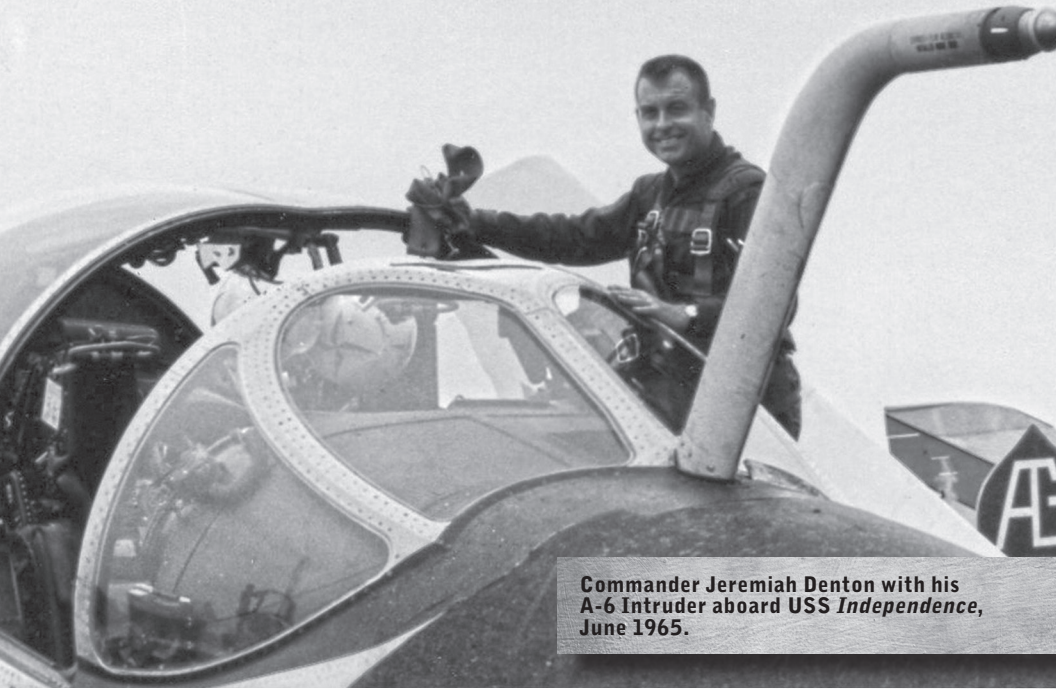
Jerry and his bombardier-navigator, Bill Tschudy, conducted their preflight checks. Then Jerry gingerly worked the throttles to taxi the Intruder toward the bow, past the ship's massive

superstructure, which bore a white “62,” marking *Independence* as America’s sixty-second aircraft carrier. A series of air crewmen in brightly colored shirts, goggles, and headphones guided Jerry to the catapult. Several men locked the Intruder into the mechanism that would momentarily drag the plane down the deck and sling it off the bow as if it weighed nothing.

Jerry Denton sat at the tip of a mighty spear. In his aircraft, he became an instrument of foreign policy. All the efforts of the United States Navy ultimately went toward launching him from this ship so he could drop bombs on an enemy target. Countless instructors had spent long hours training him. Veteran captains commanded their destroyers, submarines, and frigates to protect Jerry’s aircraft carrier. Every man aboard *Independence* played a role in launching this heavy-laden plane off the deck with Jerry at the controls. Jerry and his fellow aviators existed at the very center of a loud, expensive, and highly dangerous enterprise.

Many flight instructors warned students their aircraft would try to kill them; pilots were always battling both their machines and physics. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, they often lost. During Jerry’s early career, longtime aviators had a 23 percent chance of dying in a crash; nearly half could expect an emergency ejection. Yet these men each felt in total control and ascribed any crash to a mistake. Jerry Denton didn’t make mistakes. He always came home.

From his cockpit, Jerry looked to his left and saw a yellow-shirted officer spinning his hand in the air, signaling for full power. Jerry pushed the throttle forward. Behind him, his



Commander Jeremiah Denton with his A-6 Intruder aboard USS *Independence*, June 1965.

engines thundered. The Intruder bucked against the locked catapult. Jerry checked his rudder, elevators, and ailerons—the surfaces that controlled his aircraft’s flight. All functioned perfectly. He gave a quick salute to the officer: He was ready. Jerry gripped the yoke with his left hand and the throttle with his right. The officer dropped to one knee and pointed his hand down the deck, giving the signal to launch. The catapult engaged. It yanked the Intruder forward and, three seconds later, slung it off the deck at 150 knots, or 170 miles per hour.

Four months earlier, in March 1965, the US military launched Operation Rolling Thunder, an air campaign designed to drop so many bombs on North Vietnam that its government would

cease supporting Communist insurgents in South Vietnam. The operation was part of America's strategy to support South Vietnam and contain Communism, the political system the American government perceived as the nation's greatest threat. The administration of President Lyndon Johnson believed in the Domino Theory—that Communism would topple democratic governments like dominoes, one after another, expanding the influence of China and the Soviet Union country by country across Southeast Asia and the globe. Granted, the government supported by the United States in South Vietnam was neither democratic nor popular, but at least it wasn't under the influence of Communist powers. Vietnam had become the latest proxy conflict in the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union.

Jerry had flown more than twenty Rolling Thunder missions since arriving off the North Vietnamese coast in June 1965, and he grew more frustrated with each assignment. President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara permitted bombing only of certain targets as they tried to deter and intimidate North Vietnam without escalating the conflict into an all-out war. They often selected targets like parking lots, bridges, and depots instead of strategic bases, factories, and ports. Jerry and his squadron mates felt they routinely risked their lives for little gain. Thus far, Rolling Thunder had not deterred the government of Communist Party Chairman Hồ Chí Minh in Hanoi. North Vietnam continued to support Communist guerrillas—known as Việt Cộng—in South Vietnam. By the end of 1965, America

would have committed nearly two hundred thousand troops to the growing conflict.

From his cockpit, Jerry could see little difference between North and South Vietnam. His shadow flicked over flooded fields of rice in North Vietnam that looked just like paddies south of the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ—the no-man’s-land that separated the two countries just south of the seventeenth parallel. He quickly found the Mã River and followed it inland toward his target, the Than Hóa Bridge, which the North Vietnamese used to pump supplies south to the Việt Cộng.

“Rainbow flight from Rainbow leader,” Jerry radioed to the twenty-seven aircraft arrayed behind him. “Target at ten o’clock . . . Rainbow leader rolling in.”

Jerry pushed the yoke forward and nosed the Intruder toward the bridge and nearby battery of antiaircraft artillery. His bombardier-navigator, Bill Tschudy, readied the ordnance. Suddenly, an explosion shook the aircraft. Flames and smoke enveloped its wing. Warning lights flashed; the radio went dead. Another hit. The plane jerked and rolled right. Jerry stood up in his seat and jammed the left rudder pedal with such force that he snapped a tendon in his leg. Adrenaline masked the pain. The plane kept rolling. The engines stopped responding. Jerry lost control. He feared only seconds remained until the aircraft combusted.

When the Intruder righted itself momentarily, Jerry punched Tschudy in the shoulder: Time to eject, he signaled. Both men pulled their ejection handles. Tiny charges blew off the canopy,

and a second later, Jerry and Bill rocketed upward in their ejection seats. They left the air-conditioned quiet of the cockpit and entered a hot cloudless sky boiling with explosions and alive with noise. Jerry tumbled through the air until his parachute deployed. He hung limply beneath a canvas dome and looked about. He watched his crippled aircraft flying away trailing thick smoke. He saw Bill in the distance beneath an open chute. Below him, the lightly forested ground, rapidly filling with infantry, came closer. Falling from one world into another, Jerry felt like Alice in Wonderland.

Seconds before Jerry lost his aircraft, he planned to complete another routine bombing run and return to *Independence* for a gluttonous evening meal served on linen tablecloths followed by a steaming shower. He'd sleep in fresh sheets before the next day's change-of-command ceremony, where he'd assume leadership of the Sunday Punchers. He'd arrive home in Virginia Beach by Christmas.

One explosion changed everything. It shredded two decades of confidence and rendered his considerable ability and status as a naval aviator irrelevant. His sense of invulnerability crumbled. During the thirty seconds he estimated he had before landing, he thought of evasion and escape.

Looking down, he observed that he'd land in the Mā River, which appeared muddy enough to hide his swimming downstream underwater. He'd splash down, the chute would collapse on top of him, and he'd strike out below the surface, swimming hard and surfacing far downstream. He'd hide in riverbank bushes, lying

submerged and breathing through a hollow reed overnight. The next day, he'd make his way to the coast—only ten miles away—and signal for a rescue. He'd be flying missions again by next week.

Below him, uniformed enemy troops lined the riverbank. They watched him float helplessly toward them. His descent seemed to accelerate as he neared the river and his feet plunged into the muddy water. His whole body followed. The limp parachute settled just upstream. Below the surface, Jerry quickly freed himself from the straps and kicked off, heading downstream.

With sudden horror, he realized his left leg wouldn't move. Until now, he hadn't noticed the severity of his injury. He had a ruptured tendon that, after the rough ejection, now protruded through a gash in his skin and flight suit. His left leg was useless. His heavy flight boots began pulling him downward, into the river's cold depths. Panic replaced calm. Jerry kicked for the surface and gasped for air. He swallowed water and choked. He gasped and began sinking; his boots were too heavy. In that moment, survival became more important than escape. He inflated his life vest and shot to the surface. Looking around, he could see soldiers watching him from the bank. They waved him toward shore; one fired a shot over Jerry's head. No options remained except surrender. He could imagine nothing worse.

Soldiers dragged Jerry from the brown water and stripped him of every item he had except his underwear. They took his flight suit, boots, socks, weapon, radio, and watch. They left him wet, muddy, injured, nearly naked, and bound with rope. The accomplished naval aviator and father of seven struggled to retain his

pride. He felt much less like an American officer than he had moments earlier.

Kneeling amid a gaggle of thirty soldiers, he first wondered when, if, or in what condition he'd return to his family. He had no real idea what might lie before him. Truthfully, he knew little about North Vietnam and even less about how the North Vietnamese treated American prisoners. He suddenly thought about what would sustain him through whatever lay ahead. He recalled a list of important quotations he'd kept during his college years at the Naval Academy. Now, facing an unknown test, several came back to him. "Nurture your mind with great thoughts," Benjamin Disraeli had said. "To believe in the heroic makes heroes."

Jerry also recalled an anonymous quote that seemed apropos: "The greatest heroes known are those that are afraid to go, but go." Jerry was certainly afraid; he didn't have much choice about going, however. He could only control *how* he went, *how* he would conduct himself. He could choose *how* to respond to whatever came. Despite all he'd lost, he remained a man of faith and a naval officer. He resolved to show North Vietnam what that meant.