



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Captured by Love: Stories of Vietnam POWs – Part 2

**Guest(s):** USAF Ret. Col. Lee Ellis

**Air Date:** August 10, 2023

[Listen to the broadcast](#)

- Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.
- Roger Marsh: Welcome back to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Now I have a question for you. What makes a good love story? Is it one that has met insurmountable challenges and with God's grace lasts a lifetime? Indeed. Well, today we'll hear more about those who have lived out great love stories. Our guest on the program once again is United States Air Force retired Colonel Lee Ellis. Lee shares how he made it back to his family after he was a POW in the Vietnam War. And although many soldiers and servicemen had found love before being sent off to war, Lee miraculously found love after he returned home. So let's join USAF retired Colonel Lee Ellis and our co-host Dr. Tim Clinton, right here, right now on Family Talk.
- Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, welcome back on this 50th anniversary of the end of the U.S. engagement in Vietnam. And by the way, the return of our POWs, some 684 POWs returned home alive after the Vietnam War. Lee yesterday a fascinating discussion about you and your experience as a fighter pilot flying number of missions in South Vietnam. You were shot down, I think over North Vietnam and captured. You spent 1,955 days in captivity as a POW. And Lee, I just want to say thank you for your faithfulness, your service, and by the way, your witness for Christ that your faith is what helps see you through. Lee, just again, take our listeners who maybe weren't with us yesterday into those moments and that moment when Operation Homecoming happened and you knew you were going home.
- Lee Ellis: Yes, I'd been there over five and a half years almost. And by that time that had become our way of life. One of the things that happened up there was everybody returned to their faith. There were a lot of fighter pilots that hadn't been in church a lot, but I'm telling you some of the stories guys told me, he said, I'm coming down in my parachute and I'm looking up and I start praying, "Lord, I'm sorry, but I need you now." And guys would pray for hours every day locked up in a cell a lot of times by yourself or with another guy or anyway, you don't talk all day long if you have roommates and you just pray, and really depending on the Lord in that situation, and that was a big part of our resilience along the way. But Operation Homecoming came and as a result of the big

bombing campaign of December, the Christmas bombing of 1972, and they finally agreed to let us go.

And so we started coming home in February, first group, February 12th, second group, February 28th, third group. I was in March 14th, we were captured most all of us in the fall of '67. And then the last group were pretty much all those who'd been there less than a year, whereas most of my group had been there five to eight and a half years. So it was a big celebration, but our emotions were pretty flat. We were very much managing ourselves until we got free. And then we started celebrating and cheering. We went to Clark Air Base, about three hour flight over there from Hanoi. That's the largest hospital base in the Far East at the time. And so we went to the hospital there. First thing we did was go to the cafeteria and eat, it was about 5:30 in the afternoon. And the first group that came out, they were worried about what they're going to be able to eat. Well, by the time I got there, they knew we could eat anything and everything.

And so I had the steak and some eggs and sausage and all sorts of stuff and then had ice cream and one guy ate two dozen eggs by the way, and then say he was a football player. But we called home and we got a good physical, we got a haircut, we got a new uniform and two days later we flew back to be with our families. Now we did call them and talk to them. And you went back to the nearest regional hospital. And so I went to Montgomery, Alabama, Maxwell Air Force Base, my family lived in North Georgia. So my parents were waiting there, my brother and his wife and son. And we just had a great reunion and we just started getting accustomed to being in the real world again. And we adjusted very quickly overall, but we were, because of the pressure put on by the wives and families on first our government and then the communist government, our government to put more pressure on them. And then the communist government were getting embarrassed because of the pressure about our torture and treatment.

So they stopped the torture in the fall of 1969 when Hồ Chí Minh died. So we had three and a half years to get healthy and get over the torture and get over the shame and guilt and anger and bitterness because we knew if we went home bitter and anger and all that kind of stuff, those negative emotions, we would still be in handcuffs and leg irons. So we worked every day for those three and a half years to get rid of it and we came home very healthy, our PTSD's been very low compared to other combat veterans and we've had great lives. All of our guys have just about all have done really well. Most of us stayed in the service, most of us, the younger ones all went back on flying status. I got requalified, became an instructor pilot right away, went back to Valdosta, Georgia where I'd gone through undergraduate pilot training.

And in the POW camps, our connection with each other was so powerful and so meaningful because it was us against them. And so our team, we worked together, we believed in each other. I lived in a cell, it was about 1800 square feet for over a year and a half with 53 guys, and we're all close friends. There were only twice when one guy yelled at another and he apologized before we

went to bed that night. It was incredible. We became healthy because you had to be authentic. You couldn't pretend you're somebody and you had to take ownership for all of your issues.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Not easily done though, Lee, in the midst of all of it. It's a journey. I wanted to ask you a little bit about, we know the word reintegration is a big word for military coming home, that's like that when war comes home piece. But Lee, you came back to a country by the way, where all was not well, there was a lot happening, the civil rights movement, et cetera. There was a lot of anti-war going on in this country. People were not proud of those who served in Vietnam. We know that a lot of movies came out like Platoon, Hamburger Hill, We Were Soldiers, remember all that. And I mentioned yesterday, Rambo or what have you, Born on the 4th of July. And I'm just thinking about all the narrative through the years related to Vietnam. But Lee, what was it like to come back to a country that was pretty much struggling to bring any type of affirmation for that service and that commitment, that fight that you had over there, that willpower just to get back home?

Lee Ellis: Here's the amazing thing, because of what the wives and families had done, and our government to some degree, to put pressure on the communists about our treatment, POWs and MIAs became famous. There was one wife who spoke at a college football game to 25 or 30,000 people for two minutes at halftime and that kind of thing was happening and we got welcomed home.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, wasn't that about the same time that Tony Orlando had that tie a yellow ribbon-

Lee Ellis: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: ... around the old oak tree piece? I remember as a boy seeing yellow ribbons around oak trees everywhere, as a kid growing up in Pennsylvania.

Lee Ellis: We're driving home, my parents picked me up at the airport and we're driving home. I kept seeing all these yellow ribbons along the highway and we got to my hometown of Commerce, Georgia, they were everywhere. And I said, what is this? And they said, it's the song Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree, Tony Orlando and Dawn. Well, I heard it, and it was actually number one in the spring of 73, 50 years ago, and Tony was invited to come to the Cotton Bowl to play at a veteran's event and he, and Bob Hope was the MC, but he and Dawn sang that song. And one of our couples who's in the book, she had lost her husband, he didn't come home. He was missing in action till we came home and then they declared him dead. And she was there though. Her mother said, you need to go to that event.

She was sitting there and a guy sitting next to her who had a date just out of formality with someone, and he came home and his wife had said, I want a divorce. They didn't have any children. So they're sitting next to each other. He

looks over and sees tears coming down her face and he reaches over and kisses her and puts his hand on her arm and looks at her. And he showed empathy. Well, they started dating and they married at six months later. They've been married 49 years. Can you believe it? Right there, listening to Tony Orlando singing Tie a Yellow Ribbon. But that's, Tony is a close friend of ours. He comes to all of our reunions and usually sings. And two years ago he gave a testimony about his relationship with the Lord. It was so powerful.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, this comes home from me because just this week, as a matter of fact, tomorrow night and we're going to be celebrating 50 years marriage for my sister Ruth Ann and her husband Chuck. Chuck is a retired corporal out of the Pennsylvania State Police Department, but Chuck was a Vietnam veteran. U.S. Marine Corps, his platoon served and they were up in the DMZ zone. They would go back and forth between North and South Vietnam. He told me horrible stories, how he could hear the North Vietnamese chasing their platoon, shooting at them and more and what it was like for him to sleep in the jungle in the middle of the night and more. But their story of togetherness is what we're celebrating tomorrow night of love. Lee, you guys put together this book *Captured by Love*, and I want again for you to tell our audience about why you wrote a book related to love stories that come out of Vietnam. Because there are nuggets in here that I really believe Chuck and Ruth Ann had inside their marriage that allowed them to persevere.

Lee Ellis: Yeah, I think the resilience that we had learned and the humility to be authentic that we had learned, and the same thing with the wives and families going on back home, especially the wives. And so those that were married, many of them stayed married even though their husband was gone five, six, seven, even eight years, their wives were waiting on them when they came home. Some of them wanted a divorce and moved on and the guys accepted that, they didn't have a choice, but they met someone in a couple of cases they met widows of their buddies who were fighter pilots.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Which was amazing to me. Yes-

Lee Ellis: Isn't it incredible?

Dr. Tim Clinton: ... how God ordained all this?

Lee Ellis: Yeah, they had such compassion for each other, such empathy that both had gone through hard times and suffered. And that became a link. One was trying to be empathetic to the other, but they saw that they had a lot in common and they had such great respect for each other. And now as I said, they've been married more than 48 years. A couple of them have passed away, but one guy's wife died while he was a POW. He'd been there about three years, or about two years before he came home. His wife died, she had had a terminal disease and his best buddy had been shot down before he was, and he took their family back to Chattanooga before he was shot down. So he comes home and he meets his buddy's wife and talks to her and they started dating and they got

married six months later and he helped raise her three sons who had lost their father and his son had lost his mother.

And she actually sang in the Billy Graham crusade and he started a prison ministry in Chattanooga, first for the prisoners and then for the prisoner's family. So wonderful stories. They both passed now, but their son has provided their story in the book. These stories are so many of them. Faith comes out as being the anchor point and their commitment to each other, to their mission in life, their ability to be independent and interdependent. I wrote that in this month's blog, but also that's the story of Mo Bakker. And he came home and met Honey and they've been married 49 years now. So it's just amazing.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, as you reflect back even on your own life, as you think about these 20 inspiring stories, a gift to all of us, this is about war and love, it's about men and women, it's about injustice and joy. It's about despair and hope. Is there a story or two in there that just even touches your heart in this phase of your own life with your wife Mary? And as you think and probably come together, and I know you as a group of POWs often meet and try to encourage and still strengthen one another. Can you share something with us?

Lee Ellis: I think from a miraculous perspective, when you read the stories you think, that almost had to be a miracle, didn't it? Because what the women were doing back home, it changed the world for us. And what we were doing there helped us get healthy and ready to go home. And all of that comes together in these stories and the character that had grown and increased in these couples. So when I think about Tom McNich, okay, Tom was single, Air Force Academy class of 64 fighter pilot, outstanding guy, grew up in the mountains right up the road here just in North Carolina. He was a fighter pilot. He was shot down. He was a POW over six years, he comes home, but he had been dreaming on those years. He kept thinking of who would be the ideal girl and she was going to be tall or brunette, slender, young, never married, and he was going to date for a while before he came home. He wasn't going to get serious with anybody.

He's going to enjoy being a bachelor because he hadn't been a bachelor very long when he got captured six and a half years up there. Well, he comes home and lands at Montgomery, Alabama, Maxwell Air Force Base like I did, but he came on a group earlier. And there was a young lady in the audience there whose husband was on that flight. And her best friend was a gal whose husband had passed away from cancer about a year and a half earlier. And her friend was Jewish. Well, Tom had been dreaming about this girl, but she was going to be a Christian because he had strong faith. Well, he meets Yona. Two weeks later, he proposed to her on May the 24th, the night we were in the White House for the largest gala banquet that's ever been held at the White House, 1973, we got invited. He proposed to her that night. They've been married more than 49 years now, and they have the best relationship I've ever seen in a couple.

And so I go to their house and we have blessing, let's pray before we eat. And they have a wonderful faith relationship. And it's just an amazing story, how God put them together. Their faith is strong and they had a wonderful family.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, no doubt you wrote this book for all those who have served, who serve and more and their families and probably many listening right now who may be in a marriage to a Vietnam veteran or someone who is served in the Middle East. Lee, at the end of the day, we also know this. And modern day tragedy is what's happened to a lot of our veterans. Some of them really didn't have the opportunity to figure out that PTSD piece, reintegration was bad for them. They often live in poverty, homeless. We hear so much about that, again, PTSD and suicide among our veterans. Lee, what does that do to your heart and what do you say to those who are listening that might be their narrative, their story right now.

Lee Ellis: It's very painful because I think there's almost nothing worse than to feel alone and that you're not worthy. God has placed in us, love makes us feel worthy. And if you're not receiving love, if you isolate yourself, you're not going to get healthier. And that's what we had going for us. And that's what the wives had going back home, was we felt loved because of what people did for us. And I mentioned earlier when the POWs came home, we got welcomed home. We had a parade in my hometown. Now, yes, a lot of people were against the war, but they knew that prisoners of war should be welcomed home and they did treat us well, whereas the regular Vietnam veterans, many of them were spit on. There are many areas where they couldn't even wear their uniform because they might get attacked. So they were not welcome. And that added to the PTSD of the Vietnam Veterans.

So letting someone know that you care about them, that you appreciate them, that they're valued and worthy. And I do this in leadership coaching. I've been coaching leaders for 27 years, but one of the things I said, you got to get results, and it's good to be results oriented, but you got to connect with people and you got to let them know. And I teach them the four A's. You acknowledge their existence, you accept them for who they are, you affirm them for something they've done, and then you show some ways of appreciating that they're on your team. And the same thing is true at home with your kids, with your spouse. You got to let them know that you value them and how important they are, connect with their heart. And I'm telling you, they're going to get healthier, they're going to perform better, and they're going to pass that on to somebody else. And it's God's love coming to us through us giving past to somebody else. And to me, that's what our job is on this earth.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, we're fighting time again, but I wanted to go back. You came back stateside and you felt God wanted you to stay in the Air Force and you continued on, you got into leadership, you had your own squadron, et cetera. You taught fighter pilots and more. Lee, what is it that maybe you went through that you wanted to make sure got in their heart that helped prepare them for what they might experience? Lee, we're in a fight right now in modern day culture. A lot of

people are afraid, they're nervous, they're worried about our military, whether or not we have a strong national defense. They hear wars and rumors of wars around the globe and more. Just want to hear from you some of your thoughts.

Lee Ellis:

I think it all has to start with your character, and character's based on your values. You got to guard and protect your character. I have to guard my character every day. I might say something I shouldn't say, I might do something I shouldn't do. There were human beings. You go read the Bible. Every star in the Bible got off track and did some things that were unethical. So we have to work at that. And then secondly, you have to believe in yourself and believe that God has given you talents and perspective for a mission that He has for you in life. When I retired in 1990, the airlines just started hiring military pilots and I thought, well, that'd be a good job. I could do that. And I prayed about it and I thought about it and I just knew that was not what God had planned for me, He had something else.

And that was the best decision I ever made, was to go develop a career assessment program for Larry Burkett. And that led to, after that was all done, led to helping leaders hire and manage better. And that led to a leadership consulting company. So remember, you are unique. Listen to the Lord's direction in how He has wired you, how He has helped you think, and what are your best talents? Focus on that mission and purpose that's unique for you, and then receive His love, give it to others, and you're probably going to have a real good life.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Yeah. Lee, I was looking at some of the statistics, 58,220 fatal casualties in the Vietnam War, Americans. In the midst of it we know again that this is the 50th anniversary of the end of the war or our engagement in Vietnam and the return of our POWs. I think the war ended in April of 1975. At least some 684 POWs returned home alive after the Vietnam War, of which you were one of them. But we also know that there are those out there who are still praying for even after all these years, thinking of 1,582 Americans who are still unaccounted for according to the defense, POW/MIA accounting agency. Lee, some closing thoughts to those families out there whose sons and daughters gave all. And as they reflect on this 50th anniversary and we have shared your story of grace and love and faith and the ability to help persevere.

Lee Ellis:

I think that's, it's so difficult to lose a member of your family. And I lost four roommates that were part of the war, either in the early part or as POWs, but they weren't family. And I know that's very, very difficult. And I think we have to just believe that God has a purpose for us in our life and that there's some things that we can't control or fix, but we still have a mission. And our mission is to receive His love and to give it to others and to make up for that. As we receive love from others, it makes us healthier. And when we give it to others, it makes them healthier.

So think of ways that we can get connected to people, connected at the heart with others who are some similarities that we do. The Gold Families Club where

people are MIA, wives and families of MIAs, missing in action, KIAs, killed in action. Staying connected to people who've gone through something similar to you is so important. It worked for the POWs, it worked for the wives. Stay connected to people who've gone through a similar hardship and it will help you to feel safe and to grow healthier.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, what a delight to have you. I know that you have an organization Leading With Honor and Freedom Star Media and so much more. God's working in and through you. You care about the lives of those around you, especially those again who have served, those who serve and their families. Lee, what an honor to have you. Thank you for your service. One last comment about *Captured by Love*. Again, your new book, *Inspiring True Romance Stories from Vietnam POWs*. And again, Lee, the life lessons in there, the stories and so much more. I think anybody who would pick this book up would be just fascinated by what you guys put together.

Lee Ellis: Tim, about 75% of the people who mentioned the book to me say, I'm laughing on one page and I got tears on the next. It's amazing. And they say, I'm just loving it. I'm giggling and laughing on one page. I got tears on the next and off to the next one to be laughing again, because it's so emotional, but it's so real. And so there's a lot of humor in it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. And a lot of life lessons I think at the end of every chapter about what you can take away with you. And it's all anchored by the way in our but God story.

Lee Ellis: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, what a delight to have you. I know Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, again, thinks so much of you and remember fondly Larry Burkett and the ministry and so much more. But again, thank you for your service. We're delighted you took time to join us and we celebrate you. Thank you again for your faithfulness.

Lee Ellis: Thank you so much, Tim. Good to be with you again after all these years and you're doing a great job.

Roger Marsh: Well, those are great words of wisdom from United States Air Force retired Colonel Lee Ellis today here on Family Talk, and that was the conclusion of his two-part conversation with our co-host, Dr. Tim Clinton about being a prisoner of war during the Vietnam conflict and the love stories he has compiled through fellowship with former POWs, fellow comrades, some very courageous men indeed. Lee's own love story and many others are included in his new book called *Captured By Love: Inspiring True Romance Stories from Vietnam POWs*.

But before we go for today, it has come to our attention that some unscrupulous individuals have been using Dr. James Dobson's image and likeness to falsely endorse online products. We want to make it very clear that



Dr. Dobson and the organization that he leads have nothing to do with these scams. And I mean nothing.

We do not, nor have we ever endorsed any outside products or services, let alone any product or service that is not in line with biblical principles and values. We cherish the trust and confidence that you have given us through the years, and we will always seek to uphold it. I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of Dr. Dobson and everyone here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thank you so much for listening today. We also appreciate your prayers and your faithful financial support. You've been listening to another edition of Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.