



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Captured by Love: Stories of Vietnam POWs – Part 1

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

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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.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Friends, welcome into Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host of the broadcast here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm honored to serve alongside Dr. Dobson as resident authority on mental health and relationships here at the JDFI. And I also serve as President of the American Association of Christian Counselors. We're so glad you joined us today.

Hey, over the next two days, we're going to be joined by retired U.S. United States Air Force Colonel Lee Ellis, a true hero, as you're about to find out. This American fighter pilot, a brave patriot, was shot down during the Vietnam War in 1967. He was held as a POW, a prisoner of war, for more than five years in Hanoi and surrounding prison camps. He grew up in a Christian home, but it was during his time as a POW that God's protection and provision for his life became the most real.

Now after spending 1,955 days in captivity, Lee was released during Operation Homecoming on March 14th, 1973. But he didn't retire. He picked up right where he left off and resumed his Air Force career. He went on to command a flying squadron and started leadership development sanction programs and efforts within the Air Force before retiring as a full Colonel. Lee is now the founder and president of Leadership Freedom and Freedom Star Media. He has authored or co-authored several books including *Leading with Honor: Leadership Lessons From The Hanoi Hilton* and *Captured by Love: Inspiring True Romance Stories From Vietnam POWs*. We're going to talk a lot about that today and tomorrow on the broadcast. Lee and his wife Mary call the Atlanta area home. They have four grown children, six grandchildren. I love that.

Lee, welcome into Family Talk. We're so honored to have you. Thank you for joining us. Dr. Dobson and his wife Shirley send their regards.

Lee Ellis: Well, thank you so much, Tim. Great to see you again, after a good many years. We were there in the early days of your organization there, but also I think about Dr. Dobson a lot because I was on his program with Larry Burkett. When I

retired from the Air Force in 1990, Larry hired me to come and build a career assessment program. It started out as Career Pathways and became Life Career and Life Pathways, and we developed this assessment, Career Direct, and it's still used worldwide. But we were on the program with Dr. Dobson a couple of times and that was just, oh, it was just so honored to be there, but it was so much fun to be there with them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, again, delighted to have you join us. You have an inspiring life and story. You've come out with a new book entitled, *Captured By Love: Inspiring True Romance Stories From Vietnam POWs*. But, Lee, there's so much to your history, your life that I want take our listeners back and understand who you were as a young man and then what started to unfold and how God absolutely captivated your life and kept you strong in the midst of a storm. Take us back, Lee. Tell us about what it was like growing up as a young boy, your young life, how you were raised in a Christian home, when did you give your life to Christ?

Lee Ellis: Yes. I grew up in a farm in North Georgia, about 10, 11 miles from Athens, Georgia, the University of Georgia. And that had a place because my mother had graduated there in 1931 and her brother had played football there and he was a VA doctor when I was growing up. So I had that background, but I actually plowed mules and worked on the farm but early on I started wanting to be a pilot. And I'd be out there in the fields and I'd look up at those airplanes during the Korean War and I said, "That's where I am. I'm not going to be behind a mule all my life."

So sure enough, I got out of high school and went to University of Georgia, got in the Air Force ROTC. And I was not the best student. I was probably one of the worst students that ever graduated in four years. But in Air Force ROTC, I was a distinguished graduate, number two in my class, and got a regular commission and three days after I finished school, I went straight to Valdosta and Flight School. 53 weeks later I got my wings and an assignment. Now this was August, 1966. It said, F-4 Phantom, which is the Air Force newest fighter at that time, Pipeline Southeast Asia. And over half my class were assigned Pipeline Southeast Asia. August, 1966, the war, the air war especially, but all the war was building up in Vietnam and that meant as quick as I got combat trained, I would be headed off to war.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And you did. Lee, you wound up over in Vietnam. As I read through your history, your life, you did several tours of duty, I think, and you were some 53 combat flights at the time?

Lee Ellis: Yes, I had 53 combat missions over the North and then I had some more, maybe 10 or 15 more, over the South, flying close air support for the Army and the Marine Corps in the northern part of South Vietnam, I Corps, as it's called. And then also have some interdiction missions over the trails in Laos.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah, Lee, just for those who are listening, and probably some of them understand this because they can go back and they remember the Vietnam

War, but Lee, you had 53 combat missions. No doubt, it's not for the faint of heart. You've got to be well-trained, pretty bold, very courageous. You're flying a pretty serious piece of equipment, aircraft. But you're getting hammered. I mean, you're getting shot at. I mean this is dangerous.

Lee Ellis: Yeah, we got shot at most every day and I was hit several times. But on the 7th of November, 1967, I got there to Vietnam the first week of July and on the 7th of November my airplane was hit and just blew up, and very unusual. And there's another story to that, but I don't want to go into it now, but it just blew up right over enemy territory. My teammate, there were two of us in the F-4, two pilots in the Air Force F-4s and the Navy Marine Corps just had one pilot and one radar intercept officer. And I was a junior pilot in the backseat, but we both had to eject immediately. And fortunately everything worked perfectly. We were very well trained and I was not terrified or scared. I was just doing what instantly I knew what I had to do. I did it, made my parachute coming down and planned and everything. Did my parachute landing fall. My partner, they actually caught him before he did his parachute landing fall.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Wow.

Lee Ellis: They caught him in his parachute, captured him right then. Well, I got on the ground and jumped in an old bomb crater and pulled out my emergency radio and called my wing man and said, "Hey, I'm 200 meters north of the river, start strafing at 300. I'm headed south." I saw him a couple years after the war and they said, "Man, we heard your call, but we decided we couldn't shoot that good. We're afraid we'd hit you." And I said, "You're very wise, because they captured me within 90 seconds."

Dr. Tim Clinton: No kidding.

Lee Ellis: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, what was going through your mind? What was that initial phase like when you realized, "Hey, I'm captured. We're in trouble here?"

Lee Ellis: Well, once I was captured, up until that point, I was totally alert and thinking of ways to evade. But once I was captured, they stripped me down to my underwear and then gave me my flight suit back. And I was in shock for a little bit, but then I survived and I could see they were trying to figure out what to do with me.

Now as it turned out, the militia guy in charge there was an incredible person. I didn't know this until last year. I found out he was greatly admired, tough, and a Christian. Isn't that amazing? And he took care of me, he protected me. He wouldn't let the local people beat me up. He made his soldiers protect me. But he tied me up, put a rope around my neck, tied my hands up, put a blindfold on me and led me village to village to figure out till he got in touch with the party

bosses and they told him what to do. And eventually we started moving north toward Hanoi and it took me two weeks to get to Hanoi. And during those times I knew that I had to turn my hands over to the Lord, and my life over to the Lord even more, that He would take care of me if that's what's supposed to happen.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

The ability to persevere through that kind of adversity and challenge, I'm not sure people really are prepared. And we try to prepare our soldiers to deal with that, but Lee, it goes to places that you have to reach really far down in and find that resilience, I guess, to keep going. I remember in grad school I read the story of Viktor Frankl and he wrote that book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, talked about being in the concentration camp in Nazi Germany. And he said, "Our quest for meaning," in other words, how to transcend that, "is the only thing that's going to get you through that kind of a horrific situation."

Lee, Vietnam became the most unpopular war, I think, in American history. You were in the midst of all that. And you saw the torture, the mistreatment of people that began to be paraded, I think, out in media and more. Lee, take us into that. Help us to understand what was going on at that time. And this is what, 2023, the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, and the release of POWs. I think I read, Lee, is this true? 684 POWs returned home alive after the Vietnam War. But it was an absolute nightmare trying to get that done, especially in the middle of the climate the country was in, Kent State, all kinds of craziness going on.

Lee Ellis:

Well, the thing is we were well-trained. Those who were POWs between eight years and five years. I was there five and a half, but I have friends that were there eight years as POWs. And then we stopped the bombing in the summer, early fall, of 1968 up there. We stopped all the bombing. Mostly all the POWs in Hanoi were air crews. And so for three and a half years, we didn't have any more bombing up there, so we didn't get any more POWs. So we didn't know what was going on back home. Then in December of '71, but mainly in '72, they started bombing again because they were invading the South and they wouldn't sign an agreement to let the POWs go. And so that ultimately was what Nixon had to go back do. In December of 1972, President Nixon authorized 11 day bombing campaign that brought them to the table and they signed the agreement to let us come home.

And by that time, counting the ones in Laos and South Vietnam and the other army ones that were in North Vietnam and a couple other camps, there were about 600 and something, as you said, up there. And there were just under 400 of us that were there five years or more. And then we got another 160 or 70 the last year that were in the Hanoi Hilton Complex, which was six or seven camps around Hanoi.

When I got there, two weeks after I was captured, November the 22nd, 1967, I was put in a cell that was six and a half by seven feet with three other guys. So you can imagine being locked up for the next eight months with three other guys that are air crews, F-4 pilots and crew members, and we're strong

personalities and we're pretty confident. But up there, the one thing that was we became teammates in a powerful way and we had great leaders. And in my books I talk about the incredible courage and leadership, mission and people of our leaders, and it went from the top down. So we always had somebody who was a great mentor and a great example, setting an example of courage and commitment to our mission and also helping us build a team.

So we had to communicate covertly. We had tap code. We have one of the stories about the guy who brought in the tap code, Smitty Harris, in our new book, *Captured By Love*. In fact, they were on the Memorial Day concert in Washington DC, Smitty and Louise. He's 94. He was going to be there, but he had a little bit of health problem, hurt his back. And so they had a video of them. But they had an actor and actress playing their role. And then I was on ABC News showing them the tap code in how Smitty had brought that in, enabled us to communicate covertly. And they never were able to break us from that. And that communications brought collaboration, it brought enhancement of our culture, but it really helped us to be surviving that whole ordeal.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That kind of stamina, that ability to press through, Lee. Was there maybe a scripture or some thought that maybe God put in your heart that really helped you through your time of captivity?

Lee Ellis: Well, there were several. It's been so long now it's hard for me to remember which ones were more important. But one of them that I went over a lot was the first Psalm. I went over it a lot. And of course the 23rd Psalm a lot. And beyond that, right now I've kind of moved on, but one of my cellmates grew up Catholic. His parents got upset with the school where his brother was, and so they pulled him out of the Catholic Church and the school, and he hadn't been to church, but two or three times in his whole life.

And he would look over at me and say, "Lee, do you know any Bible verses?" Of course I'd memorized some growing up and I'd share one or two. And then the next day he'd say, "Do you know anymore?" And finally I said, "Ken, I've run out." But then our neighbors next door had some and so we got more Bible verses tapped through the walls and later they would roll up a blanket and talk very loudly and we would get them through the walls that way. So the Bible verses were very important. People were memorizing them all the time.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, were there moments where you saw people raw and to the edge and you had to help each other along? When I think of trauma, I think the antidote to trauma really is relationship, that ability to press into our relationship with God. And we need each other, friends for the fire.

Lee Ellis: Totally agree. That's the most important things. So the first time I was tortured, they wanted me to fill out and they were bringing everybody that had come in recently, to do a three page biography. Okay? Questions. I figured they were doing it for Russia so they could build knowledge about American pilots. But anyway, it's a three-page biography of all of our background, our family, our

income, our jobs, all the training we'd had, all this kind of stuff. Well, our commitment was to the six articles of the Code of Conduct, which we'd all memorized in training that we're going to be loyal to our country, we won't share anything with them. We'll only give them name, rank, service number, date of birth, of that kind of stuff.

So I resisted and refused to do it, and eventually they started torturing me and eventually after a long time I gave in and I told them I would fill it out. Well, I did fill it out and the only thing I put on there that was true was my father's first and last name, hoping that someday I'd get to write a letter home. And I did at two year point. A year and a half later, I did get to write a letter, six line letter, and I got one at two and a half years, a six line letter.

But when they tortured me and I agreed to fill it out and I did and they put me back in the leg irons and handcuffs and blindfolded me, I'm still laying in this filthy torture room, and I laid there and cried like a baby. I was so ashamed that I was not tough enough to resist that and deny them what they wanted. Well, I get back to my cell and one of my guys had already come back. He didn't last long as I did, but my cell leader lasted longer. And he was a New York State wrestling champion in high school and wrestled at the University of Pennsylvania. And he was one of the toughest guys in all the prison cells and just a great person of great character. And he lasted longer than I did, of course. But he said, "Man, we did our best."

And then we got contact a little few months later with other people and they said, "Man, everybody's been through that. You did your best. Some of us are tougher than others, but as long as you do your best to resist them and then get ready to bounce back, we're proud of you. Stay connected. We're going to go home proud. We ain't leaving without you."

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Wow. Together. That's the motto in the military, "I've got your back. I'm your buddy." And it's trained and it's ingrained in you from day one, isn't it, Lee? Lee, that's true in life. We need each other so much. Lee, what was it like for your family? I'm thinking about did they know you were alive? Were they just praying you were alive? I mean, 1,955 days is a long time.

Lee Ellis:

Five years, four months, and two weeks. Well, the fact that I pulled out that emergency radio and made that radio call? They told my parents that, "He made a radio call after he got on the ground, so we know he was alive on the ground." Now, with a lot of people, they didn't know that. So they knew that I was alive on the ground, so they had hope that I was still going to be alive. And then I wrote my first letter at two years, and they got it two and a half, but they had assumed during that time that I was probably going to be alive and I was. So that was helpful for them, but it wasn't 100%,

And then in the '69 timeframe, the League of Wives and Families got going and my parents got into that. My mother was a school teacher and a pretty good speaker. So she spoke at Rotary Club, churches. And these wives and families,

they got millions of letters written to the Communist delegation at the Paris Peace Talk and a lot of the wives and families took them over there and confronted them with these letters from Americans demanding that we be treated with lenient and humane treatment, which they had signed the Geneva Accords that required that. So that was a big part. That kept them busy and hopeful. And then finally they got a letter from me, and I think that really lifted them up too.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, in 1973, again, the 50th anniversary this year, Operation Homecoming, and you're going home. I can't even imagine what the feelings were like.

Lee Ellis: Well, by that time we were always kind of thinking, "Well, someday we're going to go home." We believed that. And for me, initially it was going to be six months from now, and then the July of '68, I said, "It'll be a year." And then in '69 I said, "I can make it two more years." But it was really three and a half. So you just learned to do that. But when we got ready to go home, we knew they were required by the Paris Agreement. The protocol said they would notify us within 48 hours and give us a copy of the protocol to the agreement saying that we'd be released in over a 60 day period, first in, first out, except sick and wounded first. So we were going home in groups. I was in the third group that came home. They were almost all the people from the summer and fall of '67 and early '68 in the third group. So the first group came out on February the 12th. The agreement was signed on January the 21st. So that was kind of what was happening.

But by that time, our emotions were so controlled and so flat. And we didn't want to give the enemy propaganda so when they read that to us out in the courtyard at the prison, we did not act excited or anything. We just looked at each other and turned and walked away because we knew they'd take pictures of us celebrating and they would say, "Well, they were always against it and now it's over. See how happy they are." We weren't going to give them that. So we just walked away. But we went back and talked about it and decided, "Yes, we'll wait and see. We'll believe it when it happens." And it wasn't until we got on that C-141 at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi, and it broke ground and we started cheering. And we could feel the wheels come off, the cheering started. And then when we got over international water, the aircraft commander came on the intercom and said, "We're now feet wet, or international waters." And then it really started cheering.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Lee, we're fighting time so much, but I'm just enthralled with you and this story. You have so much to share about reintegration. You are going to continue to share tomorrow more about your story and what it was like for you to come back stateside. But in the midst of it, you put together, with a good friend of yours, a book called *Captured by Love: Inspiring True Romance Stories From Vietnam POWs*. And, Lee, what I love about it is these are stories about people who went to war in relationship, those who came back after the war who developed a relationships. And it's about hardship, it's about resilience. But you

wrote this book for what reason? I want people to understand where we're going to go tomorrow because this is a gift to all of us.

Lee Ellis:

I knew the guys, I'd lived with a lot of them in the POW camp, and so at reunions, I kept hearing these romance stories. I'd known some of the guys were married before, and some of them, but I met their wives, and their wives were so fun and telling stories. And I decided Hollywood couldn't write a script this wild and crazy. This is real and somebody needs to write a book about it. And then a couple years later, I realized that we were getting old and nobody was writing a book about it so I reached out to a friend of mine and I asked him did he know anybody who could help me with this? And he said, "Well, I've got a friend, Greg Godek, who's a romance writer, and he can probably help you."

So I contacted Greg. We have 20 stories in there. Some were married and stayed married seven, eight years. Some were married and came home and their marriage had been a little shaky or for some reason, their wives were POW wife for six, seven years. Some of them were MIA. They didn't even know if they were coming home and they had divorced them or wanted to divorce and move on. But within six months they met somebody and they've been married 49 years now. And some of us were single and we met somebody after we came home, most of the guys within a few weeks, and they had proposed within two or three months and were married and within six months and they've been married 49 years now. And I was probably about the last bachelor because I dated all these girls, but I never met the one until I met Mary and I knew pretty quickly and she knew pretty quickly that this was the one. We've been married 48 and a half years.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Well, we're going to talk about that and a whole lot more tomorrow here on the broadcast. Also, Lee, how God kept you in the service. You continued on, became a real leader, retired as a full bird Colonel and had your own squadron, and you've got a few words to say about where we're at in terms of national defense and training our warriors to defend America in her wars as we go forward.

Lee, what a delight to have you today. Seriously, I can't wait to continue the discussion tomorrow on the 50th anniversary of the end of U.S. engagement in Vietnam and the return of our POWs. By the way, we'd be remiss, Lee, if we didn't say there are still 1,582 Americans still unaccounted for according to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. And we really want to bring honor and respect to them and their families.

Lee, what a delight to have you. On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife Shirley, we salute you and can't wait to join together again tomorrow. Thank you so much for joining us.

Lee Ellis:

Thank you, Tim.

Roger Marsh:

As you heard in firsthand testimony, the POWs of the Vietnam War endured incomprehensible emotional trauma and physical abuse. Please join us again tomorrow to hear more about how the United States Air Force Retired Colonel Lee Ellis returned home to American soil safely and grappled with a new challenge as he readjusted to life after the war and even found love. You will not want to miss this broadcast.

And by the way, the next time you see a veteran on the street or at the store, I often see them wearing those retired service caps signifying their branch and division, make sure you thank them for their service. They will appreciate it.

Okay, before we go, it has come to our attention that unscrupulous individuals have been using Dr. Dobson's image and likeness to falsely endorse online products. We want to make it clear here at Family Talk that Dr. James Dobson and the organization he leads have nothing to do with these scams. 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. From the very beginning, Dr. James Dobson's ministry has been guided by Proverbs 22:1, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver or gold." We cherish the trust and confidence you have given us through the years and we always seek to uphold it.

I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of Dr. Dobson and everyone here at the JDFI, thank you for making us a part of your day. May God richly bless you and your family. And be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

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