

HOPE

A Former POW's Story

By Sara Clark, GDVS Editor

As a POW of the Vietnam War, Colonel Ben Purcell knows what it is to fight for his country. Although he was returned to the United States over 25 years ago, Purcell's memory of the event remains vivid and stands as a stark reminder to the freedom American's so often take for granted today.

Purcell's imprisonment began after his helicopter was shot down on February 8th, 1968. He spent 62 months in various prison camps, 58 of those months in solitary confinement. At capture there were six men who were taken prisoner. The Vietcong striped the men of all possessions - even their combat boots. Their thumbs were tied together behind their backs, and a rope tied above their elbows. Then the Vietcong told them to march. For days the men hiked with no shoes and little food or water, stopping at various places along the way to the prison camp. On February 14, the prisoners were interrogated for the first time. It was during this first interrogation that Purcell remembered it was his fortieth birthday- a thing he never thought he could forget, "From this point things went downhill fast" Purcell commented, and he remembers wanting to give up. But Ben Purcell always exuded an air of confidence which held him together.

Yet, no matter how together he was, nothing could have prepared him for the five years that followed. Kept in solitary confinement the bulk of the time, Purcell slept in a 10 x 12-foot cell, and even though he was moved to various prisons, the set up was always the same. He was surrounded by Vietcong guards and interrogators who constantly prodded at him to turn on his country. "Deny yourself as American Serviceman, the Vietcong said. Criticize yourself as the aggressor - then things will get good for you," Purcell continues, "They told me I would be given better rations if I gave in. But to betray myself and my country was not an option for me." In fact, not only did Purcell not give in, but he was able to escape twice. The attempts, unfortunately, were not a success in the way of com-

pletion, but they were definitely an inner victory. Ben Purcell had managed to show the Vietcong that their prison could be penetrated. Still, he was striped of all personal items, including his wedding band, a symbol of the bond between he and his wife Anne, and Purcell wondered if he would ever again see his family. To serve as a reminder, Purcell fashioned a new wedding band, one made from bamboo and sown together with some blue thread. Seeing that symbol of love around his finger helped Ben remember what he had to live for, "I knew I had Anne and the children at home waiting for my return."



Ben Purcell reunited with his wife Anne in 1973.

The truth is that Ben Purcell did not know if he would ever see his family again, or for that matter any other American or even the American Flag. Reflecting back on thoughts he had while in captivity, Purcell did wonder after a few years had gone by if it would be fair to go back to his family when he surmised that Anne had already gone through the grieving process. But that thought only lasted for a short time and Ben Purcell never gave up on his life or his country, "Every morning I would wake up and say [to myself] Ben, I hope this is the day you're going home, then the sun would go down and I'd say, Well, tomorrow is another day."

When the time finally came for Purcell to be returned to the United States on March 27, 1973,

he would not let himself get too excited. He didn't rejoice until he was on American soil because even in the last days of captivity, the threat of death still hung in the air.

It is because of these experiences and a strong faith that Ben Purcell's pride for America is so alive today. "Even something as simple as saying the pledge of Allegiance means more to me than words could express," commented Purcell. He also knows that he is one of the lucky ones. Many POW/MIA's came back home and had difficulty readjusting to life in America. Some people can not handle reentering society, while others are plagued by physical and emotional effects of their captivity and find every day life presents hardships.

HOPE

A Former POW's Story cont.

While Purcell suffered from the loss of five years not in America, he did not have trouble readjusting to life with his family. What did change, in his view, was America itself. Ben found that women, for instance, played a much bigger role in the military than they had when he had left five years earlier. The government and policy was continuing to change, and it seemed that the Army was commanded by committees. Race relations had also become a major issue. Purcell did make adjustments then, but will never be able to completely fill the gap of those lost years.

The memories Ben has of those five years are wrapped up in the many tales of his everyday prison life. For each incidence



Former Prisoners of War (Vietnam) visiting the White House, September 1973.

L-R Warrant Officer Donald Rander, U.S. Army; Mr. Bernhard Eiehl, Nurse with Maltese Aid Society (West Germany); Charles Willis, Civilian Station Manager, Armed Forces Radio Station, Hue VN; Marc Cayer, Civilian Agriculture Specialist (Canada); Col. Ben Purcell, U.S. Army

that Ben Purcell experienced, is an in depth story on how he dealt with it and still managed to survive. It truly is a wonder. The most common thread that runs through his entire captivity, however, is his relationship with his wife, Anne Purcell. While he always presented an air of confidence throughout his imprisonment, Ben admits to having "low" periods, and even bouts with depression and despair more than once. But it has, and always will remain the thoughts of his wife and family and their love and support of him that pulled him through each valley. "I do not know what would have happened if I did not have Anne waiting for me" Purcell confided.

The saddest element to the story is that more people don't know about it. Ben Purcell's capture – while tragic – is not out of the ordinary. Throughout the last century, America has experienced war and felt the effects. The scar left on POW/MIA's and their families is still prevalent today. We all know how important history is to our future survival, but many do not know of the POW/MIA issue that still exists in America today. People need to be reminded that thousands of Ben Purcell's still live in America, and throughout the world.

These days Purcell does not remain silent about the battles he had, but instead embraces them and speaks to all who will hear him about the importance of remembering all POW/MIA's.

He harbors no vengeance and speaks with the calm strength achieved through the trials of war and years of life. "It is hard to forgive, but it is the only way to survive and proceed to a higher plain of existence. You have to have enough love and forgiveness in your heart and then you can get along with all others regardless of background."

Speaking with Ben Purcell brings a type of peace to one's heart. To see a man, who has created a wonderful life for himself, despite adversity, gives hope to the idea that man is never too lost. Ben tells his audiences, "When I shake another person's hand, it fills me with joy. Such a simple act of human contact that we all perform means much more when the opportunity has been taken from you for a long time."

It is men such as Ben Purcell who remind us that POW/MIA's and their families paid a heavy toll in defending our country. We could never appropriately give thanks for the sacrifices that were made for our freedom. People need to know about these men and women and recognize them as individuals who experienced parts of life we will never see. It is a large task, but one the American people should never give up hope on. As Ben Purcell said, "Where there is life, there is hope."



Photo taken upon retirement from active duty on August 31, 1980