

## **Brigadier General Robinson Risner** *“I felt like I was 9 feet tall”*

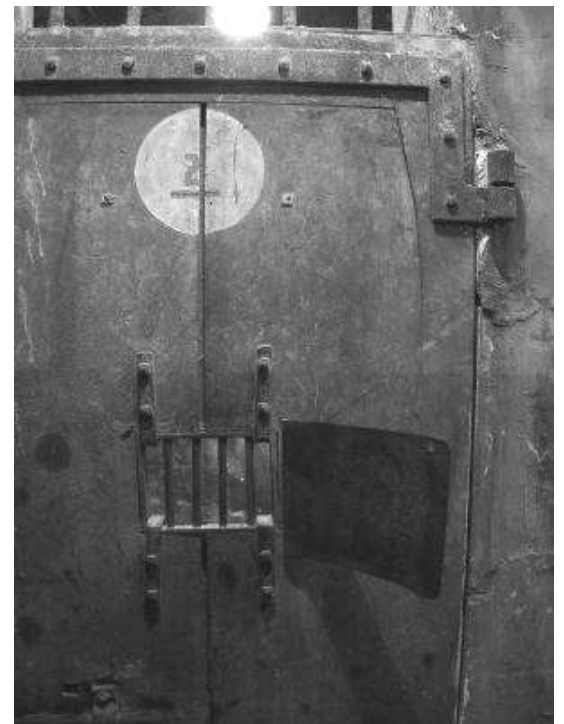
Brigadier General Robinson Risner was a senior ranking officer, who was held and tortured for seven and a half years in the infamous Hanoi Hilton, a North Vietnamese



prison for some of our POW's. Senior officers, who rotated commands as they were moved in and out of solitary confinement or singled out for torture, report that The Lord's Prayer was spoken from the depths of the soul to bring courage to the 47 men whose total days in captivity totaled 108,116 days. In those dark and terrifying times rotting away thousands of miles from home, Colonel Robinson Risner recounted in his book about their decision to conduct unit worship and prayer services in defiance of the communist North Vietnamese, another military institution like the Air Force hostile to prayer. To Risner and most other POWs there is little doubt of the absolute military necessity of leader-led unit prayer to their survival as an American military unit:

I could not have existed if I had not been able to pray. To be able to mention in prayer the names of my wife, children, friends or relatives, or one of my fellow POWs who I knew was being tortured or mistreated, brought us together. The thousands of miles, the walls of my cell, the guards, were all transcended by this dimension of communication.

The Commanders at the Hanoi Hilton knew that the unit would need total participation to bolster morale and to resist their captors. Since there were a few agnostics, they agreed to make the service both patriotic and religious. The Code of Conduct, written for POWs, would be tested in a very matter-of-fact course of action —“I will trust in my God and the United States of America.” Along with the decision to pray, there had to be planning for the eminent possibility of severe life and



death consequences to this simple display of loyalty to God and country by men who remembered that America's national motto is **"In God We Trust:"** Despite blunt threats of reprisal, Risner reported:

[A] decision was made that we would have church service regardless of the consequences. The next task was to predict what the Vietnamese reaction would be, as well as develop some contingency responses on our part. We thought we knew how the Vietnamese operated, and we expected to have some losses.<sup>1</sup>

In violation of North Vietnamese prayer policy, on December 26, 1970, a choir of six voices sang from toilet paper hymnals, and officers officiated. No one POW was the sole prayer leader as all had a part in the church service; but on February 7, 1971, the enemy had had enough and broke in during a closing hymn, and ordered the prayer service stopped. The prisoners continued to sing and ended the service by praying the Lord's Prayer together as Colonel Risner, not a chaplain, led and prayed the Benediction. In the next few seconds, the Vietnamese grabbed Risner to drag him to solitary confinement.

Today the grand statue of Risner at the Air Force Academy is nine feet tall. As he was dragged out the remaining 46 POWs in the room began singing "The Star Spangled Banner" to show their faith and support. After his release from captivity, Risner was asked how he felt when the men began singing. **"I felt like I was 9 feet tall and could go bear hunting with a switch."** Despite severe persecution and torture, the POWs continued to hold prayer services - even while in solitary confinement by listening to each other pray from within their cells. Admiral Jeremiah Denton, who shared command in the Hanoi Hilton with Admiral Stockdale, Colonel Risner, and others, wrote of this time in his book, *When Hell Was In Session*,

A man does a lot of praying in an enemy prison.  
Prayer, even more than sheer thought, is the  
firmest anchor.<sup>2</sup>

In 2001, at the dedication of the Risner memorial at the Air Force Academy, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent letters of congratulations, calling Risner a role model saying, **"Now more than ever, we need to draw on the strength from those who have gone before."** Yet eleven years after the dedication of Risner's statue on the Air Force grounds, a continual barrage of gloating media reports reveal the Air Force Academy's and the U.S. Air Force's openly hostile

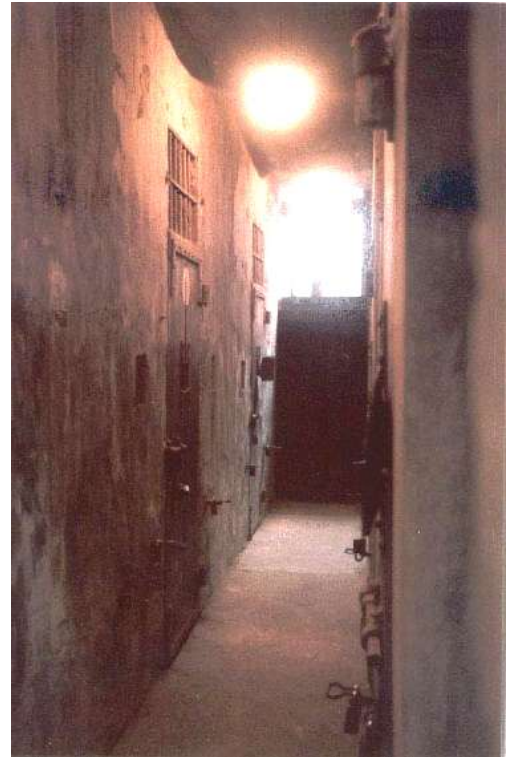


<sup>1</sup> Colonel Robinson Risner. *The Passing of the Night. My Seven Years As a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese*. New York: Random House, 1973, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Quoting Jeremiah Denton, Jr. (1983). *The EYEWITNESS HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR 1961-75*. Ballantine Books. See also, Jeremiah A. Denton, Jr. *When Hell Was In Session: A Personal Story of Survival as a P.O.W. in North Vietnam*. NY: Readers Digest Press, 1976.

position to the prayers of leaders like Risner, even as America is again at war. Pitching out the source of the “strength” of a Risner and his fellow POW’s, and in spite of the unbroken American history of leader-led unit prayer that reaches back 230 years in our military, the Air Force Academy, the Pentagon, and the White House, are surrendering to provocative attacks by organizations like the ACLU, B’nai B’rith, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Jewish Committee, and their allies, with guidelines which severely limit prayers. This disregard for the long battle-tested tenet of training and practice for military leadership, which includes prayer, will no doubt, if you ask men “who have gone before” have a “real, not hypothetical, adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, standards, or discipline,” for those in the future who will go in harms way.

Colonel Risner’s stand joined by other POWs against the North Vietnamese anti-prayer policy in 1971 caused them to be held in “punishment and separate” from other POWs until a few days before release. Risner’s memorial at the Air Force Academy stands like a mountain against all attempts to suppress prayer, and honors the American Military’s First Principles that sustain those called upon to go for us. Untested political experiments in wartime jeopardize the strength of future military leaders, who will someday need to draw upon “faith,” the same strength that sustained a courageous Command leadership through seven years at the Hanoi Hilton. The attempts to suppress prayer should be resisted with the same determination and force of will exemplified by Col. Risner and the other POWs in the prison system of communist North Vietnam, no matter what it may cost us.



It remains the duty of all public officials to ensure that all Military Training Academies, both state and federal, fully prepare our future soldiers and officers for the rigor and peril of combat, which must always include frequent leader-led unit prayer. The Declaration of Independence recognizes the “Creator” as the source of our law and liberty as “the laws of nature and of Nature’s God” establishing a fixed standard, a higher discipline – a battle-tested standard – to restore and uphold against years of disturbing reports of multiple military crises against America’s first military principles of virtue, honor, patriotism and subordination, called “Exemplary Conduct.”

Virtue, honor, and prayer recall to all military and civilian leaders that, as John Adams said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” This is not the time to leave the field to “domestic enemies” who would have the temerity to urge Congress to force our soldiers to fight “without a prayer.”