

Welcome to freedom

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Col. Murphy Neal Jones (A&S '60) wanted to be a fighter pilot since he was in the first grade. He joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps while at Tulane and was commissioned a second lieutenant when he graduated in 1960, earning his pilot's wings the next year.

On June 29, 1966, Jones participated in the first bombing raid on the North Vietnam capital of Hanoi. He was on his third mission when he piloted his F-105 Thunderchief laden with 700-pound bombs over the heavily defended city. Before he could drop the payload, Jones took fire from rockets and anti-aircraft cannons. His plane was hit and on fire when he ejected over the outskirts of Hanoi at more than 600 mph at an altitude of only 300 feet.

Jones remembers hitting the ground and bouncing 10 to 15 feet in the air. The impact dislocated his shoulder, completely broke his left arm, fractured six vertebrae and tore both ACLs.

Jones was captured and paraded through Hanoi, where he says people lined the streets to throw "everything they had" at him. This was just the beginning of Jones' ordeal. He would spend the next 2,420 days as a prisoner of war.

He was among the first American POWs released in 1973 as a part of the Paris peace agreements.

Jones remembers the moment when he and 100 or so other men were waiting near the airfield, and he first saw the C-141 that he would board.

"The plane had an American flag on the tail, and they were flying an American flag out the window," Jones says. "I remember when I got onboard and took a seat and they cranked up the engines; once we broke ground there was a big cheer. About 15 minutes later the pilot came over the public address and said, 'Gentlemen, welcome aboard. We have just crossed the coast of North Vietnam. Welcome to freedom.'"

While on the flight from Hanoi to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, Jones and the other POWs read special editions of Newsweek and Time printed especially for them, covering all the news that had happened during their time spent as captives.

During the flight, they talked to the crew on the transport plane. In the photo above, Jones is seen talking to a crew member.

Jones says that while he can't remember the Air Force sergeant's name, he remembers that he was from Denham Springs, the neighboring town to Baton Rouge, where Jones grew up.

Jones retired from the Air Force as a colonel in 1982 and returned to Tulane in 1990 to become the director of development for Tulane Athletics. On Sept. 17, 2016, the Colonel Murphy Neal Jones Football All American Wall was dedicated in the Wilson Athletics Center on the Tulane campus in honor of Jones' "unparalleled service and sacrifice."

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