

Foreword by RETIRED USAF COL CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS

U N D E R

T H E

C O V E R

O F

L I G H T

The Extraordinary Story of
USAF COL Thomas "Jerry" Curtis's
7½-Year Captivity in North Vietnam

CAROLE ENGLE AVRIETT

PRAISE FOR
Under the Cover of Light

“[Col. Curtis’s] staunch resistance in the face of grueling physical and emotional treatment made him an outstanding example of what it means to stay committed to faith and country, no matter the cost.”

COL JOE KITTINGER, USAF (RET.)

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Under the Cover of Light: The Extraordinary Story of USAF COL Thomas "Jerry" Curtis's 7½-Year Captivity in North Vietnam

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No one ever expects to encounter truly devastating circumstances in their lives. I know I didn't. But if you have a relationship with God, he helps you meet those challenges with hope. Confidence in him is never misplaced. He has remained with me through the years—without him, I could not have done the things I've been called upon to do.

COLONEL THOMAS "JERRY" CURTIS, USAF (RET.),

POW 1965–1973

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

JOHN 1:4-5, ESV

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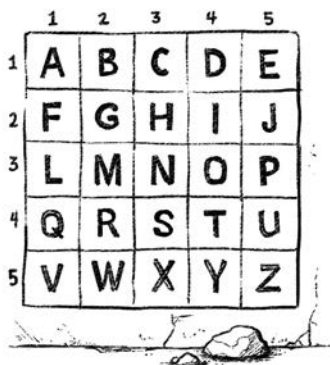
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FOREWORD



CAPTAIN TOM CURTIS was the pilot of an HH-43 helicopter that was shot down in September 1965 in North Vietnam during an attempt to rescue an Air Force pilot whose F-105 fighter bomber had previously been shot down by heavy ground fire.

For men in combat who are in need of help or may later be in a position to require assistance, men involved in SAR (Search and Rescue) are *all* heroes. These SAR men disregard their own safety to help save the lives of downed comrades in arms. And most of the time they fly into zones where there is heavy resistance from an enemy who has already inflicted losses on our forces. Nevertheless, they search for, find, and rescue the wounded soldiers or downed airmen—often at great peril to themselves.

That was exactly what happened to Tom Curtis and his crew of four when he tried to extract a downed F-105 fighter pilot.

All but one of Tom's crew were captured by North Vietnamese soldiers. Tom's copilot evaded capture for a short time but was captured by the Pathet Lao in nearby Laos. He later was killed in an escape attempt.

My F-105 fighter was shot down about five months earlier than Tom and his other crewmen. I was captured immediately when my parachute touched me down near the bridge (at Thanh Hoa), which I had just bombed. My captors were very angry. After two days of gross mistreatment they trucked me to a large prison in Hanoi, which we called the Hanoi Hilton—where torture, interrogation, and solitary confinement continued. Any communication with other POWs was forbidden. After a month or two I was pulled from my cell and taken to another, larger cell to join three other American POWs. In a couple of days one other POW joined us. We were all overjoyed to be together.

At an Air Force Survival School (before leaving the States) I heard an instructor tell about POWs in a German camp in World War II communicating between buildings by tapping on a common water pipe. As I left class, I found the instructor walking by me, so I asked him how they sent the dashes—thinking it was the Morse code. He quickly took me to the chalkboard and showed me the “tap code” they used.

It was a five-by-five matrix of the alphabet, omitting *K*. We used *C* for *K*. The first line was *ABCDE*, and the first column was *AFLQV*. To use the code, one would first tap one to five times to identify the *A*, *F*, *L*, *Q*, or *V* row, pause, and tap one to five times to identify the letter in that row. Thus the letter *S* would be tapped *AFLQ*, pause, *QRS*. I taught this code to the others in the large cell. Within a few days our captors put us

all back in solitary confinement, and we successfully tapped to our comrades in adjacent cells. Recognizing the importance of communicating, we went to great lengths to ensure that every POW knew the tap code. It spread like a chain reaction.

The importance of communication between POWs cannot be overstated. It was a morale booster. It provided a vehicle for the POW chain of command to be utilized. It provided for shared information to counter the efforts of the enemy to divide the POWs and for POWs, under the direction of the senior ranking officer (SRO), to form a common resistance to their aims. It provided information from friends and family back home (from later shoot-downs). It provided educational opportunities from a wealth of knowledge (all POWs shared a need to make some productive use of time spent in prison). Communicating, clearing for guards, and all efforts to assist the communication process (not limited to just the tap code) used a great amount of time each day.

Through the tap code, POWs gained the strength of unity. Shared information of torture and mistreatment created a peer pressure for every POW to resist to the best of his ability and group support for those who were already resisting. Our captors tortured us to obtain propaganda statements. With the richness of our language we used double meanings, slang, lies, and other means to make those statements unusable. We developed great pride in ourselves and in our fellow POWs through our resistance. We, under difficult circumstances, operated as an effective organization to counter our captors' efforts to exploit us. Communication helped us to come home with honor, knowing that in the end we prevailed over a brutal enemy. We won our war!

Through our covert communication in the Hanoi Hilton, I learned of Tom's incarceration. Later, in November 1970, the POW camp at Son Tay was attacked by our armed forces to free American POWs. Unfortunately, all POWs had been moved from that camp by the North Vietnamese a short time earlier. Within three days our captors closed all the small POW camps (fearing another raid) and trucked us back to the Hanoi Hilton.

By now we could not be put back in small cells—there were too many of us (about 360). So our captors put us in large cells with up to forty men to a cell. That was great for us. And that is where I got to know Tom Curtis very well. Tom, I, and others worked together to successfully put coded messages in the six-line letters our captors occasionally permitted us to write home. Tom was one of the most respected POWs in our cell—a tough resister, a leader, responsible, industrious, and a true friend.

One final thought. We endured a lot, including time away from family and an inability to have a normal life with all the freedoms this country provides. Nevertheless, I believe that in retrospect, most (if not all) returned POWs recognize now that the net effect of our incarceration is a positive in our lives. Those bad times no longer haunt us. While there, we had time to better form and strengthen our values. We learned the value of prayer. While we didn't immediately obtain the miracles we prayed for, we received greater gifts of much more value—patience, knowledge that we were not alone, the will to go on, a sense of worth, and an optimistic view of the future with a greater closeness to our God. Those miracles that we prayed for all occurred and more—just not on our time schedule but on God's.

FOREWORD

I cherish the brotherhood I experience even now with the many returned POWs, especially with men like Tom Curtis, who came home with honor. I am honored to be able to write this foreword.

CARLYLE “SMITTY” HARRIS

COLONEL, USAF, RETIRED

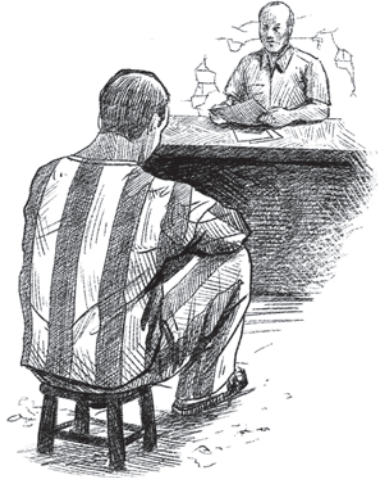
AUTHOR'S NOTE

FEW MILITARY HISTORY accounts are more inspiring than those produced by the prisoner-of-war experience in Southeast Asia in the sixties and seventies. Men of faith and commitment to family and country displayed what it meant to endure debilitating hardships yet emerge with honor and dignity.

This is the story of one of those POWs, Thomas “Jerry” Curtis, a brave man yet full of grace, who began trusting God as a young boy and maintained trust even through 2,703 days of captivity in the prison system of Hanoi, Vietnam.

What Jerry learned in captivity about the Light of mankind has never been more relevant than it is today, for we live in times that are increasingly dark and challenging with powerful forces of both good and evil looming on the horizon. His story is a message of triumph over adversity, of courage and hope, commitment and endurance. Above all else, it is a testimony that even in the blackest night, Light remains in the world—it cannot be conquered, and it will not fail.

PROLOGUE



ONE MORNING in late April 1966, in Houston, Texas, Dr. Michael Ellis DeBakey discovered that his patient's heart had stopped during a valve-replacement procedure. The physician was the first to use a mechanical heart pump in a human, saving the patient's life and ushering in all future open-heart surgeries. At the same time, on the other side of the world and in drastically different circumstances, another Houston son experienced his own heart-stopping moment.

A sudden grinding of the lock on his cell door in Briarpatch, the most primitive camp within Hanoi's prison system, caused Captain Thomas "Jerry" Curtis to sit bolt upright. It was too late in the morning for turnkeys to bring his plate of worm-filled rice with boiled pumpkin and too early in the day for his

bowl of thin cabbage stock. An unscheduled visit could mean only one of three things: a session of prolonged physical abuse, intensive interrogation laced with propaganda, or both.

Since his shoot-down seven months earlier on September 20, 1965, the rescue-helicopter pilot already had endured sadistic guards all too eager to administer punishment. The possibility of what might lie ahead on that April morning filled him with incredible anxiety. Adrenaline surged. His heart pounded.

As the door banged open, an armed guard rushed into the small cell. He motioned at the prisoner with a chopping movement to the wrists, a sign for Jerry to put on his long-sleeved shirt, part of his striped prison uniform. Pulling the coarse cotton tunic over his head suddenly seemed a monumental task. He left the shirt hanging out, a required sign of subservience.

Jerry labored to stay focused as he was shoved down a narrow corridor to another solid masonry room where the camp commander waited. Nicknamed “Frenchy” by POWs because he spoke English with a heavy French accent, the North Vietnamese officer seemed not to notice the captive’s entrance. The guard motioned for Jerry to sit on the low, child-sized stool directly in front of a large wooden desk behind which Frenchy wielded authority.

From his elevated position, Frenchy began, slowly and methodically, outlining his prisoner’s dilemma. His quiet rant explored all the ways Jerry no longer had anyone or anything he could rely on.

“You are . . . blackest of criminals. You . . . no longer have military, no government, no country.” He drew each word out, savoring his control over his prisoner. “You . . . no longer have family for support. If you get sick, no doctor will come unless

I say. You have no friends who can help you. You do not have possessions or job or resources, whatsoever. You . . . have no food . . . not even sip of water unless I say so. You are completely alone . . . and vulnerable.”

After what seemed an eternity, the North Vietnamese officer, obviously pleased with his monologue, delivered its summation, a final statement intended to underscore the prisoner’s hellish situation. “Now, here in this place, you have only me to rely on . . .” The commander’s voice trailed off, and then he added, “. . . and your God.”

Frenchy meant that last comment to further debilitate the man hunched on the stool before him. Surely such a man, captured, beaten, and with little hope of escape, must have been abandoned by God. But Frenchy’s words had just the opposite effect. They spoke directly to Jerry’s inner strength. He felt a surge of hope, a penetrating ray of extreme light in a moment of utter darkness.

In the years following his release from Hanoi, Jerry often thought back to this moment. Scripture records God frequently using pagan rulers and authorities to do his bidding, sometimes even to say what he wanted said. Pharaoh found himself bending to the Lord’s desire to release the Israelites from bondage. Powerful kings—Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, and Artaxerxes—fulfilled with words from their own mouths God’s ultimate purposes.

On that particular day, a smug North Vietnamese camp commander representing an atheistic Communist regime and believing himself to be in complete control inadvertently delivered a personal message of hope. Using an unlikely mouthpiece, God planted in the heart of one of his children a definitive reminder of his abiding presence.



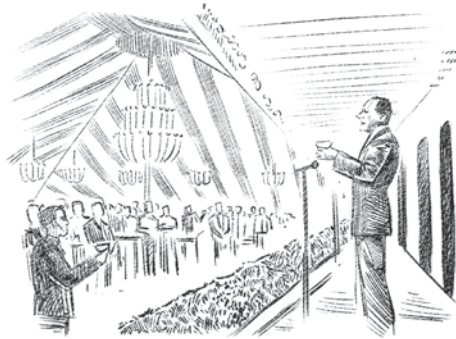
PART 1

THE MISSION: COMBAT SEARCH AND RESCUE

CHAPTER 1

THE DINNER PARTY

MAY 24, 1973



SOME SAID ENTERTAINER Sammy Davis Jr. was the first to float the idea for a large soiree honoring returned prisoners of war from Vietnam. Others said First Lady Pat Nixon, during an emotional embrace with Margaret Manhard at a White House reception, had promised a “big celebration” when Mrs. Manhard’s husband came home. Philip W. Manhard had been the highest-ranking civilian captured by the Viet Cong and held for five torturous years in the jungles of South Vietnam; both women eagerly awaited his return. Still others thought the idea surfaced in the Oval Office while Cabinet members watched footage of the first freed POWs arriving at Clark Air Force Base aboard a C-141 Starlifter.

Wherever the idea originated, President Richard Milhous

Nixon, amid growing scandal, latched on to it with palpable enthusiasm, and so did the rest of the country. No matter on which side of the war a person's political beliefs landed him or her, nearly everyone thought a party for the POWs was in order.

And who didn't recognize the uniqueness of the occasion? All the returning prisoners—repatriated a short nine weeks earlier and reunited with wives, children, and families, many of whom had not seen one another for as long as eight years—were regarded as heroes. The group quickly attained near-celebrity status. Once the celebration began to take shape, an incredible outpouring of entertainers came forward to participate, some of the best known in show business.

The role of master of ceremonies naturally fell to Bob Hope. John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Sammy Davis Jr., Roy Acuff, Joey Heatherton, Vic Damone, Irving Berlin, and Les Brown and His Band of Renown, among others, were eager to perform for the troops gratis. They spent most of the night mingling, shaking hands, and posing for pictures with as many as desired.

Remembering the evening years later, then-presidential military aide Colonel Stephen Bauer said no event in all his six years of working at the White House was "more thrilling, awesome, or satisfying than the celebration held for the just-released prisoners of war." Excitement overflowed to social staff, domestic staff, press corps, guards, police officers. Even the usually stoic Secret Service wore happy smiles and maintained a generally relaxed attitude.

The menu was kept simple, nevertheless hearty: roast sirloin of beef au jus, tiny new potatoes, and selected garden vegetables. A pair of long aluminum canoes filled with ice became unlikely buckets for dozens of bottles of champagne, and two

THE DINNER PARTY

additional Army refrigerator trucks kept hundreds of strawberry mousse desserts and Supreme of Seafood Neptune appetizers with cornsticks chilled at the appropriate thirty-six degrees.

More than thirteen hundred guests attended that evening. The sheer size of the dinner required an enormous tent, longer and wider than the White House itself, covering the south lawn where the president's helicopter normally lands. Underneath the sprawling canvas, hanging chandeliers along with hundreds of votive candles created a serene glow. As guests arrived, dozens of table stewards rushed to put finishing touches on 126 round tables draped with gold cloth, topped by beautiful place settings, flowers, and linens.

It was the largest seated dinner ever given at the White House since John Adams first occupied its still-unfinished interior 215 years ago. It remains so today.



In their room at the Statler Hotel, two blocks north of the White House, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas “Jerry” Curtis, in his formal Air Force mess dress uniform with its new silver oak leaves, stood quietly watching his stunning wife clip her pearl earrings into place. The day had been nonstop. That afternoon in the West Auditorium of the Department of State, President Nixon's address to the POWs began with a nearly two-minute standing ovation. The returning POWs as a group would forever think of Nixon as the one who brought them home.

While the honorees listened to their commander in chief, their wives, mothers, and guests were hosted by the first lady and her daughters—Tricia Nixon Cox and Julie Nixon

Eisenhower—in the State Department’s formal Diplomatic Reception Rooms. Now the couple was headed to the White House to be honored along with the other POWs at a formal, seated dinner, with entertainment by a host of celebrities, and to meet the president himself: heady events for anyone, much less the youngest of nine children born into a rural Texas subsistence-farming family.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the large Curtis family had farmed acreage near Teague, Texas, outside of Houston. Though they lived “cash poor,” especially through the Depression years, what they needed for survival they planted and harvested themselves. Whatever they picked in the garden that day became supper that night. The family was self-reliant, confident, hard-working, and unassuming.

When Emily Parazade Howell Curtis realized she was pregnant with their ninth child, she chose the name “Geraldine,” certain she was carrying a girl. During the same time frame, the family leased land from a Mr. Jerry West, who often rode his horse to visit. Between his mother’s mistaken intuition and a friendly landowner, the name “Jerry” survived and is what family and close friends call Thomas Curtis today. Air Force friends and acquaintances, however, know him as “Tom,” since the military customarily uses first names.

Jerry’s father never went to church except for funerals. But his mother led a quiet Christian life, helping neighbors whenever they needed it, displaying a servant’s heart as the occasion called for. Very shy as a boy, Jerry dreaded going down to the altar in front of everyone at Cloverleaf Baptist Church. At twelve, however, he felt an irresistible press upon his heart

to “walk the aisle” and ask Jesus Christ to be his Savior, even though he had silently done so a year earlier.

After graduating from high school, Jerry commuted back and forth to Houston University’s main campus. But a gradual loss of interest in his diesel electric studies plus growing financial need prompted him and some friends to check out the aviation cadet program sponsored by the United States Air Force. Glen Duke, his best friend since sixth grade, went with him.

Jerry had never even been in an airplane. His first flight came as a passenger in a Navion, and Jerry immediately fell in love with flying. He trained with civilian instructors at Kinston, North Carolina, the first twenty hours in the PA-18 Super Cub, then 120 hours in the T-6 Texan. After training in the T-28 and the T-33, Jerry received his wings and a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant on December 18, 1954. For several years afterward, he would fly jets and then transition into helicopters.

Pilot training had required all his attention, to the exclusion of everything else, including faith. So when he finally arrived for his first assignment at Ellington Air Force Base, Houston, several older siblings set out to see he returned to his Christian roots. One of the ways they did this was to invite him to attend a revival service being held at Uvalde Baptist Church, where one of his brothers was a deacon. It was here he met his future wife, Terry. She was eighteen years old at the time and played piano for the services.

After dating for two years, during which Jerry taught high schoolers in church and in general drew closer to the Lord, the couple married on April 12, 1957. Their marriage always included active church involvement wherever they were stationed, including beginning a small church in Germany, Faith

Baptist Church in Kaiserslautern, which today is one of the largest churches in the International Baptist Convention. It was here that Jerry was ordained as a Baptist deacon and continued teaching Bible studies, and Terry contributed her talents at the piano and organ and as a solo singer.

At this moment, as they prepared at the hotel to meet the president of the United States, their life together before Jerry's imprisonment seemed a million years past. Words could hardly express all the emotions Jerry was experiencing. He was still just getting used to being in the same room as his beautiful wife again. Before he was shot down, they had been married for eight wonderful years, enjoying each other and their two young children and Jerry's work in the military. As Jerry was fond of saying, "Life is good." Then disaster struck.

He was lost in recollections when Terry appeared in her evening gown, signaling she was ready. Jerry smiled as he remembered the first time he saw her at eighteen years old, playing the piano for a church revival service and wearing enormous orange flower earrings that covered half her cheeks. They stepped into the hallway of their hotel and rode the elevator downstairs. Attentive escorts pulled out huge umbrellas to protect them from the downpour that had persisted for the past thirty-six hours. The largest seated dinner ever held at the White House awaited them.



The evening was a blur for the Curtises. As Jerry and Terry joined the long reception line under a covered tunnel created to protect the arriving guests, Jerry relished seeing fellow POWs

decked out in their crisp formal military attire. Everyone was polished and gleaming. He felt almost bewildered with joy.

Though the rain began to slacken, the White House lawn remained squishy wet. Attendants frantically covered the ground with burlap runners and straw, to little avail. Women, in a futile attempt to keep their skirts dry, hiked up their long evening dresses. Open-toed evening shoes sank down into soft, drenched turf, as did the legs of dining chairs. No one seemed to care. Someone even commented the downpour was God himself weeping tears of joy now that the POWs were home and out of the grasp of hell.

When President Nixon made it clear after dinner that they were welcome to roam through the White House unescorted, the guests became like kids in a candy store. Everyone agreed it was the highlight of the evening. One Navy pilot, shot down late in the war, afterward recalled exploring the upstairs with another former POW. Opening a door along an empty corridor, they walked in on the president himself, alone in his study. He simply waved, bidding them to make themselves at home.

The night continually offered surreal contrasts from the POWs' previous existence of years of imprisonment. The most important difference, of course, was exchanging captivity for freedom, delightfully demonstrated by their unfettered run of the White House.

But the differences abounded everywhere. They had exchanged chipped, glazed tin plates for historic fine china, stamped aluminum spoons for silver flatware, tin drinking cups for crystal flutes, and bowls of thin soup for as much sirloin steak au jus as they could eat. Even the tent itself presented a subtle contrast, its red and gold stripes seemingly morphed into a festive echo of the

dingy red-and-beige striped prison pajamas worn 24-7 during their years within Hanoi's prison system.

Despite the lovely evening and its merriment, however, there would be long periods of adjustment ahead for nearly all returning POWs and their families. As ABC News White House correspondent Tom Jarriel pointed out during live television coverage of the event, some ninety returnees declined the White House dinner invitation for a host of different reasons. Some were still recuperating from various health issues, and some had met with devastating family news when they returned, such as wives who had died, leaving them widowers, or parents who were critically ill and required care. Others discovered themselves single again after spouses had obtained divorces in Mexico. A few returned with deep antiwar sentiments and declined the invitation as a form of protest. For many, adapting to the return home would prove as challenging as being away had been. For one, who took his life just nine days after the dinner party, the adjustment proved more difficult than could be endured.

Jerry looked down at the beautiful table setting before him. For 2,703 days, hunger had been his constant companion. Every man there that night had lost weight—forty, fifty, sixty pounds or more. He himself had, at his lowest point, weighed only 125 pounds. He had eaten scant bits of food, often riddled with worms or other foreign objects, always surrounded by gloom and darkness and the threat of torture. His journey to the splendor of a White House dinner had begun eight years previously at a remote outpost in Thailand, next to a little-known country bordered by a long river on one side and a winding trail on the other in a far-off corner of the world.