

War Hero Credits His Survival to VMI



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Earlier this year, four alumni who graduated from Virginia Military Institute in 1950 returned to the small military college in Lexington, Virginia, to celebrate a momentous occasion: Their 75th class reunion. Having four individuals in their mid-90s all healthy enough to travel is notable in and of itself—but one of them, retired U.S. Air Force Col. Thomas H. “Tom” Kirk Jr., has a heart-stopping story of resilience in the face of one of the worst human experiences.

Now 96 years old, Kirk can recall with vivid clarity almost every detail of his 5-and-a-half years in the Ho Loa Prison, better known as the Hanoi Hilton. He was shot down on a bombing run over North Vietnam and immediately captured, where he was tortured for several days and fed a starvation diet of less than 1,000 calories per day.

One in three Americans held prisoner by the Viet Cong died in captivity—but Kirk would not be among them. He credits his survival in large part to the habits of heart and mind picked up at VMI, a college long known for its exceptional track record in producing commissioned officers for all branches of the service. “I was in solitary [confinement] for 2 years,” he stated, “and I’ll tell you, if it hadn’t been for VMI and structure in my life and what discipline I had gained ... I don’t know how I made it through, but VMI has always been a source of strength, a source of wisdom, and a source of discipline that I think so many people need so desperately in our youth today.”

Growing up, Kirk had no idea he’d be attending a military college, much less become a revered alumnus of one. Music was his passion, but it kept him out at night so much that his father suggested a civilian college might not provide the discipline his son needed. Upon graduation from VMI, Kirk commissioned into the newly created U.S. Air Force and fell in love with fighter jets. In 1967, after service in the Korean War, Kirk was assigned to Takhli Air Base in Thailand, from which he and others conducted bombing runs.



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In the face of near-certain peril, Kirk completed 66 successful missions. “People don’t understand till you do it how fearsome that is because when you roll in ... you get about a third of the way down, and the entire world is shooting at you, and you see everything flying by,” he recalled, describing the Hanoi area as “the most dangerous airspace in the history of modern air warfare.”

When he was shot down, captured, and imprisoned, Kirk hit a low like he’d never encountered before. “The days go by,” he stated, “[and] all I can do is think about how everything’s gone. I’ve lost everything. Somehow, I dug deep and found the strength to bring my mind clearly to say, ‘I can do this. I can do this, and I will go home someday.’”

In early 1973, Kirk’s captivity finally came to an end, and his bravery was well rewarded: Among his awards and honors are the Air Force Cross (second highest for valor), four Silver Stars, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Legions of Merit, two Bronze Stars (one for valor), seven Air Medals, and a Purple Heart.

