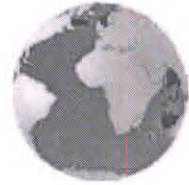




BEDINGER, HENRY JAMES



Name: Henry James Bedinger
Rank/Branch: O2/US Navy
Unit: Fighter Squadron 143, USS CONSTELLATION (CVA 64), pilot
Date of Birth: 30 March 1945 (Philadelphia PA)
Home City of Record: Hatboro PA
Date of Loss: 22 November 1969
Country of Loss: Laos
Loss Coordinates: 163740N 1055807E (XD033385)
Status (in 1973): Released POW
Category:
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: F4J
Missions: 30
Other Personnel in Incident: Herbert Wheeler, pilot

Source: Compiled by Homecoming II Project 15 May 1990 from one or more of the following: raw data from U.S. Government agency sources, correspondence with POW/MIA families, published sources, interviews. Updated by the P.O.W. NETWORK.

REMARKS: 730327 RELSD BY PL

SYNOPSIS: The USS CONSTELLATION provided air power to the U.S. effort in Vietnam early in the war, having participated in strikes against Loc Chao and Hon Gai in North Vietnam during August 1964. One of the first American POWs of the war, and certainly one of the most well-known, LTJG Everett Alvarez, launched from her decks and was captured during this series of strikes in 1964. The CONSTELLATION was large and carried a full range of aircraft. Fighters from her air wing, CVW-14, earned the carrier the Meritorious Unit Commendation in 1968 during a particularly intense period of air attacks. VF-96, a premier fighter squadron awarded the Clifton Trophy two straight years, flew from the CONSTELLATION in October 1971. During this period, two of her pilots, LT Randall H. Cunningham and LTJG William "Willie" Driscoll became the first American aces of the Vietnam War, having shot down five Russian-made MiG enemy aircraft. The CONSTELLATION remained on station throughout most of the war.

One of the aircraft launched from the decks of the CONSTELLATION was the F4 Phantom fighter jet. The Phantom, used by Air Force, Marine and Navy air wings, served a multitude of functions including fighter-bomber and interceptor, photo and electronic surveillance. The two man aircraft was extremely fast (Mach 2), and had a long range (900 - 2300 miles, depending on stores and mission type). The F4 was also extremely maneuverable and handled well at low and high altitudes. The F4 was selected for a number of state-of-the-art electronics conversions, which improved radar intercept and computer bombing capabilities enormously. Most pilots considered it one of the "hottest" planes around.

LTJG Henry J. Bedinger was an F4J Naval Flight Officer assigned to Fighter Squadron 143 onboard the USS CONSTELLATION. On November 22, 1969, he and his pilot, LT Herbert Wheeler, were launched from the carrier on a reconnaissance mission over Laos. Their call sign was "TAPROOM".

During the flight, as they were over Savannakhet Province approximately 10 miles west-southwest of the city of Sepone, the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and the crew was forced to eject. Two full parachutes were sighted by other aircraft in the area and contact was made on their survival radios. The pilot, LT Wheeler, was recovered by search and rescue helicopters. Bedinger radioed that he was surrounded by enemy troops. This, along with heavy small arms fire from the ground, prohibited a helicopter rescue of LTJG Bedinger. His last radio transmission was, "I guess I'm a prisoner of war." Oriental voices were heard on the rescue frequency several times after his last message.

Bedinger had been captured by the North Vietnamese operating in Laos. He was immediately moved to North Vietnam where he spent the next 3 1/2 years as a prisoner of war. Unlike other POWs, however, Bedinger was held apart from Americans captured in North Vietnam, although he was put in with an American civilian shot down in Laos, Ernie Brace.

At the end of the war, Bedinger and about a dozen others were presented as the so-called "Laos prisoners." The original list of releasees did not include a single man missing in Laos, and after considerable haggling, these men, who were captured in Laos but moved immediately to North Vietnam, were included on the list of the returnees. It was generally presumed that these men were held by the Pathet Lao, and they were "officially" released by the Pathet Lao, but they met their Lao "captors" on the day of their release. Bedinger had spent only ten days in Laos; most of those ten days were consumed in travel to North Vietnam.

Nearly 600 Americans were lost in Laos during American involvement in the Vietnam war. Although the Pathet Lao stated during the war that they held "tens of tens" of American prisoners of war, no negotiations were conducted which would secure the freedom of these men.

Since the war ended, nearly 10,000 reports relating to Americans missing, prisoner or unaccounted for in Southeast Asia have been received by the U.S. Government. Many authorities who have examined this largely classified information are convinced that hundreds of Americans are still held captive today. These reports are the source of serious distress to many returned American prisoners. They had a code that no one could honorably return unless all of the prisoners returned. Not only that code of honor, but the honor of our country is at stake as long as even one man remains unjustly held. It's time we brought our men home.

Jim Bedinger remained in the service and worked in the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon in the late 1980's. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant during his captivity, and in the late 1980's had the rank of Commander.

SOURCE: WE CAME HOME copyright 1977

Captain and Mrs. Frederic A Wyatt (USNR Ret), Barbara Powers Wyatt, Editor
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UPDATE - 09/95 by the P.O.W. NETWORK, Skidmore, MO

HENRY J. BEDINGER

Lieutenant- United States Navy

Captured in Laos: November 22, 1969

Released: March 28, 1973

I was born 30 March 1945 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and was raised in the suburbs north of Philadelphia (Hatboro Upper Morehead, Pa) I attended Meadowbrook School in Pennsylvania; St. Peters School, Peekskill, New York; and Union College, Schenectady, New York where I received a BA in History in 1967. I was commissioned on 25 August 1967 through the Aviation Volunteer Reserve Officer Candidate program at Pensacola, Florida. I was married to Miss Laura Yepez of Patchogue Long Island, New York on 23 December 1967 and received my wings in May 1968. I was captured 22 November 1969 while flying an F-4 aircraft. Our first son, Daniel Michael, was born 9 March 1974. My plans are for a career in the United States Navy.

I can remember visiting the Liberty Bell as a small boy and wondering if it could really ring. Today I know it still rings "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

November 1996

Henry Bedinger retired from the United States Navy as a Commander. He and Laura live in California.

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Front Section: Recovered Pilot, above DMZ
Back Section: Left behind Anticommunist whiles further
- MIA - never returned