

THE LAST CASUALTY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

On panel 01W of the Maya Lin designed Vietnam War memorial "Wall" several spaces before the apex are three names: Harley H. Hall, Mark Peterson, George W. Morris. The apex of the Wall marks the end of the war after the 1975 fall of Saigon but there is no mark attributing the midnight January 27, 1973 cease fire set by the Paris Peace Accords which was the end of the active U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam. Hall, Peterson and Morris were the last lost in the Vietnam War just before that 1973 ceasefire.

My own participation in the War was not consequential. I was in Medical school when the draft started and was deferred but then signed up for Navy Flight Surgeon school in Pensacola Florida and applied for and was selected for the coveted assignment of Flight Surgeon for the Carrier Air Wing on the U.S.S. Enterprise, the flagship of the Seventh Fleet, and was attached to the two F4 phantom fighter squadrons (including CDR Harley Hall's VF143) from Miramar California, home of the Top Gun Navy Fighter Weapons School. I was in that capacity for two years on the USS Enterprise until after 27 January 1973 when the War ended. A month later with the ships surgeon, trying to work our way back to the States on Air Force medivac flights, we found ourselves in the company of a few military people on the tarmac of Clark AFB to see the first POWs returned from Hanoi.

Late in the war all knew that the objective was to get out. Being a physician allowed for an easy personal denial of the moral ambivalence of the War.

CDR Harley Hall, executive officer of F4 squadron VF143 on the Enterprise, had three previous carrier combat tours and was just returning from two years as commander of the Blue Angels Navy Flight Exhibition Team. Although coming up through officer candidate school he was the youngest Commander rank in the Navy and clearly on fast track for Flag rank. Besides being a natural leader, he was a very nice guy admired by his crew mates and enlisted men.

On January 23, 1973, ironically the day after the death of Lyndon Johnson, President Richard Nixon announced to the country that an agreement had been concluded at the Paris Peace Accords that the end of active participation of the U.S. military would go into effect in an official cease fire midnight GMT 27 January. In December and early January on the Enterprise flight operations over Hanoi had been especially intense. Although now everyone knew that the war was finally to be over, flight operations continued on targets of troop and supply trucks moving more aggressively south right up until the cease fire was to go into effect. This may have been intended to convey future U.S. resolve, as futile as it may have seemed. CDR Hall led a group of four F4s on their last attack mission of the war just hours before the cease fire. Activity from the ground was intense with antiaircraft fire and several hand-held S7 surface to air missiles deployed. Hall's plane was hit but failed to get over the safety of the water before ejection. Hall and his back-seat RIO, LCDR Al Kientzler, parachuted but became separated and landed on a large island in a river in Quang Tri just south of the DMZ surrounded by V.C. and North Vietnamese soldiers. The three other F4s remained overhead while an OV10 observation plane crewed by Forward Air Control (FAC) pilots, LT Mark Peterson and Captain George Morris, went down low to assist the SAR. LCDR Kientzler was shot in the leg while parachuting and was quickly captured. CDR Hall was observed alive, separated from his parachute, and running from his landing site. The OV10 observation aircraft

was immediately hit by an S7 and crashed but not before Morris and Peterson ejected, but on landing Peterson radioed that he was under fire from approaching V.C. The SAR site soon swarmed with multiple search aircraft including six A-1 Skyraiders and helicopters. The Navy destroyer *USS Turner Joy*, close in to shore also covered enemy actions in the SAR for Hall, Peterson and Morris. Just before midnight GMT the **last round** of the Vietnam war was fired by the *USS Turner Joy*. (Ironically 8 ½ years earlier the *Turner Joy* along with the *USS Maddox* had been involved in the August 4th 1964 “Gulf of Tonkin Incident” from which President Johnson requested the Congressional resolution authorizing the use of military force in Southeast Asia.) No further contact or sightings of the downed airmen occurred and rescue could not be accomplished. Injured Al Kientzler ended up as a POW in Hoa Lo Prison, the “Hanoi Hilton”, and was repatriated home in March with no knowledge of what happened to his pilot CDR Hall. Later the next day South Vietnamese Bright Light Soldiers trained by the U.S. to rescue downed pilots reported finding LT Mark Peterson and Capt. George Morris tied to a tree and decapitated - the last confirmed combat deaths of the active Vietnam war. No trace of CDR Hall was seen and he was the last American to be listed as missing presumed POW.

Mary Lou Hall had a four-year-old daughter and was seven months pregnant with Harley’s unborn son when the black car with the Navy chaplain and Casualty Assistance Officer drove up to her San Diego home with news of CDR Hall’s loss, even as the War had been over for several hours. But as gut-wrenching as this personal story is, aside from the timing, it is only one of 58,000 other such American stories and perhaps a million Vietnamese stories.

The importance of the Harley Hall story is that it epitomized the MIA issue. The politics of the POW/MIA issue was, to pun, inescapable. It was the essential demand for the “peace with honor” that Nixon and Kissinger needed - the moral redemption - and the North Vietnamese knew it at least since the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969 when the treatment and identification of POWs began to change. Even today after 65 years, the accounting for and repatriation of remains of Korean War missing is still part of political negotiation.

From the time of CDR Hall’s downing he was believed to have been captured with a high likelihood of release. The war was over and all POWs were being repatriated. But neither Kientzler nor any other returning POW had seen or had any knowledge of CDR Hall.

The POW situation was multifaceted. Those airmen shot down and captured in the North under the control of the North Vietnam regulars, if not severely injured or killed by a local soldier or civilians, were taken to Hanoi for interrogation which, if they survived the initial torture, had a reasonably good chance for survival. Those captured in the South by Viet Cong were either killed immediately or remained long periods in remote camps in the South or in Laos in starvation conditions with poor supervision and no reporting to international authorities. They rarely made it to the relative safety of Hanoi. Quang Tri at the time of the downing of the pilots was under the control of both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. A captured pilot was a valuable asset, especially one of the rank and stature of CDR Hall. That value continued and became even more important after the initial release of the 591 POWs already held, for continuing leverage over the expectation of possible U.S. reparations to Vietnam stipulated by the Paris Peace Accords. There was belief among many in the intelligence community that not all POWs were released. Of some 1,200 to 5,000 expected POWs only 591 were released. Of the POWs released

or accounted for there were none with amputations, burns or severe physical or mental disabilities as would have been expected and none of an estimated 250 released from Laos.

Eventually the Defense Intelligence Agency accumulated a mass of intelligence in CDR Hall's file nearly a foot thick - reports of sightings, intercepted Vietnam radio messages tracking Hall from battalion to battalion after shootdown and even mention of a "big Blue Angel" paraded about Hanoi. There was also a document declassified from the recent demise of the Soviet Union that Hall had been interrogated by Russian officials in Hanoi. CDR Hall's name remained on POW status until he was declared deceased per Federal law February 1980.

As scenes of returning POWs in February and March 1973 receded from public memory Congress lost any interest in support of South Vietnam and Nixon became embroiled in impeachment. After the fall of Saigon in 1975 Vietnam and the War had become a bad dream, the negotiating value of any remaining POWs became not only worthless but a possible liability. Political expedience required maintenance of the idea that all POWs had been returned. Aside from some committed families, the MIA issue seemed to become marginalized to conspiracy theorists and Hollywood movies. But by 1980s as the SRV became internally stabilized as well as alienated from China after the Vietnamese - Cambodia War, interest in normalization was manifested in both SRV and the U.S. Vietnam was looking to have U.S. trade sanctions removed so it could become integrated into the world economy. Any lingering doubt about the MIAs needed to be resolved. Motivations may have been altruistic but the imperative of geopolitics and economics placed the need for final resolution ahead of veracity.

In 1988 in Hanoi the Vietnamese Office for Seeking Missing Persons provided the U.S. Joint Casualty Resolution Center six written reports. One report on CDR Hall claimed that a Vietnamese team revisited the crash site where a burial site in a trench was discovered with incredulously no artifacts remaining supposedly due to pillage by local villagers. This would have violated all protocol for North Vietnamese handling of burial of high value downed pilots. Subsequently with U.S. emphasis on repatriation of remains the Hanoi government produced three front teeth as remains of CDR Hall. The U.S. Defense Department declared CDR, now Navy Captain Hall, dead, with the remains of the three teeth returned to Mary Lou Hall. Mary Lou refused to accept the teeth as proof of death. An independent forensic odontologist determined that the three front teeth matched those of CDR Hall but showed significant periodontal deterioration indicating that CDR Hall must have lived several years after the crash with poor dental care. The teeth also showed marks indicating manual extraction.

Mary Lou Hall was a realist. She was resigned that her husband must have died years earlier. But she could not accept a constructed narrative by some officials of the U.S. Defense Department that denied continuing evidence of MIAs for the sake of expedience.

All wars must end and be reconciled. So did this one. The American public wished to put it behind them. John Kerry as well as John McCain, now U.S. Senators, had reasonable personal motives for finality as did many veterans. Even Everet Alvarez, the longest incarcerated POW, said he thought too much attention had been devoted to the POW issue and not enough to all those who had died or were missing. In 1992, to facilitate reconciliation with the SRV, the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs was established, with John Kerry (Navy decorated War veteran and subsequent antiwar activist)

as majority leader and John McCain (Navy pilot and POW) also on the committee. The committee had the appearance of finding the truth about MIAs but soon became divided between those who wished to pursue the intelligence supporting MIAs and those seeming to wish to suppress it. Toward the end confidential documents were reportedly ordered purged from the files and shredded. As the committee progressed it took on the character of a mere formality. McCain displayed hostility toward contrary witnesses who he claimed disparaged his patriotism. Many stood to benefit from the business windfall of dropping sanctions. The largest commercial development was a 900 million-dollar contract for a deep-water seaport negotiated by John Forbes, Senator Kerry's cousin. At the risk of disparaging a locally revered politician, John Karry seemed often to display a propensity for political opportunism.

Mary Lou Hall was among five family members allowed to give personal testimony to the Senate Committee. She was allowed to finish reading no more than half her three-page letter to the committee before she was cut off for lack of time. The one who repeatedly insisted that she stop reading was the Committee Chairman John Kerry. Famously stated 20 years earlier during another Senate Committee hearing: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in the Vietnam War; how do you ask the last man to die for a mistake?" No one cut him off for lack of time. Sad and ironic that the same man would deny a plea to be heard from the widow of the last man to die in the Vietnam War.

Need the last casualty of the war be - like the first - truth?

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