

Coping in North Vietnam: A Navy Prisoner of War Remembers



Lieutenant George Coker was a Bombardier/Navigator flying on an A-6 Intruder, and he deployed to Vietnam in 1966 aboard USS *Constellation* (CV 64). On August 27, 1966, George and his pilot, Jack Fellowes, were shot down over North Vietnam. Their plane was hit by a surface-to-air missile, which blew off the right-wing, and the two crew members ejected from the aircraft after it went into a flat spin. Both men were captured by armed villagers soon after landing. George was held by the North Vietnamese at several different POW camps in the Hanoi area. After enduring six years of imprisonment, on March 4, 1973, Coker was released as part of Operation Homecoming.

George Coker was part of a group of eleven POWs in Hanoi who gained a reputation for being defiant toward their captors. These eleven men have been given the name “The Alcatraz Gang” because they were put in solitary confinement in a prison they referred to as “Alcatraz” for well over two years. Watch George Coker’s oral history to learn more about his time in the prisoner of war camp. In this portion, he talks about how he dealt with solitary confinement and what got him through this ordeal in Alcatraz. The video is available on YouTube: <https://tinyurl.com/GeorgeCoker> or you can click directly on this QR code from your smartphone or tablet (using either a QR reader app or your phone’s camera).



Questions to consider:

1. What is the importance of oral histories? Why do we spend the time to speak with veterans about their experiences?
2. Is this a primary source or a secondary source? Why?
3. Why do you think the camp where the prisoners endured solitary confinement was referred to as “Alcatraz”?

4. Do you think George Coker's experience in the prisoner-of-war camp was similar to other prisoners'? Why or why not?
5. What were some of the particular things Coker did to deal with confinement?
6. When George Coker talks about spending time thinking, he also goes on to say, "it's extremely hard for anybody to comprehend." What do you think he means by that statement and why?
7. Why do you think communication with other prisoners, through tap code, was so important psychologically to his survival?
8. What lessons can we take away from hearing this particular story about George Coker's time as a POW?