

'They Were All Sure They Were Going to Die'

The family of a former prisoner of war in North Korea during the Vietnam War recalls the agony of his confinement and the sweet homecoming after his release

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The three oldest children of Malcolm Loepke well remember Aug. 17, 1969.

Chris, the oldest who was 13 at the time, remembers the knock on the door of his family's Elwood, Ind., apartment. Dawn, who was then 11, remembers pulling into the parking lot with her mom, Diane, and her younger brother, Don. Dawn recalled her mother letting out a gasp when she saw the Army chaplain's car. She knew they were there to see her.

Just hours earlier, Diane heard on the radio that a U.S. helicopter had been shot down in North Korea. Malcolm flew helicopters and was stationed in South Korea. Dawn had assured her mom at the time there was no way it was her dad.

"I remember my mom was crying and this wasn't good," said Don, who was 5 when the news came that his father, along with two others, had been shot down over North Korea.

"I really didn't understand much of what was going on until a local newspaper had a photo of him. It was two weeks before we knew he was alive."

Flying the unarmed OH23 Raven helicopter was Warrant Officer Loepke with Capt. David Crawford and Spec. 4 Herman Hofstatter on board. Part of the 59th Aviation Company, the helicopter was shot down near Kumchon, about 15 miles inside North Korean territory.

When they crashed in a river bed, they got out and tried to take cover behind the engine, which wasn't much to shield the trio, who were all bleeding from being shot at while in flight. Crawford was the first to head out of the river, with the others to follow him.

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The North Koreans started beating Crawford with their rifle butts, and Loepke fell on top of Crawford to protect him. Hofstatter was shot in the legs so that he couldn't make a run for it.

Chris said his dad later maintained that he had a guardian angel with him since his flight suit was full of holes.

“My dad said the North Koreans saw his 101st Airborne badge and started screaming ‘Rakkasan! Rakkasan!’,” Don said. “That is the last thing he remembers before waking up in the back of a truck. He said they were all sure they were going to die.”

Loepke earned his third Bronze Star for his actions that day.

‘THE OLD MAN WOULDN’T COOPERATE’

What followed was 108 days of captivity at the hands of the menacing North Koreans. The GIs were separated and wouldn't see each other until just more than a week before their release.

They were beaten daily. Their captors told the Americans they would hold them for nine years. Loepke was told that his wife had forgotten about him and was now seeing his brother, in a failed attempt to mentally torture him.

Don recalls hearing his dad speak of a time when he had lost hope while in captivity. “One of the most sadistic” of the guards came in to beat on Loepke, who mustered the strength to “clock him.” Loepke, who was 35 at the time, proceeded to get beat unconscious.

“Our Uncle Monty was friends with the Marine Corps general who was part of the release negotiations team,” Don said. “He had been told that my dad wouldn't make it home alive. The North Koreans said the ‘old man’ wouldn't cooperate.”

But he did make it home, along with Crawford and Hofstatter.

‘THEIR OUTLOOK WAS GOOD’

It took five private sessions of the Korean Armistice Commission to secure the release of the Americans. Marine Maj. Gen. Arthur H. Adams represented the U.S. during negotiations.

After one of the meetings, The Daily Dispatch (Moline, Ill.) reported on Sept. 4 that it would not release the crewmen until the U.S. admitted the trio was on a criminal mission.

Adams dismissed the notion, saying: “It is preposterous to state that we dispatched the unarmed helicopter willfully or with any hostile intention.”

Even then, there was some speculation that the U.S. would end up getting the men released

using the same tactics deployed to free the crew of the USS Pueblo (AGER-2) a year prior. The Pueblo was captured on Jan. 23, 1968, and held for 11 months in North Korea.

U.S. officials later signed a statement admitting the ship was spying. But just before the agreement was signed by Maj. Gen. Gilbert Woodward, he announced that the State Department had instructed him to retract the statement before signing it.

In December 1969, Adams signed a Communist-drafted statement confessing to a “criminal act” and admitted the crew intentionally strayed into North Korean territory.

Once their release was secure, however, the general recanted his statement, saying that “there was no criminal act or intentional infiltration.”

He said he had acted in the “humanitarian interest of securing the release of these men.”

On Dec. 3, Loepke, Crawford and Hofstatter were brought by a Russian jeep to Panmunjom where they were released just before noon. Army Col. Morris E. Jessup, United Nations Command secretary to the Armistice Commission, handed a written receipt to the North Koreans after the men were turned over.

During the prisoners’ debriefing, they explained how their North Korean captors brutally pummeled them with their fists and rifle butts. Worse, according to the GIs, were the statements read to the prisoners from Senate “doves” (a term used during the Vietnam War to describe those opposing U.S. military action in Southeast Asia). The statements were delivered to the prisoners in an attempt to break their spirits.

After the release of the Americans, Col. Paul Sheffler, commanding officer of the 121st Evacuation Hospital west of Seoul, told the Associated Press that all three men had spoken to their families and that “their outlook was good.”

Crawford and Loepke appeared physically better than Hofstatter, who was on crutches and had open wounds on his knees.

While they weren’t immediately asked if they were tortured, Hofstatter reportedly said, “It was pretty bad,” when asked about their time in North Korea.

COMING HOME

Loepke’s wife, Diane, heard about the release on the radio and cried out, “Thank God!” Minutes later, the State Department liaison officer called her to confirm the news.

With just weeks until Christmas, Dawn told the Associated Press, “It’s going to be the best Christmas present I’ve ever had.”

Chris told the reporter that he was excited to show his dad the model plane he had built and refused to fly until his father returned home.

Diane talked of a cake she had baked and then froze weeks earlier. When the Associated Press asked her if that cake was still in the freezer, she replied, "You'd better believe it is," adding that it is where it would stay until her husband was home.

The Americans were eventually flown to Ft. Knox, Ky., to be reunited with their families.

"When he came off that plane, my mom was the first person to grab him and hug him," Chris recalled. "There were a lot of reporters. Tom Brokaw was at our house. The whole experience was overwhelming. The fact my dad made it back was a gift from God."

Chris said his dad, whose healthy weight was 185 pounds, weighed 135 pounds when he came home.

"I was right behind my mom on the ramp to the airplane," Don said. "I jumped into my dad's arms and about knocked him over."

Loepke, who had served in the Korean War with the 187th Regimental Combat Team from 1951 to 1953, received an age waiver to re-enlist during the Vietnam War.

He was working for Chrysler at the time of his re-enlistment. With two brothers serving in Vietnam, Loepke hoped to be sent there as well. He never expected he would end up back in Korea.

He left the Army in 1972 but was a pilot in the National Guard until 1979. When he exited the Guard, he had 6,000 hours of both rotor-wing time and fixed-wing flying time, all accident free. For Chris and Don, both of whom are pilots, this is an impressive feat.

Dawn said she loved that her dad was a pilot. He owned a small plane and would fly her to Ft. Knox to visit the friends she had made while the family was stationed there.

"I hope that he knew how much I loved him and what an incredible man he was," she said. "He loved the military and was so proud. He wore the uniform proudly and was a survivor until the bitter end."

The Loepke family welcomed their fourth child, Gloria, with the patriarch leading a full life as a journeyman electrician at Chrysler. Don said while some vets return from war and experience problems with alcohol to help drown out the memories, his dad threw himself into his work.

“In my opinion, my dad had PTSD,” Chris said. “He was always working, always doing something.”

Don remembered an incident when he was 7 or 8. He went to wake his dad from a nap. As he shook him awake, his dad jumped from where he was asleep, pinning Don to the ground before realizing what was happening.

“He felt so bad about it and apologized but told me to always just call out to him if he was asleep and not touch him,” Don said. “There’s no doubt an entire generation of military folks had PTSD and never even knew.”

Of the three POWs, Hofstatter is the only one still living. Crawford died at the age of 65 on Sept. 29, 2007.

The Loepke children said their dad continued to amaze them until the end as he continued flying until a year before his death on Feb. 12, 1999. Diane died from cancer just two years prior. Loepke himself had lung cancer.

He had always wanted to drive his motorcycle to Alaska. He and another couple headed off on their adventure in September 1998 right after Loepke had his chemotherapy port removed.

In South Dakota, they made a pit stop so that Loepke could receive a blood transfusion at a hospital. In Canada, his friends had an accident and couldn’t continue due to the condition of their motorcycle. Loepke continued the journey alone, reaching Alaska after a month on the road.

“I was so proud of him,” Dawn said. “He wanted to see Alaska before he died, and he did.”

This article is featured in the February 2022 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.