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Glenn Robins, *The Longest Rescue: The Life and Legacy of Vietnam POW William A. Robinson*.
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In *The Longest Rescue*, Glenn Robins (Georgia Southwestern State Univ.) tells the remarkable story of Capt. William A. Robinson, US Air Force (Ret.). Robinson was part of an Air Search and Rescue Team's flight to rescue a downed American pilot in Ha Tinh Province in North Vietnam near the Laotian border—enemy-controlled “Indian Country” to anyone who served in country. The author gives background on his subject's hometown of Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, and his complex relations with near and extended family members. When Robinson joined the Air Force in 1961 as a means to escape life in a forlorn southern mill town, service in Vietnam was far from his thoughts.

Robins describes the establishment of the Air Rescue Service at the end of World War II and the introduction of helicopters into the force. He digresses into the fascinating story of Lt. Duane Martin, USAF pilot and later prisoner of the Pathet Lao; Martin died in an escape planned by Lt. (j.g.) Dieter Dengler, US Naval Reserve, in Laos. Robinson's best friend in captivity was Neil Black, a Parajumper (rescueman) and, in Robinson's words, a “gung-ho, snake eater, Superman” (33). Both Robinson and Black survived their incarcerations.

After this excursus, the author recounts the shoot-down and capture of Robinson and his friends on 20 September 1965 and their seven long years behind the wire. In the initial shock of their capture, most POWs feared they would be summarily executed. In Robinson's case, the North Vietnamese used him to stage a propaganda film. It showed a lone young girl with a rifle heroically “capturing” the enemy flier. That image was, of course, a publicity bonanza for the communists, but it likely saved Robinson's life by confirming his capture to the outside world, including the Pentagon.

Robins next describes the “long march” to Hanoi. As during the prisoner marches after the Battle of the Bulge, Robinson's convoy was strafed by USAF pilots, but benefited from their poor marksmanship. In the city of Vinh, Robinson met his first truly sadistic guard: a man he called the “One-armed Bandit” put him in iron shackles, restraints the French had earlier used in Indochina for decades. It was now abundantly clear who was in charge.

In Hanoi, Robinson was confined in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton,” the prison the French called Hoa Lo (The Oven). Robins explains how the Americans imprisoned there communicated with each other, their adherence to the Code of Conduct, and their reliance on one another for support, leadership, and the will to live. He then describes the North Vietnamese prison system of fifteen camps, including Cu Loc (The Zoo) and Xom Ap Lo (The Briarpatch), and the torture methods used to extract more than names, ranks, and serial numbers from the American POWs. The “Ropes” technique, for example, involved trussing up prisoners, rotating their arms, and tearing the shoulder sockets, causing excruciating pain. American prisoners began to tell the Vietnamese wild stories just to avoid the dreaded ropes. It was, Robins writes, a brutally effective game of “Make Your Choice”—the North Vietnamese ensured that their prisoners would choose talk over silence.

The author now returns to Dieter Dengler's story, but does not wrap it up till the book's last chapter.¹ He discusses escape attempts and the brutal torture inflicted after the failed Dramesi-Atterbury escape attempt in 1969.² The POW peace advocates occupy a page or two. The section on repatriation (Operation

1. For fuller details, see Dengler's *Escape from Laos* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Pr, 1979).

2. See John A. Dramesi, *Code of Honor* (NY: Norton, 1975).

Homecoming) is very good, noting that the POWs enforced their own rule of not talking until everyone was out.

Robinson's later meeting with his former captors and with Nguyen Kim Lai, the young girl filmed "capturing" him, is both disturbing and illuminating. Yes, it is a good thing to forgive old enemies—US Civil War veterans did just that in time—but the exploitation of brutalized prisoners in a patently propagandistic "documentary" is another thing entirely.

Robinson was "rescued" not in the common, military sense of the word, but perhaps only psychologically or emotionally. The book's leitmotif is the stoic Stockdale-Denton³ order to "Bounce Back": take the hit and move on. Captain Robinson complied with that simple directive for the rest of his life. His unique personal story touches the heart, as many POW biographies do. In that sense, *The Longest Rescue* will excite readers' emotions rather than their intellectual curiosity.

The author's description of the National POW Museum at the Andersonville Historic Site near Americus, Georgia, is a very moving part of his book. The creation of a museum at the site of the most horrific prisoner camp of the Civil War is a powerful tribute to the humility, suffering, and endurance of all American POWs, including William Robinson and his comrades-in-arms. *The Longest Rescue* is a fine contribution to US military history in general and to POW studies in particular.

3. James Stockdale and Jeremiah Denton were naval aviators held as POWs near the Hanoi Hilton at a special facility that Stockdale dubbed "Alcatraz." Denton, another member of the "Alcatraz Gang," later became a Rear Admiral and US Senator (R-Alabama); Stockdale became a Vice Admiral and Vice Presidential candidate on Ross Perot's independent ticket in 1992.