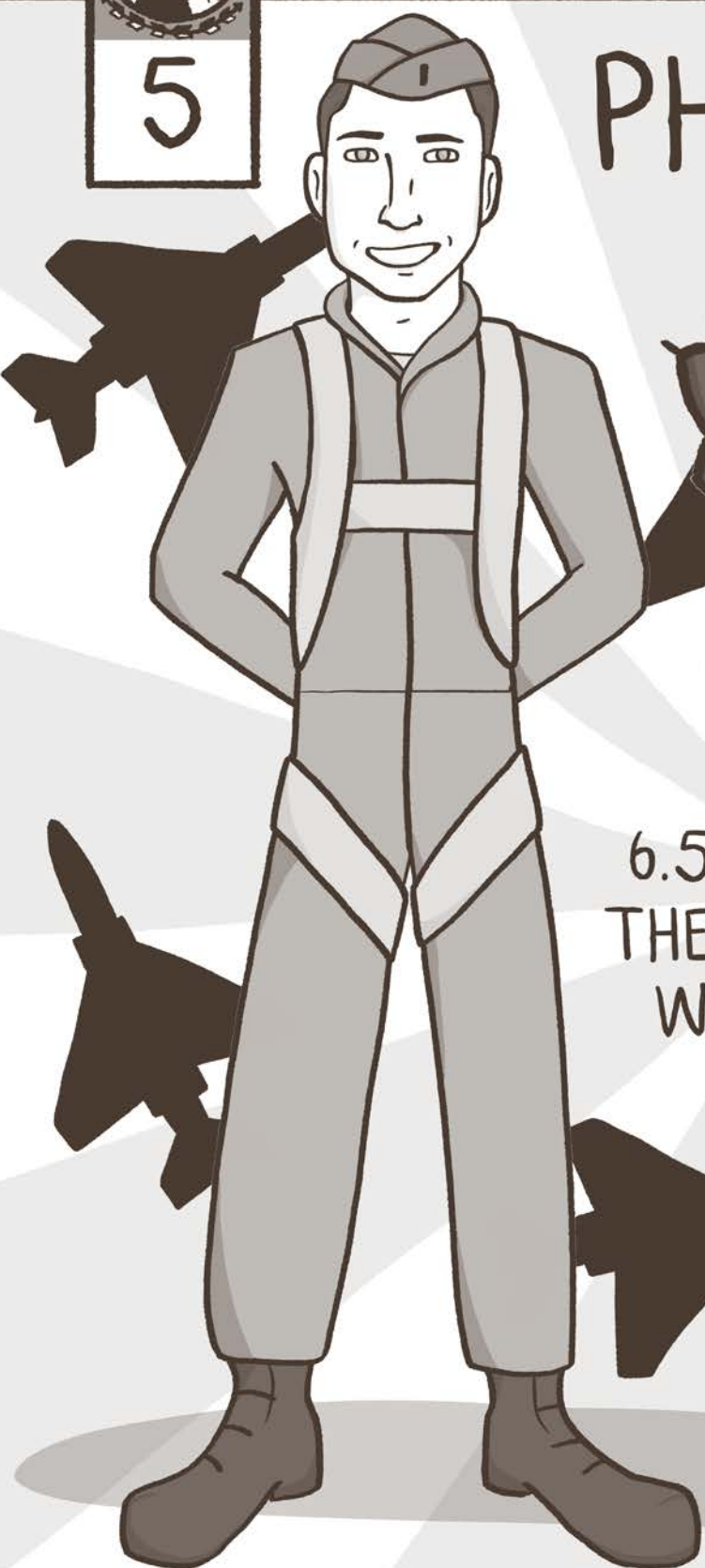




# PHANTOM OF WAR



SURVIVE A  
6.5 YEAR STAY AT  
THE 'HANOI HILTON'  
WITH A FIGHTER  
PILOT!

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY MELINA TESTIN

STORY PROVIDED BY JOHN BORLING VIA THE HOLT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY, LISTEN AT PRITZKERMILITARY.ORG

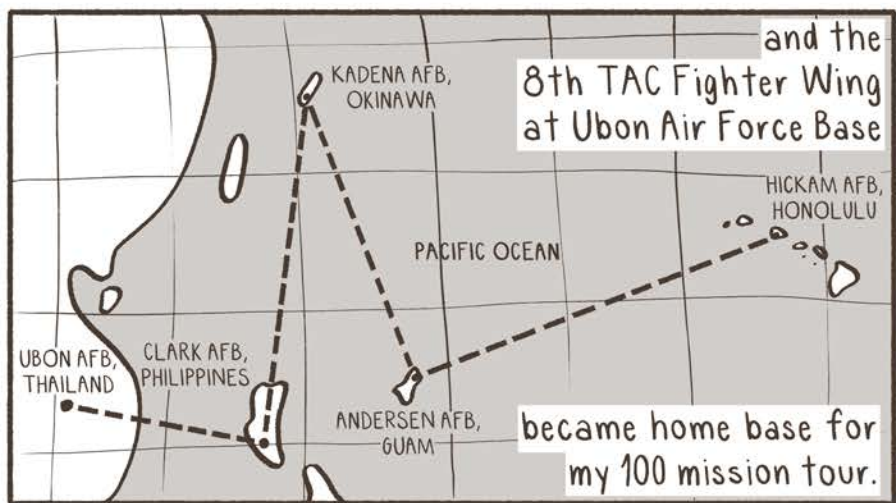
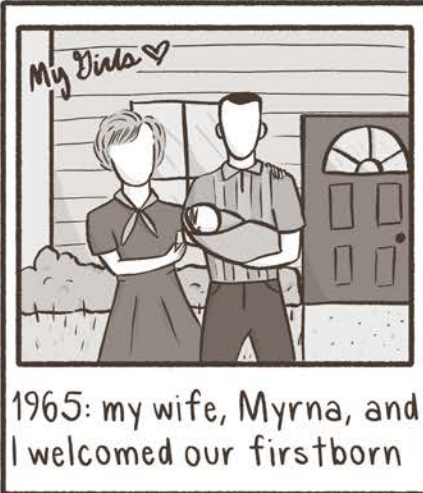
LEARN A SECRET  
POW CODE!  
Pg. 8

# John Borling

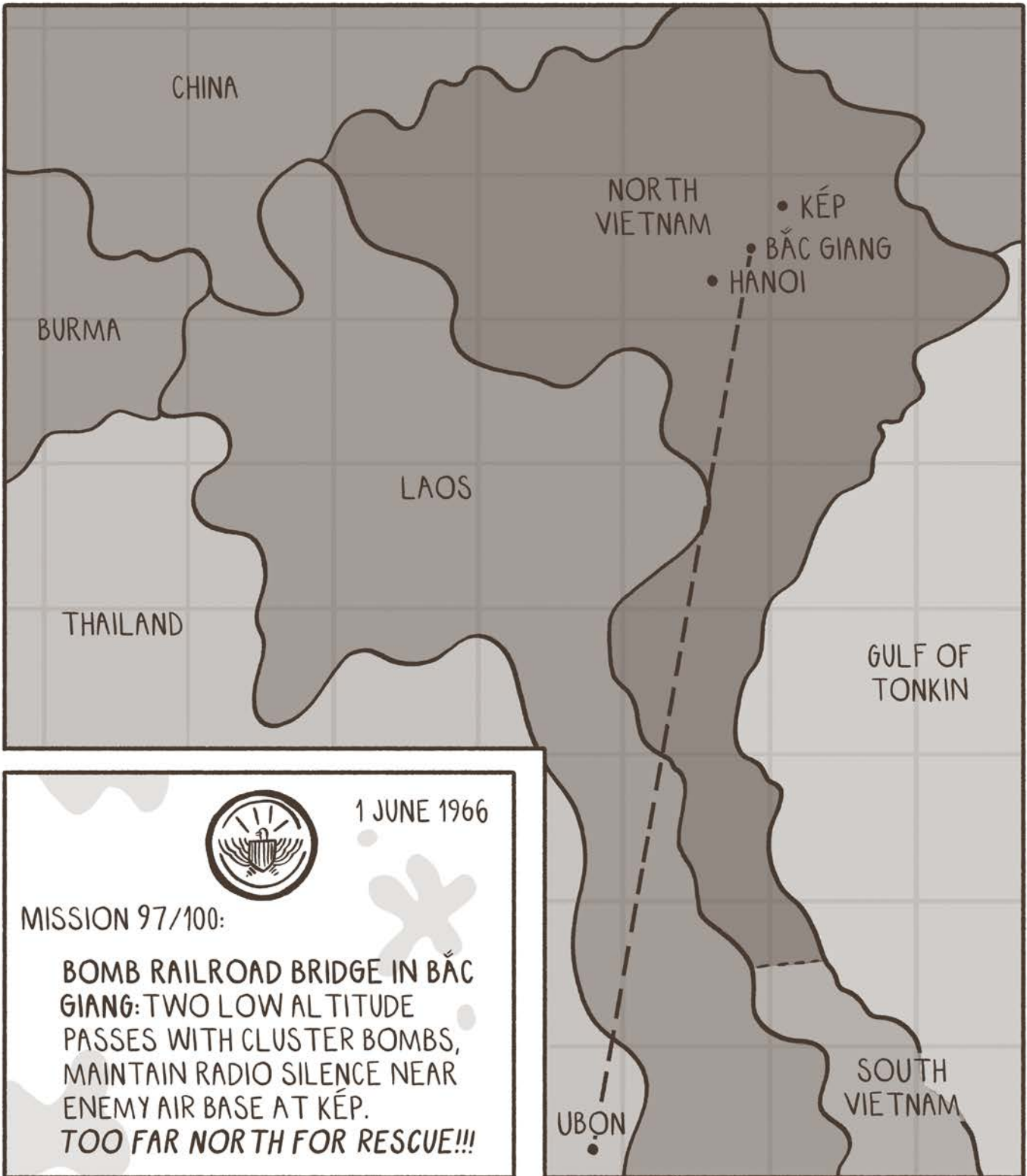


John Borling was born 24 March 1940 on the South Side of Chicago. He joined JROTC in high school, and was accepted into the US Air Force Academy in 1959. After graduating first in his flight school class, John was anxious to put his training to use, flying F-4 Phantoms in the Vietnam War.

I didn't know much about Vietnam other than there was a war on, and I was in a hurry to get there.



Fragmentary orders arrived no earlier than the day before the mission.



1 JUNE 1966

MISSION 97/100:

**BOMB RAILROAD BRIDGE IN BẮC GIANG: TWO LOW ALTITUDE PASSES WITH CLUSTER BOMBS, MAINTAIN RADIO SILENCE NEAR ENEMY AIR BASE AT KÉP. TOO FAR NORTH FOR RESCUE!!!**

The mission spiraled out of control fast:

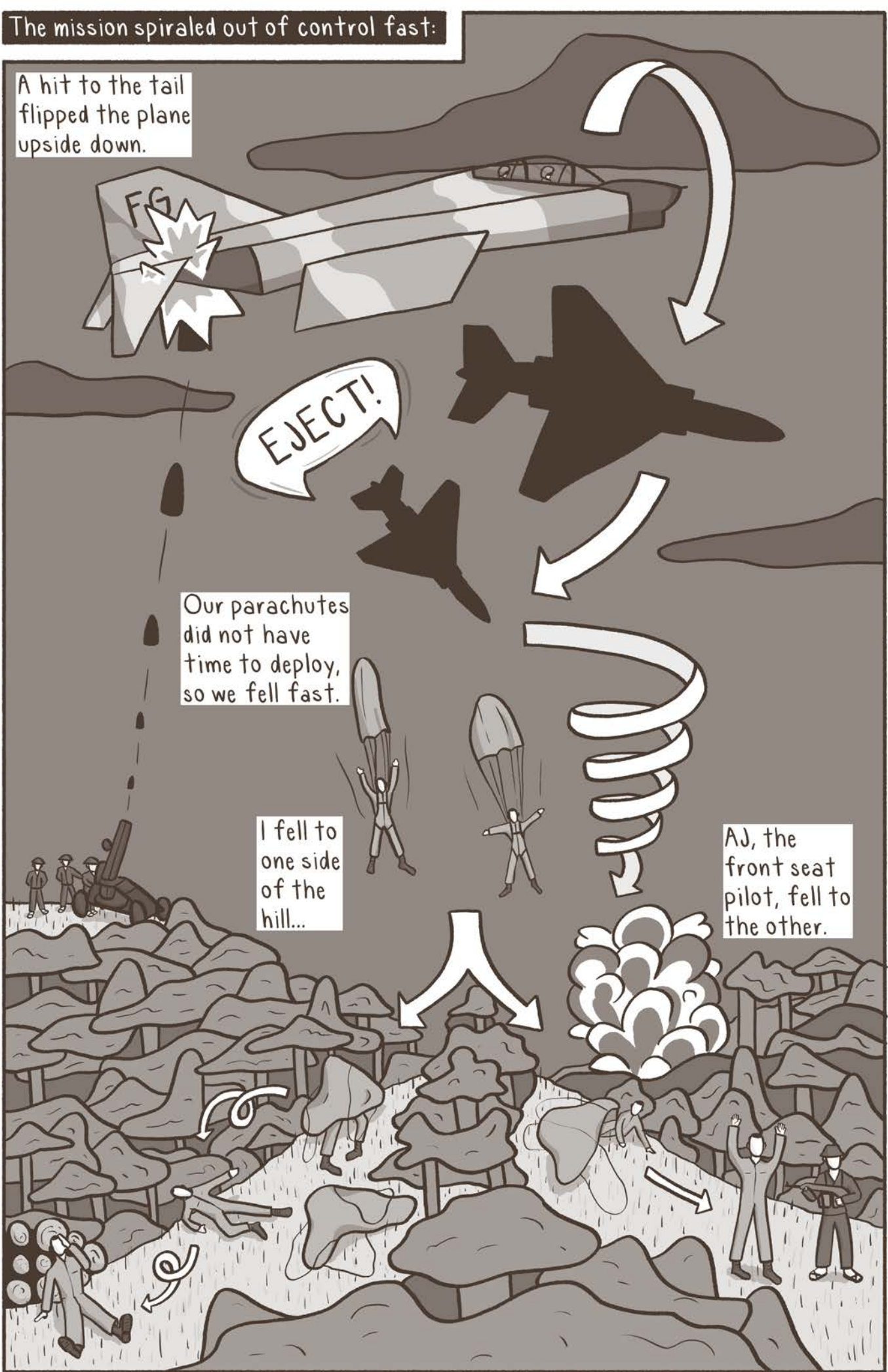
A hit to the tail flipped the plane upside down.

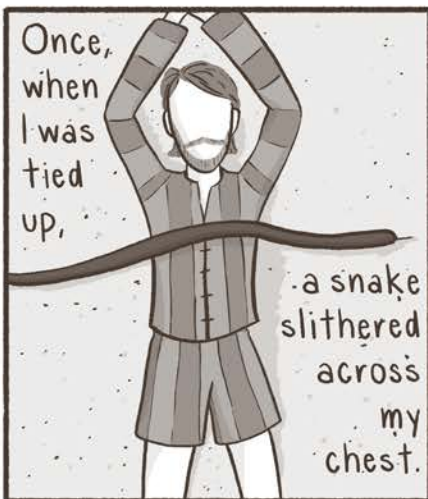
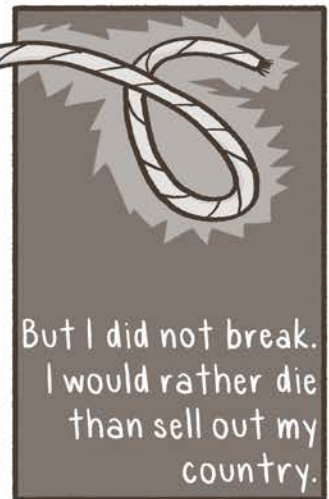
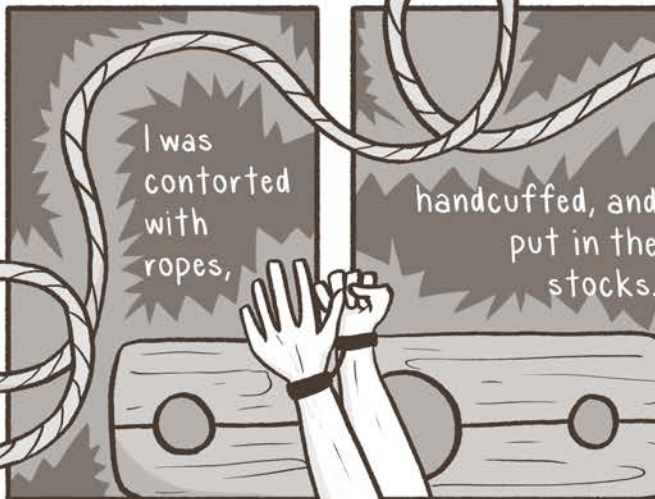
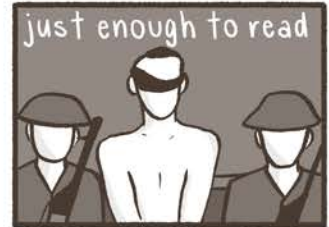
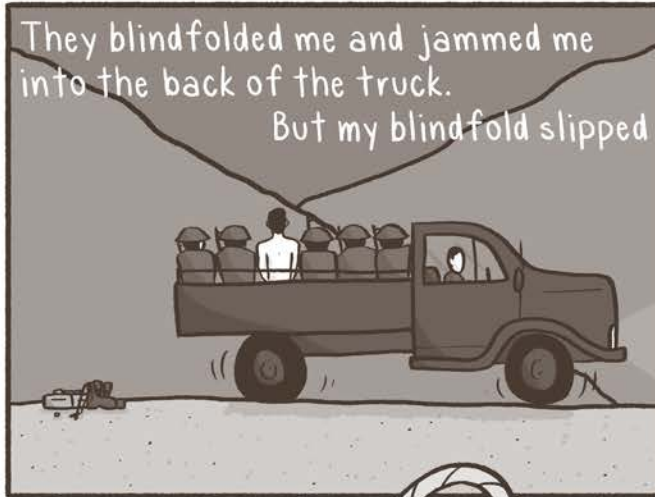
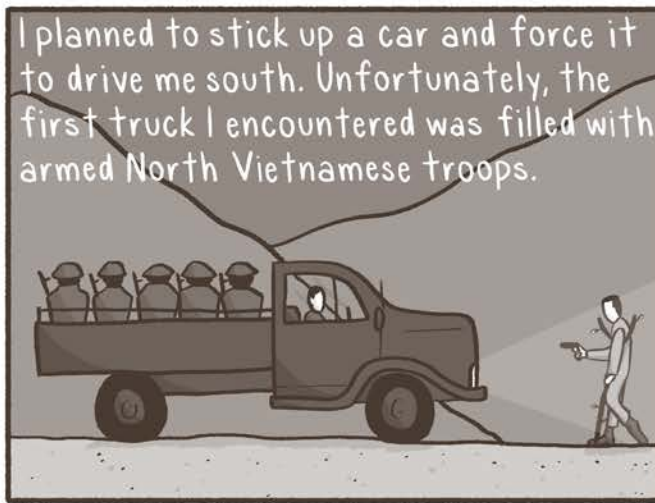
EJECT!

Our parachutes did not have time to deploy, so we fell fast.

I fell to one side of the hill...

AJ, the front seat pilot, fell to the other.





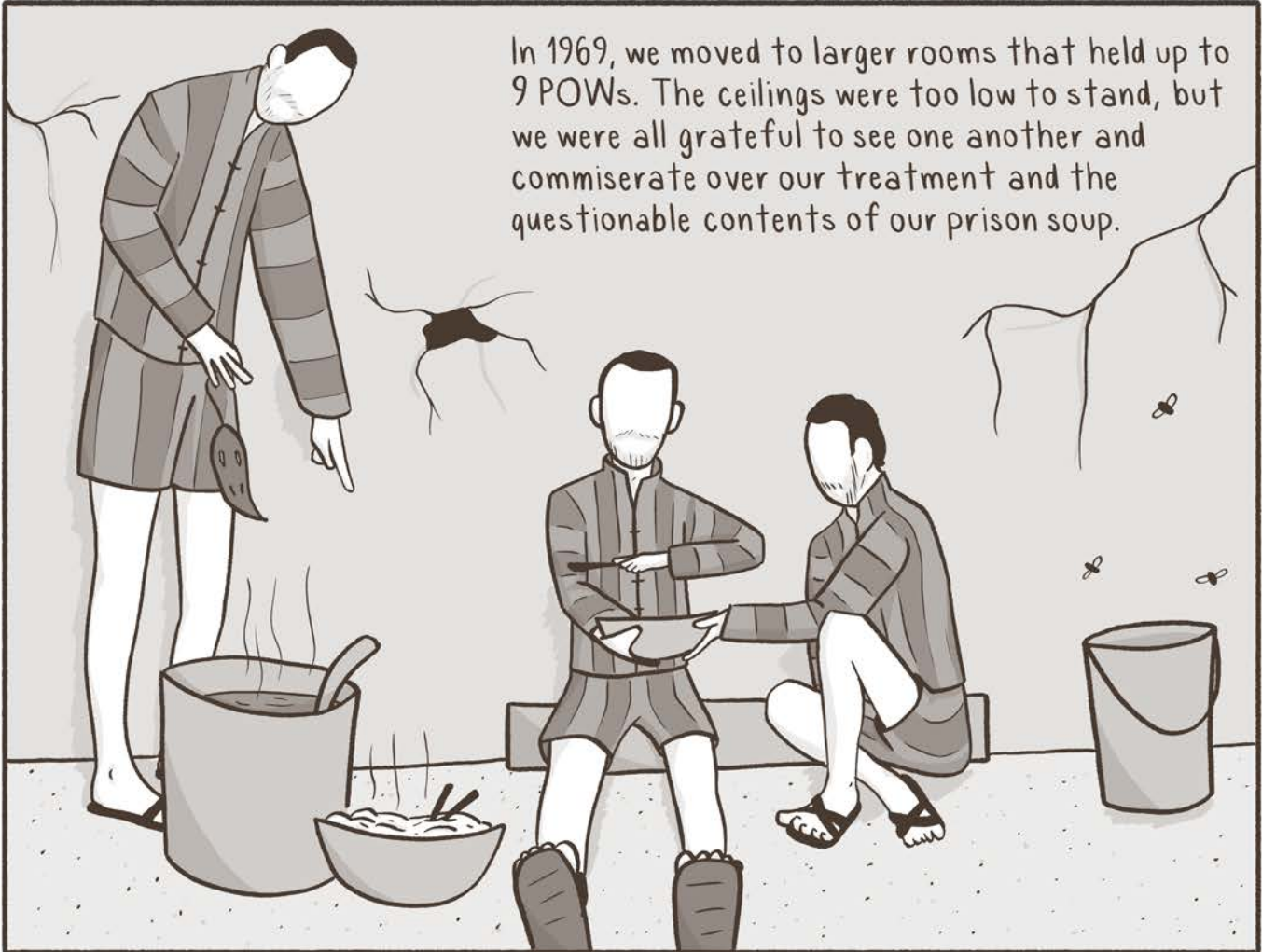
August 1966, Smitty, one of the POWs, taught us a tap code he had learned in survival training. We used it to connect over 70 POWs at the prison.



"...when days of dim hope and boredom abound..."



I wrote poetry about imprisonment, flying, and memories of home to tap through the walls. Memorizing the verses was a welcome distraction.



In 1969, we moved to larger rooms that held up to 9 POWs. The ceilings were too low to stand, but we were all grateful to see one another and commiserate over our treatment and the questionable contents of our prison soup.

By 1971, treatment had improved, but I fell ill and nearly died.

All I ever dreamed of was

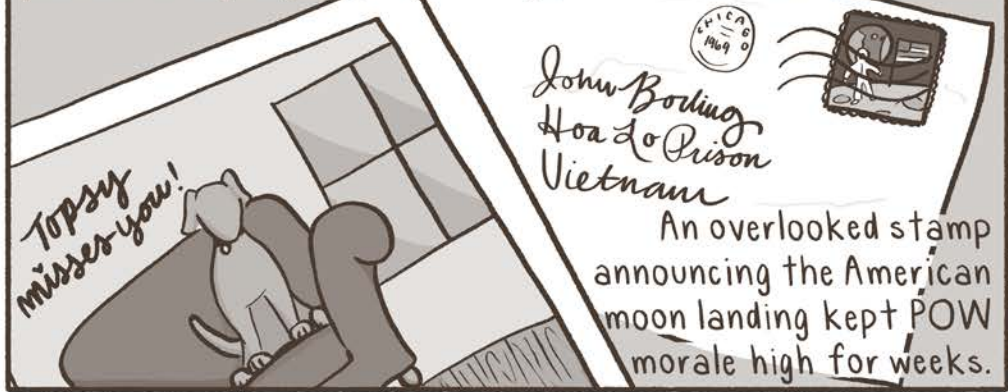
a nice simple breakfast with my wife.



I dropped from 210 lbs to 120 lbs over the course of my imprisonment.

Letters from home began to arrive in 1971, too, but only bad or bizarre news tended to make it through the censor. I wanted a picture of my daughter,

but all I got was a picture of my dog.



We were moved into the mountains during Operation Linebacker II, Dec 1972.



Finally, after 6.5 brutal years as a POW, I was released 12 Feb 1973 to



I picked back up as a fighter pilot and rose to the rank of Major General.



My time as a POW was a defining moment, not the defining moment. More importantly:

- I graduated from USAFA
- I served as a White House Fellow
- I am a pilot
- I am married
- I run marathons (26.2)
- I commanded the 94th TFS
- I have two daughters

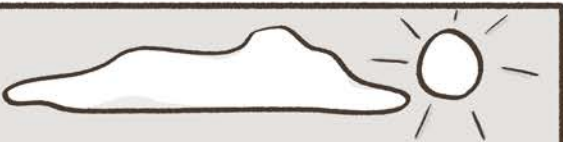
When I visited Vietnam in 2002, most of the people I met were too young to remember the war and held no animosity toward American visitors.

One morning, I jogged to Hòa Lò

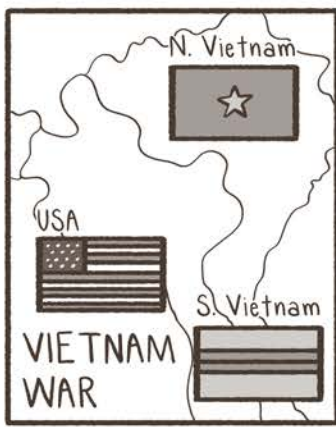
MAISON CENTRALE and it felt like '66 again.

The experience of war never ends.

I still have scars from my torture as a POW. AJ, the pilot who crashed with me in Bắc Giang, committed suicide. Plenty of us did not come back at all.

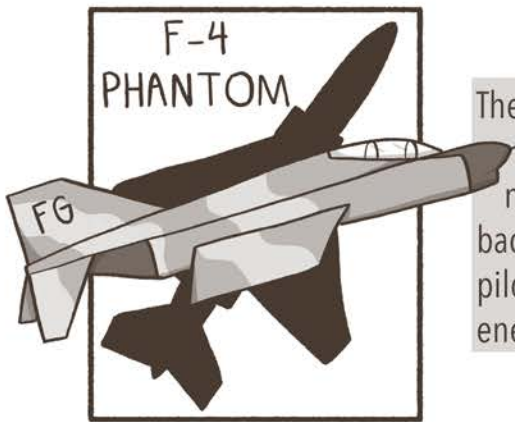


I was a fighter pilot. — I tried hard.



American intervention in the **Vietnam War** began with the end of French occupation in 1954. Vietnam was divided into North and South until reunification could be organized. Heightened by Cold War tensions over the spread of communism, American advisors supported the South Vietnamese government. The first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, and American military involvement lasted until 1973. Fighting between North and South Vietnamese troops continued until the fall of Saigon in 1975. Vietnam reunified under the communist government in Hanoi.

The **433d Tactical Fighter Squadron** was part of the 8th TAC Fighter Wing stationed at Ubon Air Force Base in Thailand during the Vietnam War. Known as Satan's Angels, its pilots, like John, flew F-4s with tail code 'FG' for ground support, bombing, and reconnaissance missions. The 433d was deactivated as a fighter squadron in 1974, and is now assigned to the Air Force Weapons School.



The **F-4 Phantom** was an American fighter-bomber aircraft used during the Vietnam War, known for its speed and advanced radar. F-4s were manned by crews of two, with the less experienced pilot confined to the back seat. During his fateful 97th mission, John was one of these frustrated pilots occupying the back seat. Hundreds of F-4s, like John's, were downed by enemy fire over the course of the war.

The **Hỏa Lò Prison** was built during the French occupation of Vietnam and turned into a POW prison complex during the Vietnam War. American soldiers referred to Hỏa Lò by the euphemism **Hanoi Hilton**. John faced torture in the Zoo sector and lived with other POWs in the low-ceilinged rooms of the Annex building. Following the 1969 death of North Vietnamese president Hồ Chí Minh, treatment improved, but POWs continued to suffer from starvation, torture, and isolation. Much of the prison has been demolished, but its iconic French "Maison Centrale" gate remains as a memorial to those who suffered within its walls.



**WOXOF** is Air Force terminology for weather unfit for flight. Pronounced "walks off," WOXOF is an acronym meaning the weather is obscured, with zero visibility due to fog.

A **Fragmentary Order** is a short mission statement given just before its execution. Frag orders maximize secrecy and are useful in situations subject to rapid change.

The **United States Air Force Academy (USafa)** was established in 1955 in Colorado Springs, CO. John's class of 1963 was the first to spend all four years on the permanent campus.

**Operation Linebacker II** was an American strategic bombing campaign carried out by B-52 bombers against targets in North Vietnam in late December 1972.



## Learn a Secret POW Tap Code!

In the Hanoi Hilton, John and the other prisoners communicated secret messages through the walls with a system of tapping. The numbers around the grid signify the number of taps. To locate a letter in the grid, use the first coordinate to determine the row and the second to determine the column.

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C	D	E
2	F	G	H	I	J
3	L	M	N	O	P
4	Q	R	S	T	U
5	V	W	X	Y	Z

**Think Before You Tap:** There's no 'k' in tap code. Use the letter 'c' in its place, or the tap pattern 2,6.

**Practice:** POWs tapped their names, words of encouragement, and, John's favorite, poetry. Practice tapping your name and messages of your own.

**Decode:** Fill in the blanks below to decipher a few lines from "Hanoi Epitaph," one of the poems John wrote while he was a POW.

$\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{4,3}$      $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{5,1}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{3,5}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,4}$   
 $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{5,4}$      $\overline{1,4}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{1,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{4,3}$      $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{1,4}$   
 $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$      $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{2,6}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{5,2}$   $\overline{4,3}$      $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{1,4}$      $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$      $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$   
 $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{1,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{4,3}$      $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{1,4}$      $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{2,1}$   
 $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{4,2}$      $\overline{5,1}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{2,4}$   $\overline{1,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{4,2}$      $\overline{2,1}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{1,3}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,2}$   
 $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{4,2}$      $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$      $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$      $\overline{1,4}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,2}$   
 $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{2,1}$      $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{3,1}$      $\overline{1,3}$   $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{2,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{4,3}$      $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{2,6}$   $\overline{2,4}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{4,3}$   
 $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$      $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,2}$      $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{3,1}$   $\overline{5,4}$      $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$   
 $\overline{1,4}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,2}$      $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{2,1}$      $\overline{2,5}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{4,3}$   $\overline{4,4}$      $\overline{2,2}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{2,4}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{2,2}$   
 $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{3,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{1,2}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{4,4}$      $\overline{5,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$      $\overline{1,4}$   $\overline{4,2}$   $\overline{1,5}$   $\overline{1,1}$   $\overline{3,2}$   
 $\overline{5,2}$   $\overline{2,4}$   $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,5}$   $\overline{4,4}$      $\overline{2,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{3,5}$   $\overline{1,5}$      $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{4,2}$   
 $\overline{1,3}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{3,3}$   $\overline{5,1}$   $\overline{2,4}$   $\overline{1,3}$   $\overline{4,4}$   $\overline{2,4}$   $\overline{3,4}$   $\overline{3,3}$

# 1966 POW TAP CODE

JOHN BORLING

from "Hanoi Epitaph" by John Borling:

The years have passed, the many Decembers,  
And no one knows and no one remembers

The sound of your voice, your face, or your name.

So you dream of steel chargers, skies to roam:  
Mostly you dream of . . . just going home.  
But you dream without hope or conviction.