

Looking Back at Nam and Ahead

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

LOS ANGELES — Col. Ed Miller says that for five years and four months the closest he came to a woman was finding a long hair in the boiled pumpkins his jailers served him. When he tells you about that he has a big grin on his Iowa face as he lifts his eyes toward the ceiling in a small gesture of good humor. His most frequently made remark is, "I got no complaint."

Ed is a combination of traits that would be at war with each other in another personality, but in him they are under control. Discipline and compliance, a reckless adventuresomeness and a strong ambition are yoked to an ability to adapt and accept things as they are, extracting whatever good can be got from them.

He says that until it happened, he never thought the North Vietnamese could shoot him and his Marine Corps F4 Phantom down. That was his ambitious self-confidence: "Everything I go into, I aspire to the top." The other side shot him down anyway, breaking his back and

Crushing his ankle. Still he tried on the second day

of his captivity to escape, and that you might say was his recklessness.

In the camp he lost close to half the body weight on his 6-foot-2 frame and all his hearing, but he exercised his broken bones and muscles so that to watch him move today you'd never know. Of that experience, of the weeks in solitary confinement, he doesn't quite say he has no complaints, but he puts a face on it not many men can. His jailers were so much smaller than he that he says he'd taken worse licks on the basketball court than he got from their rifle butts. Ed even had a formula for accommodating the progression of lost years by telling himself that each day he grew younger. By the world's reckoning he is 42; by his own he is 29.

The father of five sons, Ed Miller came back to be divorced. "My wife told me she wanted a separation the first weekend home. . . . I had already decided over there that if she met another man—well, good luck," he says. No complaint again, but whatever Mrs. Miller's reasons, they didn't concern another man. To Ed they are a mystery.

"The only thing that bothered me was that I didn't

in 1973 America

Poster

understand it," he says, accepting what he cannot change. The nearest he comes to permitting himself a reproachful remark is when he says something like, "the oldest boy was an honors student when I left and a dropout when I came home."

But generally the America that Ed Miller returned to, isn't an alien place. Perhaps part of the reason is that he has little trouble comprehending what we were doing here while he was in jail. Even before he was shot down he had serious doubts about the war; his soldier's duty made him fight. The years in the camp solidified them so he did not come home feeling that his country had betrayed him.

A teen-age enlistee, he made it from private to colonel, but he lacks the social isolationism, the obdurate right-wingism we might presume of a man who looked forward to becoming the Marine Corps commandant until his war wounds forced him into retirement. A career man, a veteran of the Korean War also, Ed is a mildly liberal, not very political Iowan with big ears and a hayseed accent who voted for Ike, JFK and Johnson and stayed in the American middle.

"America hasn't changed much, but what has

changed I like better. People are more honest, there's less hypocrisy and people don't ignore that everybody likes sex or smokes a little weed," Ed says and then recounts, "I haven't had a haircut in two months and I own a pair of red pants and a Hang-Ten shirt with three-quarter length sleeves."

His politics aren't terribly optimistic but they're hardly out of joint with the times: "Agnew? he's law-and-order-after-I-get-mine. Isn't that what Hitler did in the 1930s? Well I figured we'd go Fascist, but now with Watergate I don't think so any more."

Ed has dark stories to tell about what actually went on in the camp, about the Pentagon public information officers teaching the men to step off the plane and thank God and Nixon for peace with honor. He may write a book, but for now he's granted Nixon amnesty and is getting ready to go to law school.

The anger that ought to be in anybody who lived his first five years in an orphanage, grew up in a foster home and lived his life as Ed has, is either absent or under a control so fierce that it is invisible; because Ed is living well, seeing his kids, accepting the present and ambitious for the future. No complaint.

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