

= George Thomas Coker =

George Thomas Coker (born July 14 , 1943) is a retired US Navy Commander , honored with the Navy Cross for his leadership as a prisoner of war (POW) during the Vietnam War , and a Distinguished Eagle Scout noted for his devotion to Scouting .

In 1966 , the A @-@ 6 Intruder on which Coker was serving as bombardier ? navigator was shot down over North Vietnam . He was held as a prisoner of war in the " Hanoi Hilton " and other camps for 6 @.@ 5 years (1966 ? 1973) . After his release , he continued to serve in the Navy until his retirement in 1986 . He also returned to active participation in Scouting .

= = Personal information = =

George Coker was born in Amarillo , Texas in 1943 . In 1951 , his family moved to Linden , New Jersey , where he became a New Jersey high school state wrestling champion in the 142 lb weight class and played high school varsity football at Saint Benedict 's Preparatory School in Newark , New Jersey . Coker attended Rutgers University from 1961 ? 1963 , where he also wrestled . While at Rutgers , he participated in an aviation officer cadet program and was commissioned an Ensign in the United States Navy . After his release from Vietnam , he returned to college and graduated from the University of San Diego in 1976 with a BS in political science . He studied education and mathematics at Old Dominion University from 1982 to 1986 . Coker is married and has three children ; two daughters and a son .

= = Scouting life = =

Coker grew up in Linden , New Jersey and became an Eagle Scout in Troop 32 of Saint Elizabeth 's Catholic Church in Linden on January 27 , 1959 . He has stated that his passion for Scouting is one of the things that got him through his 6 @.@ 5 years as a POW in North Vietnam , to the point that at times all he could remember was the Scout Oath , but not the names of his family members .

Both of Coker 's older brothers were involved in Scouting and Coker first became involved when he joined Cub Scouts in late 1951 . He completed the Cubbing program and joined Troop 32 . Troop 32 had about a dozen members at that time but had over 60 members when Coker made Eagle Scout in 1959 . During this time the troop formed an Explorer Post and Sea Scout unit . After making Eagle Scout , Coker joined the Sea Scout unit and worked at summer camp before the joined the Navy in October 1963 . When Coker returned to Linden after being released from captivity , the Scouts were his biggest supporter . Troop 32 now had over 100 members . Local citizens turned out by the hundreds to greet him . Coker visited many of the local Scouting units . Coker was then inactive in Scouting during a busy Naval career , but got involved again when his son joined Cub Scouts as a Tiger Cub after the family had settled in Virginia Beach , Virginia . He became the den leader of 7 boys , all of whom earned their Arrow of Light , the highest recognition in Cub Scouting . They moved on to Troop 62 , Virginia Beach , in May 1994 ; with five of them later becoming Eagle Scouts , including his son .

Troop 62 's adults asked Coker to become Scoutmaster , a position in which he served for several years . Coker is also a Vigil Honor member of the Order of the Arrow (OA) . Coker served as the lodge adviser for Tidewater Council 's OA lodge , Blue Heron Lodge , from December 2005 until December 2007 . He was honored by the Boy Scouts of America with their Distinguished Eagle Scout Award on August 9 , 2005 .

= = Military career = =

= = = Bombardier / navigator = = =

Coker served as a Naval Flight Officer for 23 years in the United States Navy . He entered the

United States Navy Reserve on October 31 , 1963 and entered active service at Lakehurst , New Jersey on November 13 , 1963 , serving until his retirement on September 30 , 1986 . Following graduation from Aviation Officer Candidate School , he attended Basic Naval Aviation Observer (BNAO) School at NAS Pensacola , Florida followed by advanced jet navigation training at NAS Glynco , Georgia . Following graduation and receiving his wings as a Naval Aviation Observer (NAO) , he completed additional training as a bombardier / navigator in the A @-@ 6 Intruder .

On his first deployment , Coker took part in a 19 @-@ aircraft attack on a radar control facility in Kép , 38 miles northeast of Hanoi . In the face of flak , automatic weapons fire and extremely difficult weather conditions , Coker directed the pilot , navigated his aircraft , managed the ordnance system and used his electronic countermeasures equipment to provide protection for the strike group . The attack inflicted significant damage on the well @-@ protected and dug @-@ in radar station and its equipment , with all three radar stations out of operation and the target described as " obliterated " . For his actions , Coker was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal .

Coker was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions the following day , July 1 , 1966 . His airplane was diverted to attack three North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin that were heading towards U.S. Navy destroyers in the area . Coker navigated to the scene and called out airspeed , altitude and dive angle to allow the pilot to focus their attacks on the enemy boats as they in turn concentrated their fire at Coker 's aircraft . One enemy ship was hit and sunk , and a second suffered a near @-@ miss . The citation notes that " Lieutenant Coker 's resourcefulness , superb airmanship , and courage in the face of great danger contributed materially to the success of the mission . " In a two @-@ hour @-@ long battle , all three ships were sunk by the U.S. Navy aircraft .

Coker was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal for his actions as part of a coordinated 23 @-@ aircraft attack on petroleum storage tanks in Hai Phong on August 2 , 1966 , consisting of four waves of A @-@ 6 Intruders and A @-@ 4 Skyhawks , firing a combination of 750 and 1 @,@ 000 pound bombs and rockets . The attack was the third in a series of attacks on North Vietnamese oil storage depots dating back to June . Despite heavy anti @-@ aircraft fire , Coker provided accurate guidance to the pilot on airspeed , altitude and dive angle , while operating both the attack navigation radar system and electronic countermeasures . Despite adverse weather conditions , Coker 's actions contributed to an attack that destroyed all but one of the facility 's storage tanks .

= = = Prisoner of war = = =

On Coker 's 55th bombing mission , he was a Lieutenant , junior grade serving as the Bombardier ? Navigator of an A @-@ 6 Intruder from Attack Squadron 65 (VA @-@ 65) operating from the USS Constellation (CV @-@ 64) , when he and his pilot , John H. " Jack " Fellowes , were shot down over North Vietnam on August 27 , 1966 while flying near Vinh in Ngh? An Province . The aircraft was hit by a surface @-@ to @-@ air missile , which blew off the right wing , and the two crewmembers ejected from the aircraft after it went into a flat spin . Their wingman tracked the parachutes as the crew descended , but lost sight of them due to poor visibility and flak after the crew were within 50 feet of the ground . Ejection was at about 2 @,@ 000 feet altitude and 18 miles inland in flat terrain . Coker and Fellowes landed about one mile apart . Fellowes landed on a hillside and Coker in a large rice paddy in a well @-@ populated area . Both were captured by armed villagers soon after landing . For three hours after they ejected , American aircraft made a thorough search , despite moderate to heavy flak , but were unable to spot the parachutes or get a signal from their emergency beepers .

Coker was held by the North Vietnamese at a number of different POW camps in the Hanoi area , including Cu Loc , Dirty Bird , Alcatraz Grove , the Zoo , Little Vegas , and H?a Lò Prison (the " Hanoi Hilton ") .

While in a facility on the outskirts of Hanoi known as " The Zoo " , he was forced to endure a torture called " the wall " , in which he , as well as other prisoners , were forced to stand facing a wall in his cell with his hands above his head from the time a gong sounded at 5 : 30 in the morning until it sounded again at 10 : 00 at night . After two weeks , the knee injury he suffered when he ejected

had worsened , and he was taken to a hospital where the infection was drained . After a two @-@ day respite while he recuperated , " the wall " torture continued for two more months . Coker called this " probably my worst experience in Vietnam " .

During his captivity , Coker was notable for the ferocity with which he resisted his incarceration . Coker was considered one of " the baddest of the baddest " of the POWs , a reference to his stubborn resistance to his captivity . Coker 's Silver Star Medal citation cited his fierce resistance as one of the significant reasons the North Vietnamese eventually abandoned harsh treatment of the prisoners . Coker served as Chaplain to his fellow prisoners while he was in captivity , providing them with spiritual guidance and constructive counseling . For these efforts , he was awarded the Legion of Merit .

In July 1967 , Coker devised " unusual and ingenious methods " to allow his fellow prisoners to communicate with each other within their camp , assisting their collective efforts to resist their captor 's demands and improving the morale of American and Allied POWs . For his " heroic achievement " , Coker was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Combat " V " .

That year , Coker and Air Force Captain George McKnight (another of the " baddest ") conceived an escape plan . The two would escape from their cells and make it to the nearby Red River , swim by night and hide by day , estimating that it would take three or four days to reach the mouth of the river . There they would commandeer a boat and make it out to sea where they hoped to flag down a ship of the United States Seventh Fleet , estimating that it would take eight days from their escape until their rescue . The two removed the hinges from their cell and escaped from Dirty Bird prison in Hanoi the night of October 12 , 1967 , climbed to the roof of the prison block and jumped to another roof to escape . They tied themselves together to avoid separation and jumped into the Red River near the Tanwa Bridge . That night they made it 15 miles downstream in the dark and hid in the mud on the river 's edge at daybreak . The two were recaptured 12 ½ hours after they had escaped when they were spotted by fishermen along the shore early that morning and were handed over to soldiers . They were held in irons at H?a Lò prison before being returned to Dirty Bird a few days later . Their effort made them two of the very few POWs to ever escape from a North Vietnamese POW camp . Coker was awarded the Navy Cross , the Navy 's highest award for heroism , for his actions in his attempted escape as a prisoner of war . The citation reads in part :

... for extraordinary heroism during an extremely daring escape from a solitary confinement cell while a Prisoner of War in Hanoi , North Vietnam on October 12 , 1967 . During a period of particularly harsh treatment , Lieutenant Commander Coker and another prisoner executed an escape as a two @-@ man team despite the high risk of brutal reprisal or possible loss of life . That night , after opening the cell door by removing door bolt brackets from inside the room , he proceeded over the wall and through several blocks of housing to the Domer Bridge . Walking under the bridge to the Red River 's edge , he swam downstream all night and at sunrise buried himself in a mudbank in an effort to remain concealed . He was later discovered , recaptured , severely beaten for many hours , and banished to solitary confinement for two and a half years .

On October 25 , 1967 , Coker was one of 11 of the most effective resisters , among the 267 POWs then held , who were placed in a special facility in a courtyard behind the North Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense , soon nicknamed " Alcatraz " , located about one mile away from H?a Lò Prison . Coker and McKnight were added to nine prisoners who had been at a facility nicknamed " Vegas " : Jeremiah Denton , Harry Jenkins , Sam Johnson , James Mulligan , Howard Rutledge , Robert Shumaker , James Stockdale , Ronald Storz and Nels Tanner . While most of those among the Alcatraz 11 were senior officers , Coker was the youngest and most junior of those isolated from the other POWs . The 11 , known as the " Alcatraz Gang " , were separated from other captives and placed in solitary confinement for their leadership in resisting their captors . In Alcatraz , each of the 11 men were kept in solitary confinement . Coker spent two years alone in a windowless concrete cell measuring 3 feet by 9 feet that had a light bulb kept on around the clock . He was locked each night in irons by a guard . Coker remained in Alcatraz until December 9 , 1969 and spent the next three years in captivity shuffled between a number of different prisons .

On March 4 , 1973 , both Coker and Fellowes were released as part of Operation Homecoming . Vietnam @-@ era POWs were released by order of capture , and Fellowes and Coker were in the

second large release group , about No. 123 and # 124 . Of their 2 @, @ 382 days in captivity (6 @. @ 5 years) , 2 @. @ 5 years were in solitary confinement and 2 @. @ 5 years in the " Hanoi Hilton " . They also spent time in several other POW camps around Hanoi . Fellowes retired from the Navy in July 1986 and Coker on October 1 , 1986 .

Coker was promoted to full Lieutenant during his captivity and retroactively designated as a Naval Flight Officer (NFO) , all NAOs having been redesignated as NFOs during his captivity . Coker was awarded six decorations at a ceremony at NAS North Island in San Diego , California : Navy Cross , Silver Star (Silver Star Medal) , two Bronze Stars (two Bronze Star Medals) , Legion of Merit , and the Navy Commendation (Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal) . In 1974 , Mayor John T. Gregorio presented him with a key to the city of Linden . Coker was also awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for his " aggressive leadership " as Director of the Atlantic Fleet Command Center upon retiring from the Navy .

Coker is one of the names of fellow POW 's that future Senator John McCain recites in the 2005 film , Faith of My Fathers ; a film based on the 1999 McCain memoir of the same title , Faith of My Fathers .

The 1974 documentary film Hearts and Minds , which was critical of the United States ' role in the Vietnam War , featured Coker briefly . Coker , at the time of filming , had recently returned from six and a half years of internment in North Vietnamese camps for American prisoners of war ? where he had endured torture and other mistreatment by his captors . The film shows a homecoming parade in his honor in his hometown of Linden , New Jersey , where he tells the assembled crowd on the steps of city hall that if the need arose , that they must be ready to send him back to war . Answering a student 's question about what Vietnam looked like , he responded : " Well , if it wasn 't for the people , it was very pretty . The people over there are very backward and very primitive , and they just make a mess out of everything . " Time magazine 's Stefan Kanfer criticized the lack of balance in the film 's portrayal of Coker , noting that " [t] he camera , which amply records the agonies of South Vietnamese political prisoners , seems uninterested in the American lieutenant 's experience of humiliation and torture . "

A fellow POW , Commander Paul Galanti , said " George is one of my heroes ... but the real reason we 're home is the bad guys wanted to get Coker out of the country . So , you see , George Coker is the real reason we were released . "

= = = Military decorations and awards = = =

Coker 's military awards include :

Navy Cross

Silver Star Medal

Legion of Merit w / Combat " V "

Distinguished Flying Cross

Bronze Star Medal w / 5 ? 16 inch gold star and Combat " V "

Purple Heart w / 5 ? 16 inch gold star

Meritorious Service Medal

Air Medal w / bronze Numeral 5 device

Navy Commendation w / two 5 ? 16 inch gold stars and Combat " V "

Combat Action Ribbon

Navy Unit Commendation

POW Medal

National Defense Service Medal

Vietnam Service Medal w / two 3 ? 16 inch silver stars and two 3 ? 16 inch bronze stars

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation w / palm

Republic of Vietnam Civil Actions Unit Citation w / palm

Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal w / 1960- device

= = In retirement = =

In addition to continued Scouting activities , Coker has been involved in supporting ex ? POWs for many years . In December 2004 , he was elected Commander of his local POW chapter , the Tidewater ex @-@ POW Association . In 2008 , he was also serving as the head of a Virginia state ex ? POW association . Coker and his wife are also active in church and civic activities , such as counseling young married couples . Coker still has nightmares from his time as a POW . Reflecting on his wartime experiences in a Veterans Day tribute to POWs , he said " If you 're never tested , you don 't know ... You 're capable of a great deal more than you realize , if you really set your mind to it . Look at me . I did it , and there 's nothing special about me . I 'm just another guy . " Coker went on to say part of that is " ... realizing there 's something bigger than yourself ... "