

Jerry Coffee 1934 -2021, Humble Hero Who Saved World, Then Got Shot Down

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In the early morning hours of Saturday, November 13, 2021, Captain Gerald L. "Jerry" Coffee, USN (Ret.) received "final orders." Surrounded by loved ones, he left for heaven at his condo in Alexandria, VA, where he and his wife, Susan, his partner and wife of 27 years, lived parttime. Jerry Coffee believed in the invincibility of the human spirit. He battled dozens of serious medical challenges and always miraculously bounced back. He lived a long and amazing life of inspiration, incredible adventure, and family love. **His military decorations include the Silver Star, two awards of the Legion of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Bronze Stars, the Air Medal, two Purple Hearts, and the Vietnam Service Medal with 13 stars.** He was 87.

Jerry was born on June 2, 1934, in Modesto, California to Georgette and Leonard Coffee. A sister, Cheryl, came along 9 years later. Even as a young boy he was one of a kind, favoring the outdoor life of sports as well as artistic endeavors such as drawing, painting, theater and singing (he had a mean ear for harmony). After high school, Jerry attended Modesto Junior College, where he joined the trampolining and diving teams, and then UCLA, achieving a degree in Advertising Art where he joined Sigma Nu fraternity and the varsity ski team, ski-jumping being his specialty. In 1957, commercial art degree in hand, Jerry also got his draft notice. Jerry had met his first wife, Bea, at Modesto High School, and they married just before he headed to Pensacola to be a naval aviator. He finished 2nd in his flight class.

After returning from flying reconnaissance missions in the Middle East, **Jerry was tapped to be one of 12 Navy photo reconnaissance pilots, assigned to fly out of Key West in October of 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis to covertly record suspected Soviet missile sites in Cuba.** During the missions, his supersonic RF-8 flew literally "under the radar" of the Cubans and Soviets. The many years he spent discerning light and shadow as an artist combined with his athletic skill of making split second decisions to equip him perfectly for the mission.

Those qualities arguably saved the world from nuclear destruction. At the end of one of those missions, Jerry was supposed to turn back to Key West but instead banked suddenly and detoured from his flight path. "Something just caught my eye off to one side. It looked like a big parking lot or motor pool, full of equipment and I thought I'd better check it out. I had no idea what it meant, but I flew over it with all cameras running." The pictures he took proved to be of short-range Soviet nuclear-tipped missiles known as FROGS, soon to take aim at the U.S. Naval Fleet. On November 10, Marine Corps Commandant David M. Shoupe wrote Lieutenant Gerald L. Coffee in a letter, "Your reconnaissance flight over Cuba provided the most important and most timely

information for the Amphibious Forces which has ever been acquired during the history of this famous Navy-Marine fighting team." Jerry's other flights discovered more evidence of Soviet nuclear capabilities on Cuba that helped President John F. Kennedy and his military leaders during negotiations with the Soviets.

Shot Down. Just three years later in February 1966, his fate would turn. He loved serving his country and he loved flying. He also dearly loved his burgeoning family. With one more family member "on the way", Jerry headed to Vietnam. On February 3, 1966, flying reconnaissance missions off the aircraft carrier Kittyhawk, his RA5-C Vigilante was shot by anti-aircraft fire causing him to have to eject. Severely injured floating in the Tonkin Gulf, he was almost immediately captured. Despite injuries sustained from the highspeed ejection, Jerry's captors put him before a firing squad, tortured him, and dragged him through hamlets and villages on his way to Hanoi. The infamous "Hanoi Hilton," Hoa Lo prison was to be seven years and nine days as a prisoner of war.

During those years of brutality and torture when the communist Northern Vietnamese jailers continually defied the Geneva Conventions and tried to kill Jerry's spirit, he resisted. Now a Navy Commander, he worked within the prisoners' chain of command to learn the tap code used to communicate between cell blocks. He risked torture when encouraging fellow prisoners through tapping on the walls and showed incredible fortitude and leadership, as evidenced by the commendations and fitness reports from senior officer, Admiral James Stockdale, and other senior leaders. As Jerry would eventually delineate in his book, *Beyond Survival*, the perseverance and even growth he experienced in those unspeakable circumstances were attributable to faith in God, faith in his country, faith in his fellow prisoners, and faith in himself. While Jerry was in prison, his youngest son was born. They didn't meet for 7 years.

After returning from Vietnam in 1973, Jerry spent two years at UC Berkeley earning an MS in political science. Then was assigned to VC-1, an A-4 Skyhawk squadron at NAS Barber's Point in Hawaii, later becoming the squadron commander. In 1977 Jerry was selected to attend the top-level National War College at Ft. McNair in Washington, D.C. (Here he met Susan Ditto whose husband, USMC Lt, Col John Ditto was his study mate. Years after John had died in a Harrier crash in 1981, she would become Jerry's beloved wife and soul mate, spending their happy union traveling, writing, and enjoying their Aiea, Hawaii home overlooking Pearl Harbor). After War College, he took over as the Air Operations Officer at CINCPAC Fleet Headquarters in 1978. It was obvious that Jerry was eager and willing to speak about his experiences in Vietnam, so the Navy eventually gave him a role as a public relations officer and, during his tenure as such, he gave hundreds of speeches a year to military units and civilian groups alike on behalf of the Navy and until his retirement in 1985. His acclaimed book, *Beyond Survival*, published in 1990, is in its 5th printing.

Upon retirement, Jerry continued to speak about his experiences primarily for corporate and association conferences and military events. But he was always available for churches, schools, and Boy Scout troops. His message focused on the "invincibility of the human spirit" and the

importance of faith when faced with adversity. Jerry gave his keynote address at conferences for an entire cross section of business, professional, educational, faith, and military organizations throughout America and in nine foreign countries. Over the years, he inspired 20 consecutive "plebe" (freshmen) classes at the United States Naval Academy, speaking on the topic of honor. After 35 years of speaking, he retired at age 82.

The prestigious Million Dollar Roundtable selected him as one of its top 12 most popular, highest-rated main platform speakers for the past 20 years. He also holds the National Speaker's Association's CSP, CPAE (peer recognition) and induction into the Speaker's Hall of Fame. **His numerous civilian awards include the George Washington Honor Medal from the Freedom Foundation at Valley Forge and the Honolulu Chapter of the Navy League American Patriot Award.**

Jerry's humility was his best attribute. His mission was never to aggrandize himself, but to impart to every audience member that they were tougher and stronger than they believed. "Have faith, be tough, hang in there and you will emerge tougher and stronger than you would've otherwise been without the adversity." The hundreds of letters and emails he received over the years proved that he was making a difference in lives. "Beyond Survival (book) not only changed my life but saved my life," a testimonial repeated often in the letters and emails he has received. He will be deeply missed by many, but his family and closest friends will feel it the most. He always signed off his tapping on the walls in prison to his fellow POWs, GB "God Bless," and GBA "God Bless America."

Before being laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery at a future date, **Jerry was celebrated at the Naval Academy Chapel in Annapolis, MD, on Tuesday, December 7, at 10:30 a.m. EST,** and will be celebrated **at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu, HI, on Sunday, December 12, at 2:00 p.m. PST.**





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Tags

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