Getting shot down over North Vietnam—the impact of three 57mm anti-aircraft explosions, the engine plummeting from 8000 rpm to zero, flames rushing from the intakes as the aircraft plunged toward fiery destruction in a rice paddy—marked my confounding entry into life as a prisoner of war. Losing close friends and seeing war's devastation was an up-close, personal experience. It didn't fundamentally change who I was or what I believed, but strengthened many of my values.

We had already been moved when U.S. Special Forces attempted a rescue of American POWs from Son Tay prison—great for our morale, but alarming for the Vietnamese who began exercises to thwart potential future raids. Our group of prisoners began to worry, What if? What if U.S. commandos came and the Vietnamese decided we should be executed? We needed a plan.

As a naval officer, I was ready to do whatever I was called to do, but I was dumbfounded when I was selected for hand grenade suppression. If a guard lobbed a live grenade into the room, I was to suffocate it by throwing my 110 pounds on top of it. If that sounds drastic to you, think what was going through my mind.

Our instructor was Marine Warrant Officer John Frederick, an expert on hand grenades. John was the strong silent type, constantly exercising his 250-pound "Hulk" body. He could take me out with one hand while doing one hand push-ups with the other. But John had a gentle nature and a reassuring voice. "A hand grenade is a simple thing," he said, "a small explosive surrounded by frangible shrapnel. That shrapnel must accelerate to do damage. The theory is that we can make the shrapnel harmless if we don't give it a chance to accelerate."

Theory? Who tested that theory? We sat nervously glancing at each other.

"So, when we go on alert, grab your bedroll and stand ready." John picked up his bedroll and held it firmly against his chest. "I need something to represent a hand grenade." He looked around and settled on my well-worn, porcelain-enamed steel cup. I positioned it on the concrete slab where he pointed.

Suddenly my cup became a live hand grenade. "Hu-wah!" John leapt into the air and landed bedroll first on the grenade. "Just hold your position until the blast is muffled." Rocking back on his knees, he lifted the bedroll to reveal a smashed snarl of enamel chips. His satisfied expression turned to dismay. "Gee, I'm really sorry." He shook his head while the group disbanded amid snorts and snickers.

I told him it was no big deal, though I had an attachment to that old cup. I was surprised that I was able to bend it back and even more surprised when it didn't leak. I look at that cup today, sitting on my bookshelf with its scars and chips, and see the resilience, strength, and character exemplified by John Frederick.

After my first return trip to Vietnam in 1995, a few simple thoughts helped put the past in perspective: Vietnam is a country, not a war. Vietnamese are people, not prison guards. Son Tay is a city, not a prisoner of war camp. It's better to seek lessons to be learned than to vilify participants, supporters, or protesters on either side.

Four return trips have shown me that Vietnam is a country of contrasts, from North to South, from city to remote regions, and from young to old. I'm fascinated by the new way I see things. On the road to Son Tay in '95, I could sense exactly where I was from the smells, sounds, and feelings I had while blindfolded in the back of a truck twenty-seven years before. In '97, I traded stories over a beer with two Son Tay policemen who were twelve years old the night of the Son Tay prison raid. The former Viet Cong veteran I met in '95 was the only male survivor in a family that lost seven brothers and a brother-in-law. Thirty years earlier, I had dropped bombs where he was living and fighting. By some quirk of fate, we both survived and moved on with our lives.

I no longer seek to sweep my eight years in the Vietnam War behind me. I have a deep interest in the broader aspects of the war and all who took part in it. I'm drawn to things Vietnamese—the people, the country, the history and culture—and look forward to my next visit. Getting to know people of other countries broadens our worldview. It narrows the separation of us and them toward that of we.