

Naval training, early assignments, marriage and family

Following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, McCain entered the [United States Naval Academy](#). McCain was a rebellious midshipman and his career at the Naval Academy was ambivalent and lackluster.^[10] He had his share of run-ins with the faculty and leadership; each year he was given over 100 demerits (for unshined shoes, formation faults, talking out of place, and the like),^[10] earning him membership in the "Century Club".^[2] He did not take well to those of higher rank arbitrarily wielding power of him — "It was bullshit, and I resented the hell out of it"^[10] — and would sometimes intervene when he saw it being done to others.^[2] At 5 foot 7 inches^[11] and 127 pounds^[12] (1.70 m and 58 kg), he competed as a [lightweight boxer](#) for three years, where he lacked skills but was fearless and "didn't have a reverse gear."^[12] He did well in a few subjects that he was interested in, such as [English literature](#), [history](#) and [government](#).^{[2][10]} Despite his low standing, he was a leader among his fellow midshipmen,^[10] especially in organizing off-Yard activities; one classmate said that "being on liberty with John McCain was like being in a train wreck."^[10] Despite his difficulties, he later wrote that he never wavered in his desire to show his father and family that he was of the same mettle as his naval forbears. Dropping out was unthinkable and so he successfully completed his training and graduated from Annapolis in 1958; he was fifth from the bottom in [class rank](#).^[13]

Upon his graduation McCain was commissioned an [ensign](#), and spent two and a half years as a naval aviator in training at [Naval Air Station Pensacola](#) in [Florida](#) and [Naval Air Station Corpus Christi](#) in [Texas](#),^[14] flying [A-1 Skyraiders](#).^[15] He earned a reputation as a party man, as he drove a [Corvette](#), dated an [exotic dancer](#) named "Marie the Flame of Florida", and, as he would later say, "generally misused my good health and youth."^[7] During a practice run in Corpus Christi, his aircraft crashed into [Corpus Christi Bay](#), though he escaped without major injuries;^[14] another time he emerged intact from a collision with [power lines](#) over [Spain](#).^[2] He was graduated from flight school in 1960^[16] and became a naval pilot of [attack aircraft](#).

McCain was stationed on the [aircraft carriers](#) [USS *Intrepid*](#) and [USS *Enterprise*](#),^[17] in the [Caribbean Sea](#). He was on alert duty on *Enterprise* when it imposed a blockade and quarantine of [Cuba](#) during the 1962 [Cuban Missile Crisis](#).^{[18][16]} He then returned to Pensacola station, where he served as a [flight instructor](#) at [Naval Air Station Meridian](#) in [Mississippi](#), whose McCain Field was named for his grandfather.^[17] By 1964 he was in a relationship with Carol Shepp, a [model](#) originally from [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania](#); they had known each other at [Annapolis](#) and she had married one of his classmates, but then divorced.^{[14][17]} On [July 3, 1965](#), McCain married Shepp in [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania](#).^[13] McCain adopted her two children Doug and Andy,^[19] who were five and three years old at the time;^[17] he and Carol then had a daughter named Sidney in September 1966.^{[20][21][22]}

McCain grew frustrated with his training role and requested a combat assignment.^[15] In December 1966 McCain was assigned to the [aircraft carrier](#) [USS *Forrestal*](#), flying [A-4 Skyhawks](#); his service there began with tours in the [Mediterranean Sea](#) and [Atlantic Ocean](#).^[23] During all this time, McCain's father had risen in the ranks, making [rear admiral](#) in 1958 and [vice admiral](#) in 1963;^[24] and in May 1967 his father was promoted to four-star admiral and made [Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe](#), stationed in [London](#).^[3]

In Spring 1967 *Forrestal* was assigned to join [Operation Rolling Thunder](#), the bombing campaign against [North Vietnam](#) as part of the [Vietnam War](#).^{[13][25]} The [alpha strikes](#) flown from *Forrestal* were against specific, pre-selected infrastructure targets such as arms depots, factories, and bridges;^[26] they were

quite dangerous due to the Soviet-designed and supplied anti-aircraft system fielded by the North Vietnamese Air Defense Force.[26] McCain's first five attack missions over North Vietnam went without incident,[15] and while still unconcerned with minor Navy regulations, McCain had by now garnered the reputation of a serious aviator.[18] But McCain and his fellow pilots were already frustrated by Rolling Thunder's infamous micromanagement from Washington;[26] he would later write that "The target list was so restricted that we had to go back and hit the same targets over and over again.... Most of our pilots flying the missions believed that our targets were virtually worthless. In all candor, we thought our civilian commanders were complete idiots who didn't have the least notion of what it took to win the war." [25]

By now a Lieutenant Commander, McCain was again almost killed in action on July 29, 1967 while serving on the *Forrestal*, operating at Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. The crew was preparing to launch attacks when a Zuni rocket from an F-4 Phantom was accidentally fired across the carrier's deck. The rocket struck McCain's A-4E Skyhawk as the jet was preparing for launch.[27][28] The impact ruptured the Skyhawk's fuel tank, which ignited the fuel and knocked two bombs loose. McCain escaped from his jet by climbing out of the cockpit, working himself to the nose of the jet, and jumping off its refueling probe onto the burning deck of the aircraft carrier. Ninety seconds after the impact, one of the bombs exploded underneath his airplane. McCain was struck in the legs and chest by shrapnel. The ensuing fire killed 132 sailors, injured 62 others, destroyed at least 20 aircraft, and took 24 hours to control. (This incident, with flight deck video, is still used in United States Navy Recruit Training damage control classes;[15] the video has been made available by McCain's Presidential Exploratory Committee.[29]) A day or two after the *Forrestal* incident, McCain told *New York Times* reporter R. W. Apple, Jr. in Saigon that, "It's a difficult thing to say. But now that I've seen what the bombs and the napalm did to the people on our ship, I'm not so sure that I want to drop any more of that stuff on North Vietnam." [30] But a change of course was unlikely, as McCain said, "I always wanted to be in the Navy. I was born into it and I never really considered another profession. But I always had trouble with the regimentation." [30]

As *Forrestal* headed for repairs, McCain volunteered to join the VA-163 Saints on board the short-staffed *USS Oriskany*. (Before McCain's arrival, on October 26, 1966, a mishandled flare caused a deck fire, resulting in the deaths of 44 crew, including 24 pilots, and the *Oriskany* underwent significant repairs; the ship's squadrons also suffered heavy losses during Rolling Thunder, with one-third of their pilots killed or captured during 1967.[15]) By late October 1967, McCain had flown a total of 22 bombing missions.[31]

On October 26, 1967, McCain was flying as part of a 20-plane attack against a thermal power plant in central Hanoi, a heavily defended target area that had previously been off-limits to U.S. raids.[33][34] McCain's A-4 Skyhawk was shot down by a Soviet-made SA-2 anti-aircraft missile after delivering its payload.[34] McCain fractured both arms and a leg in being hit and ejecting from his plane. [35] He nearly drowned after he parachuted into Truc Bach Lake in Hanoi.[33] After he regained consciousness, a mob gathered around him, spat on him, kicked him and stripped him of his clothing.[36] Others crushed his shoulder with the butt of a rifle and bayoneted him in his left foot and abdominal area; he was then transported to Hanoi's main prison.[36] Although badly wounded, his captors refused to put him in the hospital, deciding he would soon die anyway; they beat and interrogated him, but McCain only offered his name, rank, serial number, and date of birth.[36] Only when the North Vietnamese

discovered that his father was a top admiral did they give him medical care^[36] and announce his capture; at this point, two days after it went down, McCain's plane going missing and his subsequent appearance as a POW made the front page of *The New York Times*.^[30]

McCain spent six weeks in a hospital, receiving marginal care, was interviewed by a French television reporter whose report was carried on CBS, and was observed by a variety of North Vietnamese, including the famous General [Vo Nguyen Giap](#), many of whom assumed that he must be part of America's political-military-economic elite.^[36] Now having lost 50 pounds, in a chest cast, and with his hair turned white,^[33] McCain was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Hanoi in December 1967, into a cell with two other Americans who did not expect him to live a week (one was [Bud Day](#), a future [Medal of Honor](#) recipient); they nursed McCain and kept him alive.^[37] In March 1968, McCain was put into [solitary confinement](#), where he would be for two years.^[36] In July 1968, McCain's father was named [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command \(CINCPAC\)](#), stationed in [Honolulu](#) and commander of all U.S. forces in the Vietnam theater.^[3] McCain was immediately offered a chance to return home early:^[33] the North Vietnamese wanted a mercy-showing propaganda coup for the outside world, and a message that only privilege mattered that they could use against the other POWs.^[36] McCain turned down the offer of repatriation due to the [Code of Conduct](#) of "first in, first out": he would only accept the offer if every man taken in before him was released as well.^[38] McCain's refusal to be released was even remarked upon by North Vietnamese officials to U.S. envoy [Averell Harriman](#) at the ongoing [Paris Peace Talks](#).^[33]

In August 1968, a program of vigorous torture methods began on McCain, using rope bindings into painful positions and beatings every two hours, at the same time as he was suffering from [dysentery](#).^{[36][33]} Teeth and bones were broken again as was McCain's spirit; the beginnings of a suicide attempt was stopped by guards.^[33] After four days of this, McCain signed an anti-American propaganda "confession" that said he was a "black criminal" and an "air pirate",^[33] although he used stilted Communist jargon and ungrammatical language to signal the statement was forced.^[39] He would later write, "I had learned what we all learned over there: Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine."^[36] His injuries to this day have left him incapable of raising his arms above his head.^[40] His captors tried to force him to sign a second statement, and this time he refused. He received two to three beatings per week because of his continued refusal.^[41] Other American POWs were similarly tortured and maltreated in order to extract "confessions".^[36] On one occasion when McCain was physically coerced to give the names of members of his squadron, he supplied them the names of the [Green Bay Packers' offensive line](#).^[39] On another occasion, a guard surreptitiously loosened McCain's painful rope bindings for a night; when he later saw McCain on [Christmas Day](#), he stood next to McCain and silently drew a [cross](#) in the dirt with his foot^[42] (decades later, McCain would relate this [Good Samaritan](#) story during his presidential campaigns, as a testament to faith and humanity^{[43][44]}). McCain refused to meet with various anti-war peace groups coming to Hanoi, such as those led by [David Dellinger](#), [Tom Hayden](#), and [Rennie Davis](#), not wanting to give either them or the North Vietnamese a propaganda victory based on his connection to his father.^[36]

In October 1969, treatment of McCain and the other POWs suddenly improved, after a badly beaten and weakened POW who had been released that summer disclosed to the world press the conditions to which they were being subjected.^[36] In December 1969, McCain was transferred to Hoa Loa Prison, which later became famous via its POW nickname of the "[Hanoi Hilton](#)".^[36] McCain continued to refuse to see anti-war groups or journalists sympathetic to the North Vietnamese regime;^[36] to one visitor who

did speak with him, McCain later wrote, "I told him I had no remorse about what I did, and that I would do it over again if the same opportunity presented itself."^[36] McCain and other prisoners were moved around to different camps at times, but conditions over the next several years were generally more tolerable than they had been before.^[36]

Altogether McCain was held as a [prisoner of war](#) in North Vietnam for five and a half years. The [Paris Peace Accords](#) were signed on [January 27, 1973](#), ending direct U.S. involvement in the war, but the [Operation Homecoming](#) arrangements for POWs took longer; McCain was finally released from captivity on [March 15, 1973](#),^[45] having been a POW for almost an extra five years due to his refusal to accept the out-of-sequence repatriation offer.^[46]

Return to United States

Upon his return to the United States, McCain was reunited with his wife Carol, who had suffered her own crippling, near-death ordeal during his captivity, due to an automobile accident in December 1969 that left her facing months of operations and physical therapy;^[47] by the time he saw her again she was four inches shorter, on crutches, and substantially heavier.^[48] As a returned POW, McCain became a celebrity of sorts: *The New York Times* ran a photo of him getting off the plane at [Clark Air Base](#) in the [Philippines](#); he published a long cover story describing his ordeal and his support for the [Nixon administration's](#) handling of the war in *U.S. News & World Report*; he participated in several parades and personal appearances; and a photograph of him on crutches shaking the hand of President [Richard Nixon](#) at a White House reception for returning POWs became iconic.^[47]

McCain underwent treatment for his injuries, and attended the [National War College](#) in [Fort McNair](#) in Washington, D.C. during 1973–1974.^{[47][16]} Few thought McCain could fly again, but he was determined to try, and engaged in nine months of grueling, painful [physical therapy](#), especially to get his knees to bend again.^[48] By late 1974 McCain had recuperated just enough to pass his flight physical^[48] and have his flight status reinstated,^[47] and he became Executive Officer and then [Commanding Officer](#) of the [VA-174 Hellrazors](#), the East Coast [A-7 Corsair II](#) Navy training squadron stationed at [Naval Air Station Cecil Field](#) outside [Jacksonville](#) in Florida and the largest attack squadron in the Navy.^{[47][16][49]} McCain's leadership abilities were credited with turning around a mediocre unit, improving its aircraft readiness and pilot safety metrics and winning the squadron its first [Meritorious Unit Commendation](#),^[48] and while some senior officers resented McCain's presence as favoritism due to his father, junior officers rallied to him and helped him qualify for A-7 carrier landings.^[48]

During the time in Jacksonville, the McCains' marriage began to falter.^[50] McCain had extramarital affairs,^[50] and he would later say, "My marriage's collapse was attributable to my own selfishness and immaturity more than it was to Vietnam, and I cannot escape blame by pointing a finger at the war. The blame was entirely mine."^[50] His wife Carol would later echo those sentiments, saying "I attribute [the breakup of our marriage] more to John turning 40 and wanting to be 25 again than I do to anything else."^[50]

