

# A "Poor Peasant"

By Thomas J. Cutler

**N**ineteen-year-old Douglas Hegdahl had joined the Navy in 1966 to see the world. He soon got his wish! Within a few months, he found himself in Southeast Asia as a member of the gunnery gang in USS *Canberra*.

The Vietnam War was in full swing by this time and the Navy was carrying the war to the enemy in a number of ways. In the south, Sailors wearing black berets took to the rivers and littorals to fight Viet Cong guerillas "up close and personal." Seals were involved in covert operations, and Seabees built bases from the Cua Viet River in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south. Naval aviators shared the skies with Air Force pilots to pound targets in Communist North Vietnam. And cruisers, destroyers, and frigates of the Surface Navy served on the gun line of Vietnam, striking enemy positions in both the North and South. *Canberra* was one of those cruisers called upon to bombard Communist targets with her six 8-inch, ten 5-inch, and eight 3-inch guns.

Wanting to get a better view of a night bombardment, the young Sailor went out on deck one dark night and was knocked overboard by the blast from a 5-inch gun. No one saw him go overboard, and *Canberra* steamed off into the darkness. After spending a few hours alone in the South China Sea, Hegdahl was saved from drowning by some North Vietnamese fisherman, who promptly turned him over to local soldiers.

Doug Hegdahl began a nightmare common to all American POWs during the Vietnam War: an existence of imprisonment, interrogations, isolation, beatings, loneliness, fear, and horrible

living conditions that, for him, would last for more than two years. He was moved to several different locations, eventually ending up in Hanoi, where he would share the ordeal with Navy and Air Force aviators who had been shot down over North Vietnam.

Early on, when the young seaman apprentice tried to convince his captors that he was not an aviator like the others, telling them that he had come from a ship, they accused him of being a commando, a "spy from the sea" and threatened to execute him. When his interrogators brought out paper and pens, demanding that he write a confession of his "crimes," he looked at the pens as though they were some complicated piece of machinery and told his tormentors that he couldn't read or write, saying "I'm a poor peasant." The North Vietnamese believed him, but it soon became apparent that Doug Hegdahl was anything but the slow-witted "peasant" he was portraying.

Although he seemed very much out of place as a seaman apprentice among the other POWs—who were mostly aviators, older and more senior in rank—his fellow captives realized they had a real asset in young Hegdahl. First, he was able to commit small acts of sabotage, such as pouring sand into the gas tanks of enemy trucks. That was impressive enough, but more significantly, it soon became evident that he had a phenomenal memory. Before long he was able to memorize the names of the more than 250 POWs then imprisoned in North Vietnam.

The enemy had tried on several occasions to release some of the POWs for their own propaganda purposes, but

the Americans had made a pact not to accept early releases. However, the senior leaders began to see a real advantage in making an exception of Hegdahl. As his roommate Dick Stratton explained: "You are the most junior. You have the names. You know first hand the torture stories behind many of the propaganda pictures and news releases. You know the locations of many of the prisons."

Doug Hegdahl was very reluctant to agree, fearing that his going home early would ultimately dishonor him. In the end, it took a direct order. Hegdahl accepted an early release, taking his head full of names and other accumulated intelligence back to the United States.

There was no question that the POWs had made the right decision in making an exception to their pact for Seaman Apprentice Hegdahl. As predicted by Stratton and the others, Hegdahl's ability to recite the names of the other POWs proved invaluable, providing information that was until then largely unknown. His revelations about the terrible conditions and torture being inflicted on the POWs had also previously been a well-kept secret. In the end, the most junior POW in Hanoi had been able to strike a significant blow against his enemy without ever firing a shot.