

The following passage is from the book Faith of My Fathers by John McCain and Mark Salter.

“O Come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant’, we sang a little above a whisper while our eyes were darting anxiously up to the barred windows for any sign of the guard. ‘Joyful and triumphant’, we were clad in tattered ‘prisoner-of-war’ clothes. I looked around and two dozen men who were huddled in a North Vietnam prison cell—light bulbs hanging from the ceiling illuminated a gaunt and wretched group of men, grotesque caricatures of what had once been a clean-shaven, superbly-fit Air Force Navy and Marine pilots and navigators. We shivered from the dampness of that night. The air, the fevers and the plague of a number of us was obvious. Some were permanently stooped from the effects of the torture; others limped or leaned on make-shift crutches. ‘O come ye to Bethlehem; behold Him, born King of Angels’. What a pathetic sight we were! And yet, this was Christmas Eve, 1971. We were together for the first time...some after seven years of harrowing isolation and mistreatment in the hands of a cruel enemy. Keeping Christmas, the most special day any of us would ever observe. There had been Christmas services in North Vietnam in previous years but they were Spiritless, ludicrous stage shows orchestrated by the Vietnamese for propaganda purposes. The only one we had been allowed to hold, though we feared that, at any moment our captors might change their minds. I was designated ‘chaplain’ by our senior-ranking POW, Officer Colonel George (Bud) Day (He won the Medal of Honor), and as we sang ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’, I looked down and saw a few sheets of paper, on which had been penciled Bible Verses that tell the story of Christ’s birth. I recalled how, a week earlier, Day, who had asked the Company commander for a Bible. ‘No’, he was told. There were no Bibles in N. Vietnam. But a few days later the Camp Commander had come into the communal cell to announce that he had found one Bible in N. Vietnam. ‘You will be allowed to have it for just a few minutes.’ Colonel Day had requested that I perform the task, so hastily, I went to Luke, Chapter 2, or this worn-out Vietnamese Bible, which had been placed on a table just outside our cell door. I furiously copied down Chapter 2 until the guard approached and took the Bible away.

The service was simple. After saying ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, we sang Christmas Carols, some of us ‘mouthing’ the words until our pain-clouded memory caught up with our voices. Between each hymn, I would read a portion of the story of our Lord’s birth. “And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people – born this day in the City of David”. (He didn’t get it all down correctly, but he did get it) “a Savior which is Christ the Lord.” Captain Quincy Collins, a former choir director of the Air Force Academy led the hymns. At first we were nervous and stilted in our singing. Still burning in our memories was the time, almost a year before, when the N. Vietnamese guards had burst in on our church service, beating 3 or 4 of the men leading in prayer, and the rest of us were dragged away to a confinement. We were locked away for eleven months in 3’ X 5’ cells. Indeed, this Christmas service was just a part of a defiant celebration of the return to our regular prison in Hanoi. And as the service progressed, our boldness increased. The singing swelled, ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’, ‘Hark the Herald Angels’ Sing’, ‘It Came Upon the Midnight Clear’. Our voices filled the cell together as we shared the story of the baby, ‘Away in a Manger, no crib for a bed.’ Finally, it came time to sing perhaps the most beloved hymn, ‘Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm; all is bright’. Half a dozen of the men were too sick to stand. They sat on raised, concrete platforms that ran down the middle of the cell. Our few blankets were placed around the shaking shoulders of the sickest of the men to protect them against the cold. Even then, these men looked transfixed as we sang the hymn: ‘round yon virgin, mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild.’ Tears rolled down our unshaven faces. Suddenly, we were 2,000 years and a half-a-world away in a village called Bethlehem and neither war nor torture nor imprisonment nor the centuries themselves had dimmed the hope born on that ‘Silent Night’ so long ago. ‘Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.’ We had forgotten our wounds, our hunger, our pain. We raised prayers of thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ, for our families and our homes, for our country. There was an absolutely exquisite feeling that all of our burdens had been lifted and a place that had been designed to turn men into vicious animals; we clung to one another, sharing what comfort we had. Some of us managed to make a crude gift. One fellow had a precious commodity – a cotton wash cloth. Somewhere, he had found a needle and thread and fashioned the cloth into a hat which he gave to Colonel Day. Some men exchanged ‘dog tags’, others used prison

spoons to scratch out IOU's on bits of paper – some imaginary thing we wished another to have. We exchanged these 'chits' with smiles and tearful thanks. The Vietnamese guards did not disturb us. As I looked up at the barred window, I wished that they had been looking in. I wanted them to see us faithful, joyful, and yes, triumphant.